

Beware of predatory publishing – but also of low-quality blacklists

By Jan Erik Frantsvåg

Abstract

We should be wary of low-quality journals and predatory OA publishing. But we should also know which sources' judgement to trust. Is the new website *Predatory Reports* a trustworthy source of information?

Keywords

Blacklists, predatory journals, predatory publishers, predatory publishing

Predatory publishers or journals are problematic for many reasons, one of them being that they create problems for serious open access (OA) publishing efforts. But that cannot lead to a practice of calling anything one doesn't like, predatory.

I recently came across the website [Predatory Reports](#), with a subtitle of *Predatory Journals in Scientific Publishing*. I have strong misgivings about this site, and I wonder if the website is serious.¹

In the About section, we learn that they are “an association of scientists and researchers who seek to help researchers identify trusted journals and publishers”. But that is, more or less, it. We don't know who they are, what their connections are with publishers and journals, what field they are active in etc. Anonymous criticism is in itself a problem, but it is not the only problem with this website. While I had issues with Jeffrey Beall's lists, he was open about who he was, and he gave information about why publishers and journals were listed – he didn't just list them. He also unearthed and published a lot of interesting information about the journals and publishers. I won't go into the discussion if blacklists are useful or needed here, that is another discussion.

¹ The content of the site is changing often, and some content has been added during the writing of this viewpoint. For practical reasons I have to “freeze” my impression of the site as it was around March 20th without taking into consideration later changes and additions.

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Predatory Reports contains a list of predatory publishers, and a list of predatory journals, what is usually termed a blacklist. There is no description that tells me whether the list of journals is limited to stand-alone journals – i.e. journals without a publisher – as I seem to remember was the case with Beall’s list. A look at the list tells me that it is not, it could be a mix of stand-alone journals and journals from the publishers listed – or only a list of the journals belonging to the publishers listed. But again, the persons² behind this site have chosen to keep us uninformed.

The site lists no stringent criteria for inclusion of publishers, neither does it point to which criterion/criteria is the reason for the inclusion of a given publisher or journal. While Beall’s list had rather vague criteria or an idiosyncratic application of criteria, reasons for including a publisher were generally to be found in the list or on the website.

On the home page there is a [list of characteristics of predatory journals](#). To quote the characteristics:

“Complaints that are associated with predatory journals (open-access) publishing include:

- Accepting articles quickly with little or no peer review or quality control, including hoax and nonsensical papers.
- Notifying academics of article fees only after papers are accepted.
- Aggressively campaigning for academics to submit articles or serve on editorial boards.
- Listing academics as members of editorial boards without their permission, and not allowing academics to resign from editorial boards.
- Appointing fake academics to editorial boards.
- Mimicking the name or web site style of more established journals.
- Making misleading claims about the publishing operation, such as a false location.
- Using ISSNs improperly.
- Citing fake or non-existent impact factors.
- Boasting about being "indexed" by academic social networking sites (like ResearchGate) and standard identifiers (like ISSNs and DOIs) as if they were prestigious or reputable bibliographic databases.

Predatory publishers have also been compared to vanity presses.”

Now, there is nothing wrong with the list of criteria per se, it is the use of them that I find unsatisfactory, to say the least. It is also interesting that a website that says it

² It is unclear whether there is a single or multiple persons involved in the website: generally, there is a “we” authoring, but in one blog post I see an “I” authoring. I have not made a detailed study of this, but the “I” indicates that the community behind this website might be one single person.

“seek[s] to help researchers identify trusted journals and publishers” is wholly concentrated on identifying untrustworthy journals. One cannot identify a trusted journal or publisher merely by its not being included in a list of untrustworthy journals and publishers.

I have been involved in a journal (MDPI's *Publications*)³ listed here as predatory. Elsewhere, e.g. in [DOAJ](#) and the [Norwegian Register for Scientific Journals](#)⁴ I find it listed as a bona fide scholarly journal. I have looked through the list of predatory journal characteristics, most of them couldn't possibly be a reason for listing *Publications* as predatory.

The average time for manuscripts to go through the review process in *Publications* is 6 weeks – which in some disciplines may be categorized as (too) quick. However, from good knowledge of *Publications* – being on the receiving and giving end of peer review – I would argue that the journal's editorial team makes every effort to provide authors with substantial feedback. The journal does reach out to academics to submit articles, but I would not describe its campaigning as aggressive. MDPI has, with e.g. Hindawi and Frontiers, been criticised for heavy use of special issues. Such special issues also exist in *Publications*, but looking at articles in 2022 and so far in 2023, a clear majority have been published in the general issues. So, what is the basis for Predatory Reports to include this journal? It might be that if they had argued for the inclusion, I could evaluate their arguments, agree or disagree – but at least understand their reasoning. But they only state that this is a predatory journal, period. No reasons given, at all. (It must be mentioned that the journal, while today listing an APC of CHF 1400, for most of its life has had an APC of 0. Having a 0 APC is generally not considered consistent with predatory publishing, as the definition includes charging a fee.)

Predatory publishing is a term generally used only for OA journals, as many such journals have a business model where authors pay a fee to have their article published. In serious OA journals, this comes with peer review, whereas predatory journals more or less skip this quality assurance part of scholarly publishing. Some of us would argue that publishing worthless articles in subscription journals, especially if journals are bundled and sold as a package, also comes under the concept of predatory publishing – however, this is generally not seen as a problem. Interestingly, the home page of Predatory Reports comes with an illustration that gives an

³ I, with most other members of the Editorial Board, [left the journal a short time ago](#), this was [not connected to problems with the journal itself](#), but to some of the publisher's general practices.

⁴ DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals), the authoritative database of OA journals, checks that journals have quality assurance procedures in place before admitting them to the directory. The [Norwegian Register for Scientific Journals](#) is a governmental whitelist, defining which journals are of such a quality that they can be classified as scholarly, and merit publication points and added money to the author's institution. There is a secretariat and more than a hundred committees of scholars to oversee and evaluate this list.

impression that this website sees predatory publishing mainly as a non-OA problem, as OA publishers in the illustration are only a small fraction of predatory publishers.



Figure 1. Venn diagram of OA and Predatory Publishers. Taken from <https://predatoryreports.org/home>.

As one can see, there is only a small overlap between OA publishers and Predatory Publishers in the diagram. This does not tally well with what I gather from the text on the website. This is a sign that the level of scholarship behind this website does not include knowledge of how a Venn diagram works. (I notice, by the way, the website incorporates a Think. Check. Submit. video. But <https://thinkchecksubmit.org/> is neither credited nor mentioned, which is not in accordance with normal scholarly practices.)

The News section of the website is concentrated on two publishers, SCIRP and MDPI, while Frontiers now seems to be on the way in. I have little knowledge of SCIRP, much better of MDPI. And I agree that there are practices within the MDPI portfolio that merit discussion and criticism. I note that the Norwegian Register for Scientific Journals, Series and Publishers (this is what decides if your publications are counted as scholarly in Norway, and should give your institution funding) have decided to [assign a non-scholarly status](#) (level 0) to a number of MDPI journals, and having two journals up for scrutiny (level X). This is based on input from the Norwegian scholarly community. It is well worth to note that they have explicitly not listed MDPI as a non-scholarly publisher – this has been discussed but it was decided that this must be evaluated on a journal level in such a case. This has been a more or less public process: the criteria are well documented, and we know who has taken these decisions. During the revision of this viewpoint, I discovered MDPI had published [their views](#) on *Predatory Reports*, and argued against the status of predatory publisher.

During some years, I have been under the impression that there could be some kind of anti-MDPI activism going on in some circles. And historically, there has been activity

trying to discredit OA as such, e.g. spreading the rumour that OA means no peer review. This has at least to some extent been connected to initiatives by traditional publishers, wanting to protect their revenue streams.

The website’s lack of quality and transparency makes me wonder whether this, too, is an attempt to use real problems in some journals and with some publishers, to create a negative view of OA in general?

Criticising publishers and journals is, and must be, a very legitimate act in a scholarly context. We need to be aware of what are good practices, and what practices are bad. And we need open discussion on this.

What we don’t need is an anonymous website passing judgement on publishers or journals, not citing proper arguments for these judgements except for some summary information on the publisher level. It seems quite obvious to those who have followed the debates, that journals can only be evaluated at the journal level. Bad publishers may have good journals, good publishers may have bad journals, just as good journals may have some low-quality content, and vice versa.

Predatory reports looks to me to have some resources behind them. They have a nice design, fine illustrations and the money to rent server space. Still they represent, to me, a new low in the debate on journal quality.

Do we need a blacklist of blacklists to protect us against this kind of rubbish?

Note:

The Author has for some years been on the editorial board of *Publications* (one of the journals listed as predatory in *Predatory Reports*), and has authored and reviewed articles in *Publications*. He resigned from the editorial board, together with the editors and a majority of the editorial board, on March 17th 2023 due to disagreements with MDPI management on policy issues not influencing the editorial quality of *Publications* itself.