

At-Risk Articles

Leveraging open infrastructure to recover and preserve the scholarly record

Jeanette Hatherill
Scholarly Communication Librarian
University of Ottawa, Canada
jeanette.hatherill@uottawa.ca



Thank you - and thanks everyone for coming. Before I dive in, a quick note here on terminology. There is no currently agreed-upon standard definition of what constitutes a “predatory” publisher. (Cobey et al, 2018)- I used “predatory” publishing in the session description and abstract for clarity as this is the most common terminology used - but I will prefer deceptive publisher or deceptive outlet in this talk.

My name is Jeanette Hatherill and I am a scholarly communication librarian and in that role I deal with many queries on the topic of deceptive publishers.

A couple of years ago, a professor called me with a problem. She was working with a PhD student at our institution and an early career researcher in another unspecified country. Unfortunately, the other researcher was not yet very familiar with some aspects of publication ethics, and had submitted and had gotten accepted an article they had all been working on together without the knowledge or consent of the professor or student. The professor was familiar with the concept of deceptive publishers, and so dug into this journal she had never heard of before, then she called me. Looking at the journal website together on the phone, it became pretty obvious that this was a scam outlet. So came the question that inevitably arises at this point: what now?

what now?

What to do with all that research out there in these outlets?

It seems to me that there is a problem in scholarly publishing that it seems no one is really talking about.

Consider that Articles that appear in questionable outlets are not indexed, they are not archived, they are not discoverable. And, should that publisher cease operations or neglect to maintain their servers? They are At Risk of being lost to the scholarly record. And moreover, this is potentially valuable research is at risk of being lost.

potentially valuable research is at risk of being lost

When you think about it: the prof and grad student in a good program at a reputable university, the research was solid, the results worth communicating, but by virtue of where it appeared for all intents and purposes, it's Lost.

scope of the problem

2014 : 8,000 questionable publications produce over 420,000 articles (Shen & Björk, 2015)

2019 : Cabells lists 12,000 questionable publications (Cabells, 2019)

How big is the problem we are talking about here, what is the scope of this problem - how many articles are potentially at risk?

In 2015 Shen & Björk published the first large-scale analysis of market volume and characteristics where they found that in 2014 the state of the field was that 8,000 questionable publications had produced over 420,000 articles. Now, unfortunately there has been no replication or update of that study but as a very rough proxy for looking at how that market has potentially grown, Cabells in 2019 lists 12,000 questionable publications. I do not intend here to go into the issues off blacklisting and whitelisting here, nor an analysis of how the methodologies behind these numbers of 8,000 and 12,000 may differ - but suffice it to say that for the purposes of illustration this provides a somewhat reasonable proxy to show that the market may still be growing. So it is reasonable to expect that we have well over half a million articles out there now that are at risk.

no currently agreed-upon standard definition of what constitutes a “predatory” publisher (Cobey et al, 2018)

So what about these articles - what characterizes them?

Recall that I mentioned at the top of this talk that there is no currently agreed-upon standard definition of what constitutes a “predatory” publisher. (Cobey et al, 2018) However, there is a very much a theme that emerges in much of the literature, and in many commentaries, editorials, lists, guides, and advice and that is that these journals have Questionable Peer Review

questionable peer review

“such journals do not provide the peer review that is the hallmark of [...] scholarly publishing” (Laine & Winker in WAME, 2017)

General consensus that “such journals do not provide the peer review that is the hallmark of [...] scholarly publishing”. (Laine & Winker in WAME, 2017)

questionable peer review?

a majority of authors believe it had undergone peer review that was substantial, helpful or of similar quality to other outlets (Cobey et al 2018, Cohen et al 2019, McCutcheon et al 2016)

Now, interestingly, the very limited research done on author perception of peer review in questionable journals seems to contradict this, with the majority believing it had undergone peer review that was substantial, helpful or of similar quality to other outlets. (Cobey et al 2018, Cohen et al 2019, McCutcheon et al 2016) However, the sample sizes of these studies is generally quite low and depending on how the survey questions were phrased (whether they were “accusatory” or not, may have certainly biased the results - that aren’t really generalizable in any case. In fact, one has to wonder if the stigma surrounding this topic plays a role in the lack of research into this aspect of deceptive publishing - but I digress.

questionable publishing practices

a large percentage of research in questionable venues has not been adequately peer-reviewed

authors see their work “published” without consent, notice, fee payment, nor copyright agreement

(Bowman et al 2018, Chambers 2019, Harris 2018, Memon 2018, Witham & Runcie 2017)

Despite author perceptions, a large percentage of research in questionable venues has not been peer-reviewed.

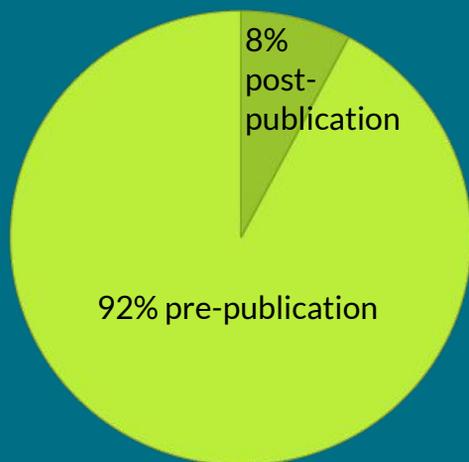
In addition, we see very common reports in the literature and anecdotally of authors who see their work “published” without consent, notice, fee payment, nor copyright agreement. (Bowman et al 2018, Chambers 2019, Harris 2018, Memon 2018, Witham & Runcie 2017)

research that has not yet been validated

Which begs the question: without the hallmarks of legitimate publishing must it be considered “published”?

Or can it be reframed : not yet validated by the scholarly research community?

In the literature



514 articles
published between 2010 and 2019
pre-publication n = 474
post-publication n = 40

With that thought in mind - I'd like to turn back to that question of what now? As I mentioned, it seems to me that there is not a lot of discussion on what to do with the articles, the research that has appeared in these venues, and a recent review of the current literature bears that out.

From a search of the major academic databases - Scopus, WoS, Medline, EBSCO, ProQuest and others for French literature Érudit and Persee for example, I came up with 514 in scope research articles that discuss predatory publishing. 92% of these, kind of talk about the issue "pre-publication" in other words sort of inform or alert researchers to the issue, attempt to quantify and define the scope of the market, discuss blacklists whitelists and the limitations, controversies and racial dimensions of these, or contextualize the issue within the broader broken academic publishing system or within a global north global south perspective. Only 8% deal with the question of consequences after publishing in one of these outlets, and of these 40 only 16 of them actually discuss what now with regard to the article itself - others look at impact on career progression, consequences and considerations for future knowledge synthesis, or look at it from an ethical or legal perspective.

post-publication articles

or : the what now?

So what can we surmise from those 16 articles - what do they say about the what now with that article.

retraction

consensus that authors could retract or withdraw papers despite noted difficulty in dealing with the original questionable venue

(Balehegen 2017, Dadkhah 2016, Fiala et al 2019, Harvey 2017, Memon 2018)

There is a consensus that authors should retract or withdraw papers. This despite a noted difficulty in dealing with the original questionable venue for this course of action. (Balehegen 2017, Dadkhah 2016, Fiala et al 2019, Harvey 2017, Memon 2018)

submitting to a new journal

after retraction, the article could be submitted to a new journal
(Dadkhah 2016, Harris 2018, Kojima 2017, WAME 2017)

this solution is not universally accepted
(Bowman 2018)

Submitting to a new journal

Proposed that after retraction, the article could be submitted to a new journal.

(Dadkhah 2016, Harris 2018, Kojima 2017, WAME 2017) However, this solution is not universally accepted. (Bowman 2018)

acknowledging

no consensus as to whether and how these publications should be listed on an academic CV

(Moher et al 2017, da Silva & Tsigaris 2018, Cappell 2015)

Acknowledging

No consensus as to whether and how these publications should be listed on an academic CV. (Moher et al 2017, da Silva & Tsigaris 2018, Cappell 2015)

As we can see, there is a lack of consensus and discussion about what to do with these articles - it's a very grey area without much guidance for this potentially valuable and not yet validated research.

preprint servers & open peer review as a solution?

And this is where my proposal comes in :

Can we harness the developments in preprints and open peer review to solve this problem?

Could an author retract the article, acknowledge its “prior publication” and submit it for open peer review on a preprint server or post-publication peer review platform?

copyright

discussions regarding retraction and republication hinge on whether or not a copyright transfer agreement has been signed (COPE, Kojima 2017)

A few considerations:

What about copyright?

Most discussions regarding retraction and republication hinge on whether or not a copyright transfer agreement has been signed. (COPE, Kojima 2017) This misses a key feature of open access publication:

copyright remains with the author

that the copyright remains with the author.

As long as the article is under a CC-BY license and the place of first “publication” is cited, there is no reason under a copyright framework that this would not be permissible.

publication ethics

WAME, COPE, & ICJME address duplicate publication under an ethical framework of deception on the part of the author; transparency about the initial “publication” resolves this issue.

WAME guidance suggests that “authors whose legitimate research was published in predatory journals should have a mechanism for submitting [...] to a legitimate peer reviewed journal”.

(Laine & Winker, 2017)

What about publication ethics?

WAME, COPE, & ICJME address duplicate publication under an ethical framework of deception on the part of the author; transparency about the initial “publication” resolves this issue.

WAME guidance suggests that “authors whose legitimate research was published in predatory journals should have a mechanism for submitting [...] to a legitimate peer reviewed journal”. (Laine & Winker, 2017)

No ethical publication guidelines currently exist on posting a retraction and requesting open peer review. WAME, COPE & ICJME should consider this solution.

theory vs. practice

So Theoretically this seems plausible - but where theory meets practice is where things get a bit murkier.

open peer review

“Open peer review is an umbrella term for a number of overlapping ways that peer review models can be adapted in line with the aims of Open Science....

First off what am i talking about when i say open peer review:

Open peer review (OPR), despite being a major pillar of Open Science, does not have a standardized definition not a common understanding of its main traits, however, OpenAire and one of its main researchers propose that open peer review can be seen as an umbrella term for a number of overlapping ways that peer review models can be adapted in line with the aims of Open Science,

They provide 7 main traits which may or may not be present in a particular system of open peer review, so you may have one of these or many and these and they can be combined in any number of ways.

open peer review

...

Open identities

Open reports

Open participation

Open interaction

Open pre-review manuscripts

Open final-version commenting

Open platforms”

(Ross-Hellauer 2017)

- : Authors and reviewers are aware of each other's identity
 - : Review reports are published alongside the relevant article.
 - : The wider community to able to contribute to the review process.
 - : Direct reciprocal discussion between author(s) and reviewers, and/or between reviewers, is allowed and encouraged.
 - : Manuscripts are made immediately available (e.g., via pre-print servers like arXiv) in advance of any formal peer review procedures.
 - : Review or commenting on final “version of record” publications.
- (“decoupled review”): Review is facilitated by a different organizational entity than the venue of publication.

open pre-review manuscripts

most preprint servers specify that the research must not already be published

When I first imagined this solution, I did have pre-print servers in mind - after all it is my contention that because these papers have not undergone peer review they are analogous to preprints - however in initial investigations most preprint servers - all the "arxivs" - will not accept a manuscript that has already been "published". However, these policies are set by people, and I would suggest that those advisory boards and groups who manage and set policies for these platforms could revise them and establish guidelines to allow for what I am suggesting here today.

Most of these platforms perform a cursory review of any submitted articles and therefore the author could submit their work with an acknowledgement of its appearance elsewhere and an explanation or supporting evidence of the lack of peer review. For example, if they contend no peer review was performed they could provide their preprint and the final version to demonstrate that there is no discernible difference. If they contend the peer review was inadequate, they could provide the peer review reports that demonstrate this. i.e. paper is well written is pretty insubstantial peer review.

open final version commenting

Pubpeer
ScienceOpen

The second element that I would suggest can be employed is a sort of combination of post-publication and decoupled peer review. Two platforms, Pubpeer and ScienceOpen work on DOI lookup for their commenting features, therefore if an article has a DOI these platforms can be used for their commenting functions. In this way, an author could actively solicit reviews from individuals in their fields.

A drawback of this approach though is that while this solves the peer-review or validation question, it does not solve the preservation issue because the article is not harvested or stored elsewhere.

could an author retract the article, acknowledge its prior “publication” by including a citation, and submit it for open peer review on a preprint server or post-publication peer review platform?

So back to the question: could an author retract the article, acknowledge its prior publication and submit it for open peer review on a preprint server or post-publication peer review platform?

As it stands there is no way for authors to retract the article, acknowledge its appearance by including a citation, and submit it for open peer review on a preprint server.

However, this limitation is social and political, not technical, and so I urge disciplinary communities to think about this question of what to do with the at risk research in their field. Rather than dismissing it or ignoring it, which seems to be the current approach, I suggest that people can their frame of mind, to consider the research that appears in these outlets to research that is At Risk and consider it as an issue that the disciplinary community must try and solve. I urge those with the ability to affect political and social change - and maybe those who are currently building preprint servers - to help me answer that question

what now?

Jeanette Hatherill
Scholarly Communication Librarian
University of Ottawa, Canada
jeanette.hatherill@uottawa.ca
@jeanetteanneh

WHAT NOW?

Thank you