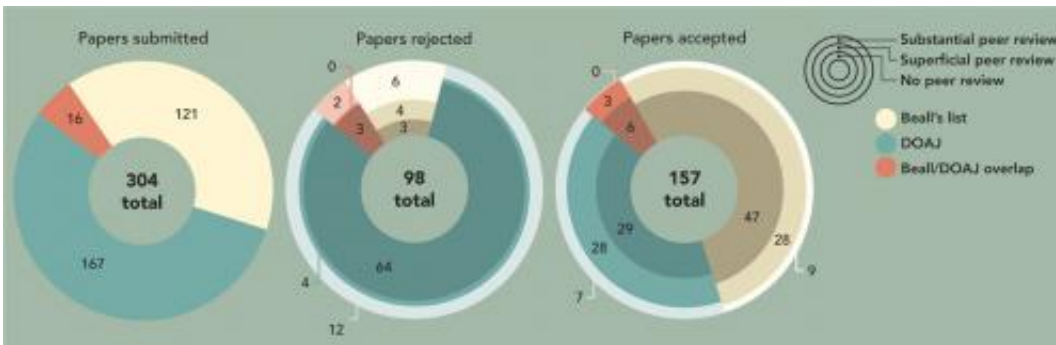


Research paper publishing sting reveals lax standards of many open-access journals

October 4 2013, by Bob Yirka



Peer review reviewed. Few journals did substantial review that identified the paper's flaws. Credit: 'Who's Afraid of Peer Review?' by John Bohannon, *Science* 4 October 2013; Vol. 342 no. 6154 pp. 60-65 DOI: 10.1126/science.342.6154.60

(Phys.org) —John Bohannon, contributing news correspondent for *Science*, the highly respected peer-reviewed journal has conducted what he calls a "sting operation" that reveals problems with open-access publishing journals. The results of his operation have been published in a *Science* News piece.

Over the past several years, a debate has arisen in the academic and research community. Should papers written by researchers be published as open-access (free for readers) or behind closed pay-walls? Some suggest papers written by researchers that use public funds should always be available for anyone to read without having to pay. Others insist that

the only way to ensure quality and integrity is to have well respected journals accept only those papers worthy of publication and then to vet them via a peer review process. In his sting operation, Bohannon offers evidence of major flaws in the open-access publishing system.

The overall purpose of his sting operation was to reveal whether open-access journals were truly peer-reviewing articles as they were claiming. To find out, he wrote a bogus [research paper](#) in which he claimed to have found a lichen-based wonder drug that showed cancer fighting capabilities. But, he of course didn't do any research, instead he made everything up. As part of doing so, he wrote his paper in a way that was certain to be rejected by any real peer-review process—it was full of technical errors, and even went so far as to suggest bypassing clinical trials. Bohannon even had the paper reviewed by some experts in the field to ensure that the errors he introduced were so blatant that no respected peer group could miss them. Once the paper was ready, he used a computer program to create hundreds of slightly different versions of the paper (with different author names, etc.) and then sent them to 304 open-access journals asking for the paper to be considered for publishing. Sadly, nearly half of the targets accepted the bogus paper indicating that they had not peer-reviewed the paper or their reviewers were very low quality. In all he reports that 157 journals accepted the paper while 98 rejected it outright and only 36 responded back to him with comments suggesting they had actually read what he'd sent them. Furthermore he found that many of the journals that presented themselves as western based, were actually operating in India and other eastern countries.

Bohannon doesn't offer any real analysis of his sting operation, preferring apparently to let the results stand on their own with the clear implication that because of unscrupulous operators, open-source publishing is seriously flawed and in many cases should not be taken seriously by those wishing to publish research papers.

More information: 'Who's Afraid of Peer Review?' by John Bohannon, *Science* 4 October 2013: Vol. 342 no. 6154 pp. 60-65 [DOI: 10.1126/science.342.6154.60](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.342.6154.60)

See also: [Flawed sting operation singles out open access journals](#)

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