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PERSPECTIVES

Predatory Journals: How Should We Understand and Evaluate Them?

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ABSTRACT
Predatory journals have emerged as a growing challenge to academic integrity worldwide, driven by increasing publication pressures and ongoing changes in scholarly publishing. Although numerous lists, warning signs, and checklists have been proposed to identify such journals, the lack of consensus and standardized approaches has created confusion among researchers and institutions. This paper is presented as an opinion piece that reflects on existing debates and practical experiences related to predatory publishing. Drawing on the literature and the authors' analytical perspectives, the paper discusses common misunderstandings surrounding predatory journals and highlights limitations of list-based evaluation approaches. It argues for a more cautious, context-sensitive, and process-oriented approach to assessing journals, emphasizing transparency, peer-review practices, editorial governance, and publisher credibility. By offering reflective insights rather than empirical findings, this article aims to stimulate critical discussion and support more informed decision-making in journal evaluation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, the rapid growth of predatory and fraudulent journals has become a serious concern within the global academic community. Fueled by increasing publication pressure and the pervasive publish-or-perish culture, these journals exploit structural weaknesses in scholarly publishing, particularly within the expanding open-access ecosystem (Chandra & Dasgupta, 2024). As a result, early-career researchers and scholars from developing research systems are especially vulnerable to deceptive publishing practices that may undermine research quality, academic credibility, and public trust in science.

Since Jeffrey Beall first introduced the term predatory journals and proposed a set of warning indicators in the early 2010s, the topic has attracted sustained scholarly attention (Beall, 2010; Beall, 2015). Subsequent studies have attempted to define predatory journals, document their characteristics, and assess their prevalence across disciplines (Grudniewicz et al., 2019; Cobey et al., 2018). In parallel, universities, funding agencies, and publishers have introduced policies and initiatives to protect academic integrity and guide researchers away from illegitimate outlets.

Despite these efforts, identifying predatory journals remains a complex and contested task. Existing approaches rely heavily on blacklists, whitelists, and checklists, which often apply inconsistent criteria and lack transparent empirical foundations (Cukier et al., 2020). As a consequence, researchers frequently face uncertainty when evaluating journals that fall into grey zones, particularly newer, interdisciplinary, or regionally based publications.

Moreover, many commonly held assumptions, such as equating publication fees, fast peer review, or high publication volume with predatory behavior, risk oversimplifying a multifaceted phenomenon.

Against this background, this paper presents an opinion piece reflecting on how predatory journals are commonly understood and evaluated in academic practices. The contribution of this opinion piece lies in its focus on everyday evaluation practices and assumptions that shape researchers' publication decisions. While prior studies have extensively documented characteristics of predatory journals, less attention has been paid to how common beliefs and informal heuristics influence journal assessment, particularly in contexts where institutional guidance is limited. By addressing this issue, the paper seeks to complement existing research and encourage more reflective evaluation practices.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The next section discusses challenges associated with existing lists of predatory journals. This is followed by a brief discussion of common operational patterns observed in predatory publishing. The main section then examines six widespread misconceptions that shape how journals are evaluated in practice. The paper concludes with a discussion of implications, limitations of this opinion-based approach, and directions for further debate.

2. THE CHALLENGE OF INCONSISTENT LISTS

Research on predatory journals has expanded substantially since the early 2010s, reflecting growing concerns about the integrity of scholarly communication. Early work by Beall (2010) focused on identifying warning signs of exploitative open access publishing, emphasizing characteristics such as aggressive solicitation practices, opaque fee structures, and the absence of rigorous peer review. Subsequent studies have sought to refine these initial observations by offering more systematic descriptions and conceptual clarifications of predatory publishing practices.

A major strand of the literature examines the definitional ambiguity surrounding predatory journals. Grudniewicz et al. (2019) argue that the lack of a shared definition has hindered effective responses, noting that predatory journals operate along a spectrum rather than forming a clearly bounded category. Similarly, Cobey et al. (2018) highlight the conceptual overlap between predatory journals and low-quality or emerging journals, cautioning against simplistic binary classifications. These studies suggest that predatory publishing should be understood as a set of practices rather than as a fixed list of outlets.

One of the primary efforts to address predatory journals has been the creation of lists identifying them. According to research by Cukier et al. (2020), over 90 such lists or websites have been established, often based on easily observable criteria such as unprofessional presentation. However, the significant diversity and inconsistency among these lists pose several challenging questions for the scientific community: (i) Which of these lists can be considered a reliable reference?; (ii) Is it necessary for researchers to consult all 90 different lists to assess a single journal?; (iii) If a journal is flagged as predatory by only one list while others remain silent, which source should a researcher trust?

In fact, the validity of most of these lists is highly questionable. Only three of the more than 90 lists were developed based on empirical evidence (Dadkhah & Bianciardi, 2016; Hansoti et al., 2016; Mouton & Valentine, 2017). This indicates that only these three lists were compiled using transparent evaluation criteria, specific methodologies, and independent verification. In contrast, the majority of the remaining lists are subjective compilations, lacking both transparency and standardized methods.

Comparative analyses have demonstrated the extent of this inconsistency. Studies comparing Beall's List, Cabells, and the Directory of Open Access Journals show limited overlap in their classifications, with some journals appearing simultaneously on both blacklists and whitelists. Such contradictions highlight the absence of a universally accepted standard for determining journal legitimacy and underscore the risks of relying on any single list as a definitive authority.

Within the Vietnamese academic community, Beall's List is one of the most frequently referenced sources. However, this list has faced criticism since its initial publication by Beall in 2010 due to inconsistencies with other sources and its failure to provide a clear, systematic set of evaluation criteria (Cukier et al., 2020). Furthermore, the reliability of Beall's List has been called into question, as it is no longer managed by Jeffrey Beall himself but maintained by an anonymous individual, as explicitly stated on the Beall's List website (Figure 1).

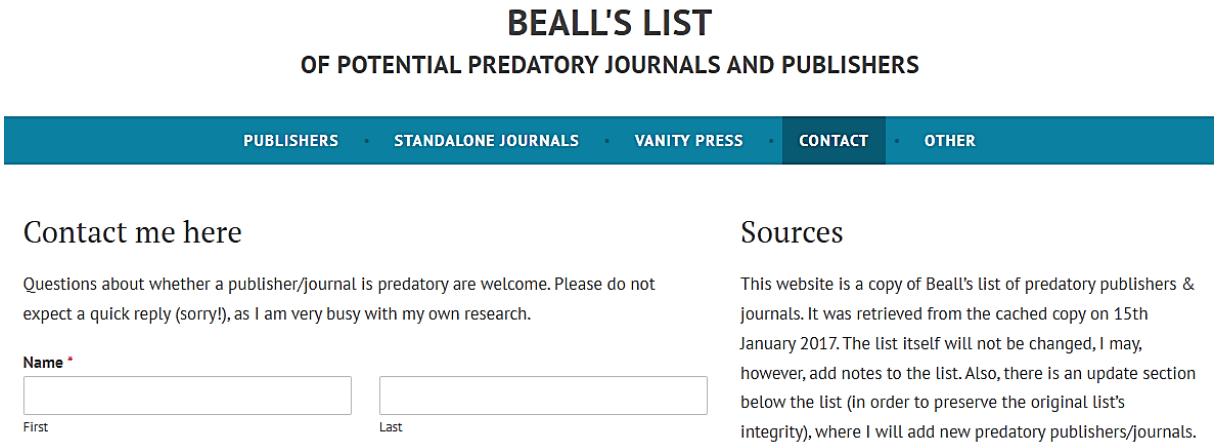

Figure 1. Its original author no longer manages Beall's List
(Source: Beall's List of Potential Predatory Journals and Publishers, n.d.)

3. COMMON OPERATIONAL MODELS

The literature suggests that predatory journals do not operate according to a single uniform model. Instead, they adopt a range of operational strategies that evolve over time in response to regulatory pressure, indexing requirements, and researchers' publication incentives. Understanding these operational patterns is essential for accurate journal evaluation, particularly when surface-level indicators appear legitimate.

One commonly documented model involves a gradual transition from legitimate practices to exploitative behavior. In the initial phase, a journal may adhere to basic academic standards, including formal peer-review procedures and transparent editorial governance, to establish credibility. During this stage, the journal often seeks inclusion in reputable indexing databases such as Scopus or the Web of Science. Once indexed and recognized, the journal may shift its operational strategy by prioritizing publication volume over quality. This transition is typically marked by aggressive manuscript solicitation, promises of rapid review, and reduced scrutiny during peer review. While such journals may continue to appear legitimate based on indexing status alone, their internal practices increasingly resemble those of predatory outlets.

Another prevalent model is the sudden emergence of journals with minimal or fabricated scholarly infrastructure. These journals often feature professionally designed websites and claim international scope, yet provide little verifiable information about editorial oversight, peer-review procedures, or the publisher's identity. In many cases, editorial board members are either untraceable or listed without consent. This model relies heavily on exploiting researchers' limited time and information asymmetry, particularly among early-career scholars.

A more sophisticated and potentially harmful variant is journal hijacking. In this model, fraudulent actors appropriate the name, scope, and branding of an existing legitimate journal. By creating a deceptive website that closely resembles the original, they solicit submissions and publication fees from unsuspecting authors. Unlike conventional predatory journals, hijacked journals exploit the established reputation of legitimate outlets, making detection especially difficult without careful verification of publisher details and submission channels.

Across these models, a common feature is the prioritization of financial gain over scholarly integrity. However, it is important to note that operational characteristics alone do not automatically determine whether a journal is predatory. Some journals may exhibit transitional weaknesses due to limited resources or organizational immaturity rather than deliberate exploitation. Consequently, operational models should be interpreted in conjunction with broader evaluative criteria rather than treated as definitive evidence.

This analysis reinforces the need for evaluation approaches that focus on patterns of practice rather than isolated indicators. By understanding how predatory journals operate and evolve, researchers and institutions can better distinguish between intentional exploitation and developmental limitations. This perspective provides a necessary foundation for examining the widespread misconceptions that often distort journal assessment, which are discussed in the following section.

4. SIX COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT PREDATORY JOURNALS

4.1. Supposedly Reputable Journals are Trustworthy

One common misconception is that a journal's reliability can be assessed based solely on its outward appearance. Many predatory journals today invest heavily in presentation—creating professional-looking websites, recruiting editorial boards with seemingly prestigious names, and displaying impact metrics that appear impressive. However, these elements do not always reflect actual scholarly quality. In fact, editorial board members might be listed without their consent, and impact metrics could be fabricated or derived from unrecognized evaluation systems (Richtig et al., 2018). Even possessing an ISSN or being indexed in Scopus or Web of Science does not guarantee legitimacy or quality.

Evidence shows that some predatory journals initially employ relatively rigorous peer review processes to build credibility and secure indexing. Once they achieve this status, they often shift to a commercialized model by lowering peer review standards, sending mass solicitations, and charging low fees to attract a large volume of submissions. Additionally, having an official address in a developed country, such as the United States or the United Kingdom, is not a safeguard, as many such addresses may be nominal or hard to verify. These examples illustrate that relying solely on superficial indicators is insufficient. Thus, identifying predatory journals requires careful, multi-dimensional assessment.

Researchers should develop strong analytical skills, stay informed about scholarly publishing practices, verify information using authoritative databases, confirm peer-review procedures, and seek expert opinions to ensure accuracy. In light of increasingly sophisticated predatory journals, it is crucial to address these misconceptions to protect research integrity and uphold academic standards.

4.2. Journals That Charge Publication Fees are Fraudulent

Another widespread misunderstanding, particularly in regions less familiar with the open access publishing model, is that any journal charging authors publication fees is predatory. According to COPE (2019), a journal charging publication fees does not automatically indicate that it is exploitative. Many respected publishers (e.g., Nature, Elsevier, Springer) operate open-access journals with transparent and clearly defined article processing charges. The key distinction lies not in whether fees are charged, but in how they are structured and how the peer review process is conducted.

Beall (2012) stresses that legitimate scholarly journals always disclose publication fees, peer review procedures, review timelines, and waiver policies. In contrast, predatory journals often obscure their fees, impose unusual or exorbitant charges, or disclose fees only after a paper has been accepted (Xia et al., 2014). Non-transparent fee structures, combined with lax or absent peer review processes, are accurate indicators of exploitative practices. While predatory journals always charge fees, not all journals that charge fees are predatory. Therefore, researchers should make holistic evaluations, considering factors such as transparency, publisher credibility, editorial and peer review information, and recognition within the scholarly community.

4.3. Fast Peer Review Equals Poor Quality

Another misconception is that journals with short peer review times inherently lack rigor. In reality, this is not necessarily the case. Shorter review cycles can result from efficient workflows, large pools of reviewers, and effective automation systems. For example:

- IEEE Access (Impact Factor: 3.9, Q1) maintains an average review time of 4-6 weeks, thanks to its network of over 1,100 experienced Associate Editors worldwide (IEEE, 2023).

- PLOS One employs a model of "conditional rapid review" processing submissions that meet preliminary standards within 10 days (PLOS One, 2021).

However, it is essential to differentiate between "rapid peer review" and "instant acceptance." Journals that accept manuscripts within days or even hours, without requiring revisions or providing detailed review reports, typically demonstrate superficial evaluation and are often indicative of predatory practices. Conversely, a rapid review that includes specific comments, revision requests, and substantive feedback reflects an efficient yet rigorous process. Therefore, speed alone should not serve as the sole criterion for evaluation. Researchers must consider additional factors such as the transparency of the review process, the quality of reviewer reports, and the academic reputation of the editorial board.

4.4. Receiving an Invitation to Submit an Article: An Act of Appreciation towards Research Value?

Receiving an invitation to publish from an international journal can make many researchers, particularly those early in their careers, feel recognized and valued. This often leads to the assumption that the journal is genuinely interested in their specific expertise or research topic. However, this is a common tactic employed by predatory journals to attract authors (Cukier et al., 2020).

Predatory journals often send out generic invitation emails that fail to mention the recipient's specific expertise, research titles, or contributions (Lewinski & Oermann, 2018). Many researchers receive invitations from journals unrelated to their field, or even from journals they have never heard of (Wood & Krasowski, 2020). This suggests that these invitations are not based on genuine academic assessment; rather, they are mass-marketing strategies designed to solicit manuscripts for profit. In contrast, reputable scholarly journals extend invitations only under specific circumstances—usually to researchers with publications directly related to the special issue's focus or when an editor has a legitimate reason to invite a particular scholar. Therefore, publication invitations should not be automatically regarded as academic recognition. Scrutiny is essential, particularly when invitations are impersonal, lack transparency about the peer-review process, or fail to disclose fee information.

4.5. Mega-Journals: Are They Disguised Predatory Journals?

Some people mistakenly assume that mega-journals—characterized by their high volume of publications, broad subject coverage, and review criteria based on methodological soundness rather than novelty—are essentially predatory journals in disguise. This reflects a misunderstanding.

Mega-journals represent a legitimate and increasingly popular publishing model, especially in the context of open science and the growing demand for rapid and transparent dissemination of research (Spezi et al., 2017). The fundamental distinction between mega-journals and predatory journals lies in the transparency and rigor of their peer-review processes. Established mega-journals, such as PLOS One, Nature Communications, and PeerJ, maintain clear review policies, specialized editorial boards, and rigorous control over published content, typically managed by internationally recognized publishers (Cheng et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2016). While these journals do not necessarily require groundbreaking discoveries, they still demand sound methodology, valid data, and conclusions that align with evidence.

The real issue is that some predatory journals deliberately label themselves as "mega-journals" to create the impression that mass publication is acceptable. This has led to the misconception that all mega-journals are predatory. In reality, the problem lies not in the quantity of publications but in whether academic standards are consistently upheld. Thus, evaluating a journal should be based on multiple factors rather than simply its publication volume or operational model.

4.6. Distinguishing Low-Quality Journals from Predatory Journals

Another misconception is that journals of modest academic quality are equivalent to predatory journals. In reality, not all newly established journals, lesser-known outlets, or those without an impact factor are predatory. Many emerging journals are still refining their workflows and improving peer-review standards, often originating in developing countries where they may not yet meet the benchmarks of well-established outlets. These journals may face limitations in funding, staffing, or indexing, yet they still demonstrate transparency and a commitment to improvement.

In contrast, predatory journals typically lack transparency in their review procedures, fail to disclose clear editorial information, and prioritize profit through fees over scholarly quality. Therefore, quickly labeling underdeveloped journals as predatory is inappropriate and may contribute to undue stigmatization, particularly against publishing initiatives outside major academic centers.

Distinguishing between a developing journal and a predatory one requires careful evaluation - not solely based on citation indices or years in publication, but also on transparency, scholarly commitment, and the journal's potential for improvement. This distinction is particularly crucial for researchers selecting outlets for their work and for research governance bodies responsible for designing fair and reasonable policies for journal recognition and classification.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1. Discussion

The reflections presented in this paper suggest that predatory journals cannot be reliably identified through single indicators or simplified heuristics. Instead, predatory publishing should be understood as a set of practices that collectively undermine core principles of scholarly communication, including transparency, peer review integrity, and editorial accountability. This perspective is consistent with prior arguments that emphasize the absence of a universally accepted definition and the spectrum-like nature of predatory behavior (Grudniewicz et al., 2019; Cobey et al., 2018).

The six misconceptions discussed illustrate how reliance on surface-level signals such as publication fees, review speed, indexing status, or publication volume can distort journal evaluation. Similar concerns have been raised in studies demonstrating that both blacklists and whitelists apply inconsistent criteria and frequently disagree in journal classification (Strinzel et al., 2019; Cukier et al., 2020). When such tools are used mechanically, they risk legitimizing journals that strategically comply with formal requirements while engaging in questionable practices, and they also risk unfairly excluding legitimate but less visible outlets.

These observations support calls to move away from static, list-based approaches toward more reflective and process-oriented evaluation. Scholars have increasingly argued that journal assessment should focus on how editorial and peer review processes function in practice rather than on symbolic markers of legitimacy (Shamseer et al., 2017; Shen & Shah, 2023). From this perspective, transparency in governance, clarity of peer review procedures, and consistency between stated scope and published content are more informative than nominal indicators alone.

As an opinion piece, this paper proposes a multidimensional approach to journal evaluation rather than a formal assessment instrument. Drawing on prior discussions in the literature, four dimensions emerge as particularly relevant. These include transparency of policies and fees, integrity of peer review practices, credibility of publishers and editorial boards, and consistency of scholarly content over time. Similar dimensions have been highlighted in empirical and conceptual work examining differences between legitimate and predatory journals (Hansoti et al., 2016; Shamseer et al., 2017).

The implications of this perspective extend beyond individual publication decisions. Institutional reliance on simplified indicators may reinforce problematic incentives and contribute to misclassification, particularly for journals operating outside dominant academic centers (Nielsen & Davison, 2020). A more reflective evaluation approach may help institutions balance the protection of research integrity with respect for academic diversity and freedom.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research

Given its nature as an opinion piece, this article has inherent limitations. The arguments presented are interpretive and based on selective engagement with existing literature rather than systematic evidence or original empirical data. The six misconceptions discussed should therefore be understood as illustrative reflections rather than empirically validated categories. Future research could examine the prevalence of these misconceptions among researchers, reviewers, and administrators, and their influence on publication behavior and research evaluation outcomes.

Further empirical studies could also explore the long-term effects of predatory publishing on research careers, knowledge dissemination, and public trust in science, building on prior work in this area (Xia et al., 2014; Cobey et al., 2018). Comparative analyses of institutional policies across national and disciplinary contexts may provide additional insights into how evaluation frameworks can be designed to minimize unintended consequences.

5.3. Conclusion

Predatory journals represent an evolving challenge within contemporary scholarly publishing, shaped by publication pressure, structural incentives, and uneven access to information. Understanding and evaluating these journals requires moving beyond simplified assumptions and static classification tools. As argued in this opinion piece, misconceptions about fees, peer-review speed, journal reputation, and publication scale significantly contribute to confusion in journal assessment.

By reflecting on these misconceptions and situating them within existing debates, this paper emphasizes the value of holistic and process-oriented evaluation. Rather than relying on singular markers or authoritative lists, researchers and institutions are encouraged to assess journals on transparency, peer-review integrity, publisher credibility, and

scholarly consistency over time. This perspective aligns with broader calls for more nuanced and context-sensitive approaches to safeguarding research integrity (Grudniewicz et al., 2019; Shen & Shah, 2023).

Ultimately, this article aims to contribute to ongoing discussion rather than to provide definitive solutions. In an academic environment increasingly shaped by performance metrics and publication pressure, fostering critical reflection on how predatory journals are understood and evaluated is an essential step toward more responsible and equitable scholarly publishing practices.

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