



The UKZN Griot. Of Publishing and Perishing

BY:

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‘Publish or perish.’ This term has been around for a long time. Yet, even today, the many who do not publish, do not perish. Their lack of publication productivity units (PUs) may be punished in one way or another, but nothing that the CCMA can’t handle.

The digital age, however, sees new threats in every PC, as scamsters across the world, especially in Pakistan, China and India develop the new 419 model that rips off inexperienced academic authors desperate for publication. South Africans have been largely shielded from these conning publishers, a clear benefit of this otherwise flawed regulation and reward mechanism.

“Predatory publishers” are creatures of the Net, lurking in the dark deep spaces, prowling through conference programmes, and appropriating email addresses from university websites. They prey on academics, students, anyone who needs immediate “refereed” publication – for appointment, tenure, resource, promotional and PU purposes.

These often unsuspecting individuals are hunted down and sent beguiling personalised invitations to submit papers to journals with improbable and grammatically incorrect titles – e.g. Journal of Advance Research or the International Journal of Science and Technologe. Naïve authors with deep pockets are promised immediate review (i.e. within 48 hours), referees can be suggested (e.g. Mom and Pop, a neighbour), and publication within the month, while self-plagiarisation is encouraged i.e. just submit one of your own already published papers, or take a published article written by someone else and put your name on it, or mix-‘n-match from a variety of separately authored studies appropriated from legitimate journals and substitute your name for author/s of the originals.

Cutting and pasting from the Net is the new norm. There are thousands of these titles to submit to, with individual phishers listing up to 300 on a single web page.

Predatory journals' websites are typified, like 419 letters, with grammatical errors, misspellings and appeals to one's venal side. And, like 419s, they often work. The sites and titles, even layout, are often cloned from legitimate journals, so don't be fooled when Stephen Hawking's purportedly personally invites you to submit a paper on any topic under the sun to a dodgy journal with which he is claimed to be associated.

Authors are invited to join unlisted august editorial boards by editors who provide only a first fake name. These phishing exercises work on economies of scale – they list up to 300 open access titles just waiting to ensure that your article in any discipline will offer one the next-best-thing to celebrity status. These mega publishing outlets are run from untraceable IP addresses, fake P.O. Boxes, and rundown store fronts in places no-one has ever heard of. But they do sport real bank accounts. Maybe you are on the board of a journal you never heard of? If so, pay up.

The key to publication in this model is that readers do not have to pay for access, but that authors have to pay for acceptance. The claim made by these open access journals is that they will attract readers and citations. This is the "gold" author-pays model, not to be confused with the South African system of page charges. The fees can be upwards of USD 3 000 per paper but might be waived for authors from poorer countries. Fear not, the publisher will have stolen your copyright and sell it onwards to other desperate authors who think they've been approached by a kindly uncle in the third hand article business.

'But there's more', as one genre of direct TV selling goes, your paper will be entered into a lottery draw for a free annual membership of a chimerical disciplinary association that is managed by the same phishing publishing procurer. Or, authors will be invited to conferences scheduled for places like Oxford. What more could an author want?: fame, recognition, and disciplinary status. What is delivered, however, is impaired reputation, discreditation and loss of self-esteem when one realises that one has been scammed.

But again, this can be a bonus where university HR divisions fail to check out the CVs of applicants who proudly list scam journals amongst their academic output. These journals manufacture their own impact factors and one or two even get accepted by key indexes. You can fool some of the people all of the time.

The delights of open access and Internet piracy have to be negotiated by wary authors. But there's hope. Like Spiderman, Superman and Batman, there is a site that exposes the open access con artists, the opportunists, one that brings exposés thrice weekly to my inbox of new scams, new phishing techniques and new incomprehensible journal titles. The latter enter my inbox on a daily basis.

The exposé site is called Scholarly Open Access edited by librarian Jeff Beall. Beall has a very thick skin – he fends off threats of legal action all the time. He does this in his personal capacity and protects the rest of us from mendacity, stupidity and fraud. He exposes titles, websites, and editors, when they can be identified. One such at a known Texas institution is editor or associate editor of over 100 journals

and he is on the editorial board of many more – clearly the man does not sleep. Most editors who are listed are given fake CVs, indeed, these CVs may even proudly claim that they lack qualifications. Hey, the NRF A-raters, do check whether or not your mug shot has been (mis)appropriated.

In the pressure to publish, novice authors fail to check these titles, to study back issues or to do any research into the very vehicles that hold their careers hostage. They become victims of their own carelessness and impatience. They become part of the problem; they pay, published and perish.

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