

Short Communications

The Deuce List - A Tool to Evaluate Journals and A Mini-review on Predatory Publishing

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ABSTRACT

The research malpractice of predatory publishing (PP) has been prevalent for over a decade. Research scholars in healthcare, young or veteran, fall prey to the shady deeds of illegitimate publishers, thereby creating a dump ground of academic dissemination. This communication serves as an educational guide on PP in the scientific world and simultaneously outlines 40 characteristics of fraudulent publishers. The list can also serve as a tool for academicians to impart knowledge on PP to healthcare students.

Keywords: Evidence-based research analysis, Knowledge dissemination, Predatory journal, Scientific journal evaluation, Scientific misconduct

INTRODUCTION

Scientific communication has witnessed a prolific rise, courtesy of the intangible World Wide Web, archival sources, multiple modes of dissemination, and interdisciplinary networking. Readers, publishers, and authors are at the forefront of facilitating this heritage of knowledge. The open-access (OA) movement was initiated to make research available to everyone. However, the greed for financial gains has breached the reader-publisher-author triangle.^[1] Many countries have taken undue advantage of academic and publishing policies, with India's stake featuring prominently in the top echelon [Table 1].^[2-4]

In November 2018, India's University Grants Commission (UGC) introduced the Consortium of Academic and Research Ethics (CARE) as a cadre that could ensure the legitimate dissemination of evidence-based research studies. In 2019, the then Vice-Chairman of UGC, Prof. Bhushan Patwardhan raised his concerns in a *Nature* article, stating that India churns out nearly a third of the total predatory publications (~400,000 per year) as per 2015 estimates.^[5] As a result, in 2020, the UGC-CARE published a guidance document titled, 'Good Academic Research Practices (GARP)'.^[6]

Section 3.3.1 of the document educates the reader on selecting a reputed and valid medium for promulgation of their research work. This section also addresses concerns regarding publishing misconduct and scientific fraud committed by predatory publishing (PP). The GARP endorses the following 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 practice.'

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A review of the UGC-CARE's functioning in December 2023 revealed that the list of journals recommended by the 'expert' group contained predatory publications. Moreover, renowned journals were ignored, and the evaluation of non-STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) journals was limited. Three years before this review, the National Education Policy (NEP) highlighted the over-reliance on decision-making power left to centralized bodies (like UGC-CARE). Thus, on 3rd October 2024, the UGC-CARE list was officially scrapped. In 2025, the UGC has left it at the behest of the higher education institutes, universities, and research & development entities to decide locally the choice of journal to disseminate their work in.^[7] The decision to remove the ex-cathedra list of a key component of academic integrity in the country has raised concerns about whether this move by the UGC will see a spike in PP. The absence of an apex body to monitor the validity of publications has left India's academic integrity vulnerable to scientific misconduct. Readers can go through Rasal Singh's educative piece published in Outlook to understand more about the morass faced by Indian researchers today.^[8]

The concept of PP is not a novel one. It has been over a decade since Jeffrey Beall's landmark work became the nidus for bringing publication malpractice to the limelight.^[9] Yet, PP continues to prosper. In fact, it is so widespread, that it is now described by a plethora of names - dark, illegitimate, pseudo, false, misleading, dubious, phony, free-riders, fraudulent, deceptive, questionable, Hage-Taka, blacklisted, hijacked, 'trojan horses of academia', 'murky dark side of open access'.^[10]

Illegitimate publishing can be a diagnosis owing to one of the etiologies: a) exclusion of PP in the academic curricula, b) miscreancy of academicians in intentionally opting for PP to finagle academic promotions, c) post-graduates contrived to resort to PP to showcase a 'publication' as a part of fulfilling an academic degree, d) dilettante academicians who fall prey to PP, e) ineptitude of academic administrators and inspectors to detect PP. The consequences of PP are multifarious. Firstly, the research becomes vulnerable to deletion from the public domain without it being assigned a persistent object identifier e.g., DOI (digital object identifier) in the first place. Secondly, the research is not cited or discovered in a literature search. Thirdly, the imprudence of choosing PP can be sordid for the research scholar; they besmirch their reputation and leave scope for researchers to use their name and affiliation unethically. Should a researcher realize their mistake of publishing in fake journals, it still comes with an added price of retraction costs. The jeopardy that scholars can put themselves in through PP due to peer pressure and duress robs them of the opportunity to enjoy the rewards of legitimate publishing.^[11]

Academicians have previously developed journal evaluation tools or narratively iterated the qualities that identify PP to

address concerns associated with publication misconduct.^[12] Yet, the exponential rise of PP, despite the counters to stop them, is irrefutable. Thus, this mini-review is drafted to present a single standardized list that educates research scholars about the various traits of predatory publishers.

METHODOLOGY

A literature search was carried out across three scientific databases with a forward citation score of over 70%.^[13] A search string comprising relevant keywords, truncations, nests, and Boolean operators was input to find studies that reported on PP. Recency was ensured by setting the timeline of our literature search after 2013 since the first prominent list of Beall was released in the same year. After the initial title and abstract screening, a final screening was done for 12 published papers on the topic published in the last eight years [Table 2].

A full-text screening of the chosen studies revealed that multiple characteristics of predatory journals overlapped across all articles. Thus, these traits were listed and de-duplicated to give a final list of 40 characteristics [Table 3].

DISCUSSION

Deuce in tennis is a scoring term used when the game score reaches 40-all. Additionally, the informal use of the word 'deuce' has been used as a substitute for 'devil' or a means for exhibiting annoyance. Since PP instils a similar emotion in academicians, the deduced set of the 40 traits of PP was named 'The Deuce List'. However, this annoyance may not be triggered in academicians. This can be said owing to a few startling statistics on the attitudes of academicians in India that resort to PP.

It might be a demoralizing statement for ethical researchers and academicians to learn that PP has been opted by academicians intentionally. Some of the most common reasons among research scholars to publish in PP despite knowing its flaws were unavailability of funds, pressure from supervisors, desperation to publish, publishing for tenure, fit of the paper in the journal, difficulty in publishing due to low originality of research publication, invitation from the journal, lack of mentorship, lack of personal motivation to publish, social identity threat (e.g. poor proficiency in English language), presumption that Western or International journals might not be interested in their work, and lack of research proficiency.^[14,15]

Perhaps the most comprehensive work from an Indian perspective was done by Seethapathy *et al.*^[16] They revealed that government and private colleges accounted for 51% of PP, and 18% was from private universities or institutes. Furthermore, researchers from national institutes have

also resorted to PP (11%). The authors from these national institutes have acknowledged the Government of India for getting them grants, and the study itself documented 112 such publications. This further raises questions about the screening procedure of research organizations and whether the responsible authorities are aware of how to monitor a journal's legitimacy.

Journal selection is anchored by two observations: a) that the journal falls within the scope of your research work, and b) that the journal is legitimate enough to preserve the works worth publishing. The Deuce List helps in satisfying the latter. It is a vade mecum for researchers to choose a legitimate and reputed publication. Owing to its simplicity, The Deuce List is largely self-explanatory and is principally didactic for teachers.

Researchers can use The Deuce List to diagnose if the journal is questionable and deceptive. They can use it to infer whether a journal shows high predatory behaviour. By no means does The Deuce List suggest that even one item of the list is enough to give a verdict of illegitimacy to a journal. However, the researcher must be skeptical if many boxes are ticked during the journal evaluation through The Deuce List.

The Deuce List also adds to the literature by educating the readers on PP. This is crucial due to the fact that India's contribution to educating its scholars on PP has been minimal

as per systematic and bibliometric reviews.^[17,18] The duality of India's scientific prowess can be adjoined by the fact that it currently ranks sixth among all countries in terms of maximum publications but is ranked 200 in terms of average citations received by each published paper.^[19]

As of February 2025, three highlights encapsulate India's status quo in scientific research. Firstly, the allotment of Rs 20,000 crore by the Union Ministry in its latest budget to private-sector-driven research has uplifted the spirits of many.^[20] Secondly, implementing a One Nation One Subscription to ensure that over 6,300 HEIs and research & development institutions access over 13,000 scholarly journals (from nearly 30 major publication houses) counters the 'pay-to-read' OA model.^[21] However, the snubbing of the UGC-CARE list outweighs the two progressive moves. With a lack of a central

Table 1: Rate of predatory publications in India.

Author and year	Total predatory publications evaluated	Percentage of predatory publications from India
Shen and Bjork (2015) ^[22]	656	27%
Moher <i>et al.</i> (2017) ^[3]	1907	27%
Shamseer <i>et al.</i> (2017) ^[4]	93	62%
Demir (2018) ^[2]	832	42%

Table 2: Studies chosen for full-text screening.

Year and author	Article type	Summary
2016, Masten & Ashcraft ^[23]	Narrative Review	Compares the characteristics of traditional, scholarly open access, predatory open access
2017, Ferris & Winker ^[24]	Narrative Review	Discusses ethical considerations in predatory publishing
2017, Gonzalez <i>et al.</i> ^[25]	Literature Review	Compares the characteristics of predatory and open-access journals based on Beall's criteria
2017, McCann & Polcsek ^[26]	Literature Review	Summarizes open-access publishing models and gives characteristics of predatory journals as per a literature search between 2007 to 2017
2017, Memon ^[27]	Qualitative Study	Lists down characteristics of predatory publications based on thematic analysis of 25 "calls for submissions".
2017, Shamseer <i>et al.</i> ^[4]	Cross-sectional Study	List down 13 characteristics of predatory publications following a comparison between potential predatory, presumed legitimate, and fully open-access journals
2017, Rele <i>et al.</i> ^[28]	Evaluation Tool	Describes the journal evaluation rubric which helps in the quantitative assessment of journals
2018, Umlauf & Mochizuki ^[29]	Report	Compares professional and predatory models of research
2019, Bucceri <i>et al.</i> ^[11]	Narrative Review	Proposed a checklist for identification of predatory journals and summarizes the consequences of predatory publishing
2020, Elmore & Weston ^[30]	Narrative Review	Gives tips for identifying predatory journals and details their common characteristics
2021, Huseynova <i>et al.</i> ^[31]	Observational study	Highlights specific characteristics like distorted images, grammatical errors, etc as consistent with predatory publications after a comparison of 431 journals that were either presumed predatory, presumed legitimate open access, and presumed legitimate subscription.
2022 Ibrahim <i>et al.</i> ^[32]	Cross-sectional Survey	Reports on the current understanding of graduates in medical centers regarding predatory publications

Table 3: The deuce list of predatory journal characteristics

The deuce list	
Sr No	Predatory journal characteristics
1	Misleading name (does not match the content of the journal)
2	Promises of rapid publication on spam mails or journal website
3	High acceptance rate
4	Absence of archiving or depository or repository policies
5	Bogus and non-existent editorial board
6	Lack of clarity in ownership
7	False claims of indexing
8	Bogus citation metrics (e.g. Index Copernicus Value)
9	False claims or absence of peer-review
10	Misrepresentation of journal (distortion of journal identity)
11	Flawed or unclear editorial process
12	Grammatical or syntax errors in manuscripts
13	Incomplete or unclear author guidelines
14	Unprofessional layout of journal website (flashy/scrolling/pixelated graphics)
15	Distorted images in published manuscripts of the journal
16	Outdated or lack of manuscript handling system
17	Lack of retraction policy
18	Unprofessional solicitation mails
19	Improper or fake ISSN numbers
20	Low quality of published research (e.g. below par language, plagiarized content)
21	Mimics legitimate journals (journal phishing or hijacked journals)
22	False editorial office address
23	Questionable special issues
24	Inconsistent publication schedule
25	Engagement with predatory conferences
26	Journal is not in top five of search results after performing a search through a search engine
27	Flawed website design (broken links, difficult navigation)
28	No persistent object identifier allotted to articles (e.g. Digital Object Identifier, Archival Resource Keys, etc)
29	No policy on repercussions following identification of research misconduct
30	Attractive words used in journal name ("International", "World", etc)
31	Article Processing Charge (APC) or links to APC displayed on homepage of journal website
32	Absence of indexing information
33	Journal from a developing (low- or middle-income) country
34	Broad scope with vague description which encompasses multiple fields of studies
35	Manuscript submission via email
36	Non-professional contact email (personal email ids like @google.com, @outlook.com, @hotmail.com, @yahoo.com, etc)
37	No mention of adhering or following the guidelines of Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), Open Access Scholarly Publishing Association (OASPA), World Association of Medical Editors (WAME)
38	Intrusive ads on journal website
39	Over 20 articles in a single issue
40	Editorial board from a specific country

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portal of valid journals to bank upon, The Deuce List is a measure to lay the kibosh on PP.

CONCLUSION

The cessation of PP is a Sisyphean notion based on the absence of sly researchers. However, academicians can impart and educate recently enrolled students regarding publishing, publishing misconduct, and research malpractice as an early preventive measure for PP. To ensure this, The Deuce List acts as a catalyst for ethical researchers to uphold scientific integrity.

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