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## Jocalyn Clark: How to avoid predatory journals—a five point plan

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Increasingly, I'm asked to advise and assist with the problem of predatory journals. While it's probably only an annoying nuisance to many in the developed world, the increasing number of spam emails inviting articles and conference participation is beginning to feel like a potentially serious problem for developing world scientists and institutions. This demands action, as Richard Smith and I argue in a recent editorial in *The BMJ*.

That's because these countries' relative lack of development also extends, unsurprisingly, to scholarly publishing. Whereas in rich country institutions we would have training, supervision, and support that generate a level of literacy to discern predatory versus legitimate journals, this is often missing or nascent in developing country institutions. As a recent paper shows, the majority of authors in predatory journals are inexperienced and based in developing countries.

Predatory journals (a term first coined by librarian Jeffrey Beall) are fake or scam journals that send phishing emails offering "open access" publication in exchange for payment, without providing robust editorial or publishing services. They have been discredited by the scientific community, and because they are not indexed in standard databases any research published in them is effectively lost. Their motive is financial gain, and their modus operandi is a corruption of the business model of legitimate open access publishing.

Many organisations and universities around the world are facing this problem, but it appears predatory publishers may be particularly targeting institutions in the global south.

I'm struck by how many more spam emails from predatory publishers I get to my Bangladesh institutional email than I do to my Canadian academic account. In a recent seven day trial, I received 14 predatory journal spam emails to my icddr,b account and six to my University of Toronto account; a colleague at Harvard in the same period got just two.

This can't be explained by inadequate junk mail filters, as the system we use at my organisation in Bangladesh is an industry standard.

I recommend a five point plan for researchers to avoid predatory journals, which involves "doing your homework" to check the credibility of a journal or publisher, and always being sceptical of unknown journals. To distinguish legitimate from predatory journals, here are some useful sources of information—none of which are adequate on their own:

1. Is the journal or publisher listed in Beall's List? If so, it should be avoided, as this "blacklist" is regularly updated and specifies criteria for identifying predatory journals and publishers.
2. If claiming to be an open access journal, is the journal in the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ)? This is a sort of "whitelist," and journals here must meet specific criteria.

3. Is the publisher a member of recognised professional organisations that commit to best practices in publishing, such as the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE); the International Association of Scientific, Technical, & Medical Publishers (STM); or the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association (OASPA)?
4. Is the journal indexed? Do not accept the journal's claims about being indexed. Instead verify these claims by searching for the journal in databases such as PubMedCentral (free) or the Web of Science (requiring subscription).
5. Is the journal transparent and following best practices when it comes to editorial and peer review processes, governance, and ownership? Are there contact details for the journal and its staff (email, postal address, working telephone number)? Reputable journals have a named editor and editorial board comprised of recognised experts. Are the costs associated with publishing clear? Credible journals do not ask for a submission fee. Many bona fide open access journals require a publication charge, but this is levied after acceptance and through a process separate from the editorial process.

To help with “doing your homework” authors can consult new guidance from COPE, which—along with the DOAJ, OASPA, and the World Association of Medical Editors—has set out principles of transparency and best practice that set apart legitimate journals and publishers from “non-legitimate” ones.

These sources of information can help any researcher struggling to avoid predatory journals, but should supplement rather than supplant extensive discussions among co-authors about the right and reputable target journals for their papers.

In addition, those of us who collaborate with and advocate health research from developing countries should lend our support to colleagues, especially junior colleagues, to spread publication literacy and to fight against the predatory journals.

*Jocalyn Clark (@jocalynclark) is executive editor of the Journal of Health, Population and Nutrition, and other external publications at icddr,b (a global health research organisation in Dhaka, Bangladesh). She was a senior editor at PLOS Medicine and assistant editor at The BMJ.*

Competing interests: The author has no further interests to declare.

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**Mr. Gunn** · 8 months ago

Since points 2-5 are mostly what is done to establish the list for point 1, less some personal opinion of the list maintainer, you would probably be bets of making this a 4 point plan and dropping point 1.

3 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**Jocalyn Clark** → Mr. Gunn · 8 months ago

Agree. And indeed there are mixed views of the motives of Beall's list. But lots of people like lists and dislike doing the homework involved in 2-5, and so I include it. But it's by no means a panacea.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**Adam Etkin** · 8 months ago

Good post and agree overall, especially #5, but I've got a personal stake in that part as the



## Managing Director of PRE!

I do want to point out a couple of items for discussion however:

1. "Reputable journals have a named editor and editorial board comprised of recognised experts."

It is not uncommon for predatory journals to list editors and board members who are real experts in a field, but those individuals have no idea they are listed as such!

2. "Credible journals do not ask for a submission fee."

While it's still not the norm, there are many credible journals which charge submission fees.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



**Jocalyn Clark** → Adam Etkin · 8 months ago

Thanks Adam. Yes, to point #1 this is a terribly egregious practice of some predatory journals. I suggest everyone google themselves regularly to ensure their names are not co-opted to market these publications. That being said, it may be difficult to have your name removed from their websites. To point #2 - can you give me some examples of credible journals that charge a fee on submission (versus on publication). thanks, Jocalyn

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**Mamoon Kousar** → Jocalyn Clark · 8 months ago

good post by you n good points highlighted by Adam. but why it is difficult to remove name from their website?

MAMOONA

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**Jocalyn Clark** → Mamoon Kousar · 6 months ago

Because predatory publishers, by their nature, are generally uncooperative with attempts to remedy their bad behaviour.

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**Pedro Silva** → Jocalyn Clark · 8 months ago

The Journal of Biological Chemistry did have a submission fee during part of the first decade of this century

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**Adam Etkin** → Jocalyn Clark · 8 months ago

Jocalyn,

Off the top of my head, Stem Cells and Development, Tissue Engineering and some other Mary Ann Liebert titles charge submission fees (or at least they

used to) and have for some time. The Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery also charges a submission fee. I'm certain there are others. Some Societies also charge submission fees for non-members. These are not predatory journals. Again, it's a small percentage but they're out there. Submission fees can offset the time/cost to conduct review and might also discourage submissions which are of low quality.

Hope this helps!

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**Jocalyn Clark** → Adam Etkin · 8 months ago

it does help thank you. I guess not all 'submission fees' are the same, and authors need to be clear and careful what they are paying for.

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**Carl Bergstrom** → Adam Etkin · 8 months ago

The Journal of Neuroscience is another high-quality biomedical journal that charges submission fees.

Submission fees are quite common among highly reputable journals in finance and economics. For a long if somewhat dated list of these:

<http://www.econ.ucsb.edu/~tedb...>

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**Jocalyn Clark** → Carl Bergstrom · 8 months ago

thank you

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**Pancho** · 8 months ago

One of the attractive features of these predatory Journals is that they are open access. In the developing world, as you nicely put it, it is very rare to have wide acces to paid (rapacious?) Journals. A case in point is the probably interesting "Who Publishes in "Predatory" Journals?" paper, but for which you have to disburse \$35 if you want the pdf file.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



**Jocalyn Clark** → Pancho · 8 months ago

I agree it's frustrating when articles published in legit journals are behind a paywall/by subscription, as is the case with the Xia article ('who published in predatory journals') and indeed with our BMJ editorial. Email Xia (or me) for a pdf of the article.

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**Koushik Sau** · 6 months ago

in point you mention as " Are there contact details for the journal and its staff (email, postal address, working telephone number)?. similar command already published in my article title Facts about journal publishing in open access policy

facts about journal publishing in open access policy

link : <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pm...> if you go through it and share your thought .

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**Felipe G. Nievinski** · 8 months ago

I assume you have double-checked Beall's list in its entirety and stand by each and every inclusion. Between blacklists (Beall's) and whitelists (the future of DOAJ, hopefully), we should all be mindful about the gray area, the borderline cases, the false positives. A few more aggressive publishers were once called predatory and have since been removed from such listings (e.g., Hindawi) -- does anyone know how many similar retractions happened? Controversial nominations such as MDPI, whose journals include one sponsored by a learned society (ISPRS) and another one featuring open peer review (Life), have been investigated and cleared by the OA publishers association (OASPA) but remain blacklisted. Other inclusions such as SCIRP are indexed and receive genuine impact factors (IF) from Thomson Reuters (TR) -- then sometimes lose their TR-IF because of citation stacking! Despite the qualifier "potential, possible, or probable", at the end of the day it's unclear how many infractions of Beall's criteria does it take to be labeled a predator -- we just hear the final verdict; there is little transparency about which publisher is guilty of which transgression (other than blog posts). Lest not we all be called unethical for writing a blank check / giving a free pass that may end up in undue accusations. The best approach that I've seen so far is those of subject-area expert-reviewed journal listings, such as the Directory of Nursing Journals, that has been vetted by interested parties such as the International Academy of Nursing Editors. We may wish reality was all black or white, good or bad, villain or hero -- but can we start a more nuanced conversation about why "questionable publishers" are so attractive for researchers in the Majority World in the first place?

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**Jocalyn Clark** → Felipe G. Nievinski · 7 months ago

Thanks for your comments, and I think you've raised what is probably the most challenging part of this problem - the grey area. Having a blacklist and whitelist as guides is helpful - I know this from experience working with LMICs researchers who are inundated with the spam emails and still new to the open access field so struggle with discerning legitimate publishers.

But they are no panacea, as I acknowledge here and we acknowledge in the accompanying editorial to this blog.

Consulting the recent COPE guidance on 'legitimate' publishers will help, and it's particularly useful when considering journals that have been called out as questionable either on Beall's List or other forums. Judge for yourself using this: Committee on Publication Ethics. Principles of transparency and best practice in scholarly publishing.<http://publicationethics.org/files/u7...>

Your suggestion of expert-vetted journal listings is a good one (we have started introducing these at our institution, per research centre), but these must be constantly

updated and the experts of course must make transparent their criteria and interests.

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**Felipe G. Nievinski** → Jocalyn Clark · 7 months ago

It seems we need different sets of overlapping criteria to cover all ground. Here's a few more suggestions. A useful demarcation principle is the existence of a community of scholars around the journal, as attested by, e.g., journal sponsorship by a learned society. Second is inclusion in non-profit online scholarly publishing platform/service, such as BanglaJOL and Scielo (see, e.g., LILACS Database Journal Selection and Permanence Criteria: [link](#)). Some countries maintain national lists of approved journals, such as the Norwegian Scientific Index, the Brazilian Qualis, and the South African DHET list of Approved Journals.

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**Tahir** · 8 months ago

Thanks for sharing your opinion on predatory publications. However, there are some issues that need to be addressed before finalizing your 4 or 5 point agenda to assess the quality of a journal. Otherwise young authors will keep such journals alive

1- Non- English writers are they encouraged to write in English journals from developed countries? Some students often share that their paper was rejected on English quality not on scientific soundness.....you mention about coaching and guidance, some journals dnt even give opportunity such authors to revise/ edit the paper to improve its readability. if a paper is rejected by 2-3 " GOOD" journals for sure a frustrated young author will publish his/her paper a low quality journal..... 2- Good journals doubt the reliability of data. a very good colleague of mine struggled 2 years to publish his data in "Good" journals. The common comment was the number is so high and we doubt the results. he published his paper in a journal who is not indexed in any database. I know his data is genuine and accurate. 3- This issues is extensively studies and is of poor interest to developing countries..... I think this practice should be changed as well. I am quite sure even a poor quality article is addition 2-5% new information in to scientific literature. 4- When Libraries issue ISSN why they dnt see who is publishing the journal who is the editor. This check need to be done when ISSN is issued. 5- Every database EMBase,EBSCO, Proquest, Pubmed, Scopus have quality metrics to add a journal in their databases. If database improve their assessment standards quality of journals can be improve. 6- In Bella's list some of the publishers like Hindwaii.. OMICs..... etcs are heavily criticized and many of their journals have ISI impact factor. so why they criticized..... this is open access model BMC..... Sage open/Springer open/BMJ open/DOve press.... they are also charging alot with a fast peer review 2--3 months, why they are not criticized. I think there should be fairness in judging journals.

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**Rath R. Weird** · 8 months ago





I have been invited to be a Guest-Editor-in-Chief by one of them made-up journals, to submit a review article on my research in another, and to explain what the heck I am researching to an Interim Editor-in-Chief of a third one. And that was just Friday. Did they run out of chimpanzees to come down to my level on the academic food chain?!..

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**Skeeve** · 8 months ago

One more thing. I suggest checking the physical address of these "journals". It is by no ways a sure bet, but, if your plug in the physical address of a journal into google map and it returns you a resident beach house in California, or an Office of an Incorporation firm in Delaware then this journal is very likely a fake.

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**Jocalyn Clark** → Skeeve · 8 months ago

Yes, very good suggestion. Amazing what you find about these journals using google maps.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



**Ravi Murugesan** · 8 months ago

Really good to see this blog post supplementing your editorial. I have given similar suggestions for avoiding predatory publishers in a SciDev practical guide:

<http://www.scidev.net/global/p...>

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**Jocalyn Clark** → Ravi Murugesan · 8 months ago

This is a great Sci Dev post. Will tweet it.

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**Seye Abimbola** · 8 months ago

Thanks Jocalyn for this post.

Here's something I've experienced lately. Because my PhD is on health system governance in Nigeria, I've had search for, read and cite good academic papers analysing and discussing contemporary politics and reforms in Nigeria. Hardly is any of such papers in a "legitimate" journal; they are typically in "predator" open access journals and I have had to use them, even if reluctantly.

This is a result of young academics in Nigeria publishing predominantly in "predator" journals. I wonder what the long term implications of this trend are and if others have similar experiences.

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**Jocalyn Clark** → Seye Abimbola · 8 months ago

Hi Seye. Are you finding that the quality of the papers/studies in these predatory journals is adequate? Without the quality control and editorial/peer review of

journals is adequate. Without the quality control and editorial/peer review of reputable journals I would have assumed the quality in pred journals is v questionable or perhaps unclear.

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**Seye Abimbola** → Jocalyn Clark · 8 months ago

The papers typically read like manuscripts in their first draft, before peer or any review at all. So yes, the quality is often poor. But there is usually something useful in the papers. I think one way out is to have credible local journals in developing countries and schemes to mentor researchers on academic publishing.

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**Jocalyn Clark** → Seye Abimbola · 8 months ago

Interesting. Re mentoring have you heard of AuthorAid? no substitute for local schemes but a good initiative.

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**Aditya J Nanavati** · 8 months ago

Ms. Clark,

Excellent observation. I recently was at the receiving end of such mails. I almost caved in to the elaborate scam. I probably should have known it was too good to be true. There is an increasing emphasis on research publishing. It also has an impact on job/academic position opportunities. This makes the relatively naive medical professional in a developing country very susceptible to such scams. I have tried to write about this in a popular national journal in India (manuscript submitted but unpublished as of today). Hopefully it serves to increase awareness. Your points about lack of support and guidance are valid. The probable solution is to not only spread the word on forums like these but to include publishing know-how in formal teaching to medical professionals.

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**Jocalyn Clark** → Aditya J Nanavati · 8 months ago

Thanks very much Aditya. I agree as a priority we have to improve training, mentorship, support and oversight of publishing practices, especially in LMICs. Can you please share your paper when it's published in the Indian journal?

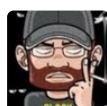
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**Aditya J Nanavati** → Jocalyn Clark · 8 months ago

Sure will share the paper once it's published.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



**Rath R. Weird** · 8 months ago

Wait, "the system we use at my organisation in Bangladesh is an industry standard" - what is it that you are smoking in Bangladesh to claim anything you use or do is an "industry



... that you are entering in Bangladesh to claim anything you see or do is an industry standard"? Or maybe Rana Plaza is the industry standard over there...

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