

Is This a Quality Journal to Publish In? How Can You Tell?

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Abstract:

This article summarizes a presentation delivered by Beth Bernhardt at the 2016 North Carolina Serials Conference. Bernhardt's talk provided an overview of predatory and unethical publishing practices, provided resources to consult when evaluating open access journal quality, and discussed examples from her work at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). The presentation's focus was on helping librarians and others prepare to serve as resources for faculty members who may need assistance in evaluating open access journals as potential publication venues.

Keywords: academic journals | academic libraries | open access | predatory publishing | scholarly communication

Article:

Introduction

In this presentation at the 2016 North Carolina Serials Conference, Beth Bernhardt shared methods for evaluating open access journals as potential publication venues and discussed the growing issue of publishers engaging in predatory and unethical practices. As assistant dean for Collection Management and Scholarly Communications at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), Bernhardt is involved in a number of open access initiatives and has firsthand experience working with faculty members who have been targeted by predatory publishers. In the presentation, she provided an overview of predatory publishing practices, offered resources that can be used when evaluating journal quality, gave positive and negative indicators of open access journal legitimacy, and discussed examples from her work at UNCG.

Predatory practices

Bernhardt first discussed the subset of exploitative publishing within the larger community of legitimate open access publishers. The practice of charging author fees for publication is not limited to predatory or exploitative publishers. Many legitimate open access journals charge publication fees, with funds going toward editorial and publishing services that add value to the publishing process. Predatory or exploitative journals charge fees and may indicate that funds will go toward editorial and publication costs, but these journals add little or no value to articles.

Such journals may not include a scholarly peer review component in the publication process, and information about peer review policies may be vague or nonexistent. The subset of journals that engage in these unethical practices can contribute to a culture of suspicion and distrust of the larger open access movement. These misperceptions may prevent faculty members and other researchers from exploring or engaging with legitimate open access publishers and journals and may cause challenges for librarians who are tasked with promoting open access initiatives on their campuses. The correction of these misperceptions is an educational opportunity for librarians, who can help faculty members understand the larger open access movement, as well as helping them avoid associating themselves and their work with predatory journals.

Bernhardt explained that predatory journals often target faculty members directly, emailing them invitations to publish. Some of these communications may be personalized and flattering, indicating familiarity with the faculty member's work and stating interest in engaging with the researcher to publish on the topic. Contact information, research interests, and publication and presentation histories are often readily available online via institutional directories, conference programs, institutional repositories, and personal websites. Predatory publishers can harvest this freely available information and use it to target faculty members directly. Faculty members who have received such publication offers may approach librarians for assistance in determining the quality and reputation of the journal or publisher. Librarians can assist faculty by providing resources and by helping faculty understand positive and negative indicators of journal quality.

Bernhardt noted that the literature shows that early-career scholars in developing countries can be at particular risk of being exploited by predatory journals. Such scholars may be working to publish and establish themselves in their fields but may lack institutional support that would prepare them to recognize or question potentially predatory publication offers (Xia, Harmon, Connolly, & Donnelly, 2014). Xia, J., Harmon, J. L., Connolly, K. G., & Donnelly, R. M. (2014). Who publishes in “predatory” journals? *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 66(7). Retrieved from: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/asi.23265/full>. By providing education and outreach to faculty, scholars, and others, librarians can help raise awareness of these issues.

Resources

Bernhardt discussed four resources that librarians and others can consult when determining the legitimacy of open access journals and publishers. Three of these resources are professional associations that can be positive indicators of journal legitimacy: the Directory of Open Access Journals, the Committee on Publication Ethics, and the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association. The fourth resource, Beall's List, is used to track journals and publishers that may operate under questionable practices. All of these resources will be discussed in greater detail. Bernhardt stressed that the inclusion of a publisher or journal in any one of these associations or lists may not provide sufficient information in making a judgment about journal quality. She noted that librarians and researchers should be prepared to do their own investigations in addition to consulting these resources.

Bernhardt first mentioned the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), which is “an online directory that indexes and provides access to high quality, open access, peer-reviewed journals”

(DOAJ, 2016a Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). (2016a). Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). Retrieved from: <https://doaj.org/>). DOAJ has a set of rigorous requirements that journals must meet before they can be added to the list, and journals that were added under previous, less stringent, criteria must apply for recertification in order to remain on the list. Current required information includes basics about the journal, such as title, ISSN, publisher, and article submission charges; editorial process information, such as clarity on the peer review process and the journal's aims and scope; open access information; content licensing specifics; copyright policies; and more (DOAJ, 2016b Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). (2016b). Journal application form. Retrieved from: <https://doaj.org/application/new>). DOAJ strives to keep its directory up-to-date and accurate and encourages users to bring forward information on included journals that may be operating under questionable practices. The inclusion of a journal on DOAJ's list is not an absolute seal of quality, but it can be a favorable indicator.

Another potential indicator of legitimacy is a journal's association with the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). COPE is “open to editors of academic journals and others interested in publication ethics” (COPE, n.d. Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). (n.d.). About COPE. Retrieved from: <http://publicationethics.org/about>). While COPE is a membership-based organization, it provides some freely accessible documentation, including a code of conduct and a best practices document geared toward journal editors. For editors and others wishing to join the organization, COPE provides a Principles of Transparency document that sets out the criteria used in evaluating potential members. These principles include transparency in relation to the peer review process, associated governing body, editorial team, copyright policies, conflicts of interest, revenue sources, and other practices and information related to the publication of the journal (COPE, 2015 Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). (2015). Principles of transparency and best practice in scholarly publishing. Retrieved from: http://publicationethics.org/files/Principles_of_Transparency_and_Best_Practice_in_Scholarly_Publishingv2.pdf). As with DOAJ, association with COPE is a favorable indicator for journal legitimacy, but potential authors should not use it as their only measure in making decisions on publisher quality.

A third association that can indicate journal legitimacy is the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association (OASPA). This group seeks to “represent the interests of Open Access (OA) journal and book publishers globally in all scientific, technical and scholarly disciplines” (OASPA, 2016 Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association (OASPA). (2016). Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association. Retrieved from: <http://oaspa.org/>). Members include open access publishers and organizations associated with open access publishing. The OASPA site provides membership criteria and a code of conduct for members. Much like DOAJ and COPE, OASPA's criteria and conduct policy value transparency in relation to peer review, editorial board associations, fees, licensing, and related issues.

The final resource Bernhardt discussed was Beall's List, which is compiled and curated by Jeffrey Beall of Auraria Library at the University of Colorado, Denver. Beall provides two online lists, one of “potential, possible, or probable predatory scholarly open-access publishers;” the other of “potential, possible, or probable predatory scholarly open-access journals.” He states

that these lists are meant to be used with further research, assessment, and judgment from scholars (Beall, 2016 Beall, J. (2016). List of publishers. Retrieved from: <https://scholarlyoa.com/publishers/>). Bernhardt noted that inclusion of journals and publishers on these lists is based on the discretion of one individual, though Beall is transparent about the criteria he uses to judge journals and publishers. Areas of critical scrutiny include practices related to editorship and staffing, business management, integrity, and journal standards, with a full list of criteria available online (Beall, 2015 Beall, J. (2015). Criteria for determining predatory open-access publishers. Retrieved from: <https://scholarlyoa.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/criteria-2015.pdf>). Beall's site also offers an active blog that discusses issues related to scholarly open access publishing (Beall, n.d. Beall, J. (n.d.). Scholarly open access. Retrieved from: <https://scholarlyoa.com/>).

Journal quality indicators

Bernhardt looked further at indicators of journal quality. Negative indicators may be as simple as the presence of misspellings or broken English on the journal's website or in their email communications. Publisher direct marketing or spamming to potential authors is another questionable practice. Other indicators may include a lack of clear and readily available information about the journal, such as a website, journal scope statement, contact information, author instructions, and policies relating to peer review and copyright. Potential authors should also look at journal back issues for table of contents information, as journals that repeatedly publish issues with the same lead authors are also often questionable.

Bernhardt noted that some predatory journals have constructed fake editorial boards based on information gathered from real faculty profiles. Faculty members who are included in these fake boards often have no idea that their information is being used in an attempt to convince other scholars of the legitimacy of the journal. Bernhardt shared an example of a UNCG professor whose information had been co-opted by one such journal. The professor's picture, title, and biography were listed on the site, making it appear that he was affiliated with the journal, but the faculty member had no such association and was not aware that his information had been harvested and used in this manner.

Positive indicators of journal quality can include clearly defined information about the journal, including its scope, audience, any fees, copyright policy, and other policies. Potential authors should examine the journal's editorship and the composition of its editorial board and should look for affiliations with established scholarly societies or academic institutions. Presence of an ISSN can also be an indicator of legitimacy.

Throughout the presentation, Bernhardt reinforced the need for researchers, librarians, and others to use their own good judgment when evaluating offers of publication from unknown journals, and she stressed the critical importance of this evaluation and research taking place before faculty members commit to a publication venue. Bernhardt discussed the difficulty of attempting to retract submitted articles from predatory publishers—even before official publication—particularly if a contract has been signed. She mentioned her experience working with a UNCG faculty member who has been in this situation and reiterated that librarians can serve an important role in helping researchers understand how to evaluate these offers. She also stressed

the importance of librarians and other campus research support personnel working proactively to educate faculty on predatory publishing practices.

UNCG practices

In the UNCG University Libraries, Bernhardt serves as the main point person for handling questions of predatory publishing practices. In this role, she fields questions from liaison librarians and members of the teaching faculty. UNCG personnel who receive direct offers of publication, or who are considering open access journals as potential publication venues, can reach out to Bernhardt, who will help them evaluate the venue.

Bernhardt shared a recent example from a UNCG professor to illustrate how predatory publishers are targeting conference presenters. This faculty member recently traveled to a conference to give a presentation, and before she had left the conference city to return home, she had already received a predatory publication request from an individual who indicated that he or she was interested in publishing on the faculty member's presentation topic. This faculty member was well versed in recognizing a predatory request, but not all faculty members are. Bernhardt finished the presentation with a handy list of online resource links, including all resources mentioned here, as well as the UNCG LibGuide on Scholarly Communications, which covers topics including “copyright, open access, author rights, digital archiving and more” (Bernhardt, 2016 Bernhardt, B. (2016). Scholarly communications at UNC Greensboro. Retrieved from: <http://uncg.libguides.com/scholarlycomm>).

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