Librarian vs. (Open Access) Predator: An Interview with Jeffrey Beall

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A few times a week, I receive e-mails inviting me to submit my manuscript to open access journals with topics ranging from software engineering to biotechnology. I have no background or expertise in these areas, but I always assumed that I received these messages because I am the contact for all of my library's journal subscriptions. After becoming familiar with the work of Jeffrey Beall, who has been working to raise awareness of what he has termed "predatory" open access publishers, I learned that that might be another, less benign explanation.

Beall, scholarly initiatives librarian at the University of Colorado Denver, researches open access publishers and keeps a list of those he believes exhibit predatory behavior on his blog, *Scholarly Open Access* (<http://scholarlyoa.com>). He says these publishers exploit the gold open access model – which requires the author of an accepted article to pay a processing fee for publication – simply to make a profit. Essentially, these publishers and journals operate as vanity presses, offering to publish nearly any article, as long as the author can pay the fee. They may also exhibit other questionable practices, such as concealing their true location and contact information or failing to properly carry out the peer review process (Elliott, 2012).

Beall has published a full list of the criteria he uses to identify predatory publishers on his blog. One trademark behavior is the use of mass e-mails to solicit manuscripts, editorships, or peer reviewers (Beall, 2012). I pulled up some of my own spam and used Beall's list to check out the

publishers who had sent those messages. Sure enough, he had already identified many of them as potential predators.

In 2012, the notion that unscrupulous entrepreneurs might use the gold open access model to make money from unsuspecting researchers hit the mainstream academic press. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* published an article on the topic, describing the stories of researchers who had been harmed by these practices. One scholar said she had her work published against her will after she refused to pay an article processing fee. Another reported being listed as a member of a journal's editorial board despite having no memory of agreeing to take the post (Stratford, 2012). Beall provided context for the original *Chronicle* article (Stratford, 2012) and participated in interviews with several other publications around that time, drawing additional scrutiny to the practices of predatory open access publishers (Elliott, 2012, Poynder, 2012).

I spoke with Beall in February 2013 to find out how the scholarly community has responded to his work and to learn what librarians can do to address this growing problem.

Kristen Wilson (KW): You were interviewed by *The Chronicle* and others about the topic of predatory open access in 2012. Since those articles have been published, what kinds of responses have you received -- both from the academic and publishing communities?

Jeffrey Beall (JB): It really runs the gamut. I get e-mails everyday thanking me for my work. Some of those e-mails include reports of being saved from having published in a bad publishing venue. Others tell me that their organization uses my Web site and list of predatory publishers in different ways. For example, one organization won't fund any article processing fees for the publishers that are on my list. On the other hand, I get some negative reactions, especially from Europeans who have a lot invested in the gold open access model. Some of them tell me that they think I'm exaggerating the problem or say that it's not as big of a problem as I make it out to be. And they say that any competent researcher is able to judge for himself whether a publisher is a good place to publish, so that that my list isn't really needed.

What they say contradicts the evidence that I see almost every day with people thanking me. I also get e-mails from people who say they wish they had learned of my site earlier. They've submitted a paper to a journal, and the journal has accepted it, but they didn't realize there was an author fee because the journal was being sneaky. Now the journal is hounding them for the author fee, even though the author want to withdraw the paper. So I disagree with what the Europeans are saying. I think this is a significant problem for researchers, and also it's a significant problem for the gold open access model itself, which I think is being poisoned by predatory publishers.

KW: You publish a list of predatory publishers each year, and I noticed that the 2013 list represents a huge increase in the number of publishers that you've listed – from 23 to over 225. Does that mean that you think this trend is just getting larger and more predominant?

JB: Yes. 2012 might be called the year of the predatory publisher. It's when I've seen the most growth since I began tracking in 2010. I do publish the list annually, but I also update it daily. I usually add a few new publishers each week and a few independent journals each week as well.

KW: On your blog, you've pointed out some new deceptive practices used by publishers, such as affiliating themselves with a well-known publisher when there is no connection and even hosting "predatory meetings." Are there other new tricks and deceptive practices to watch out for?

JB: The answer is yes. They're very clever. Their job is to get the author fees. So the authors are the customers, and they don't care so much about the people who read the content. Their job is to get the money from the authors, so they do everything they can to make themselves look legitimate. They're always coming up with new ways of doing that. Recently I've learned that the Omics publishing group, which is included on my list, has been exploiting social media, especially LinkedIn, to make itself look more authentic and to establish connections with potential authors. They've even created bogus personae with common English names – like Robert Thomas or Eric White – and they try friend people and invite them to submit papers to Omics. They friend researchers specifically, because that's where the grant money is.

I do also want to talk about the conferences that you mentioned. That's not something I keep a list of – I wish somebody were doing that. It would be a big job. There are organizations that host bogus conferences and there are organizations that host both bogus conferences and bogus journals. A lot of the publishers listed on my site also do conferences on the side. And the conference side of the predatory publishers is growing as well, I think.

KW: Have you heard any personal accounts from anybody who's actually attended one of these events?

JB: I've gotten a few e-mails about that, and I've gotten a few comments on my blog. One person said that any time scientists get together and talk good things happen, and that's probably true. But at the same time I've heard other people say they'll never attend another Omics meeting. A lot of people get fooled into attending the Omics meetings in particular because they name the conferences with names very similar to established conferences. They trick people into attending. They think it's a different conference than it really is.

KW: You've also noted on your blog that you yourself were a victim of an e-mail spoofing scam related to this work. Is that something you can talk about?

JB: It happened in December. One or more of the publishers on my list wrote an e-mail that looks like it was from me. And they used the spoofing technique to send out the e-mail. The content of the e-mail said that I would offer to review the Web sites of the predatory publishers – the recipients of the e-mail – for \$5,000 and remove them from my list. They went through the names of the publishers on my list and sent that out to everyone. In addition they also copied the e-mail on dozens of bogus blog sites that they set up using WordPress and a few others. I reported it to campus police, as the case was criminal impersonation, and they did a police report, but weren't able to follow up or investigate it because of the lack of information. And it really came from people overseas, I think. Richard Poynder, a British journalist who covers open

access, did an interview with one of the people who may be involved in it. It's great background reading. (Poynder, 2013)

KW: Have you made positive connections with any of the people who are working for these publishers because they try to contact you personally? Or more of them using questionable or illegal techniques?

JB: Some of them do contact me directly, and their reactions do run the gamut. Some of them very nicely ask me to remove them from the list. Others ignore me. And then there's this criminal approach that a few of them took. They're not all criminals, but a few of them were. Generally when I get a request to pull a publisher from my list, I'll do a reanalysis of the publisher, because they change over time. They can get better. There's been about a half a dozen or so that I've removed from my list in the past year.

KW: And that tends to be because they really have increased the quality of their publications?

JB: It's not so much the quality. It's a whole bunch of different things. They get rid of plagiarism from their articles. They are more transparent in their operations. They list where they are located when they didn't before. I try as best I can to not list any publisher that has the potential for success. I differentiate between predatory and sloppy. There are lots of new publishers that are sloppy, but that's OK because nobody's perfect at the beginning. I really only want to include publishers on my list that have a bad intent, that just want to exploit the gold open access model for their own profit.

KW: I noticed from some of your articles and blog posts that occasionally commenters will take issue with you. They say that your criteria are a little bit abstract or subjective, and they're unhappy with the way you apply them. I was curious if those comments have prompted you to rethink anything about what you do? Have you made your criteria any more stringent?

JW: The comments that I receive are very valuable. I learn a lot from them. I first published my criteria document last August. After it was published I received so many comments that I revised it and hopefully made it a lot better. I tried to incorporate all the helpful comments I could, and so a second edition was published in December.

The criteria are subjective. That's their nature. There's no objective way to measure new open access journals, especially when the publishers lack transparency and hide their operations. We can't measure how well they're doing their peer review or if they're doing it at all. So the only way to judge them is by gathering all the information you can from their Web sites, from talking to them, from reading e-mails from people who have worked with them or submitted articles to them and combine all of that information and complete the analysis. And it is subjective.

KW: I notice you use phrases a lot like "maintaining the integrity of the academic record" and recognizing "intent." Those are things that seem like they are by their essence subjective.

JB: That phrase "maintaining the integrity of the academic record," that's from COPE, the Committee on Publishing Ethics (<http://publicationethics.org>). I think that's one of the most important things that they say, and so I've adopted it as well.

KW: What do you think librarians can do within their own institutions to address this issue or to help researchers and students make sense of the publishing options that are out there?

JB: There are several things. One is that academic librarians need to gain expertise in what I call scholarly publishing literacy. That skill includes the ability to recognize publishing scams and to recognize predatory publishers and predatory journals. Academic librarians need to gain this skill and then help their patrons learn it as well. Also academic librarians need to remove metadata for predatory publishers and predatory journals from their online catalogs and all of their discovery systems and library Web sites. By including predatory publishers in library systems, they're giving these journals a tacit seal of approval from the library.

KW: Do you have any examples of libraries who have tried to move in this direction?

JB: There's a lot of academic libraries that include this information in LibGuides. I know there are several LibGuides linked to my site for example. The other part is harder for libraries because a lot of the metadata they get comes in batches from vendors. We have Summon. We check a box that says we want all journals from a certain area that are OA, and a lot of the ones they include are predatory journals. It's going to be tough for libraries to filter those out because so many libraries do batch loading now. Even in my library there are predatory journals in the catalog because we use a MARC record service that sends us batch loads of records every month. I want to raise awareness of this issue. Hopefully people will become aware of the problem, and we'll be able to get some solutions.

KW: You've raised the issue that a lot of predatory OA journals are indexed in big vendor databases, such as Academic Search Premier. Do you think that's something that these vendors are aware of?

JB: I know EBSCO's aware of it because I've exchanged e-mails with them about it. The problem is that abstracting and indexing databases, like EBSCOhost and Scopus, compete with each other. I've gone to those EBSCO lunches at ALA. When they describe their database, they always show a slide that lists how many journals they have indexed in that database, and they have a column next to that with their competitors. EBSCO's numbers are always higher. So they have a conflict of interest. They want to include more publishers and journals in their A&I databases, so they will err on the side of putting a journal in there, even when it might not be appropriate. It's a numbers game for them. They want to index the most so they can sell their database. And Scopus does the same thing.

KW: With the Elsevier boycott going on and discussions about whether the traditional publishing model is broken, open access publishing has often been seen as a savior. What do you think about that view in light of your work?

JB: Open access is two things. It's a publishing model and it's a social movement. What librarians need to do, I think, is to ask "what is the best model for scholarly communication?" and try to pursue that. Unfortunately a lot of people are fighting for open access because it matches their political beliefs. They don't like corporations, and they have more of a collectivist

ideology. We need to find the best model for scholarly communication and go with whatever that is.

KW: Are there any models you've seen that do suit scholarly communication – that seem to deliver what's needed in an effective way?

JB: Well, the traditional model has been very successful for a long time. It became expensive, but the publishers dealt with that by introducing bundles and granting deep consortial discounts. One of the advantages of the traditional model is the effective way it validated science. It was harder to get published in a traditional journal than it is in an open access journal, and as a result a lot of the OA journals are filled with junk science. So that validation feature is a very important component of scholarly communication and needs to be brought back.

KW: It goes back to scarcity of resources. When you had print journals, there were only so many you could have, but with the Internet suddenly there's no more ceiling.

JB: And the barrier to entry into the industry was much higher then. Now anybody in India can do it in a day, just starting up a Web site. That's what I'm seeing. The word is out that if you want to make easy money, just set up a scholarly publishing Web site in a few days and you're in business. You can just sit back and watch the money come in. And that's why I'm seeing a tremendous growth in the number of publishers, I think.

KW: When you think about green open access, it presents another way forward that does remove the money making aspect, but you have to acknowledge that articles published in institutional repository are only valuable if they're published in another journal as well.

JB: I agree. What I really like is what I call platinum open access, which is the same as gold open access, except there's no author fee. That takes away the conflict of interest for the publishers because they don't make more money the more articles they accept. There's a library journal that does that – the *Journal of Library Innovation* (<http://www.libraryinnovation.org>). It's benevolently funded. So that's where I really wish we could go. I wish there was enough money around that all the journals could be platinum open access.

KW: Some people have suggested that university libraries could fill the role of OA publishers. Do you think that's something you see having any traction?

JB: It's hard to say because I don't know if we want libraries to be the gatekeepers of all scholarly knowledge in that way, in the publishing sense. Do we want to be the ones who conduct peer review or manage the peer review process and decide what gets published? I don't know if that's a library's role. It's a good question – I don't know the answer really.

KW: That gets back the point that peer review is a valuable process that's needed no matter what the publishing model and somebody's got to be responsible for it.

JB: Absolutely.

KW: Is there anything new on the horizon for you?

JB: I keep getting asked to write things for different publications, which is good for me because I love to write. I'll have a few articles coming out this year. I plan to continue with the blog the same way I have been.

In addition to predatory publishing, I'm more and more studying author misconduct, including things like plagiarism, image manipulation, duplicate publication, self-plagiarism, ghost authorship, honorary authorship – because I see so much of that every day when I'm investigating publishers and journals. So I hope to expand my research into that area. I wish there were a way to crowdsource publishing ethics. I wish there was a way that people could report instances of author misconduct. I think that would help science a lot. The problem is that it would be dangerous because libelous statements could be made, and you'd have to really vet what gets through. You'd have to have hard evidence. It's easy to document plagiarism. It's harder to document something like ghost authorship.

That also goes back to the earlier question about what can academic librarians do. Academic librarians need to deal with patrons, especially students, and teach them about author misconduct, what it is, how to avoid it, what the consequences are for getting caught at it, and how easy it is to get caught, especially for plagiarism. It can be very damaging to the author. We need to help our students understand.

Shortly after this interview, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that Beall has been threatened with a lawsuit by The Canadian Center of Science and Education because he has include three of its related companies on his list. He was unable to comment on the lawsuit at this time. The lawsuit against Beall became public shortly after another academic librarian, Dale Askey of McMaster University, was sued by Edwin Mellen Press because of negative comments made about that publisher on his personal Web site. (New, 2013)

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