

Why India is striking back against predatory journals



Our foe is determined and adaptable, says Bhushan Patwardhan. A list of credible titles is the latest salvo in the fight against shoddy scholarship.

Bhushan Patwardhan

According to 2015 estimates, more than 8,000 predatory journals churn out more than 400,000 items a year, and India – which has also seen a spurt in high-quality scientific publications – contributes more than one-third of the articles in predatory publications.

Last month, India launched its latest salvo against the ‘pay and publish trash’ culture that sustains predatory journals. Over several months, more than 30 organizations representing universities and academic disciplines have vetted journals to release a reference list of respectable titles. Predators sabotaged our last attempt. We hope this better-curated list will help to cut off the supply of manuscripts to the unscrupulous operators that profit financially by undercutting academic quality.

Fending off the attack of trash science will be a long battle. Predatory journals have severely compromised scientific scholarship. They collect fees, but do not perform peer review or other promised services. My country’s experience so far shows both what makes an academic enterprise vulnerable to predatory publishers, and the coordinated efforts necessary to thwart them.

India has been proactive in fighting these outlets. A 2017 survey found that, of the ten funders most frequently acknowledged in articles in predatory journals, India’s University Grants Commission (UGC, of which I am now vice-chair) was the only one to provide guidance on its website about selecting journals (D. Moher *et al. Nature* **549**, 23–25; 2017). Ironically, that (now defunct) guidance had already been undermined. Thousands of fake journals had infiltrated the UGC’s ‘white list’ of acceptable publishers.

Around 900 universities in India are entrusted with postgraduate education. Research, however, is carried out mainly at national institutes and laboratories, as well as in a few universities. Yet, in 2010, the UGC began evaluating current and potential university faculty members by their publications. In 2013, it mandated that graduate students must publish two research articles to receive a PhD, a regulation that at present covers about 160,000 students. Although well intended, this regulation encouraged corruption. Many thousands of students desperate for publication, along with ineffective monitoring, led to the mushrooming of predatory publishing.

When the first UGC list was unveiled in 2017, I was already alarmed about the rapid penetration of predators into the Indian academic community. In 2009, I had started getting e-mails from journals with words such as ‘international’ and ‘global’ in their titles and claims of high impact factors. I wondered why I’d become so popular that I was receiving invitations to join editorial boards, coordinate special issues and submit articles in areas

outside my expertise. Then I realized that many colleagues were also receiving such e-mails, and some were accepting these invitations. It was only in 2013, when I learnt of the list of predatory journals compiled by librarian Jeffrey Beall, that I realized how serious the situation had become. By then, hundreds of academics at Indian universities, frantic to publish, had fallen prey to predators. And in some cases, that pseudo-prestige landed real jobs, promotions and awards.

In 2015, I joined the (truly) international Committee for Publication Ethics, and led an effort to prepare guidelines for acceptable research publishing at Savitribai Phule Pune University in Pune, where I was professor of health sciences. In 2017, I helped to found the Center for Publication Ethics there. We recruited like-minded academics to examine the UGC list and found that, of the subset of titles that had been submitted by universities, 88% were of poor quality (B. Patwardhan *et al. Curr. Sci.* **114**, 1299–1303; 2018). Soon after, I was invited to join the UGC Journal standing committee, which removed more than 4,000 predatory journal titles from its list.

But in my view, the more important dismantling is still to come. We need to correct the overemphasis on quantity over quality as an academic performance indicator. Teaching faculty and researchers need dependable guidance on choosing journals in which to publish. The UGC has set up the Consortium for Academic Research and Ethics (CARE) to promote these goals and to improve the quality of research at Indian universities more generally. We are developing a for-credit course that can be used as part of pre-PhD course work and in faculty induction, orientation and refresher programmes. A related UGC committee has recommended scrapping the publication requirement, and has proposed other changes to help PhD candidates produce better-quality work.

We will also provide discipline. The UGC has instructed universities to ignore publications and presentations in predatory outlets in all future evaluations, and to publicly challenge any attempts to compromise academic integrity. Publication in predatory journals will be assessed during a university's accreditation process and institutional reviews.

The predators seem to have noticed our efforts. The day before the scheduled launch of the UGC-CARE website, we noticed a fake website spoofing our identity and promoting shady journals. (We have filed a complaint to the police and an investigation is in progress.)

This dynamic reveals the protracted battle that research integrity requires. Like drug-resistant microbes, which continue to thrive despite new antibiotics, predatory journals develop new ways to survive: inducting fake editors, devising fake indexing agencies and fake impact factors, and even making online attacks. This is why CARE plans to update its list quarterly, and to monitor the list closely for both unintended consequences and attempts to game the system.

Our foe is determined and adaptable. We must be, too.



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