Predatory Journals

0. What is a predatory journal?

A. Definition of predatory journals

"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." (Grudniewicz, A. et al., 2019)

B. Distinction from legitimate journals (OA or not)

True legitimate academic journals provide a variety of services (from editorial selection, peer review, and editing, to platforms, long-term storage, and visibility, to name some of them). To cover the cost of those services, they traditionally relied on subscriptions from libraries or individuals. With the development of Open Access (OA), where articles are freely available online, the journals having chosen the OA model cannot rely on selling access to their final product. They need to find different revenue streams whether it is Articles Processing Charges (APC), society membership, or institutional support.
Predatory journals use this business model in an exploitative way: pocketing the researchers' money without delivering real editorial services.

C. Predatory journals' unethical business practices

Predatory journals have recourse to unethical business practices to lure researchers into submitting manuscripts, such as

- Spam emails: sometime overly flattering
- Fraudulent claims: about where they are indexed, their impact factors
- False pretense: copying names and designs of established journals
- Deceptive promises: promising at the same time peer review and implausible swift publication.
- No transparency: about quality control, fees, copyright, withdrawal, and digital archiving
- Fictional editorial boards, or even using the names of recognised researchers without their knowledge!

1. Why and to whom can they represent a problem?

Predatory journals pose different threats, both to the researcher (and its institution or funder) and to science itself:

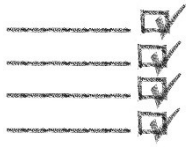
A. To the researcher

- Visibility: predatory journals are not included in proper databases as Web of Science or PubMed. Articles published in those have thus less visibility and impact.
- Storage: long-term storage is not provided. Contents can disappear overnight.
- Credibility: your paper won't be seen as a proper scientific peer-reviewed article
- Time and effort: papers may get "ransomed": your paper doesn't get the quality control and visibility it deserves, but you cannot withdraw it and it won't be accepted in another journal: you'll need to rewrite an original article.
- Reputation: your name can be associated to one of those journals: Predatory publishers often put contributors on their editorial board (without their consent). Your affiliation becomes a promotional argument for the predatory journal.
- Career: articles published in a predatory journal may be ignored by funder or employer or have a bad impact in promotion or grant application decisions.

B. To science

- **Impairing the quality and integrity of science:**
  - Distinguishing good peer-reviewed articles from low quality papers becomes difficult
  - Obtaining a retraction is almost impossible… so papers remain in the open and keep being cited even when they have been proven to be unsound
  - Decrease of general science's quality
  - May encourage distrust of scientific publication and publicly-funded research
- **Impairing the advancement of knowledge:**
  - Waste of resources: good research does not get the visibility they deserve. Efforts (financial, human, of the participants, …) are made in vain.

2. Tips and Tricks: how to identify a predatory journal



A. Investigate their claims and promises

- Quality of the website and of previously published publications: eg. are there numerous articles? are they specialized? regularly from the same authors? do DOI work?
- Indexing and impact factor claims: are they true? can they be verified?
- Transparency about fees, contact information, copyright, peer review process, etc.
- Editorial board: do the members list their editorial board role on their own web pages?
- Turnaround time: is it plausible? compatible with their promise of peer review?

B. Check existing lists of journals

Keep in mind that watchlists can only protect you against known threats and are therefore always incomplete, as new journals are launched frequently. Safelists, on the opposite, vet journals whose quality has been examined, but they are not comprehensive either.

Watchlists

- **Cabell's predatory reports.** The UNIGE library subscribe to this list. When a journal is added to this list, details of the journal's "violations" to good practices are provided. https://app.cabells.com/academic?search&only=predatoryreports

Safelists

- **DOAJ**, Directory of Open Access Journals: Indexed journals have been checked and are quality, open access, peer-reviewed, trusted journals. https://doaj.org/.
- **Databases**: some like MEDLINE, or Web of Science have rigorous selection process and will contribute to the visibility of your work. Niche journals or new publication venues may not be indexed (yet).

Lists of journals whose identity has been stolen/copied

- The Retraction Watch team maintains a list of such journals. This list is called the "**Hijacked Journal Checker**": https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1ak985WGOgGbJRJbZFanoktAN_UFeExpE/

C. Use checklists to help you assess a journal

The initiative Think, Check, Submit (https://thinkchecksubmit.org/), provides two useful checklists to help you assess the quality of a journal (and/or a conference). It is recommended by the SNSF.

D. Ask your colleagues, or your librarians for their advice

Floriane Muller, Audrey Bellier
Rév. 2025 par Floriane Muller et Dimitri Donzé