Facilitating responsible research

Michael Bisaccio explains how a new blacklist is making it harder for 'predatory journals' to hoax academics and others

In June 2017, Cabells (see box page 55) launched the *Journal Blacklist*—a subscription-based searchable database of "predatory journals", with detailed reports listing specific violations for each journal—as a counterpart to the *Whitelist*, a database containing critical information on verified and reputable academic journals. While the *Blacklist*, currently listing over 8,300 (and counting) journals, continues to grow and evolve to meet the needs of the scholarly community, the core goal has remained the same: to provide an objective and transparent tool for identifying the threats in academic publishing.

The rise of predatory journals—fraudulent operations designed to look like legitimate scholarly publications—has been rapid and has flourished in the digital age. These journals offer eager (and sometimes unaware) authors the chance to publish in a "scholarly journal," usually in exchange for an article-processing charge.

Essentially, these "journals" will publish anything for a price. In some cases, the author is an unsuspecting victim whose work may now be published alongside bad science or otherwise nonsensical work. They have paid a fee to have their work possibly damage their reputation and have also likely surrendered the right to have it published elsewhere.

However, not everyone who publishes in a predatory journal does so unwittingly. In some instances authors are complicit in the deception and knowingly seek publication in fraudulent journals for the purpose of padding their publication statistics for any number of reasons including career advancement or to secure funding.

Having faculty members publish in predatory journals tarnishes a university's reputation for research and can create a major public relations problem. This can result in the denial of a programme's accreditation or the loss or squandering of research grants and funding, not to mention the attrition of the best and brightest students.

And it isn't only authors who find themselves susceptible to the ploys of predatory operations, others are acting as peer-reviewers or editors or even serving on editorial boards, often without any knowledge of doing so (and in some cases while no longer being alive).

Predatory journals undermine scholarly communication and hinder progress and innovation by publishing anything – nonsense, legitimate research and everything in between, weakening the overall body of knowledge in any given field. A perfect storm has been created with researchers caught up in the "publish or perish" cycle of academia and an increasing number of predatory operations in play, all facilitated by the globalisation of scholarly communication.

The proliferation of digital publishing in academia has made launching academic journals easier than ever and has done much to advance the democratisation of research. It is also now easier than ever to create fake or deceptive journals for the sole purpose of defrauding researchers or to help unscrupulous researchers defraud academic institutions or other organisations.

Building the 'Blacklist'

Journals are chosen for evaluation for the *Blacklist* based on inclusion in Jeffrey Beall's widely accepted list of predatory publishers, exclusion from the Directory of Open access Journals (DOAJ) and/or the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association (OASPA), suggestions from the community, and information found during other evaluations and investigations conducted by Cabells.

The now-defunct Beall's List, produced by Jeffrey Beall, the Scholarly Communications Librarian at the University of Colorado, Denver, US, was an invaluable resource though not without its detractors. Amid pressure from his university, Beall scrubbed his list clean and shut it down.

The end of Beall's list of predatory publishers made it clear how important a role it had played in the academic universe. There remained a pressing need for information on predatory publishers but the process of building and effectively managing and maintaining such a list – and seeing to the side issues it produces – requires a great deal of time and resources. Cabells realises the importance of making the information contained in the *Blacklist* (and *Whitelist*) accessible to as many research entities as possible and strives to structure subscriptions accordingly, while also remaining sustainable from a production standpoint.

"

The rise of predatory journals—fraudulent operations designed to look like legitimate scholarly publications—has been rapid and has flourished in the digital age

8.3k

The *Blacklist*, a counterpart to the *Whitelist*, has over 8,300 journals listed,and counting...

The key ingredients to the *Blacklist* are accountability, objectivity and transparency. Only a rigorously managed transparent and unbiased process can produce an effective and lasting tool for analysing and identifying deceptive journals. The Blacklist was built using a soon to be patented methodology predicated on defining and recognising specific behavioural characteristics common to fraudulent journals. The first step in the process was to research standard practices of reputable journals by examining the top journals in the *Whitelist* along with other criteria and standards.

Journals included on Beall's list were then analysed, in particular those with specific findings communicated by Beall. Each journal was reviewed as if they were applying for the *Whitelist*, prompting a close examination of all policies, practices and published articles as well as reviews and feedback from the community posted online about the journal or publisher. This process produced a list of recurring practices that were directly against the acceptable standards confirmed by research as well as certain criteria used by Beall and trends that were consistently present in dishonest journals that were reviewed.

After close examination by the *Blacklist* team, all subjective items on the list were removed, resulting in a list of 65 behavioural indicators. Violations were then placed in four categories based on level of severity and how directly they related to deceptive behaviour. After the violations were categorised each category was given a range of scores.

The violations in each category were then analysed against other violations in that same category and each was given a score based on how serious it was compared to the other violations in the category. This scoring system was designed specifically to ensure that legitimate journals that are new, from developing countries or are simply low quality are not classified as "predatory" and included in the *Blacklist*.

The first category includes behaviours that directly indicate deception and are weighted heavily as a result. A few examples of these severe violations our investigations have turned up are:

- The same articles appear in more than one journal
- Journal/publisher claims to be non-profit when it is for-profit
- Owner/editor of the journal falsely claims academic positions or qualifications
- No editor or editorial board listed on the journal's website
- Editorial board members included without their permission or knowledge, do not exist or are deceased
- Falsely claims indexing in databases (especially DOAJ, JCR and Cabells)

The second category includes those behaviours that tend to coincide with deception

About Cabells

Since its founding almost 40 years ago, Cabells services have grown to include both the *Journal Whitelist* and *Blacklist*, manuscript preparation tools and a suite of powerful metrics designed to help its users find the right journals, no matter the stage of their career. The searchable *Whitelist* database includes 18 academic disciplines from more than 11,000 international scholarly publications and the *Blacklist* currently lists over 8,400 predatory journals.

1k~

Approximately 800 – 1,000 journals are added to the *Blacklist* each month through investigations and constant monitoring of the academic landscape

100

A total score over 100 is the threshold for including a journal in the *Blacklist*

and are, overall, weighted less heavily than those in the first category. A few examples of this type of violation are:

- Copied journal titles
- Founder of the publishing company is the editor for all journals
- No clearly stated peer review policy or inadequate peer review (ie a single reader reviews submissions, peer reviewers read papers outside their field of study)
- The publisher displays prominent statements that promise rapid publication and/or unusually quick peer review (less than four weeks)
- Authors publishing several times in the same journal and/or issue

Through careful analysis of these and similar behaviours, a guideline was created and applied in the investigation of each journal. This produced a weighted score whose magnitude increased with the probability that a journal was engaging in deceptive behaviours. A total score over 100 is the threshold for including a journal in the *Blacklist*.

Know the threats

Just as important as knowing whether or not a journal has been identified as predatory is being aware of the reasons for the classification. The *Blacklist* sheds light on fraudulent operations and each entry provides information on how to identify the journal as well as a comprehensive report of each behavioural indicator that was uncovered in the journal's evaluation.

An entry in the *Journal Blacklist* serves as a way for users to identify predatory journals with information such as its title, claimed ISSNs, country of origin, claimed discipline and website; a misconduct report categorises and details each violation to provide a transparent view of the investigated journal. Using this data, researchers can know if an invitation to publish is legitimate, if research has been peer-reviewed or if a potential research outlet is reliable and reputable.

Approximately 800 – 1,000 journals are added to the *Blacklist* each month through investigations and constant monitoring of the academic landscape and through tips and suggestions from members of the community. Blacklisted journals are permitted to appeal inclusion one time per calendar year per journal, at which time the journal's policies and procedures will be reviewed for evidence of corrective actions to comply with industry standards.

Conclusion

Of course not all scholarly journals fall into either the "good" or "bad" category—many land somewhere in between. It should not be assumed that a journal absent from the *Journal Blacklist* is on the *Journal Whitelist*, and *vice versa*. As mentioned above, the *Journal Blacklist* is structured specifically to flag only those journals that have been identified as predatory operations meant to deceive and exploit, not low-quality or new journals. The process of categorising and weighting offenses and carefully investigating each publication is crucial to this important distinction.

By hand-sourcing and investigating each journal in the Cabells database and providing actionable intelligence and metrics, the *Blacklist* and *Whitelist* serve academia by providing an unbiased and comprehensive picture of legitimacy and quality, allowing the community to not only know better journals but to also know the threats. When used together, the *Whitelist* and *Blacklist* encourage authors seeking publication to publish in credible journals and lessens the chance that university administrators or funding agencies will reward researchers for publishing in predatory journals.

gf

About the Author

Michael Bisaccio is Communications Manager at Cabells.
michael.bisaccio@cabells.com