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Editor's Comments

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Letter to the Editor

Response to: [Schira, H. R., & Hurst, C. \(2019\). Hype or Real Threat: The Extent of Predatory Journals in Student Bibliographies. *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research*, 14\(1\).](#)

Schira and Hurst (2019) are to be commended on their novel approach to examining the real threat posed by predatory publishers, through an examination of the incidence of students' inclusion of articles from predatory journals in their assignment bibliographies. This metric adds an element of balance to an emerging debate that appears to be edging closer to hysteria. To date, most commentators have reported on the expanding number journals and publishers identified by Beall or others as probable predatory publishers. For example, Pond et al. (2019, p.12) note:

In a 2013 interview with The New York Times, Beall noted that list contained 20 journal titles in 2010 and had grown to 300 by 2013. The last update to Beall's list in May 2018 included almost 1,600 suspected predatory journals and 1,200 predatory publishers. It is believed that the true number of these journals may be between 2,000 and 8,000, publishing, on average, 400,000 papers per year.

The implications of these metrics are often framed in such a manner as to appear to guarantee a wave of poor quality articles threatening to engulf the very fabric of research and science (Beall, 2016, 2017; Gasparyan et al., 2017; Johal et al., 2017; Revés et al., 2018; Shen & Björk, 2015). Few commentators have voiced a contrary opinion (see Bell, 2017 for an example of an author that is less damning of predatory publishers). But the reality may be different. While others have looked at who publishes in predatory journals and why they publish there (Demir, 2018; Offord, 2018; Xia et al., 2014), Schira and Hurst's article attempts to examine the impact of this phenomenon on student academic works.

Before continuing it must be acknowledged that Beall's list of potential, possible, or probable predatory journals is imperfect and has often been described as lacking transparency and being subjective (Berger & Cirasella, 2015; Bloudoff-Indelicato, 2015; Crawford, 2016; da Silva, 2017a, 2017b, 2018). Although Schira and Hurst acknowledge these points, they fail to mention other critiques of Beall's work that have noted its racist overtones (Houghton, 2017), or that highlight the racially charged terminology in his and other discussions of predatory publishing (Houghton & Houghton, 2018).

Five articles were identified in Schira and Hurst's analysis as being from suspect journals. This represents a mere 0.34% of all the journal articles quoted. Such a minute percentage cannot be seen as a credible threat. Nonetheless, a deeper examination of the five articles in question is warranted. What is the quality of these five articles identified by Schira and Hurst as being quoted by students? Are these good articles in poor journals? Or are they hopelessly flawed articles? This raises wider questions. For example, what is the quality of articles in predatory journals? The untested, but implied assumption, is that they are all dreadful. Such assumptions are based on a string of notorious sting operations (Aldhous, 2009; Bohannon, 2013; Eldredge, 2012; Neuroskeptic, 2017; Stromberg, 2014). The most infamous sting operation, the Bohannon Sting, involved a deliberately flawed science article being sent to numerous established and new publishers (Bohannon, 2013). However, it is crucial to remember that it was not only predatory journals that were fooled in this sting operation. The flawed journal article accepted by so many predatory publishers was also accepted by journals published by reputable publishers such as Sage, Elsevier, and Wolters Kluwer. Equally, the well known sting conducted by Sokal (1996) was targeted at a leading cultural studies journal. In this instance, in order to test review rigour, Sokal wrote a paper titled "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity", suggesting quantum gravity was a social and linguistic construct. Although patently meaningless, the article was published.

Samuel and Aranha (2018) have acknowledged how valuable articles are published in predatory journals. Although their concern is that in their minds such meritorious works are effectively lost, they nonetheless acknowledge the strength of some articles published in these journals. This theme of quality work being lost through publication in predatory journals is echoed by Wagner (2017). It would therefore be informative to have each of the five articles identified by Schira and Hurst added to ten or twenty randomly selected articles from more mainstream reputable journals in the same field as each and have them all blind reviewed and scored by ten independent experts. Thus, the average scores of the five could be examined to determine if their mean score lies within or outside of the range of scores of the comparison articles.

Further research in the same vein might be useful to evaluate a random sample of say 50 articles drawn from predatory journals in a particular field, alongside a similar number of randomly selected journals from a broad spectrum in the same field. Assuming a double-blind approach, if each article examined was assigned a composite quality metric, it would facilitate comparisons. This analysis could be done while acknowledging that factors such as the lower cost of achieving open access (Shamseer

et al., 2017), as well as increased speed to publication are both valid factors that could push an author towards a more suspect publisher.

It must be asked who benefits from the widespread damning of predatory publishers, which taints most if not almost all open access (OA) publishers. In the field of librarianship and information science (LIS) perhaps the most persuasive exploration of the issue of the potential misclassification of journals as predatory based on Beall's criteria may be seen in Emery & Levine-Clark's (2017) article provocatively titled "Our lives as predatory publishers". As we have an emerging oligopoly of academic publishers (Larivière et al., 2015) it is hard not to be suspicious of their role in the moral panic that has emerged over predatory publishing (Cohen, 1972).

Perhaps the article by Schira and Hurst combined with the recent legal judgment against the predatory publisher OMICS by a Nevada judge on behalf of the US Consumer Agency will help to alleviate some of the fears associated with predatory publishing (Dyer, 2019). The fine of \$50 million imposed by the judge may both deter some predatory publishers from their more unsavoury practices, as well as potentially enticing some to improve quality through enhanced peer review. Unfettered alarmism over predatory publishing damages the entire open access sector. Poor quality academic papers can be found throughout the spectrum of publications and it is perhaps these quality issues that are the greatest threat to academic research. The best response to quality issues throughout academia is a rigorous evaluative approach to all information (and news), whatever its source.

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Response from the authors:

We thank Frank Houghton for his comments. We will consider and learn from them as we continue our research.

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