



The UKZN Griot. Of Snake Oil and Publication Subsidy

BY:

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The analogue age was characterized by snake oil salesmen in the US, and became associated with medical fraud. Pyramid/ponzi schemes emerged a century later when finance capital became dominant, followed in the 2000s by the banking meltdown due to reckless lending and unregulated markets, and of course the narco economies are an enduring blight. The digital age ushered in 419 scams, trading on individual gullibility. Yes, we all foolishly imagine we have an unknown uncle or aunt somewhere wanting to warehouse his/her millions in our bank accounts.

In tandem with the above, threats to the academic sector are growing daily, what with predatory open access journal invitations cluttering our mailboxes[1], and now predatory conference organisers also. These scamsters sport illustrated websites and organise phantom events run by ghosts in places like Washington DC, or in Johannesburg. Predatory journals with fake impact metrics but real bank accounts offer 12 hour reviewing, and publish scientific garbage, as has been proven by article stings conducted by *Science*[2]. Now there is a new set of threats facing legitimate journals. These include: cloning, theft of titles, mimicking appearance, stealing websites and articles, and appointing fictitious board members.

Now, there are brokers who offer to “place” articles for authors and moreover offer payment and PR. Others claiming to be guest editors offer complete thematic issues, ready to print, immediately. These perverters of purveyed academic porn seem to originate from the ex-Soviet Bloc, if I am to believe the locations listed by self-appointed guest editors and brokers.

Recently, a new attempt at securing publication has appeared, written by real academics from the same ex-Soviet states. The inquiry is identical, only the names and topics differ: name, title, followed by: “Could you, please, take a look at the topic of my article and let me know whether it is appropriate for the journal ...?” Each then summarises objective, approach, conclusion, practical significance.

Initially, I wondered whether the authors are legit, and whether this kind of appeal is an indicator of the dominance of English as the pre-eminent academic language globally. I am told by Taylor & Francis that some of these inquiries from authors based in

Kazakhstan in particular might stem from publishing seminars run by the company at two universities, in response to state requirements for increased published output in WoS journals with relatively high impact factors.

Impact factors and English are intertwined. Sound familiar?

Increasingly, South African authors are driven less by a thirst to communicate knowledge but to secure DoHET publication subsidy. Where the international gurus wait patiently in the production line, South Africans demand immediate attention, immediate publication and often complain about revisions required by referee reports.

Editors of overseas journals remark on how they are sometimes browbeaten by South Africans to publish substandard articles, often to the astonishment of these submissions' reviewers whose helpful suggestions are ignored by both authors and editors.

When I and my colleagues have queried such ill-advised action, the editor's response has been thus: a) 'we felt sorry for the author, he's from Africa you know', or b) we were bullied, or c) we needed to fill the space. This kind of paternalism does the academic enterprise no good at all.

Also, such journals simply take the route of least resistance. While these journals are not 'predatory', sometimes their authors are. They are a menace to good scientific practice and editors who publish substandard work will vitiate the academic value of their journals. When due protocols are dismissed a sense of author entitlement follows.

But there's more, to paraphrase a well-known TV ad. Many SA universities now require their MA and PhD students to publish from their theses. So editors and reviewers are now having to process opportunistic submissions on a scale not previously experienced, without any recompense for the labour, time or administrative costs incurred by publishers, whose voluntary editorial boards are already stretched to the limit.

Journals are thus made into unwitting accomplices of institutional assessment processes. And, let's not discuss performance management indices where academics submit half-done papers to accredited journals simply to generate the receipt that 'proves' that they have met their annual submission quotas. Again, the journals pick up the cost of this duplicity perpetrated by desperate academics who clearly have no self-respect or respect for their peers or the consequences of this kind of unprofessionalism.

UKZN Professor Emeritus, John Aitchison, recently reminded us in the *Mail & Guardian* of some of the undesirable consequences of the DoHET subsidy, the goose that lays the golden egg, when not abused by universities or academics[3]. One open access predatory journal was recently deleted from DoHET accredited list after an exposé by *The Times*. The journal's listed head office address is actually a car park in Rome, and was being actively promoted by some snake oil apostles as a legitimate way of milking the system.

Then, there are the titles that are so general as to be meaningless, whose editors can't tell the difference between an academic study and a technical report. A recent 'Research Letter' published in the *SA Journal of Science*[4] suggested that a majority of

articles published in the astonishing 19 South African titles on management evidenced indications of plagiarism. That's another consequence of misuse of the DoHET system. Other kinds of stings now occur. One colleague recently wrote a hoax report with fictitious references in his assessment of what he assumed was a hoax MA thesis, sent him for examination, on a topic about which he knows nothing. So, now hoaxes are being perpetrated upon hoaxes and universities are party to the game[5]. Satire is the only method left to assess this kind of absurd academic environment.

By all means publish and be damned, but for the sake of knowledge. Universities need to devise indices to measure quality rather than demanding just quantity. Otherwise we might end up publishing in predatory journals that have no fixed or findable addresses – other than their bank accounts. Why is it that we had to leave it to *The Times* to expose the fraud and the snake oil? Universities should be doing this work.

- Tomaselli is a UKZN Professor Emeritus with a penchant for the absurd.

Read *Griots, Satirical columns, and the micro public sphere* which appeared in *The Journal of African Media Studies*.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this column are the author's own.