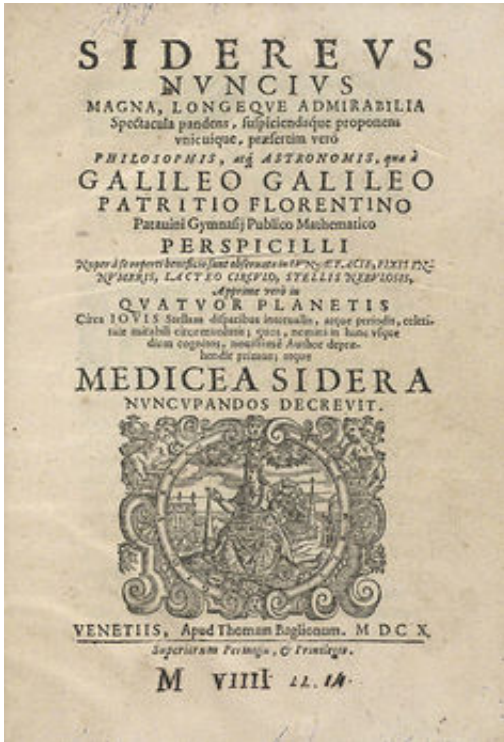


# Vanity and predatory academic publishers are corrupting the pursuit of knowledge

3 August 2015, by Michael J. I. Brown



Publishing has long been a part of academic life. Houghton Library, Harvard University

Radio National's Background Briefing recently presented a [grim academic tale](#) of identity theft, shambolic conferences, exploitation, sham peer review and pseudoscience.

Presenter Hagar Cohen provided an eye-opening introduction to predatory academic publishing and conferences, with a particular focus on the publisher [OMICS Group](#). It was also a very human story, including researchers travelling across the globe only to find they're attending an imitation of an academic conference.

Why do predatory and vanity academic publishers and conferences exist? Why are they flourishing now? And what can they tell us about the failings

of academia?

## Publish

"Publish or perish" is a simplification of academic life, but contains an element of truth. There's little point undertaking research if you don't tell anybody about it, and this has been true for centuries. Four centuries ago, astronomers such as [Copernicus](#), [Galileo](#) and [Kepler](#) discussed their observations, calculations and methods in books.

Understandably, academic publications, [citations](#) of publications and conference presentations have become metrics for academic performance. One can (and should) argue about the legitimacy of such metrics, but they are a fact of modern academic life.

Peer review of manuscripts by academics is also critical to academic publishing. Does the manuscript add to the body of knowledge? Does the manuscript accurately discuss previous work? Are there significant errors in the manuscript? Does the manuscript clearly communicate relevant methods, results and arguments? Are the conclusions of the manuscript justified?

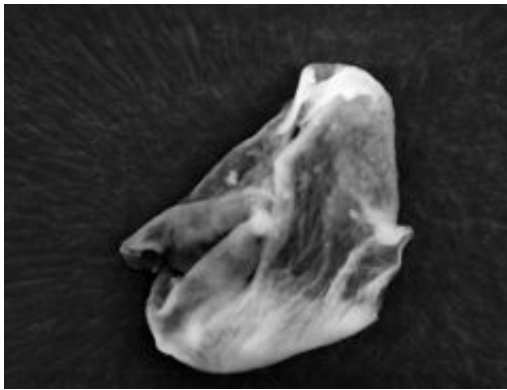
Peer review is imperfect, but prevents many dubious manuscripts from being published. It effectively excludes authors who are unwilling or unable to meet the standards of mainstream [academic publishing](#).

## Vanity and predators

Both vanity and predatory academic publishers exploit opportunities created by legitimate peer review and academic performance metrics. In particular, they allow authors to publish articles that would never survive legitimate peer review.

Vanity academic journals have existed for decades, and these imitations of legitimate journals often

promote particular (discredited) ideas or have strong ideological biases. For example, the [Journal of American Physicians and Surgeons](#) may sound respectable, but publishes pseudoscience including HIV-AIDS denial, climate contrarianism and anti-vaccination scaremongering.



Evidence for alien life or vanity publishing? University of Sheffield

More recently, there has been an explosion of predatory journals, which seek to make large profits by publishing (for a fee) virtually anything that comes their way. While predatory publishers claim to peer-review articles, this is often a sham.

For example, on Background Briefing I discussed "[Discovering the Total Contents of the Universe](#)", which was published in an OMICS journal. This article was supposedly peer-reviewed, but isn't based on observations nor a scientific methodology. Instead, it makes claims about aliens based on "ancient Indian scriptures" and "a mathematical language, which has long been forgotten by mankind". To be blunt, it is nonsense.

While most academics ignore dubious journals, such publications have an impact beyond academia. The vanity Journal of Cosmology often publishes bogus claims of alien life, which [sections of the media](#) credulously repeat.

I've also seen activists reference studies from predatory journals in an attempt to bolster their arguments.

**Exploitation**  
Predatory publishers often exploit the goodwill of legitimate academics. Being invited to present at a conference or edit a journal is usually evidence of being held in high esteem by your peers. It can be an opportunity too good to miss, but with predatory publishers there's a sting in the tail.

Predatory publishers often invite academics to join editorial boards, giving journals an air of legitimacy. However, they often ignore academics' feedback on manuscripts or even use academics' names without permission.

Similarly, predatory outfits will invite academics to present at conferences, for a hefty fee, but those conferences may be pale imitations of real conferences. Background Briefing attended a [shambolic conference in Brisbane](#) with fewer than 30 attendees. Many of the speakers listed on the program did not attend. One has to wonder if the missing speakers even knew they were on the conference program.

### Online explosion

The screenshot shows the Zia World Press website with a navigation menu and a table of journals. The table lists various journals with their tracks, indexes, and websites.

Name	Track	Index	Website
Global Economy and Finance Journal	Broad areas of Economics and Finance		<a href="http://www.gefpapers.com">www.gefpapers.com</a>
Global Review of Accounting and Finance	broad areas of Accounting and Finance		<a href="http://www.globalraf.com">www.globalraf.com</a>
International Review of Business Research Papers	Broad areas of Business		<a href="http://www.irbrp.com">www.irbrp.com</a>
Journal of Accounting Finance and Economics	Broad areas of Accounting, Banking, Economics and Finance		<a href="http://www.jafepapers.com">www.jafepapers.com</a>
Journal of Business and Policy Research	Broad areas of Business		<a href="http://www.jbrpapers.com">www.jbrpapers.com</a>
Journal of Islamic Finance and Banking Research	Islamic Banking & Finance		<a href="http://www.wbiaus.org/jifbr.html">www.wbiaus.org/jifbr.html</a>
World Journal of Management	Broad areas of Management and Marketing		<a href="http://www.wjmpapers.com">www.wjmpapers.com</a>

Zia World Press operates from a Melbourne suburban house. Screen shot/Michael J. I. Brown

University of Colorado librarian [Jeffrey Beall](#) maintains a list of hundreds of [potentially predatory publishers](#), which produce thousands of dodgy journals. Most of these publishers have appeared in

the past decade.

This proliferation is an unfortunate side effect of online open access publishing. Online publications do not have the overheads of printed journals, as they require only a website and correctly formatted PDF documents. Conference venues across the globe can be booked online with a credit card. Since this requires only a computer, many predatory publishers operate from modest offices or suburban houses.

Traditionally journals have been available via subscription only, often at considerable expense to institutions. Open access publications are available to everyone instantly, which potentially unlocks academic knowledge, but requires fees from the authors (or funding agencies) to remain viable. This opens the door for predatory publishers seeking to prise money from authors, resulting in thousands of new suspect journals.

## Lessons

Can the vanity and predatory publishers provide lessons for academia? Clearly, no sector of the community (including academia) is free from shonky online operators.

While it would be cute to assume there are just good and bad publishers, sometimes the practices of the dodgy operators can be found elsewhere. [Springer and IEEE](#) have published gibberish produced by [a computer program](#). [Elsevier](#) publishes [Homeopathy](#), despite homeopathy having no scientific basis. Academics must strive to maintain and improve academic standards, including at major publishers.

It would also be wrong to assume that functioning peer review is a simple arbiter of right and wrong. There is a spectrum of peer review, with quality varying from journal to journal. Peer review is only a quality-control process that can sometimes fail, even at the best journals.

That said, those who knowingly avoid [peer review](#) by submitting to vanity and predatory publishers are effectively avoiding scrutiny and rigour. They are deliberately avoiding what is needed to advance

knowledge and understanding.

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