

Rising number of 'predatory' academic journals undermines research and public trust in scholarship

September 19 2023, by Eric Freedman and Bahtiyar Kurambayev



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Taxpayers fund a lot of university research in the U.S., and these findings published in scholarly journals often produce major breakthroughs in medicine, vehicle safety, food safety, criminal justice, human rights and other topics that benefit the public at large.

The bar for publishing in a scholarly journal is often high. Independent experts diligently review and comment on submitted research—without knowing the names of the authors or their affiliated universities. They recommend whether a journal should accept an article or revise or reject it. The piece is then carefully edited before it is published.

But in a [growing number of cases](#), these standards are not being upheld.

Some journals charge academics to publish their research—without first editing or scrutinizing the work with any ethical or editorial standards. These for-profit publications are [often known as predatory journals](#) because they are publications that claim to be legitimate [scholarly journals](#) but prey on unsuspecting academics to pay to publish and often misrepresent their publishing practices.

There were an [estimated 996 publishers](#) that published over 11,800 predatory journals in 2015. That is roughly the same number of [legitimate, open-access academic journals](#)—available to readers without charge and archived in a library supported by a government or academic institution—published around the same time. In 2021, another estimate said there were 15,000 [predatory journals](#).

This trend could weaken public confidence in the validity of research on everything from health and agriculture to economics and journalism.

We are [scholars of journalism](#) and [media ethics](#) who see the negative effects predatory publishing is having on our own fields of journalism and mass communication. We believe it is important for people to

understand how this problem affects society more broadly.

In most cases, [the research published in these journals](#) is mundane and does not get cited by other academics. But in other cases, [poorly executed research—often on science](#)—could mislead scientists and produce untrue findings.

Misleading practices

Publishing in journals is considered an essential part of being an academic because professors' responsibilities generally include contributing new knowledge and ways of solving problems in their research fields. Publishing research is often a key part of academics keeping their jobs, getting promoted or receiving tenure—in an old phrase from academia, you publish or perish.

Predatory publishers often use deception to get scholars to submit their work. That includes false [promises of peer review](#), which is a process that involves independent experts scrutinizing research. Other tactics include lack of transparency about charging authors to publish their research.

While fees vary, one publisher told us during our research that its going rate is \$60 per printed page. An author reported paying \$250 to publish in that same outlet. In contrast, legitimate journals charge a very small amount, or no fee at all, to publish manuscripts after editors and other independent experts closely review the work.

These kinds of journals—about 82.3% of which are located in poor countries, including [India, Nigeria and Pakistan](#)—can prey on junior faculty who are under intense pressure from their universities to publish research.

Low-paid young faculty and doctoral students, who may have limited English language proficiency and poor research and writing skills, are also especially vulnerable to publishers' aggressive marketing, mostly via email.

Authors who publish in fraudulent journals may add these articles to their resumes, but such articles are rarely read and cited by other scholars, as is the norm with articles in legitimate journals. [In some instances](#), articles are never published, despite payment.

Predatory publishers may also have an unusually large breadth of topics they cover. For example, we examined one Singapore-based company called PiscoMed Publishing, which boasts 86 journals in fields spanning [religious studies](#) and Chinese medicine to pharmacy and biochemistry. Nonpredatory publishers tend to be more focused in the breadth of their topics.

The Conversation contacted all of the journals named in this article for comment and did not receive a response regarding their work standards and ethics.

Another journal, the [International Journal of Humanities and Social Science](#), says it publishes in about 40 fields, including criminology, business, international relations, linguistics, law, music, anthropology and ethics. We received an email from this journal, signed by its chief editor, who is listed as being affiliated with a U.S. university.

But when we called this university, we were told that the school does not employ anyone with that name. Another person at the school's Art Department said that the editor in question no longer works there.

It is extremely difficult for people reading a study, or watching a news segment about a particular study, to recognize that it appeared in a

predatory journal.

In some instances, these journals' titles are almost identical to titles of authentic ones or have [generic names like](#) "Academic Sciences" and "BioMed Press."

Scholars deceived

In [a 2021 study](#), we surveyed and interviewed scholars in North America, Africa, Asia, Australia and Europe listed as editorial board members or reviewers for two [predatory journalism](#) and mass communication journals.

One company, [David Publishing](#), gives a Delaware shipping and mailbox store as its address and uses a Southern California phone number. It says it publishes 52 journals in 36 disciplines, including philosophy, sports science and tourism.

Some scholars told us they were listed as authors in these journals without permission. One name still appeared as an author several years after the scholar's death.

Our latest, forthcoming study conducted in 2023 surveyed and interviewed a sample of authors of 504 articles in one of those predatory journals focused on journalism and mass communication.

We wanted to learn why these authors—ranging from graduate students to tenured full professors—chose to submit their work to this journal and what their experience was like.

While most authors come from [poor countries](#) or other places such as Turkey and China, others listed affiliations with top American, Canadian and European universities.

Many people we contacted were unaware of the journal's predatory character. One author told us of learning about the journal's questionable practices only after reading an online posting that "warned people not to pay."

A lack of concern

Some people we spoke with didn't express concern about the [ethical implications](#) of publishing in a predatory journal, including dishonesty with authors' peers and universities and potential deception of research funders. We have found that some authors invite colleagues to help pay the fees in exchange for putting their names on an article, even if they did none of the research or writing.

In fact, we heard many reasons for publishing in such journals.

These included long waits for peer review and [high rejection rates](#) from [reputable journals](#).

In other cases, academics said that their universities were more concerned with how much they publish, rather than the quality of the publication that features their work.

"It was very important for me to have it at that time. I never paid again. But I got my promotion. It was recognized by my institution as a full publication. I profited ... and it did the job," one author from the Middle East told us in an interview.

Why it matters

Predatory publishing creates a major obstacle in the drive to ensure that new research on critical topics is well-founded and truthful.

This can have implications in health and medical research, among other areas. As one [health care scholar explained](#), there is a risk that scientists could incorporate erroneous findings into their clinical practices.

High standards are crucial across all areas of research. Policymakers, governments, educators, students, journalists and others should be able to rely on credible and accurate research findings in their decision making, without constantly double-checking the validity of a source that falsely purports to be reputable.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Rising number of 'predatory' academic journals undermines research and public trust in scholarship (2023, September 19) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-09-predatory-academic-journals-undermines-scholarship.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--