**RESEARCH REFLECTIONS**

**Protecting yourself from scam artistry in the publishing world**

*by Sally Thorne, RN, PhD*

“Open access” journals are those that readers can access freely using the internet. In recent years, a rapid proliferation of new open access journals has emerged in response to pressure from both the public and various funding agencies to make the results of research accessible as possible. The open access model typically depends for its funding base on “article processing fees,” meaning that the author covers the cost (typically ranging between $500 and $2,000 CDN per manuscript). This contrasts with the more conventional publishing model in which publication is free for the author, but the journals are supported by such mechanisms as subscriptions, society fees, and advertising. Some research funding agencies, especially those supported by donors or taxpayers and, therefore, eager to ensure that the results of the work they fund are widely shared, have built the costs of these article processing fees into their research grant allocations.

In this climate, many mainstream journals and publishers have taken steps to expand their publishing model to include a fee-based open access option, and many new exclusively open access journals have suddenly appeared on the market. Much of this benefits nursing in that it reflects the same level of scholarly credibility we have come to rely on in our professional journals, but with the added bonus of accessibility. However—and this is a big however—the open access movement has also opened the door for a very worrisome new form of scam artistry in the form of what are now being referred to as “predatory publishing practices.”

**UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF OPEN ACCESS**

Credible journals take pains to serve their reading audience by ensuring that the science or professional wisdom they publish is legitimate and of high quality. In contrast, some of the newer open access journals engage in practices that are entirely market driven. In the highly lucrative market that has evolved, many have become highly skilled at attracting article submissions, often from the most naïve and vulnerable authors, and those who are under pressure to further their careers by publishing quickly. These predators are often highly creative in their efforts to lure prospective authors. Many attempt to lure you in with a flattering email—the kind that seems to be speaking to you personally, as an esteemed expert in your field. Often they capitalize on your impatience to see your work in print by offering a very rapid review process (sometimes from submission to publication in a matter of days!). Prospective authors may get caught up in these journals if they fail to do due diligence before they actually submit. The journal advertisement that comes via email may have a familiar sounding title, and a logo that looks quite official, and may claim to be the official journal of an organization whose name sounds impressive. However, when you look below the surface of those claims, you may well find that you are being lured into a publishing process that could damage your professional reputation or harm your career progress, not to mention put an unnecessary dent in your pocketbook.

Although not all open access journals are predatory, all of the predators are open access. Sadly, because of these nefarious practices in the open access world, an increasing number of scholars and professionals are getting into difficulty by virtue of having made uninformed or unwise publishing choices. However, with a basic understanding of how the scholarly publishing process works, and how the predators have started to operate within it, we can all can take proactive steps to protect our written work and our professional credibility.

**THE MECHANICS OF THE PUBLISHING WORLD**

Nursing has a long and well-established record of supporting a wide range of professional and scholarly journals, spanning the various sectors of practice and clinical domains. There are, in fact, hundreds of nursing journals, some with wide scopes and international audiences, and others designed for a more limited reach to specific nursing communities (Thorne, 2014). Typically, they are led by a respected professional leader as editor, and they may also have an editorial board made up of established experts who help shape the direction of the journal, as well as participate in ensuring the calibre of its review and publishing practices. The term “peer review” refers to those journals that build in a “blinded” external advice process, such that the editor’s decision as to whether a manuscript warrants publication is shaped by the thoughtful input of recognized and unbiased experts. In the academic world, peer review papers tend to hold extra value, as the integrity of this critical review process helps confirm the quality of scholarship. Credible journals all adhere to extensive international publishing standards set up as a safeguard to assure the reading audience of the quality and integrity of the published ideas (Clark & Thompson, 2012). So, as we know from our own Canadian Oncology Nursing Journal, it takes a considerable level of effort and expertise to manage the process of bringing a high-quality peer review paper through to publication.

In contrast, predatory journals do not operate out of conventional publishing houses or organizations designed to support those editorial practices, and they may have simply invented an organizational title. Rather than holding any professional expertise, the “editor” may be a one-person or small group publishing operation, possibly running dozens of “journals” purely as a business proposition, motivated entirely by attracting as many fee-based authors as possible. Many claim to have a peer review process, but define that quite loosely, with perhaps one or two non-expert people reading all manuscripts, or possibly seeking quick reviews, but accepting the manuscript regardless of any recommendation to the contrary. Although they may list an address in a country for which there
are known legal frameworks to regulate activities such as copyright and publication, the actual administrative base may be located in a part of the world with minimal restriction or oversight. And authors may find that, once they enter into negotiations with one of these publishers, they have lost control over what happens with their written work.

Once you submit a manuscript to a publisher, often with your copyright transfer included in the submission, all the predator needs to do to “own” the rights to your work is to accept it for publication. Once it has registered a unique identifier (DOI), you may find that there is no recourse should you change your mind and want to withdraw your work—or after having published it, subsequently closes down access—the publisher could hold proprietary title to your work despite its being totally inaccessible to you or anyone else. Unfortunately, although you can be held to copyright law, these publishers may be operating beyond the kinds of international rules we have come to expect and, like any other scam artist, if they begin to feel the heat, they could potentially close up shop and open up again somewhere else, leaving little trail to follow. So, although this is a worst-case scenario, it is worth being aware that it has happened.

So, the lesson for all of us is to ensure that, when you submit a manuscript for publication—especially to an open access journal—you are submitting it to a credible journal that will treat your work with the integrity it deserves, will adhere to international codes of ethics regarding publishing, and will uphold its end of the publishing contract. An informed author is a happy author.

DETECTING PREDATORY PRACTICES

The best defence against this scourge is to be well armed with knowledge that will help you make informed publishing decisions.

• Don’t be fooled by a pretty website or an official sounding name. Some of these predators know how to make their websites look quite convincing.

• Resist the urge to choose a journal that has sent you an unsolicited email invitation. While some of these are sufficiently absurd to be easy to spot (for example they praise your track record as a geological scientist or are full of typographical errors), others are much more sophisticated.

• Be very wary of invitations to guest edit a special issue in your field. Although these may be offering to publish your own manuscript at no cost, they may be using you as a “loss leader” in order to use you as bait for your colleagues, who may assume that the journal is credible because you are and only realize the charges for which they have become liable once they read the fine print of the publishing agreement. (As a side-note, do be aware that some of these predators use similar tactics to get you to go to exotic sounding conferences, implying you are an invited speaker, but being elusive with respect to covering costs).

• When you check a journal website, don’t be misled by the presence of a respected name in your field listed as an editor-in-chief, or an “honorary guest editor.” That individual may be unaware of the use of his or her name, or may have thought it an act of scholarly generosity to allow a struggling journal to list the name, or may have thought it would be an asset to the CV to be a journal editor, as long as no actual work was required. Or that respected person may have taken legal steps to have their name removed to no effect.

• Another species of some predatory practices is to mimic the website of a legitimate journal. Sometimes these publishers recreate the visual image, as well as the title and format of a journal that they hope will lend them the air of respectability. So linking to a journal website through an email solicitation is always risky, as you could find your way to the shadow website rather than the real thing. It is always preferable to search the real journal out yourself and bookmark it in your system.

• Finally, don’t be misled by the listing of an impact factor. While real impact factors (in Journal Citation Index published annually by Thompson Reuters) convey important information, fake “impact factors” can be purchased. Look for the fine print, and crosscheck against credible sources.

SAFEGUARDING YOUR CHOICES

Fortunately, there are useful guides to help you ensure that you are making wise and well informed decisions when it comes time to publishing your valuable work. An excellent resource is the list of predatory publishers on Beall’s Scholarly Open Access website (Beall, 2014), which was developed and is being maintained by a faculty librarian at an established U.S. university. At Beall’s site, you can search either by journal title or by the name of the publisher (or try both). And if predatory practices have been confirmed, you will find further details. Of course this is a moving field, and journals come and go quite rapidly, so if a highly suspicious-looking journal isn’t listed, don’t assume that it is legitimate.

There are also some useful warning signs and security measures listed in a recent statement by a group of nursing editors on behalf of the community of reputable nursing journals (INANE “Predatory Publishing Practices” Collaborative, 2014). These editors were alarmed by the potential harm to colleagues who unwittingly fall prey to these predatory publishers, and wanted to spread the word as widely as possible. The article in which this advice is being shared is open access upon registration in the hopes that nurses will feel free to share it widely, talk about it, and do all we can to ensure that our colleagues make wise publishing choices. As with everything in nursing, a good dose of prevention is always the best defence.

REFERENCES


