

Predatory Journals: What You Need to Know About Them?

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The Experience

Recently, I have noticed that the number of emails I receive from possible predatory journals has increased dramatically, either in the form of junk (most of them) or regular email. I receive them every day, including weekends and holidays, and often awake to an email full of invitations to contribute to these “scientific” journals. Although most researchers are already aware of this scam, it is never too late to warn others, especially early career researchers. In addition, the number of predatory journals appears to be growing;¹ thus, it is important that we know who they are and what their intentions are.

What is a Predatory Journal?

Defining a predatory journal is difficult. Predatory journals do not follow international publishing standards² and their main motive is financial gain.³ One of the main reasons why it is so difficult to reach consensus on its definition is, in part, because certain open access journals that seem to fit the definition are simply lacking editorial quality, but are not predatory *per se*; that is, they are legitimate journals with poor publishing standards.⁴ In a recent paper by the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME),² the authors provide a succinct synthesis about predatory journals and thoroughly review different approaches to identify a possible predatory journal. In particular, they provide their own table of “warning signs” to watch for (**Table 1**) and a very useful algorithm, which I believe should be used when dealing with a possible predatory journal. It is important to note, however, that all the available criteria are arbitrary and have not been validated, and thus they should be used carefully. In summary, predatory journals are illegitimate open access publishers whose only mission is financial gain at the expense of publishing all types of literature (including poor, but possibly also good quality), as long as authors pay for the publication fees.

How do predatory journals operate?

Predatory journals operate by mass-emailing researchers in hopes of getting researchers to publish with them²⁻⁴; they acquire your email address from your already published work. In my experience, email invitations from predatory journals are generally low quality, contain poor English usage, and use persuasive language as well as exaggerated adjectives to refer to you and your work. This is confirmed when I compare my own experiences to the criteria listed by the WAME in **Table 1**. Lately, I have also noticed that they are using the “Request a Read Receipt” tool, so that they know whether you opened their email or not. Moreover, it is not uncommon to receive invitations from journals in which you lack expertise; for example, I am interested in general pediatrics, gastroenterology and global health, and my research has been focused on these disciplines accordingly. Why would an Ob & Gyn journal, or even a psychiatry journal, want me to publish my work with them? So also consider this aspect when you receive these emails.

Table 1. “Warning Sign” features that should increase suspicion that a journal is predatory

No information as to whether there are author fees in the Instructions for Authors.
Peer review is not mentioned in the Instructions for Authors.
Little or no information is provided regarding the editor or editorial board.
No location is listed for the journal offices, or location is very different than the location of the editors and editorial board.
The journal website is not easily accessible in an internet search (could be a problem in a legitimate journal in a low- or middle-income locale).
The journal publishes either an unusually small, unusually large, or markedly variable numbers of articles each year.
You or your colleagues have received formulaic e-mail solicitations for submissions that do not specify an interest in particular projects or areas that you are working on.
Promised routine turnaround times for review and publication are so rapid that they seem “too good to be true” and would be unlikely to encompass the time necessary for true peer review.
You do not receive a response to e-mail or telephone messages sent to the editor or journal office within a few days.
The name of the journal is very similar to the name of a well-known, established journal with a good reputation.
The publication fees are atypical for the scholarly publishing industry (much higher or much lower fees can both signal problems [with recognition that journals in low- or middle-income countries may have legitimately low fees]).
It is difficult to identify articles published in the journal when searching Google Scholar or other databases (with recognition that new journals or those in low- or middle-income countries may face lags in indexing).
Information about author affiliations and/or contact information is not present in published articles.
Someone you know listed on the editorial board or journal staff, when you query them about the journal, is unaware of their supposed affiliation with the journal.

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Here are some common examples of email invitations from possible predatory journals:

“Dear Prof. (even though you are not a professor)/Dr. [your name],

We are in shortfall of one article for successful release of volume # / We humbly request you to submit any of your articles including commentaries, opinions / I am delighted to inform you that [journal’s name] is planning to release volume # Issue # and we need two articles to accomplish this issue.... / We are pleased to inform you that the journal is under process of accepting the articles from the experts like you / Based on your eminence and contribution towards the scientific community we request you to publish your work in [journal’s name]

Your article with the title [title of your manuscript] has left a deep impression on us / has impressed us deeply / has attracted widespread attention”

consequence in my opinion. Indeed, recent research demonstrated that a relatively large number of possible predatory journals in the fields of neurosciences⁵ and rehabilitation⁶ is indexed in PubMed – PubMed is amongst the most important databases we rely upon to conduct our research! (For review see ^{7,8}) Unquestionably, the predatory publishing issue is a global concern that needs to be addressed immediately.

In conclusion, it is paramount that we as researchers spread the word and are aware of the predatory publishing model. As you continue to publish more and more, and considering the rise in the number of predatory journals in recent years, you should expect to receive their invitation emails eventually, if not already received. It is important to keep in mind what their emails look like, and if you end up curiously surfing their website (which some of them look legitimate), be sure to apply the criteria and algorithm published by the WAME² and use your own –or your more experienced colleague’s– judgment.

What is the impact of predatory journals on today’s scientific community?

Not only are predatory journals scamming researchers and making profit in a fraudulent manner, but are also jeopardizing the credibility of science itself, with the latter being the most critical and scary

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