

Why the Scholarly Publishing Community Has Failed to Contain Predatory Journals? An Institutional and Systemic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Despite over a decade of awareness and intervention efforts, predatory journals continue to pose a serious threat to the credibility, equity, and integrity of scholarly publishing. This article examines the institutional and systemic failures that have allowed predatory publishing to persist and even expand. While unethical actors remain at the center of the problem, the blame cannot be laid solely at their feet. The academic ecosystem comprising universities, indexing services, commercial publishers, and research institutions has collectively failed to respond with the urgency, coordination, and accountability required. Key failures include fragmented oversight, misaligned academic incentives, inadequate researcher training, opaque indexing policies, and a lack of support for ethical publishing efforts in under-resourced regions. The article offers a comprehensive analysis of how these structural weaknesses have enabled predatory journals to flourish and outlines a series of actionable recommendations for global reform. The conclusion is clear: addressing predatory publishing requires more than awareness. It demands a unified, inclusive, and equity-focused rethinking of how scholarly value is defined, supported, and protected across the world.

KEYWORDS

Predatory journals, scholarly publishing, academic integrity, open access, peer review, institutional failure, academic incentives, indexing services, publishing ethics, researcher training, systemic gaps, grey zone, scholarly legitimacy, equity in publishing, ethical alternatives

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INTRODUCTION

The rise of predatory journals has become one of the most persistent and damaging threats to scholarly publishing in the 21st century¹. These journals, which often operate under the guise of legitimate open access publishing, exploit the pressure on researchers to publish, charging publication fees without providing transparent peer review, editorial oversight, or adherence to ethical standards. While initially dismissed as a fringe issue, predatory publishing has grown into a global concern that affects the credibility of science, misleads researchers, especially early-career scholars, and contaminates the academic record².



Since the term “Predatory journal” was first popularized by Jeffrey Beall in the early 2010s, thousands of such outlets have emerged worldwide^{3,4} predatory journals published over 400,000 articles in 2014 alone^{5,6}, a number that has likely increased in the years since. Despite efforts by academic institutions, publishers, indexing services, and professional organizations to raise awareness and create safeguards, these journals continue to proliferate⁷. High-profile cases of fraudulent editorial boards, plagiarized content, and fake impact factors regularly surface, undermining trust in academic publishing and confusing the wider public^{8,9}.

The scholarly publishing community, comprising researchers, institutions, funders, publishers, and regulators, was expected to act decisively in protecting academic integrity. Yet, despite increased attention, coordinated and effective action has been lacking¹⁰. This article explores the systemic and institutional reasons behind the scholarly community’s failure to contain predatory publishing. It argues that this failure stems not merely from unethical actors but from entrenched weaknesses in oversight, incentive structures, training, and publishing equity.

The central question driving this analysis is straightforward yet unsettling: Why has the scholarly publishing community failed to contain the spread and influence of predatory journals, despite widespread awareness of the problem? In addressing this question, the article offers a critical institutional and systemic analysis of missed opportunities, ongoing challenges, and the collective responsibility for meaningful reform.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This article employs a critical narrative review methodology to examine the persistence of predatory journals through an institutional and systemic lens. Sources were selected through purposive sampling of peer-reviewed literature, policy documents, reports by academic bodies (e.g., COPE, DOAJ, UNESCO), and case studies from both Global North and South contexts. Emphasis was placed on synthesizing interdisciplinary perspectives from information science, higher education, and scholarly communication¹¹. The analysis prioritizes structural patterns over isolated incidents, aiming to identify recurring institutional gaps, stakeholder failures, and global inequities. Rather than presenting original empirical data, the article constructs a conceptual framework to understand and address the enduring threat of predatory publishing.

UNDERSTANDING PREDATORY PUBLISHING

Beall’s List, a now-defunct but once widely used blacklist, named publishers that he believed engaged in deceptive or unethical practices, such as promising peer review but failing to deliver, misrepresenting editorial boards, and soliciting manuscripts aggressively without editorial standards¹².

Initially, Beall’s criteria were criticized for being subjective and lacking transparency, sometimes conflating low-resource journals with unethical ones. Nonetheless, his work sparked global debate and brought much-needed attention to the integrity of open-access publishing¹³.

In 2019, a consensus study defined predatory journals as those that “Prioritize self-interest at the expense of scholarship”, exhibiting practices such as false or misleading information, non-existent or poor peer review, and a lack of transparency¹⁴. While this definition is helpful, it remains challenged due to the nuanced and evolving nature of publishing misconduct.

Despite definitional debates, predatory journals distort the scholarly process, mimicking legitimacy while undermining scientific rigor.

Common characteristics: Most predatory journals share identifiable features that differentiate them from reputable publications:

- **Absence of rigorous or transparent peer review:** Articles are often accepted within days, lacking meaningful editorial feedback, raising doubts about the quality and validity of the research¹⁵
- **Misleading editorial boards:** Names and affiliations of scholars are often used without their consent, or editorial roles are fabricated entirely¹⁶
- **Aggressive manuscript solicitation:** Authors receive frequent, personalized emails inviting submissions or editorial roles¹⁷
- **Deceptive metrics and indexing claims:** Many predatory journals display fake impact factors, claim indexing in databases they do not belong to, or create their own illegitimate metrics¹⁸
- **Hidden fees:** While advertising themselves as “free” or “low-cost,” these journals often charge hidden publication fees after article acceptance¹⁹
- **Poor website infrastructure:** Websites may contain broken links, grammatical errors, and outdated information, signs of minimal investment in editorial infrastructure²⁰

These features are not universal, but several combined often signal a predatory operation. Their mimicry of legitimate journal design makes detection difficult, especially for early-career researchers or those in under-resourced institutions.

Grey zone: A major challenge is distinguishing predatory journals from merely inexperienced or underdeveloped ones²³. Not all journals with limited peer review or poor formatting are predatory; some are early-stage efforts from emerging academic communities²¹.

This grey zone complicates regulatory and educational efforts. For example, excluding a journal from an indexing database based on subjective quality metrics may unfairly penalize genuine, developing journals²¹. Conversely, relying solely on superficial markers of legitimacy (such as professional-looking websites or claimed indexing) can allow predatory journals to slip through the cracks.

Furthermore, the binary classification of journals as “Legitimate” or “Predatory” fails to account for the complex motivations behind their operations¹⁶. Some publishers may begin with good intentions but adopt unethical practices over time, while others may exist in a space of intentional ambiguity, exploiting the benefits of open access without clearly violating norms²².

The existence of this grey area underscores the need for more nuanced, contextual, and dynamic tools for identifying, categorizing, and responding to predatory publishing. It also highlights the importance of ongoing vigilance, community engagement, and global cooperation in strengthening the integrity of scholarly communication.

SYSTEMIC GAPS THAT FUEL PREDATORY PUBLISHING

Predatory journals thrive not only because researchers lack awareness, but because they exploit entrenched systemic flaws in scholarly publishing.

Misaligned incentives in academia: The pervasive “publish or perish” culture rewards volume over quality. This incentivizes researchers, particularly early-career scholars, to seek rapid publication, even in questionable venues²³.

Inadequate publishing infrastructure: In many Global South countries, the absence of sustainable local publishing systems forces researchers toward unaffordable options or predatory journals that appear more accessible. Without institutional backing, ethical publishing becomes a luxury²⁴.

Lack of coordinated oversight: There is no global regulatory framework to oversee scholarly publishing standards. This vacuum allows predatory journals to operate freely across borders²⁵. While some organizations have attempted to fill this gap, their efforts remain fragmented and inconsistent. These systemic issues are further compounded by stark global disparities, particularly in regions with limited publishing infrastructure.

GLOBAL DISPARITIES AND EXPLOITATION

Though predatory publishing is global, its impact is more severe in under-resourced regions like parts of Africa, South Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East²⁶. Limited access to reputable journals, high APCs, language barriers, and institutional gaps create a vulnerable environment²⁷.

In many cases, academic institutions cannot vet journal quality, leading to promotions or funding decisions based on publications in journals indexed in unreliable databases. This inadvertently rewards submission to questionable outlets, not out of bad faith, but from limited options and institutional pressure²⁸. Predatory publishers, in turn, aggressively market themselves to these communities with personalized emails, low APCs, and claims of international reach or indexing, often under the guise of being inclusive or regionally supportive.

Notably, many such operations are based in high-income countries or run by actors outside the regions they exploit²⁹. This disconnect highlights a troubling asymmetry: The Global South suffers most from a system often orchestrated elsewhere. As a result, global scholarly inequality deepens. Well-resourced researchers benefit from training and support, while their counterparts must navigate a deceptive and opaque publishing environment with little guidance³⁰.

The result is systemic harm: Compromised national research outputs, damaged reputations, and marginalization of legitimate local journals.

FAILURES OF KEY STAKEHOLDERS

Predatory publishing persists because powerful institutions have failed to respond adequately.

Indexing databases and the illusion of legitimacy: Indexing services act as quality gatekeepers but often apply inconsistent or opaque inclusion criteria. Their errors legitimize predatory journals. Calls for reform have largely gone unanswered²³.

Capacity-building gaps: Many institutions and funders have focused on researcher training, but without building the editorial and infrastructural capacity of journals, especially in the Global South. This fragmented approach reinforces dependency on dominant Western publishing systems and fails to support ethical alternatives within underrepresented regions³¹.

Siloed responses: Efforts to address predatory journals are often isolated, driven by publishers, funders, or watchdogs independently, rather than through collaborative, cross-sector initiatives. A collaborative governance model is urgently needed³².

To consolidate the systemic gaps discussed above, Table 1 summarizes the primary stakeholders in scholarly publishing, their key failures in addressing predatory journals, the resulting consequences, and recommended reforms for a coordinated global response.

NORTH-SOUTH DIVIDE IN THE PREDATORY PUBLISHING NARRATIVE

Global discourse often paints Global South researchers as uninformed or complicit, while Global North institutions are seen as protectors of quality. This oversimplifies the issue and ignores structural inequities³³.

Table 1: Summary of systemic failures by stakeholder group in addressing predatory publishing, their consequences, and recommended reforms

Stakeholder	Key failures	Consequences	Needed reform
Universities and institutions	Reward volume over quality	Encourages risky publication choices	Reform promotion and tenure metrics
Indexing databases	Opaque or inconsistent inclusion criteria	Legitimizes predatory journals	Transparent, auditable indexing
Publishers	Siloed, reactive measures	No unified global response	Collaborative governance model
Funders	Limited investment in regional publishing	Over-reliance on Western journals	Support ethical regional journals
Researchers	Lack of ethics training	Vulnerability to deceptive journals	Mandatory ethics & publishing literacy
Regulatory bodies	No global framework	Cross-border predatory activity	Create international oversight

Adapted from analysis in Sections 4-6 of this article

Southern journals are often labeled predatory based on superficial criteria, such as website design or English proficiency, without considering resource constraints. Meanwhile, Global North institutions' complicity in rewarding publication volume is rarely examined³⁴⁻³⁶.

To address this imbalance, Global South stakeholders must be empowered to co-create ethical publishing standards, not just be recipients of reform.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Solving the problem of predatory publishing demands more than individual awareness or reactive measures. A coordinated, global strategy is needed, one that addresses root causes while promoting equity, transparency, and integrity across the scholarly ecosystem.

Develop a global framework: Establish a shared framework for journal evaluation, emphasizing ethical and operational standards. Avoid rigid blacklists; instead, encourage flexible, certifiable guidelines.

Strengthen researcher training: Embed ethics training in graduate education and provide ongoing professional development. Partner with organizations like COPE, DOAJ, and UNESCO to ensure global accessibility^{37,38}.

Reform academic incentives: Shift focus from quantity to quality. Academic evaluations should prioritize impact, originality, and ethical contributions over publication count.

Improve indexing transparency: Indexers must disclose clear criteria and audit journals regularly. Appeals and delisting procedures must be transparent and fair²³.

Support ethical regional journals: Invest in regionally led journals with strong standards. Provide funding, training, and visibility to promote ethical local alternatives.

CONCLUSION

Despite years of attention, the scholarly community has failed to contain predatory publishing, not because of ignorance, but due to systemic failures. Misaligned incentives, opaque indexing, fragmented oversight, and neglect of vulnerable regions have all contributed. Superficial fixes, like blacklists or awareness campaigns, ignore the structural roots of the problem. Researchers, particularly in the Global South, are burdened, while key stakeholders have yet to be held meaningfully accountable. This article argues that predatory publishing is a symptom of a fractured ecosystem governed by inequity and misaligned values. A sustainable response requires global, inclusive reform that redefines scholarly legitimacy and strengthens ethical infrastructures worldwide. Predatory journals exploit the system's blind spots. The future of ethical publishing depends on fixing those blind spots, not just punishing the exploiters.

SIGNIFICANCE STATEMENT

This article reveals that the persistence of predatory journals is less about individual misconduct and more about entrenched systemic failures across the scholarly publishing ecosystem. By mapping the institutional blind spots, from misaligned incentives to inequitable global structures, it reframes predatory publishing as a collective accountability challenge, offering actionable reforms to build a more transparent, equitable, and ethical global research environment.

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