Opinions on “Predatory” Open-Access Publishers

Kristi Overgaard, Ethical Editor
For this issue, we asked three thought leaders for their opinions on the following:

Regarding Beall’s list of predatory publishers, what do you see as the ramifications of the proliferation of open-access publishers in business to collect available funder fees without doing appropriate peer review? How does such proliferation affect, for example, article quality, journal credibility, or tenure evaluations?

Here is what they said.

Rachel Burley
Vice President and Director, Open Access, Wiley
Jeffrey Beall’s database of predatory open-access (OA) publishers lists more than 300 publishers and journals—a 10-fold increase in just a year—and has attracted plenty of attention. It includes publishers that use deceptive practices, such as excessive e-mail spam to solicit manuscripts or reviewers, adding researchers to editorial boards without explicit permission, and hiding information about author fees.

The rapid growth of OA has created new subscription journals, a publisher typically incurring losses for 4–7 years while the publication slowly develops a base of subscribers sufficient to cover costs. The typical journal might break even in terms of its operating budget in that period, but it can be many years beyond this before the publisher recoups its initial investment. Launching a traditional subscription journal is a long-term investment that is not likely to produce a return to the publisher for 10 years or longer.

Contrast that high barrier to entry with that of a gold OA journal. The only fixed costs that an OA publisher must cover up front are those associated with staff salaries, an online hosting platform, marketing, and peer-review systems. Most other costs are variable: they are incurred only when a new article is published. They include costs of copyediting (if any), composition (if not automated), and XML markup (if full-text HTML is provided). Given the low fixed costs, a publisher can recoup its expenses much faster with an OA publishing model than it can with a subscription model. If a publisher is particularly successful in recruiting papers and in holding down costs, it is possible to recoup all investments and return a profit in the first year or two.

Given the attractive economics of starting an OA journal, more and more publishers are doing so. Because the barriers to entry are so low, the rush to OA is not limited to the established publishers. Many new entrants have launched journals in recent years. Some, such as eLife and PeerJ, have been launched by well-known agencies and investors with experienced staff who have long histories in scholarly publishing. Others have been launched by less reputable people whose sole purpose is to make a quick buck and who have no intention of providing the review and infrastructure (such as DOI deposit, legacy archiving, and abstracting and indexing) that is expected of scholarly publishers.

That second category of publishers is taking advantage of the increased volume...
of scholarly output that must find a home and of the proliferation of gold OA publications, many of which are reputable. Many OA journals are of recent vintage, so they do not always have impact factors or other indicators of quality. A disreputable publisher can launch a family of journals that have titles similar to those of more reputable publishers, list well-known scholars on their mastheads without informing them, and send out invitations to other scholars to submit their work. By the time the scholarly community figures out the ruse, the publisher can simply close up shop, bank its proceeds, rename its company, and repeat.

Subscription publishers do not have a monopoly on integrity (see Robert Maxwell), but the barriers to entry for this model are such that a publisher will see a return only if a publication maintains a good reputation and meets relevant performance metrics over a decade or longer. And although there are many reputable OA publishers that are producing high-quality publications, the barrier to entry is low enough for less reputable organizations to flourish—at least for a time. As the gold rush slows and additional performance metrics are brought to bear (as well as such systems), it is possible that predatory publishers to get into the market.

The term peer review has been appropriated by some OA publishers as though what they practice is equivalent to full peer review. But what they practice often has fewer safeguards and less rigorous practices than full peer review. Eliminating editors-in-chief is one way that megajournals have lowered the bar for themselves. Senior editors and outside peer reviewers validate that material is appropriate for a journal’s audience and sufficiently important to merit attention. In many cases, fewer than half the manuscripts received at a journal that has strong peer review are sent to outside reviewers. Other processes can be sidestepped for instance, checking for conflicts of interest, running antiplagiarism software, and securing author attestation forms. Predatory publishers have been shown to eschew even the more lenient practices, further lowering the barrier of entry.

It is not surprising that extreme practitioners of the OA model have emerged, especially given the lower barriers to entry that OA has created. The question for scientists and those who care about science is this: Are we better off having lower barriers to entry around information outlets that we all depend on?