

Navigating the new world of scientific publications: Croatian scientists and predatory journals

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ABSTRACT

An increasing number of scholarly journals and scientific papers are available in open access on the journal's websites (gold open access) and in repositories (green open access). Although both ways of achieving open access provide free access to end users, publishing costs still exist and are collected from a variety of sources, e.g. through article processing charges (APC) or crowdfunding (Spezi, Fry, Creaser, Proberts and White, 2013). The idea of the open access model was to make high quality journals available to the widest possible public (BOAI, 2002) and the model today has many benefits for the scientific communication. Nevertheless, a deviation has developed recently. The deviation – the emergence of so-called predatory journals – threatens quality and reliability of scientific communication. Such journals attract authors with low APC fees, fast publication, and false indexation data (Beal, 2015; Jalalian, Mahboobi, 2014). Predatory journals and publishers promise quick peer-review, they often have fake editorials listed on their websites, send emails inviting authors to publish papers or offering them to be editors of their journals (Bowman, 2014). Those journals are in open access, they use article processing charges model but do not control the quality (i.e. peer review process is insufficient or, in most cases, non-existent). As the information published in such journals is not verified, there is a possibility that it is wrong and further research should not be based on it. Although there is a lot of information in the literature about the common features of predatory journals and publishers, they can be defined as "the entities which prioritize self-interest at the expense of financial gain and are characterized by false or misleading information, deviation from best editorial and publishing practices, lack of transparency, and/or persistent and random requests" (Grudniewicz et al., 2019, p. 211).

The number of predatory journals has grown, and this has become a major problem for scientific communication and the development of science. Various attempts have been made to characterize and identify predatory journals and help researchers and other participants of scholarly communication to distinguish them from reliable journals. One such attempt was to separate the two with lists (Dadkhah, Borchardt, 2016; Laine, Winker, 2017; Shen, Björk, 2015; Strinzel, et al, 2019). The best-known blacklist of "potential, possible, or probable predatory scholarly open-access journals" is the one by Jeffrey Beall, a librarian who coined the term "predatory" journal in 2015 (Beall's list).

The aim of our study was to investigate whether Croatian scientists published in predatory journals and in how many of them. The sample consisted of open access (OA) papers published in 2016 and 2020 as listed by the Croatian Scientific Bibliography (CROSBIB). First we separated those published in journals covered by the Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, and DOAJ databases. The remainder was checked against three "blacklists": the DOAJ list of journals that claim they are indexed in DOAJ but are not (DOAJ, 2022), the archived version of Beall's list (Beall, 2017), and Kscien's list of standalone predatory journals and publishers (Kscien, 2015).

Of the 2153 journal titles recorded in CROSBI in 2016, 14% were not included in WoS, Scopus, or DOAJ. In 2020, of the 2383 journals, 12% were not included in the three databases. Of these, 0.4% in 2016 and 0.3% in 2020 were found on the DOAJ's list of journals that falsely claim to be included in that database, whereas 6% in 2016 and 2% in 2020 were identified on the Beall's and the identical percentage was identified on Kscien's lists of predatory journals. These findings show a drop in the number of predatory journals in which Croatian scientists published. If we look at the number of papers published in predatory journals, 75 papers were published in 2016 and 35 papers in 2020, which shows a decrease in the number of papers. This drop may be owed to better OA literacy and raised awareness of such journals. Nowadays, scientists have various options to check the quality of open access journals with tools such as Think.Check.Submit, Open Access Journal Quality Indicators, or Quality Open Access Market.

There are several limitations of our study. One is that the CROSBI database relies on author input and may not include all papers published in OA journals. Still, it is the most accurate and comprehensive database so far). The other limitation is related to the shortcomings of Beall's and Kscien's lists of predatory journals. Beall's list ceased in 2017 due to the lack of transparency but has been maintained and updated by an anonymous scholar (<https://bealllist.net/>). Kscien's list is trying to overcome this lack of Beall's list transparency by recruiting young researchers into its review board, but its accuracy is yet to be verified.

Despite these limitations, we believe that this study shows a positive trend among Croatian scientists, who are now more aware of the pitfalls of publishing in predatory journals.

KEYWORDS

open access journals; "predatory journals"; questionable journals; scientific communication

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