

## Commentary

# Scholarly publishing landscapes: a geographical perspective

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*How do changes in journal publishing relate to the locations of knowledge production, disciplinary power and value? This commentary reconsiders these questions in the light of debates about open access and the proliferation of predatory publishers.*

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A decade ago, Nicholas Blomley (2006) published an Editorial in *Geoforum*, asking ‘Is this journal worth US \$1118?’ His intervention considered value in publishing, at a time when its business models and technologies were undergoing significant change. These changes, in how/where journals are read and who pays for them, have continued, along with heightened attention to university rankings (Jöns and Hoyler 2013), benchmarks and the rise of bibliometrics quantifying the impacts of papers and journals. In the light of these shifts, perhaps Blomley’s question now needs to be supplemented with ‘how much does this article cost?’ Prior structures, whereby only subscribers paid, have been destabilised by the internet. It is in these contexts that I cite from a 21 December 2014 e-mail to me from a publisher who purports to be based in Park Avenue, New York. Under the tag of ‘Christmas Gift: Free Article Publication’, the publisher informed me that:

Now it is Christmas time. The Christmas season starts on [name of publisher and journal removed]. Giving gifts on Christmas is a relatively new development. We have prepared a special gift for you: Free Article Publication Opportunity.

[name of publisher removed] editorial board has read your article entitled *Transecting security and space in Phnom Penh*, written by Sidaway, James D.; Paasche, Till F.; Chih Yuan Woon; Piseth Keo in *Environment & Planning A* and sincerely hope you can extend your

article by adding some new research results and publish it in our journals. . .

Other solicitations continue to arrive in my e-mail spam folder, from journals I have never heard of, sometimes on subjects, such as engineering or biochemistry, far from my own interests in geography and allied humanities and social sciences. They are interspersed with e-invitations to faraway conferences in academic fields of which I know nothing. There may be some great work published in some of these journals. But I doubted the words about their editorial board reading ‘Transecting security and space in Phnom Penh’ and the sincerity of their hope that the research it reports might be extended. A brief investigation indicates that their address in New York is a mail forwarding service (where else they operate from is not immediately clear, and a lot of other firms also use that New York mailing address). Together with hundreds of others, they also featured in a database of ‘potential, possible or probable predatory’ open-access publishers compiled by University of Colorado-Denver librarian Jeffrey Beall.<sup>1</sup> What Beall calls predators operate on a pay-to-publish formula. In this they are not alone. In recent years a system of payments for open access to journal papers has evolved – that includes long-established and reputed journals (like *Area*). The result is an increasingly complex publishing landscape in which article processing fees alone

cannot be used to measure whether a journal is 'predatory' or not (Xia 2015). But according to Beall's website, what also distinguishes the 'predators' are attempts to mislead regarding their locations and sites of production and/or a tendency to send spam. The publisher may make claims about quality and impact that are not readily sustained on looking at their contents. They sometimes offer expedited review and fast publication. Ultimately, however, the question of who and what is predatory rests on complex judgements connected with wider discussions and shifts in academic publishing.

Writing from the standpoint of co-Editor of a scholarly journal owned by a commercial publisher, I had already joined discussions on the rise of, and reviewed some the growing debate about, 'predators' (O'Loughlin *et al.* 2014). Since then, spam from such journals seems to have increased at my University account. Moreover, debate continues to evolve, with critical commentaries also using terms like 'fake', '[il]legitimate' and 'sham' journals (Butler 2013; Hill 2015; Mehrpour and Khajavi 2014). Beall also documents questionable conferences as well as publication mills, which offer to co-author or place a paper, for a fee. Profit as well as dishonesty, fraud and dispute are not new to science. However, the 'predatory' journals are part of an evolving journal publishing landscape, in which there have been shifts in who pays and how and where journal papers may be read. More is being published than anyone could hope to read and journals have proliferated; but so too have modes of search, access and data retrieval and storage. At the same time there are contradictory trends yielding a concentration of corporate power in publishing in the hands of a few big firms coexisting with new start-ups and some alternative models such as community- or foundation-funded open access (in human geography found at [www.acme-journal.org](http://www.acme-journal.org)). Reviewing this changing landscape, it is tempting to simply dismiss the 'predatory' publishers – and it is easy to be condescending about them. Yet they clearly respond to a demand – and one that is shaped by wider structures of power and privilege in academia linked to place and reputation. To my mind, this connects them with interrelated issues – about the location of knowledge production and the geography of disciplinary power – that merit further discussion and that go beyond the discussion of open access that has tended to dominate the debate in the UK (Baruch *et al.* 2013).

First, it is worth re-posing questions about *where* journal publishers are located. The established commercial and scholarly journal publishers usually have head offices near the heart of western power: sites of cultural (and money) capital such as New York,

London, Oxford, and the outskirts of Amsterdam or in one case, a suburb of Los Angeles. Yet their production networks frequently involve back offices (especially typesetters and copy-editors) on the other side of the planet (India and the Philippines seem to be favoured lower-wage sites for these aspects of the production process). Many journal archives are no longer primarily held on library shelves, their hosting is online. These complex geographies may not always match the attempts at cloaking location, common among journals/publishers that feature on Beall's list (see the interactive map in Bohannon (2013) based on a sting operation in which a spoof error-ridden pharmaceutical paper whose flaws ought be quickly evident and from a fake author and institution was accepted by over 100 pay-to-publish journals). But all journals are also caught up in fractions of capital and broader economies of distinction. We therefore need to ask more questions about the control, ownership, processes and sites of production of all journals. The revolution in publishing unleashed by the internet means that the barriers to entry are now modest and thus far the age of digital reproduction is scarcely two decades old. The rise of printing<sup>2</sup> and mechanical reproduction of images and text were integral to the making of modernity bearing new forces of production and ideological shifts (in which the development of sciences and disciplines were crucial). As one account of the rise of print culture in the first half of the 20th century notes, it

went beyond the mere transmission of ideas. Print qualitatively altered the social and cultural experience of language and text in ways that had implications for the formation and reproduction of systems of knowledge and for the processes through which individuals came to understand their notions of self and their relationship to the social and material world around them. (Marashi 2015, 90)

Given such precedents and analogies, the consequences of developments in computational and communications technologies on what a report by the Royal Society termed 'the boundaries of [scientific] openness' (2012, 9) merit further historicisation and mapping.

Second, and closely related to my first point, how does the multiplication of 'predatory' journals/publishers relate to the issues of hegemony and centres in knowledge production and the uneven geographies of power that correlate with these? Geographers have often debated the consequences of these centres and putative hegemonies for what counts as knowledge (among the recent contributions to this extensive debate is Aalbers 2013). It appears that most of those deemed as predatory publishers operate near the margins of global hierarchies. But rather than celebrate their liminality,

they more often seek to disguise it. Further vexing issues emerge here. An Editorial in the reputed *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* reflected on the sting operation reported above, in which Bohannon (2013) exposed shocking lack of quality control. It notes how Bohannon

submitted an error-ridden study extolling the benefits of a new cancer drug, under the name of an imaginary African researcher working at a fictitious institute in Eritrea. (Bartholomew 2014, 384)

Bartholomew rightly raises concerns about what this means for the integrity of academic publishing. But that the imaginary figure was racialised and spatialised escapes further comment. A geographical imagination moulded by power that reproduces privilege is at work, leading to the choice of an African researcher at an Eritrean Institute. Put another way; why not concoct a European researcher at an invented East Anglian university? Moreover local, national and international norms, expectations and regulations (such as the REF in the UK and debates there and elsewhere in the EU<sup>3</sup> about open access) intersect with a publishing industry whose business models are invariably highly international, frequently involving aspects of production outsourced to lower waged venues.

Debates about where and in what formats to publish are related to careers and reputation, invariably clouded by cash, calculations and the expectations of institutions and funding agencies. Maybe 'predatory' journals have become venues for material that otherwise might not appear in the format of a journal? For scholars in many countries the demand is driven by academic ranking systems that reward publications in English in promotion appraisals. Indonesia is a case in point, where the *Direktorat Jenderal Pendidikan Tinggi* [Directorate General of Higher Education] applies a credit system for promotion, in which articles in (invariably English-language) 'international' journals garner almost double the 'points' of those in 'national' Indonesian-language ones and eight times the points rewarded for writing an Indonesian textbook, sometimes with perverse results (Kozok 2015).

Similar schemes have been established in dozens of other countries and thousands of universities. Yet this seems set to bolster the standing of those select journals that have long occupied the top tier and are therefore able to reinforce their status in a more crowded field. Analogous to the rush to hold quality money (such as precious metals) when other means of exchange are devalued, counterfeited or debased, the determination of authors who are able to place their work in the most reputed or higher ranked journals seems set to

reproduce the structures of distinction/recognition that the predators mimic. Where is this leading? Perhaps we should also look at publishing landscapes in another way, drawing on a different metaphor from the world of finance, that of the Ponzi scheme, whereby clients/authors are seduced by expectations of returns that publishers/journals promise (be these based on open access, speedy publication, potential impacts or reputations) fuelled by a seemingly endless stream of submissions, rankings and metrics.

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## Notes

- 1 There have been questions about the grounds for determining who and what features on Beall's list. See the list (<http://scholarlyoa.com/publishers/>) (accessed 10 January 2016) and wider discussions in <http://scholarlyoa.com/>, Bivens-Tatum (2014) and Berger and Cirasella (2015).
- 2 For a review of debates on print capitalism that is also an informative case study from Asia, see Reed (2004).
- 3 These include a 2015 boycott of Elsevier by Netherlands-based academics over charges that led the publisher to shift some of its policies and a workshop at the European Commission (Smith 2015) on alternative open access publishing models.

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