

## Editorial

# Predatory Journals; be aware of the spectrum!

Academia the world over, are encouraged or coerced to conduct research in their fields as the new knowledge is instrumental and essential for the world to move ahead. The pressure for academics and researchers to author research publications is indicated by the popular aphorism 'publish or perish'. In some countries, like Sri Lanka, a monthly allowance is added to their salary as incentive if they have published at least one research paper within the relevant year modifying the above aphorism to 'publish as pay-off'. Such enforcements/incentives for research were strengthened throughout the world in the recent past.

In parallel to the above enforcements for research, a new threat to the honesty of research publications has emerged. It has become a global outbreak with a rising trend; it was initially named as predatory publications. Now there are many synonyms for the term 'Predatory' as 'bogus', 'deceptive', 'dubious', 'illegitimate' 'fake', 'fraudulent', 'parasitic', 'pseudo', 'questionable' etc. However, the term predatory is still widely used. The lack of a standard peer review process and the absence of good editorial services are the primary features of predatory Open Access (OA) journals.

The peer review process, actually the 'gate keeping' process for new knowledge, is defined as "*a process of subjecting an author's scholarly work, research or ideas to the scrutiny of others who are experts in the same field*". It was initiated few centuries ago in the UK and now it is being practiced in the world of academia. The two terms 'peer-reviewed' and 'refereed' are synonyms.

In predatory journals this peer review process is absent or minimal, and in some cases, it is 'modified' in unethical and unacceptable ways. Hence, 'the lack of proper peer review' in predatory journals shows a vast range. The funny 'manuscript' submitted to a predatory open access journal in the field of computer technology by Dr. Peter Vamplew in 2014, is the best example to represent the worst extreme of the above range of the review processes in predatory journals. The manuscript including a scatter plot and a flow chart was originally created by David Mazières and Eddie Kohler in 2005, using a single sentence of seven words (containing one obscene word), over and over again (<https://www.scs.stanford.edu/~dm/home/papers/remove.pdf>), and submitted to a conference as an annoyed response to frequent emails from the organizers of the conference inviting to submit papers. Later, Dr. Vamplew submitted a copy of the same 'manuscript' to the above predatory journal and it was accepted rating as 'excellent' by the 'journal's peer review process' with a request to pay the article processing charge (APC) of US\$150 to publish the paper. This indicates that some predatory journals accept any nonsense even without opening the file or reading at least the title. The journals which follow a modified version of the normal peer review process can be considered as the other end of the range of review processes in predatory journals. In this modification, the editors of the journal invite the corresponding author of one manuscript submitted to them, to review another manuscript submitted to the same journal, and vice versa, giving a bait of 25% reduction of their APC for a quick review of the manuscript assigned to them. In order to make sure a fast review, publishers of these journals impose a condition as 'the manuscript will be sent to more than two reviewers and 25% discount of the APC will be offered only to the reviewer who submitted the review report fast'. As the 25% discount is also a significantly high amount, the relevant 'author-reviewers' try to complete the job fast deviating from a thorough review. Moreover, in this scenario, these author-reviewers are not always experts in the subject; they could be juniors or even postgraduate students in the field. Due to all these facts, the standard of the review reports of such journals could vary in widely. Hence these types of reviews are non-standard, unethical, and questionable.

Between the above two extremes, there is a series of different types/levels of reviews among predatory journals as given below;

-tabulated review carry out using the words 'excellent', 'very good', 'satisfactory', 'need revision' etc.

- non-specific review report that is generally a pre-prepared one to suit with any manuscript and it is send with minor adjustments to fit with the manuscript submitted.

- incomplete editorial review; some predatory publishers, particularly those who publish a large number of predatory journals, assign a member of their journal staff having a basic knowledge in a related discipline eg. statistics, economics etc. to give a superficial and one-sided review.

Meanwhile, some predatory publishers run fake versions of reputed legitimate journals using the same title and same ISSN number. These are called 'hijacked journals'. Knowledge on the above range of the review process could help to identify hijacked journals because unlike the original reputed journal, the highjacked journal does not maintain a thorough review process.

In all the above cases in predatory journals, the sole objective of the deviations from the proper peer review process and the lack of good editorial service is to minimize the time gap between the first submission to acceptance of the article as well as to reduce the rejection rate of manuscripts targeting easy and quick money.

However, all of the above reviews cannot be considered as 'peer reviews', because they are carried out by the journal staff. Moreover, some journals send emails to intellectuals in the relevant area and invite them to be reviewers of their journal(s). Whenever such intellectuals accept their invitations, the journal(s) send them manuscripts to review. But in many cases, the editors don't send those genuine review reports to authors; instead, they follow their own predatory way to get manuscripts published after charging APCs. Only the reviewers can check whether this is happening by comparing the published papers, with the review reports they sent.

When the range of review practices in predatory journals are discussed, some exceptional cases also should be mentioned. Platinum or Diamond OA journals are one example. (In the Gold OA model, readers get free access and the authors pay the APC: In contrast, in the Platinum/Diamond OA model both the reader and author don't pay, but an organization/Institute associated with the publisher, pays the APC to the publisher.) As an example, a private university may hire a publisher to run a journal under the name of the university. In such a case, if the publisher is given the responsibility for the whole process, the journal may run in predatory mode, but with the university name in cover pages misleading the readers as it is a 'university journal'. Another example where confusion could arise is in cases where the ownership of the publisher is changed in the middle; in such a case, a reputed journal that maintained high standards could be sold and the buyer may run it from that point onwards in predatory mode taking advantage of the goodwill earned and maintained by the previous owner. Meanwhile some of the open access, non-predatory journals also could show some predatory features when it is managed in an irresponsible way. As an example, when some academic or professional body needs to publish a journal in their field as a marketing strategy, the organization assigns the responsibility of managing the journal to a person or a small team as an additional and voluntary task; then the journal could go ahead single-handedly as a business without paying much attention to norms and standards.

The above information could help researchers to learn about the broad range of predatory practices in journals and such an awareness should help to prevent being a prey of predatory journals. It is necessary to combat predatory journals as they create pseudo-knowledge that could ruin the credibility of the researcher as well as the relevant institute. Moreover, it may also negatively affect development programs if the policy makers and planners are not capable of identifying that the relevant knowledge base is coming from fake publications. Hence, researchers are advised to be aware of the above predatory practices, in addition to the identifying features which are visible on the websites and published papers of predatory journals.

L. P. Jayatissa