Role of Editorial Boards in Ensuring Quality in the Era of Predatory Threats

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ABSTRACT

As the academic publishing landscape expands, so do the risks that threaten its credibility. Predatory journals, often indistinguishable at first glance, are exploiting the pressure to publish, undermining peer review, and damaging researcher trust. In this evolving environment, editorial boards are no longer just facilitators of peer review; they are the frontline defenders of quality and integrity. As custodians of academic integrity, they play a critical role in defending against these threats. This article explores the evolving responsibilities of editorial boards in ensuring rigorous peer review, promoting editorial transparency, and maintaining ethical oversight. It also highlights practical strategies for distinguishing legitimate journals from deceptive operations and guides editorial boards, particularly in emerging regions, to uphold scientific credibility in the face of growing predatory sophistication.

INTRODUCTION

The academic publishing ecosystem has witnessed remarkable growth in recent years, driven in part by open-access models and digital dissemination[1]. However, this growth has been accompanied by a surge in predatory publishing entities that exploit the scholarly model without adhering to quality standards[2]. In an era where academic publishing is both expanding and under threat, the role of editorial boards has never been more pivotal. As the custodians of scholarly quality, editorial boards are increasingly expected to safeguard their journals from the rising tide of predatory publishing, an ecosystem that mimics the form but lacks the integrity of legitimate outlets[3]. These deceptive journals often go so far as to fabricate editorial boards or list academics without consent to falsely project credibility and attract submissions[4]. The sophistication of these deceptive practices demands a recalibration of editorial responsibilities, especially in regions where scholarly infrastructures are still developing.

Understanding predatory publishing and its impacts: Predatory journals have emerged as a growing threat to scholarly communication, exploiting the open-access model to prioritize financial gain over academic integrity[5]. By offering fast-track publication without proper peer review or editorial oversight,

these outlets undermine the credibility of legitimate research[6]. Their deceptive practices, such as falsified indexing claims, fabricated editorial boards, and superficial quality checks, not only distort the scientific record but also harm authors, particularly early-career researchers, who may unknowingly fall into their trap[5].

The repercussions are far-reaching: Academic trust is eroded, low-quality work infiltrates citation networks, and the reputations of scholars and institutions suffer lasting damage[7]. Editorial boards play a crucial role in defending against this trend. Their vigilance is essential to maintaining rigorous standards, safeguarding journal integrity, and ensuring that only credible, peer-reviewed research enters the global body of knowledge[8].

Expanding editorial responsibilities: Editorial boards have long been responsible for overseeing peer review and shaping a journal's strategic direction. However, in today's complex publishing environment, their role has expanded significantly. They are now expected to enforce ethical standards, identify fraudulent or manipulated submissions, and actively protect the journal from reputational harm. As Torres[9] highlights, the rise of online predatory journals has made editorial misconduct more difficult to detect, reinforcing the need for vigilant, transparent, and accountable editorial leadership[9]. The credibility of a journal, and often the trust placed in its parent institution, now hinges on the strength and integrity of its editorial leadership.

Key areas where editorial boards must take a proactive stance include:

- **Reviewer selection and oversight:** Ensuring that peer reviewers are qualified, diverse, and free from conflicts of interest[10]
- **Ethical governance:** Managing retractions, handling allegations of misconduct, and maintaining adherence to international ethical frameworks[11]
- **Policy transparency:** Establishing and publicly communicating editorial guidelines that support fairness, objectivity, and consistency in decision-making[12]
- **Citation integrity:** Monitoring for unethical citation behaviors, including excessive self-citation, citation stacking, or coordinated citation cartels[13]

Hallmarks of legitimate vs. predatory journals: The increasing sophistication of predatory journals requires more than casual scrutiny. Editorial boards must actively engage in educating their stakeholders, authors, reviewers, and readers on how to distinguish credible journals from deceptive ones[14]. Understanding the hallmarks of legitimate scholarly journals is essential for protecting the integrity of academic publishing (fig. 1):

- **Peer review quality:** Legitimate journals apply structured peer review (e.g., double-blind or open) and ensure reviews are documented and traceable. Reviewers are selected based on expertise and ethics. Predatory journals often skip this, issuing fast, unverified acceptances
- **Editorial board transparency:** Credible journals list qualified, active editors with affiliations and defined roles. Predatory journals may include fake or unaware individuals to appear reputable
- **Indexing legitimacy:** Reputable journals are indexed in trusted databases like DOAJ or Scopus and provide verifiable links. Predatory journals often make false claims or display fake indexing logos
- **APC (article processing charges) transparency:** Ethical journals disclose APCs clearly before submission, outlining what the fee covers. Predatory journals often hide fees or demand payment only after acceptance
- **Ethical standards and policies:** Legitimate journals follow COPE, ICMJE, and WAME guidelines and publish clear ethics policies. Predatory outlets either lack these or present vague, unenforced statements

Criteria	Legitimate journals	Predatory journals
Peer review	Transparent, structured, time-bound; documented reviewer feedback; uses COPE-aligend practices	Superficial or absent review, often with no documentation or traceable reviewers
Editorial board	Publicly listed, qualified experts affiliated with institutions; roles clearly defined	Names may be fabricated, unverified, or unaware of their listing
Indexing	Authentically listed in reputable databases (Scopus, DOAJ, Web of Science) with verifiable links	Falsely claims indexing or mimics indexing logos; lacks transparency
APC disclosure	Clear, fixed fees published on the journal's website before submission	Hidden fees, variable charges after acceptance, or aggressive fee collection tactics
Ethics policies	Adheres to COPE, ICMJE, or WAME guidlines; has public misconduct, retraction, and correction policies	Vague or non-existent ethics statements; no policy on retractions or plagiarism

Fig. 1: A visual chart comparing key indicators of legitimate and predatory journals

Ensuring peer review integrity: Strong peer review remains the backbone of scholarly publishing. Editorial boards must go beyond assigning reviewers; they must establish systems that ensure fairness, timeliness, and intellectual rigor throughout the review cycle[15]. As peer review systems evolve, editorial boards must embrace both innovation and accountability. Sarwar *et al.*[16]. emphasize that emerging technologies such as AI-based reviewer matching and collaborative review models can enhance both efficiency and integrity in peer review, provided they are implemented within a transparent editorial framework[16]:

- **Reviewer matching and diversity:** Effective reviewer assignment must consider disciplinary expertise, geographical diversity, and gender balance[17]. Editorial boards should maintain updated reviewer databases and use AI-supported tools to avoid conflicts of interest and reviewer fatigue[18]
- **Standardized peer review models:** Implementing structured peer review models (e.g., double-blind, open, or collaborative peer review) enhances accountability and transparency. Studies suggest structured review forms improve review quality and reduce biases[19]
- **Turnaround time monitoring:** While efficiency is valued, speed should never compromise depth. Editorial boards should monitor timelines to detect red flags such as "too-quick" reviews often seen in predatory journals[20]
- **Training and guidance:** Journals should provide reviewers with ongoing education on constructive feedback, ethical dilemmas, and red flag detection. Initiatives like COPE's eLearning modules can support this

Promoting transparency and editorial independence: Transparency is a foundational pillar of editorial trust. As noted by Toroser *et al.*[21] publishing stakeholders increasingly demand visible editorial processes and clear policies on editorial independence, especially in a globalized, digital publishing environment[21]:

- **Visible workflows and policies:** Journals should publicly describe how manuscripts are handled, from submission to decision, along with review timelines and author rights. Transparency reduces manipulation and aligns with initiatives like *Plan S* and *DORA*[22]
- **Editorial disclosure:** Full disclosure of board member roles, affiliations, and any financial ties with the publisher or funders builds trust. Editors should also disclose decision-making processes and any appeals procedures[23]
- **Editorial autonomy:** Editorial decisions must remain independent of commercial influence, even when revenue depends on article processing charges (APCs). Ethical publishers provide editors with contracts that reinforce autonomy[24]

Recommendations for emerging and regional journals: Journals in developing regions often face systemic challenges: limited editorial training, constrained reviewer pools, and vulnerability to deceptive platforms. However, strategic improvements can help these journals thrive without compromising standards:

- **Adopt global best practices:** Align with DOAJ's criteria, ICMJE recommendations, and COPE principles. These serve as benchmarks for editorial transparency, ethical publishing, and author protection
- **Invest in editorial training:** Regional editors and reviewers should be empowered through local workshops, global mentorships, and access to online certification (e.g., EASE's editorial school)
- **Build consortia:** National or regional editorial consortia can facilitate reviewer exchange, shared blacklists, and collective bargaining with indexing bodies
- **Use technology smartly:** Emerging journals can adopt editorial management systems (e.g., Open Journal Systems, Scholastica) to enhance process integrity and tracking

Promotion global collaboration against predatory threats: Predatory publishing is a transnational issue; it cannot be addressed in silos. Global collaboration allows stakeholders to pool resources, harmonize ethics standards, and identify bad actors more efficiently:

- **Shared blacklists and watchlists:** The COPE, Cabells, and regional bodies like ACSE or AfSE can jointly maintain updated databases of journals and publishers engaged in deceptive practices
- **International training and capacity-building:** Cross-border editorial workshops, co-authored guidelines, and multilingual resources can help disseminate best practices across diverse communities
- **Collaborative editorial research:** Journals and universities can support research into peer review systems, predatory behavior patterns, and ethical publishing, especially in underrepresented regions
- **Indexing reform:** Global indexing services must involve editors from non-Western regions in setting selection criteria, ensuring inclusion without compromising rigor

CONCLUSION

In an era where the integrity of scholarly publishing is under siege, editorial boards stand as the first and final line of defense. Their role has evolved from passive oversight to active guardianship, ensuring rigorous peer review, upholding ethical norms, and shielding journals from predatory infiltration. This expanded mandate demands transparency, independence, and accountability at every stage of the editorial process. As predatory journals grow more sophisticated, the burden of responsibility on editorial boards, especially in developing and transitional regions, has intensified. By embracing global best practices, investing in editorial training, and fostering international collaboration, journals can fortify themselves against reputational risks and preserve the credibility of academic literature. Ultimately, the strength of any journal lies in the integrity of its editorial leadership. Ensuring quality in the age of predatory threats is not just a procedural duty, it is an ethical imperative that defines the future of scholarly communication.

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