

Open Access Journals: the Good, the Bad and the Ugly

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Traditional academic publishing developed with two main sources of revenue. First, individuals and organizations subscribe to provide revenue to cover costs of publishing, and generate publisher and academic society profits. Secondly, these journals sell advertising to drug and device manufacturers, and organizations recruiting faculty, fellows and building attendance at CME events.

With the dawn of the Internet, electronic publishing gave rise to the “open access” movement, which gained popularity due to willingness among the academic community to disseminate knowledge freely and without monetary or licensing constraints. The vanguard for this movement was the Association for Research Libraries, which developed the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Research Coalition (SPARC) in 1998. SPARC aimed to enhance scientific communication by using the digital world and university partnerships to make distribution of published scientific research more affordable.¹ Support for publicly available peer-reviewed research continued through policies implemented by funding organizations such as the National Institutes of Health and European Research Council in 2007.² To date there are close to 10,000 *quality* open access journals from 134 countries, according to the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ).³

Unfortunately, all that glitters is not gold. Since the advent of the movement, a plethora of fraudulent journals and publishing companies has emerged which has corrupted the good intentions of the open access model. These journals are infamous for charging thousands of dollars for hidden submission and publication fees, offering submission-to-publication times on the order of a week or less that make peer review impossible, plagiarizing credible journals, and creating falsified editorial boards using the names of doctors who are unaware of their existence. Many advertise themselves as having establishments in the United States or United Kingdom and develop websites that mimic those of legitimate journals, while publishing subpar research lacking any form of peer review.⁴ These predatory publishers thrive financially at the expense of authors, readers and the scientific community.

Precautionary measures, especially for novice researchers, should be taken to avoid falling victim to predatory open access journals. Organizations such as the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association,⁵ International Association of Scientific, Technical & Medical Publishers⁶ and Committee on Publication Ethics⁷ have codes of conduct that list standards for legitimate publishing companies and journals. In addition, Jeffrey Beall, a librarian at the University of Colorado, Denver, created an extensive list of red flags and other criteria that can be used to assess journal credibility on his blog called Scholarly Open Access.⁸ Most importantly, he writes “to tackle the problem, scholars must resist the temptation to publish quickly and easily” in order to preserve the integrity of the editorial process and overall quality of scientific research.⁴

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