A LOOK AT OPEN ACCESS PUBLICATION AND BEALL’S LIST OF “PREDATORY” JOURNALS

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Abstract

The Internet has changed almost every aspect of communication, including publication of academic research. Currently approximately 10,000 open access (OA) journals exist in many disciplines yet some controversy has arisen. OA journals provide a rapid turn-around publication time and reach a wide readership, but questions are asked about fees for publication and “peer review” practices. Chief among OA critics is Jeffrey Beall [1] who has compiled a list of 9,219 open access journals that he terms “predatory.” This paper questions Beall’s approach, examines some of the issues in OA publication, and offers a way to evaluate OA journals.

Keywords: Library Science, Open Access journals, Beall’s list, Peer-review.

The publication of research in academic journals has changed with the emergence of the Internet of Open Access (OA) journals. They provide a number of obvious benefits to researchers and writers, one of which is a rapid turn-around time that allows findings and ideas to be shared without the lengthy wait of most print journals. Scholars in many fields are publishing their work in these journals, which have consequently proliferated. The increase in their number has provoked interest and discussion, both positive and negative. In The New York Review of Books, R. Darnton writes, a defense, pointing out that OA journals “make knowledge available to a broad public, including researchers who have no connection to an academic institution; and at the same time, they make it possible for writers to research far more readers than would be possible by means of subscription journals.” [2].

However, OA journals have also provoked controversy: concerns that OA Journals charge authors for publication; do not provide adequate peer review; and lack history and prestige. Jeffrey Beall, [1] at the University of Denver, has developed a list of journals he calls “predatory.” Beall’s list is widely circulated on university websites and has been used by Retention, Promotion and Tenure committees to “vet” candidates’ publications.

At least one department chair advised a junior faculty member as well as a student to refuse publication in any journal on Beall’s list. Another faculty member requested an Academic Senate to pass policy that would make the inclusion of articles in OA publications ineligible for tenure and promotion. (The Senate declined.) These actions encroach on Academic Freedom and the First Amendment.

The term “predatory” is such a loaded and pejorative term that it is not surprising to find Beall’s list itself has been investigated. Walt Crawford, widely published and highly respected in the field of Library Science, has reviewed all the journals and publishers on the list and reproached its creator for placing himself in the “position of prosecutor, judge and jury” [3]. Crawford points out that Beall condemns the OA movement for being “anti-corporatist,” and concludes that Beall’s lists “constitute a sideshow consisting of distorting mirrors, having little or nothing to do with OA as a whole except to serve as a platform for Beall to take potshots at OA.” Crawford suggests that Beall’s lists “should be ignored” [4].

Another of Beall’s criticisms is that OA journals charge author fees. Some do. However, Crawford [3] points out that, “a higher percentage of subscription journals charge author-side fees, typically called page charges, than the percentage of OA journals that charge article processing charges.”

The issue surrounding peer review of articles is more complicated and more controversial. All traditional print journals and most OA journals as well as the vast majority of faculty view peer review as an important standard of publication excellence. OA journals are accused of having weak, substandard or nonexistent peer review practices. Again, this is not entirely true.

Leaving aside the numbers of OA journals that do or do not have acceptable peer review, some critics have questioned the very validity of peer review, arguing that it is biased, elitist, and inaccurate. Shatz [6] who examined the area of peer review in 2004, believes that, despite its problems, traditional peer review is the most viable approach to professional assessment. He reports on one research study, which found that the same papers by authors from prestigious institutions accepted for publication, when resubmitted with different authors and non-prestigious institutions were not recognized and were rejected.

An editorial in the New Atlantis: A Journal of Technology & Society [5] cites a report by the Cochrane Collaboration, an international healthcare analysis group, that concluded, “there is little empirical evidence to support the use of editorial peer review as a mechanism to ensure quality of biomedical research despite its widespread use and costs.” Yet another study cited by Shatz [6] found that peer review was grossly deficient in quality control. That study focused on investigators who deliberately inserted errors into manuscripts that peer reviewers were unable to detect.

Most disciplines, and journals—OA and traditional-- are not ready to dispense with peer review. There is some movement toward a more public review process [2,5] where publications are placed on line, and readers and researchers may rate, annotate and comment on papers and authors may respond.
As to the practical concerns on how faculty authors can make their way through the maze of OA publication to make informed choices. Crawford [4] proposes that potential authors check the viability of publishing in specific OA journals in nine steps: authors must assess the validity and history of any OA journal they are considering. They should make themselves aware of its policies, fees (if any) before submissions.

I would add that authors should check on whether the specific article in an OA journal is cited by other reference sources, such as Google Scholar, since for research to have impact requires that the findings be read and cited. Another useful criteria might be the number of downloads of OA articles on websites such as Researchgate.net and Academia.edu.

UCLA recommends that all faculty publications be placed on their University Open Access platform. The emerging paradigm in academic journal publication parallels changes in the book publishing industry where self-publishing is increasing and gaining acceptance; in the newspaper world where blogs are commonplace; and entertainment delivery, where YouTube, I-Tunes, and podcasts are the norm.

A final point:. Based on these evolutions, we can predict that Beall’s list will not stop the eventual acceptance of OA publications within the Academy.

References