

The Sensitivity of Research on COVID-19: An Analysis of the Response of Peer Review Systems of Predatory Journals

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ABSTRACT

Beall's list, which was heavily used as a base for selection of predatory journals by a large number of research studies left the internet in 2017. Thus, the status of journals declared as predatory in this list is debatable. To verify the quality of journals in terms of accuracy and standard of peer review, a sample of Medical Science journals from Beall's list and indexed in reputed indexing/abstracting databases was taken. The sample of journals was put to quality and credibility check by submitting a deliberately flawed research article. Deliberate errors exceed an acceptable norm in the submitted research paper. It is astonishing to see that the majority of journals (61.96%) accepted the flawed article on such a sensitive issue (i.e., COVID-19) without peer review and desired revisions. Instant mails reporting the paper's acceptance, preceded by multiple emails requesting submission for an article processing fee, were received frequently. It is found that such publishing ventures only want to generate as much revenue as possible.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, Medical Science, Peer Review, Predatory Publishing, Scholarly Communication

INTRODUCTION

Open Access (OA) is a noble concept that was supposed to herald a revolution in scholarly publishing by making research freely accessible to anyone online. However, it has turned into academic racketeering because of the rapid rise of questionable and low-quality journals. The problem of compromised quality appeared in scholarly communication as a result of a new open-access publishing model called gold open-access. The model is mishandled by a group of publishers whose primary focus is monetary gains. Such practices threaten research integrity and honest scholarly pursuits. The victimizer is what has come to be called predatory publishers. The term Predatory publisher was introduced in 2010 by *Jefferey Beall*. Experts still hung up on the term after so many years of introduction of the term, focusing on whether it is appropriate or not. However, the term is not so important; what is essential is to understand the underlying threat to scholar's communication and the damage to early career researchers and researchers based in developing countries from becoming the victims of these

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publishers. Predatory publishers are essentially counterfeit publishers. They pretend to be genuine scholarly publishers, but they aim really to generate as much revenue as possible from researchers. They employ the gold access model, charging authors a fee upon acceptance of a research article for publication. Many claim to be scholarly institutes, scholarly societies, or associations when they are just a sole proprietor running multiple journals from a dwelling. Some copy the titles of existing journals or create titles very close to those of respected journals. They use spam as their primary advertising method, filling the inboxes of countless scholars around the world. Such journals often lack and compromise the Peer review, which is a pillar of Science and research. Peer reviewers typically recommend that unscientific or unsound research be rejected for publication, preserving the integrity of the scholarly record. It also serves to help improve articles before they are published. Reviewers point out errors and omissions in manuscripts, problems that can be fixed in the next revision of the paper. Since predatory journals fail to manage an honest and proper peer review, many of the papers published in them are not only unscientific but crude, unpolished, often flawed drafts. One such example is the experiment presented in this paper, when a deliberately flawed and manipulated paper recommending certain medicines as a potential treatment for the deadly disease COVID19 is submitted in the selected sample of journals about the sensitive issue declared as the pandemic and global health emergence by World Health Organisation. Misinformation about Covid-19 might be deadly for millions of people around the globe.

RELATED LITERATURE

In recent years, we have seen the creation and growth of many OA journals. The extension of the movement or philosophy of open knowledge in universities and higher education institutions was reviewed by García-Peñalvo., García de Figuerola, and Merlo, (2010). Various forms of publishing practices have been adopted. Some newly created OA journals lack transparency and do not identify an editorial board. Many require considerable article processing charges for authors. Such journals are considered to be primarily interested in making quick money and paying little or no attention to peer review (Beall, 2012a). One barrier to combating predatory publishing was the lack of an agreed definition. However, (Grudniewicz.A.et.al, 2019) argue for a definition of a predatory journal that will protect scholarship. The definition reads, “*Predatory journals and publishers are entities that prioritize self-interest at the expense of scholarship and are characterized by false or misleading information, deviation from best editorial and publication practices, a lack of transparency, and/or the use of aggressive and indiscriminate solicitation practices.*” But the definition was challenged by (Dobusch, L., Heimstädt, M., Mayer, K., & Ross-Hellauer, T, 2020) on the ground that their proposed definition excludes an important feature of predatory journals — poor-quality peer review — on the grounds that such reviews are not accessible for analysis. If misuse of the peer-review label is not included in the definition of predatory journals, it could strengthen rather than weaken them. Thus identification of process and clarity of central part in controlling and assessing research, the peer-review system need to be identified. However, the steep production of manuscripts in the 21st century brought a lot of changes in the conventional “peer review process”. Experts are worried that the major characteristics of the “peer review process” which includes “reviewer bias, conflicts of interest, and even outright scams in which authors are caught reviewing their own papers or manipulating the review process by suggesting cronies as reviewers” (Adler & Stayer, 2017; Bero, 2017; Ferguson, Marcus, & Oransky, 2014). Most of the journals solicit the author to suggest reviewers to review the submitted manuscript. Unfortunately, authors either suggest fake reviewers or, “they are indeed real and appropriate authorities for the topic area but are suggested along helpfully with their email addresses, which have been faked and end up leading back to the author” (Fischman, 2012). Keeping the concern into consideration the editors of the “*Journal of Neurochemistry*” conducted research based on more than thousand submissions, demonstrating that “an article was 2.4 times more likely to be recommended for acceptance by an author-suggested reviewer compared to a non-author-suggested

reviewer”(Hausmann., Schweitzer., Middleton.,& Schulz, 2018). Further, (Ferguson, Marcus, & Oransky, 2014) revealed that sometimes the authors themselves provide journals with fake peer reviewers in order to secure a positive response. A consequence of the process is that some journals are now reconsidering the practice of asking authors for suggested reviewers. However, it is not in the interest of predatory journals to expose such dishonest practices, since their ultimate aim is to earn money. Haug, 2013 argues that the introduction of the APC model by “predatory” publishers cheats the authors by having low or no editorial standards but sometimes authors are willing to pay so that they can have their work published without too much scrutiny. In order to expose the real state of affairs of these journals, “some critically minded researchers have put these journals to test”. Anonymous Eastern Europe researchers sent nonsense and fictional article to a publisher, “AICIT”. The publisher accepted it very quickly, wrote a fake review and demands the author for article processing fees (Beall 2015). “Several times similar disclosures have been made in the studies in the last few years” (Segran 2015; Stromberg, 2016). Another annoying case was “the publication of a shamefully titled text “*Get Me Off Your Fucking Mailing List*”. It was an attempt by the author to stop receiving spams and offers from predatory journals. Sending the manuscript to a journal and ironically, the contribution was accepted by its editorial board and was published (Stromberg, 2016). Another scam was revealed in which a computer-generated paper was submitted by the Gilbert (2009) to “*The Open Information Science Journal*”. A large amount of money was demanded by the publisher for placement prior to publication from the authors without taking quality into consideration. “A typical sign of predatory publishing is a stubborn refusal to engage with retractions, corrections or assisting in misconduct investigations”. Recently after making a comparison of most prestigious medical journals by “Ben Goldacre on the COMPARE website for not accepting corrections to misleading articles or giving access to protocols when fraud is suspected (COMPARE, 2019)”. Others have criticized one of the biggest OA publishers, PLOS, “for not providing authors with page proofs and then not publishing corrections for the resulting formatting errors” (Chawla, 2016). The habit of labeling journals as “peer reviewed” has become “something of a gamble”. Sometimes the OA and particularly the predatory journals assert to review submissions but never trouble to do so. “Not coincidentally, this seems to be leading some academics to inflate their publication lists with papers that might not pass such scrutiny”. There are more general cases of false peer review. As discovered at *Biomed Central* (BMC) among the large portfolio of the journals many companies are involved in selling the false reviews while as, 50 articles carrying false review are withdrawn from the database (Haug, 2013). Yet another case highlighted by (Davis, 2009) where a journal claiming of enforcement of high ethical and publication standard accepted a completely nonsensical paper, with a sole intention to collect APC. A grammatically correct but “content-free” paper was generated using a software program. “The resulting article looked legitimate unless someone actually read it and realized that the text makes no sense whatsoever”. John Bohannon published an article in *Science* magazine entitled “*Who’s Afraid of Peer Review?*” revealed that dozens of OA journals targeted in an elaborate *Science* sting accepted a spoof research article, raising questions about peer-review practices in much of the OA world (Bohannon, 2013). Beall (2017) examined the problem of predatory journals, low-quality OA journals that “seek to earn revenue from scholarly authors without following best practices of scholarly publishing. Seeking to accept as many papers as possible, they typically do not perform a standard peer review, leading to the publication of improperly vetted research”.

METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE

Step 1: Selection of Journals From Beall’s List

A random sample of 144 journals in the field of Medical Sciences was selected from the Beall’s list of potential predatory journals currently maintained by an anonymous postdoctoral researcher in one of the European universities and available at <https://beallslist.net/>. 84% of journals had websites, while 16% of journal websites are no longer available. Thus, the sample was reduced to 121 journals.

Step 2: Journals Indexed by Reputed and Bogus Indexing/Abstracting (I/A) Databases

The size of the sample was reduced by selecting the journals indexed by reputed indexing/abstracting (I/A) databases, as well as by Bogus I/A databases. It was found that reputed I/A databases indexed 15% of journals, and 13% of journals were indexed by bogus I/A databases. Thus, the total sample size was reduced to 28% (i.e., 34) of journals.

Step 3: Writing an Intentionally Flawed Paper

Since the sample of journals was from the field of Medical Science, the authors wrote an intentionally flawed paper about the treatment of the COVID-19 Pandemic. During the literature search, it was found that researchers have summarized the evidence regarding *chloroquine* for the treatment of COVID-19, and many clinical trials are ongoing across the globe. The paper was structured by incorporating deliberate and serious errors in the abstract, methodology, and results exceeding an acceptable norm in the research paper.

Step 4: Submission of the Flawed Paper

The scammed paper entitled as “Chloroquine treatment of COVID-19: A systematic review of efficiency and safety” (Fig.1) under two false authors names “*Iham, Dattatreya Kota*” and *Nagadi, Bin Yamin* using a fake name generating website (www.fakenamegenerator.com) with a made-up affiliation was submitted to the sampled set of journals from March 12 to April 5th, 2020. The article was based on invented results with obvious and deliberate errors both in terms of language and concerning the reporting of methodology and results.

FINDINGS

The abstract of the submitted paper included obvious errors (Fig. 1). There is mention of certain drugs in the abstract which were presented as suitable drugs undergoing clinical trials for their efficacy and safety in the treatment of COVID 19. However, it is worth to notice that the drug names were deliberately misrepresented and misspelled e.g.; the names of drugs, Arbidol and Remdesivir were deliberately misrepresented as *Abridol* and *Remsidevir*. There are no drugs present under such names and we wanted to ensure the seriousness of the editorial and review board by incorporating such serious error.

There is a mention of 23 ongoing clinical trials in USA in the abstract, however in the methodology (Fig. 2) we mentioned Chinese Clinical Trial Registry. This means that the clinic trails are going on in USA and not in China. This deliberate error was also incorporated in the submitted paper simply to ensure whether, the peer review process of the journals would identify the serious mistake in the paper submitted to the sampled journals.

The results (Fig. 3) and abstract (Fig. 1) of the submitted paper contradict. The make-up authors specified in the result part that “Five trials were found in the trial registries” while as in the abstract and methodology section there is a mention of “23 ongoing clinical trials”.

Journals accepted the flawed paper without raising any point of concern. Furthermore, most of the citations incorporated in the paper are false. A careful observation of the results (Fig. 3) reported by the paper mentions five trails instead of “23” as stated in methodology and abstract. It is astonishing to find that such an erroneous paper was instantly accepted by the journals against payment.

STATUS OF THE PREDATORY JOURNALS

In total, 144 Medical Science journals were randomly selected from Beall’s list of ‘predatory’ journals out of which 84% journal had an active website. However, 16% journals had inactive, or the websites were no longer maintained (Table 1).

Figure 1. Submitted fabricated and falsified research Ppaper on COVID19

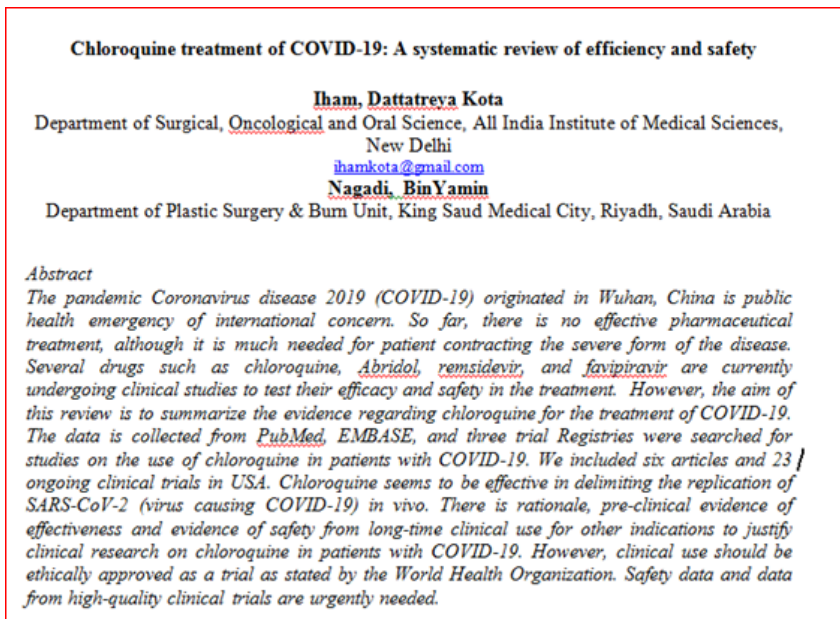
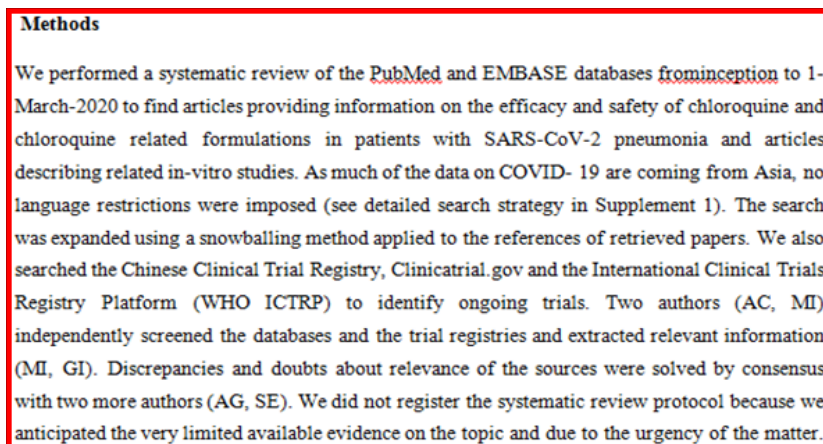


Figure 2. Methodology of falsified research paper on COVID19



JOURNAL INDEXING STATUS

Table 2 provides information about the indexing status of the journals. 15% of the samples are indexed by reputed Indexing / abstracting databases like *Web of Science*, *Scopus* and *Pubmed*. However, 13% journals are indexed by bogus and non-reliable indexing agencies like *Scientific Journal Impact Factor*, *Index Copernicus* and *Global Impact Factor*. Furthermore, relatively low percent of journals (4.3%) are indexed by both reputed and bogus I/A databases. However, 67.87% journals are indexed by numerous other matrices and databases.

Figure 3. Results of falsified research paper on COVID19

Results

The initial search identified 234 sources (156 from PubMed, 73 EMBASE and 5 from other sources). Following screening of titles and abstracts and removing duplicates, we evaluated eight articles in full text. Among these, we found six relevant articles (one narrative letter, one research letter, one editorial, one expert consensus paper in Chinese, one national guideline document in Dutch and one in Italian) [3, [5], [6], [7], [8], [9]]. Five trials were found in the trial registries (Table 1).

Table 1. Current Status of Journals

| Sample of Medical Science Journals from Bealls List | Active websites | Inaccessible/disappeared websites |
|---|-----------------|-----------------------------------|
| 144 | 121 (84%) | 23(16%) |

Table 2. Journals Indexing Status

| Journals indexed by Reputed I/A databases | Journals indexed by reputed bogus I/A Databases like Index Copernicus Global Impact factor, SJIF, NAAS | Journals indexed by both reputed as well as active bogus I/A Databases | Other matrices |
|---|--|--|----------------|
| n=121 | | | |
| 15% | 13% | 4.13% | 67.87% |

Journals Indexed by Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI), Scopus, PubMed and Bogus Indexing Databases

Indexation provides the recognition to the journal about its authenticity in terms of its originality of content as well as about its editorial board and genuine publisher. There are different indexing agencies though few are very elite like *PubMed*, *Scopus*, *Index Medicus*, etc. However, there is a rise of market of bogus indexing agencies to mislead the authors about the authenticity and quality control of the journal. The corpus of predatory journals selected for the study are indexed by both reputed I/A database (15%) and some fake metrics which are among the most reputable fake metrics like Index Copernicus (IC), Global Impact Factor (GIF), Scientific Journal Impact Factor (SJIF), National Academy of Agricultural Sciences(NAAS) amounting to 13%. The word “reputable” is used since their logos and metrics appeared on the homepage of many journals, including high-quality, peer-reviewed journals published by universities and in some other journals with low or questionable quality. However, few of the journals in the list are indexed by both types of indexing services (4.13%). Indexing of potential predatory journals by the elite indexing services can pollute the entire system of scholarly communication and is particularly dangerous for the field of Medical Science where the human lives can be put to risk if a journal is recognized by the reputed I/A service. Equally danger could be caused by the explosion of bogus I/A services in the scholarly communication.

Journals Showing Failed Submissions

On submitting the research article to the journals it was found that 17.24% journals are no more accepting the articles and the submission of manuscript failed. No response regarding the status of the submitted manuscript in terms of acceptance/rejection, minor change/major change was received from 10.34% journals even after sending multiple mails as reminder.

Acceptance, Partial Acceptance, and Rejection of Fake Article by Journals

While investigating the Acceptance, Partial Acceptance and Rejection of *fake article* by the journals it is shocking to find out 61.96% journals accepted the article in the time span of 1day to 1 month. However, 10.36% journals rejected the article.

Journals suggesting minor changes amount to 33.33%. However, no journal suggested any major change. The article processing charges are in the range of 1100- 7357 Indian Rupees. Most of the journals accepting the fake paper are indexed by Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI). Somoza-Fernández, Rodríguez-Gairín, & Urbano (2016) also reports that “it is surprising that the ESCI does not grant special value to the journals’ history and their listing in other selective indexing and abstracting databases. This low coverage suggests that the selection criteria for ESCI journals are not consistent with the overall trend in the other classical citation indexes”. Even a study by Somoza-Fernández, Rodríguez-Gairín, Josep-Manuel and Urbano (2016) reveals that *Emerging Sources Citation Index, Veterinary Science Database or DOAJ* show higher values of presence of predatory journals than expected.

Acceptance Letters From Some of the Journals Accepting Fake Article

The snapshots of email communication of journals, regarding the acceptance of the article for publication are evident from Fig. 1. The journals responded immediately (within 2-5 days) upon the submission of flawed article. However, some journals enlisted on the Beall’s list rejected the submission (Fig. 2).

Figure 4. Acceptance letters from some of the journals accepted Fake Article



Figure 5. Rejection of article by some of the journals



Figure 6. Rejection of article by some of the journals



Select Reviewer Comments of Journals Accepting/Rejecting the Paper (The Names of the Journals Have Been Kept Confidential)

“ABC”

Status: Accepted

We are pleased to inform you that out of various research article submitted, experts/ Referees panel of ABC has recommended your manuscript for publication.

“DEF”

Status: Accepted

Congratulations!!!! According to my record, your manuscript has been accepted for publication. Furthermore, you are responsible for any error in the published paper due to your oversight.

“GHI”

Status: Accepted

We are pleased to inform you that out of various research article submitted, experts/ Referees panel of GHI has recommended your manuscript for publication.

“JKL”

Status: Rejected

Your article is having 73% plagiarism. It is not to possible to process it in our journal.

“MNO”

Status: Rejected

The article is already accepted and in press in the “XYZ”. We are not processing and publish our article in our journal.

CONCLUSION

Various attempts at individual and organizational levels to create the black and white lists of journals are helpful to construct a general awareness about the growing menace of predatory publishing. However, a growing body of literature suggests that predatory publishing is too complex to be addressed by any individual list; instead, experts are demanding a more nuanced approach. For instance, rather than distinguishing between good and bad journals, it is desirable to identifying types of unethical behaviors that can occur with any journal. Unethical behavior in terms of transparency, ethics, professional standards and quality of peer review are observed in the predatory journals. The work provides ample evident to doubt the rigor and quality of peer review of journals under observation. The peer review of these journals is found extremely poor. The flawed paper is accepted by 61.96% of journals without judging the value and quality of the research contribution prior to publication. Not only the grave mistakes in the paper such as the use of false and misrepresented drug names was over sighted by the claimed peer review process of the journals but also the invented results with obvious and deliberate errors both in terms of language and concerning the reporting of methodology and results are over-sighted. It is astonishing to find that such an erroneous paper was instantly accepted by the

journals against payment. While some of the journals instantly accept the flawed paper there was also found the delays beyond the accepted norm in peer review in some of the sampled journals, which have consequences for both assessment of scientific process in academia as well as communication of important information to the knowledge receptor community. False citations incorporated in the fake paper are disaster and great corruption among the academicians and must be prevented by the journals accepting the paper. The problem is graver when one thinks in terms of quantity of papers and citation to these papers published by such unethical journals. The peer review process of such journals is fundamentally flawed and wildly inconsistent. Such journals are polluting the entire sphere of scholarly communication.

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