

Cites & Insights

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Walt Crawford

Intersections

Ethics and Access

The last ETHICS AND ACCESS piece appeared in [December 2015](#)—not only a whole-issue essay but a long one at that. This one will also make up a whole issue (partly because I'm spending more time investigating "gray OA") but be shorter. As before, it will cover a lot of ground and may seem somewhat random. But no exclamation points.

DOAJ

After stating a new set of criteria in 2013 and implementing a new application form in March 2014, the *Directory of Open Access Journals* enforced those criteria in 2016—removing around 3,000 journals that hadn't yet reapplied for listing, after removing hundreds that failed to live up to DOAJ standards. That removal features heavily in my trilogy, [Gold Open Access Journals 2011-2015](#), [Gold Open Access Journals 2011-2015: A Subject Approach](#) and [The Countries of OAWorld](#).

The links just above are to the paperback books—true bargains at \$6, \$6 and \$8 respectively (from which I get between \$0.02 and \$0.34). But if you don't find trade paperbacks useful or are not willing to spend the big bucks, you'll find links to free PDFs at the [study webpage](#).

There's probably a fair amount to be said about the changes in DOAJ and what they mean for its function as a whitelist. Here are a handful of items.

Raising the Bar at Directory of Open Access Journals

This piece by Dominic Mitchell appeared [December 2, 2015](#) at *Digital Science*.

The Open Access movement has changed the publishing landscape in a number of ways, some of which were quite unexpected. For instance, the emergence of the author as customer has resulted in a new level of understanding of the needs of researchers while enabling new entrants into the publishing market. It's no longer necessary to convince a critical mass of libraries that a new journal should

exist – publishers can effectively 'sell' their journal one author at a time. While this lowering of the barrier has enabled tremendous innovation, it also creates new challenges in terms of publishing ethics.

Thus the need to "raise the bar." Reasons for doing so:

1. The open access market had matured and becoming more diverse and complex than it was when DOAJ was launched in 2003 with 300 journals. The old criteria were simply no longer adequate to expose the information that users need to assess open access journals, in particular article processing charges (APCs).
2. The old application process was a two-stage affair which was both time consuming and resource heavy for our small team of reviewers.
3. There was a need to proactively tackle the problem of applications from questionable journals with a set of criteria that dissuaded non-serious applicants from applying and gave the DOAJ reviewers the tools they needed to quickly identify and weed out questionable journals.

The article discusses DOAJ's efforts to get 9,900 journals (those whose listing preceded the new form) to reapply—and some of the difficulties with that process. Is it worthwhile?

I believe quite firmly that the approach that DOAJ is taking is the key to solving the issue of quality and thereby the reputation of open access publishing. I would even go so far as to state that all academic publishing could benefit from elements of our processes. There have been many calls recently for a definitive whitelist of reliable open access journals that researchers can use as a guide to where to publish with confidence. That is exactly DOAJ's mission. However, in order to cope with the growth of open access publishing, DOAJ needs to be bigger. To remain vital and relevant, DOAJ needs to be faster without [the precision of the review process](#) suffering. DOAJ must transform into a fully community-driven initiative where [the funders](#) and [sponsors](#) become the contributors to a program driven by researchers and librarians who are on the [receiving end of today's system](#). Institutions should directly support those who volunteer for

DOAJ and should actively and regularly raise awareness around the importance and relevance of the DOAJ criteria, and how they are significant in today's academic publishing system. There are already [tools out there to do this](#) but there needs to be more awareness absorbed into workflows and processes.

At DOAJ, we struggle to climb over three hurdles, the first two being *prestige* and *questionable publishers*. The former takes people away from open access because they believe that there are no prestigious open access journals. The latter draws their attention to it for all the wrong reasons. Questionable publishers are a drain on our resources, an annoyance that distracts DOAJ from focussing on its third hurdle: *helping genuine publishers improve*, become more visible, and thereby more reliable. While we can never stop questionable publishers from applying to be included, as a community, we can prevent them from having any real presence in academic publishing by excluding them and marginalising them, thereby reducing their visibility. I believe that there are 2 ways to do this: raise awareness amongst researchers and librarians, on the ground, in the institutions, in the territories that need it most; and by dedicating more people power to help build and maintain the whitelist that the community is calling out for. DOAJ is already engaged in two projects that will take steps to achieving more awareness in targeted territories all over the globe. One is [a partnership with Research4Life](#) where we will assist the three member programmes to ensure that they only include quality open access journals in their offering...

I've quoted most of this because I think it's important background. I also believe that, on balance, the changes are worthwhile—while acknowledging that there are problems and that a fair number of smaller “shoestring” journals may find it difficult to complete the new forms.

Open Access reviewed: stricter criteria preserve credibility

Lillian Nassi-Calò wrote this [on May 25, 2016](#) at *SciELO in Perspective*. The lede:

Open access is being asserted as the preferred form of publication of research results, especially those publicly funded. Many studies have shown that it is economically sustainable, and that the resources used in subscription journals would be more than enough to finance this business model. Moreover, the perception of quality of open access publications is improving among the scholarly community.

Smear campaigns about Open Access, however, have also become more frequent in recent years. The major responsible for the unfounded attribution of low quality and lack of peer review of this publication model are predatory publishers and journals. The term has

become popular since John Bohannon's paper in Science in 2013^{1,2}, where the author sought to tarnish Open Access's image in general by the fact that 157 of 304 open access journals have published very low quality computer-generated fraudulent articles. Predatory journals or pseudo-journals are those which claim to be scientific open access publications, but exist solely to collect article processing charges (APC). Besides Bohannon's article, there is the predatory journal list published – and systematically updated – by Jeffrey Beall³. This librarian at the University of Colorado (Denver, CO, USA) became well known also for calling SciELO a “publication favela”, in contrast to for-profit commercial publishers – the “good neighborhood”. As expected, the Brazilian and international scientific community, reacted proportionately, such as SPARC, which stated that SciELO is considered “a model for the rest of the world”⁴.

An important caveat regarding the dropping of journals:

Lars Bjørnshauge, DOAJ's managing director, said he is “absolutely sure that the majority of the journals that did not reapply are not publications with poor ethics, but rather, journals that are unfamiliar with providing the information required for reapplication”.

The author notes that some “predatory” journals claim to be published in countries other than their actual bases—but that this isn't a problem with Latin American OA journals, most of which are university- or society-based.

Predatory journals remain Beall's favorite subject, who expressed he does not believe that DOAJ's measure will produce reliable outcomes. In his opinion, information regarding journals submitting to DOAJ is the publishers' responsibility and would be, therefore, questionable. Beall, however, should know that any submission process to reputable bibliographic databases such as Web of Science, Scopus, or Medline relies on information provided by the journal editor or publisher. It is the committees' call to assess the veracity of the information, and value the journal's integrity. DOAJ certainly does the same.

An excellent point—but since Beall's clearly anti-OA in any form, it won't convince him.

There's more here and it's worth reading. In addition to the footnotes there's a useful reading list.

'Indexed in DOAJ' versus 'the DOAJ Seal'

We'll close this brief section with this post from [November 3, 2015](#) at the *DOAJ News Service*, explaining the difference between being indexed in DOAJ and the relatively rare DOAJ Seal.

There is a common misunderstanding that only journals that get the Seal are “indexed in DOAJ”, that only Seal journals are quality, peer reviewed open access

journals. This is incorrect. ALL journals in DOAJ have been approved as quality, peer reviewed open access journals. The whole DOAJ list is the approved, community-curated list of reputable journals!...

Being indexed in DOAJ means that a journal has passed up to 4 stages of independent and objective, manual review. It means that the journal has been investigated by our Editorial team who have researched whether or not the journal/publisher does what they claim to do on the journal site and in their (re)application to us. During the investigation, the DOAJ editors go through the pages on a journal's site to make sure that all the information presented to a user is easy to find, clearly and accurately presented and easy to understand. The editorial board is investigated, and sometimes members of the board are contacted and their institutional connections verified, their work on the board is confirmed and which other boards that member sits on. Being indexed in DOAJ means that the journal adheres to high levels of quality of its publishing services and services to authors and users, including: peer review, licensing terms, a strong open access statement, a fully functional editorial board and more. Being indexed in DOAJ means that the journal is a good open access journal, a trusted open access journal....

I'll skip over the discussion of the reapplication process, already covered to some extent, to quote the discussion of the DOAJ Seal (which, to date, I haven't found especially useful—partly because it's so rare):

The DOAJ Seal, think of it like this: journals that have the Seal are journals that adhere to outstanding best practice; journals that don't have the Seal are good, trusted journals adhering to best practice. The Seal has been allocated to [a handful of journals accepted into DOAJ since 2014](#). Journals that are [awarded the Seal](#) have answered 'Yes' to [7 questions that DOAJ has chosen specifically](#) as indicators of an extra high and clear commitment to open access best practices, of extra high levels of commitment to publishing technologies, and the most 'open' form of open access. Importantly, the journals that DO NOT have the Seal still adhere to high levels of quality required for indexing in the DOAJ, especially those journals that have a green tick. *No Seal DOES NOT mean low quality, non peer reviewed, questionable, 'dodgy', 'scammy'*.

Enough said, at least this time around.

NEJM and Data Sharing

Open data is a close cousin to open access—and as with OA itself, it can be controversial. Take, for example, an editorial in the *New England Journal of Medicine* and a couple of responses.

Data Sharing

That's the editorial, by Dan J. Longo, MD and Jeffrey M. Drazen, MD, [appearing January 21, 2016](#). It doesn't carry a CC license and *NEJM* is most certainly not an OA journal, so I won't quote the whole thing. Some excerpts:

The aerial view of the concept of data sharing is beautiful. What could be better than having high-quality information carefully reexamined for the possibility that new nuggets of useful data are lying there, previously unseen? The potential for leveraging existing results for even more benefit pays appropriate increased tribute to the patients who put themselves at risk to generate the data. The moral imperative to honor their collective sacrifice is the trump card that takes this trick.

However, many of us who have actually conducted clinical research, managed clinical studies and data collection and analysis, and curated data sets have concerns about the details. The first concern is that someone not involved in the generation and collection of the data may not understand the choices made in defining the parameters...

A second concern held by some is that a new class of research person will emerge — people who had nothing to do with the design and execution of the study but use another group's data for their own ends, possibly stealing from the research productivity planned by the data gatherers, or even use the data to try to disprove what the original investigators had posited... what some researchers have characterized as “research parasites.”

The rest of the piece touts and offers an example of “symbiotic” data sharing—which can only happen by personal arrangement and with the originators *allowing* reuse of the data. In other words, *closed data*.

There are a handful of letters (and one response) with the editorial. I'll quote one paragraph from Carl Bergstrom's letter:

Longo and Drazen question whether, outside a collaborative relationship, researchers should be permitted to independently analyze data collected by others. But the alternative would allow those who generate data to grab recognition for a discovery and still restrict access to those data. That alternative would have massive unintended consequences. When data can be withheld, researchers can have their cake, by hoarding their data, and eat it, too, by claiming public credit. Should such behavior become widespread, production of public goods would diminish and the pace of discovery would slow.

From our cold dead hands: NEJM Editorial on Data Sharing

Andrew Watt posted this commentary [on January 22, 2016](#) at *Watt*, his blog. The blog has an explicit copyright notice and no obvious CC license, so...

There are few things more at the heart of the progressive science movement than the notion that good science is open science. It's a notion that has led to an explosion in [data sharing networks](#) and [advocacy groups](#) all with one goal in common. Give people access to the data.

After all what better way is there to verify, or refute, a finding than by independently assessing the original data? If your answer to this, albeit, rhetorical question was "None, that seems like a really simple way to do exactly that", you'd be correct. However, if your response started something along the lines of "Now hold on just a minute, the importance of tradition..." then you're probably an editor of the [New England Journal of Medicine](#).

In a gallingly, short-sighted editorial entitled [Data Sharing](#), Deputy Editor Dan L. Longo, M.D. and Editor-in-Chief Jeffrey M. Drazen, M.D. have shared their concerns with the scientific masses. And the masses have thus far been far from impressed. Taking to [twitter to take out their frustrations on the hapless duo](#).

That last link leads to a hashtagged list that includes a number of more recent commentaries on the editorial, commentaries I'm ignoring in the interests of brevity. But I *must* quote Watt's take on the "research parasite" nonsense:

The second concern of Longo and Drazen is where they stop pulling their punches, labeling anyone who dares use data to "disprove what the original investigators had posited" as a "research parasite." It is this comment that has drawn the greatest amount of ire from the online scientific community. Leading to the trending hashtag [#researchparasites](#). As a young researcher I would have thought that any and all steps to data verification would have been a good thing. After all what are researchers, but people desperately trying to discover the truth about the world they inhabit. Surely more eyes on the job in what is essentially a giant game of *Where's Waldo?* can only be a good thing. But it's not. At least not according to Longo and Drazen. Rather, young researchers who hope to verify the work of a well-respected, senior (I'm assuming that this is what the authors mean) academic are simply using their prominence to give their own career the nutrients it so desperately craves. Not for a second could they simply be asking "But are you sure?"

Watt calls the editorial a "tantrum." Of course, 2016 is a banner year for tantrums being taken seriously...

Translation to plain English of NEJM clarification on data sharing

This one—by Jonathan Peelle [on January 25, 2016](#) on his eponymous blog—is actually about a followup NEJM editorial, one that appears to be dated May 12, 2016 but which appeared online on January 25.

Since Peelle quotes nearly all of the "clarification" in the process of fisking it, there's no need to cite the editorial itself: you'll get there from Peelle's post. (Like the editors, Peelle is an MD.)

Just to give you a flavor:

We want to clarify, given recent concern about our policy, that the Journal is committed to data sharing in the setting of clinical trials.

People somehow misinterpreted [our previous editorial](#) as being against data sharing. Weird. Maybe it was the part where we said people who analyzed other people's data can be thought of as "research parasites". I mean, we put it in quotes to make it clear that we aren't necessarily saying that. It's just that *some* people said it and we thought it was definitely worth highlighting in our editorial. We'll be sure not to use that term again, including to clarify or apologize.

As stated in the Institute of Medicine report from the committee on which I served and the recent editorial by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE), we believe there is a moral obligation to the people who volunteer to participate in these trials to ensure that their data are widely and responsibly used.

Look, just because we talked about "parasitical" researchers who "steal productivity" from other labs doesn't mean we're not supportive of this behavior. We meant "thieving parasites" as a compliment.

The doubly-indented quotes are from the editorial. You get the idea. Read the whole thing.

Sci-Hub

I'd avoided discussing Sci-Hub directly. It falls well outside what I consider plausible ethical norms, and to my eye there's no direct link between legal OA and illegal access. But there have been interesting aspects of the discussions taking place around Sci-Hub, so I'm noting a few of the commentaries, both pro and con, while skipping many others.

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to OA

I suppose you can thank Angela Cochran and her [February 25, 2016 post](#) at *the scholarly kitchen* for the inclusion of this section, since the very title of the piece smears all of OA with the taint of Sci-Hub.

Last week in popular media, Alexandra Elbakyan got a lot of screen time (also known as free advertising)

and the response has been interesting. For those that have not been paying attention, Elbakyan runs Sci-Hub, a site that provides illegal access to over 47 million scholarly journal articles.

You can read about Elbakyan's mission in her own words [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). She sincerely believes that she is above the law.

"I developed the Sci-Hub.org website where anyone can download paywalled research papers by request. Also I uploaded at least half of more than 41 million paywalled papers to the LibGen database and worked actively to create mirrors of it. I am not afraid to say this, because when you do the right thing, why should you hide it?" Elbakyan told [Torrentfreak](#).

Despite a court injunction, Sci-Hub is still up. Forty-seven million articles are still illegally posted. For details on how this all actually works, you can [read David Smith's post here](#).

That's the intro. But...

A potential tragedy lurking in the background of this issue is what damage it will do to the larger open access (OA) movement. Advocates for OA, admittedly, have a good story to tell: science should be open to everyone. It's incomplete, but still a good story. But advocacy can be a hard thing with a movement that has little organization. Loud individuals can appear to speak for the majority and you never know what you will get.

Then she says Sci-Hub PR seems to say OA advocates love Sci-Hub—so it must be true, right? And SPARC's Heather Joseph noted *correctly* that lack of access leads people to find workarounds such as Sci-Hub. [COI: SPARC, which Joseph heads, funded my *Gold Open Access Journals 2011-2015* research.] Did Joseph in any way endorse Sci-Hub? No, she did not: you can read the transcript of the [relevant NPR interview](#) and see for yourself.

WERTHEIMER: So now we have the pirate website Sci-Hub, which provides free access to journals. What has been the reaction to this in the academy?

JOSEPH: Well, I think researchers take for granted that they're - they've been forced into a system of workarounds to try to get access to the articles that they need to do their research. Typically, a researcher will have legal access to only between 50 and 70 percent of the articles that they need to do their work. So I think this database, Sci-Hub, was just another step in a process that researchers have sadly become used to doing.

When any writer at *the scholarly kitchen* seems to express even mild support for OA, you have to look for the "but..." and it shows up here:

What Joseph and Elbakyan have left out of their interviews is that there are all kinds of ways for researchers (and the public) to legally access papers,

some of it free: interlibrary loan; free or low-cost access to developing countries via [HINARI](#), [Research4Life](#), [EIFL](#), [INASP](#); or even using Google Scholar to see if there is an accepted manuscript version hosted on the authors' website, a university open repository, a funding agency repository, or a social sharing site. Low cost options include [DeepDyve](#) or article rentals which can be as low as \$1.

What access problem? There's no access problem. That's followed by a trope I've become used to in reading about BLM and similar things:

Of course, saying that high prices drive people to break the law is sort of a losing argument if you don't then condemn the theft in the next breath.

A bit later we get more of Cochran's "support" for OA:

The OA movement has made great strides in the last decade. Folks are starting to come around to thinking that not all OA journals are predatory or chock full of junk science.

Wow. "Not *all* OA journals are predatory or chock full of junk science."

There's a lot more, including suggestions that Our Friends the REAL Publishers will make it even *more* difficult to get at journal articles. Here's a doozy of a statement:

The PDF has always been a "leakage" problem and publisher have been trying to get rid of them for years. **They are expensive to create**, offer limited use of advanced features, and don't help us keep the "eyeballs on the page." [Emphasis added.]

Oh, and we are once again reminded that societies have become habituated to forcing libraries to pay for society activities through overpriced subscriptions, although it's not put that way:

While it may be a favorite past-time for some to think about the destruction of commercial publishers, the societies go down in flames with it. Elsevier, Wiley, Sage, Springer, Taylor & Francis may make a lot of money but they also help hundreds of societies make money on their publications in order to serve up continuing education, k-12 outreach, professional development, etc. Independent societies [are much more vulnerable to harm from Sci-Hub](#) than the big corporations.

In case you're wondering, that last link is to "Caldera Solutions," AKA Kent Anderson.

The close:

There is no question that Sci-Hub is illegal. They are keeping the site live despite a legal injunction. Elbakyan is happy to talk to the press and make specious legal arguments, but has never actually had the courage to show up in court. As the OA advocates, librarians, and publishers try to create a more open

and collaborative environment, they should condemn this solution and realize the harm their silence will cause.

I regard that last sentence as total nonsense. Sci-Hub has nothing to do with OA: if articles are openly accessible, who needs Sci-Hub? That's like saying that it was the responsibility of every subscription publisher to condemn Elsevier for its fake journals: Wiley has no more responsibility for Elsevier's failings than OA advocates do for Sci-Hub.

There are an astonishing 167 comments on this post, all of them within a four-day period. Some of them are useful. Some are excruciating. (I wonder whether David Crotty has ever exceeded the speed limit, and if so whether he considers himself a criminal? By his comments, he must.) Actually, while it's a chore to read the whole stream of comments, you'd learn a *lot* about "pro-OA but..." Sandy Thatcher and David "the present system works quite well" Wojick. [Actually, Wojick manages to flatly contradict *himself* within the comment stream—going from "you need only ask the author for a copy" to "Researchers are not insulated. Many of their requests are denied" over the course of *three hours*. Now that's flexibility!]

Why Sci-Hub is the true solution for Open Access: reply to criticism

Since I criticized Angela Cochran for smearing all of OA by association with Sci-Hub, it's only fair to quote this [February 24, 2016 piece](#) by Alexandra Elbakyan at *engineering*—and do note that the author is the creator of Sci-Hub.

She's not saying that OA supports Sci-Hub; instead, she's saying that Sci-Hub is open access:

Sci-Hub is not a signal: for many researchers out there in the world, Sci-Hub is the only solution available to access articles.

Since the rest of the article is self-serving responses to another piece, I can only refer you to it. Calling Sci-Hub *the* solution to access essentially dismisses all the work of OA folk and declares that blatant illegality (or her preferred "abolishing copyright") is The Only Solution. I'm not buying it. In the comment stream, she says "I agree that Sci-Hub takes a little bit different approach from mainstream Open Access movement." Now *there's* an understatement! Sci-Hub has only one thing in common with OA: both provide access to articles.

Some thoughts about Sci-Hub

Graham Steel posted this piece [on February 18, 2016](#) at *The Winnower*; it's mostly a complete version of questions and answers from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

I'll just quote one especially relevant question and answer:

QUESTION: In [your article](#), you write that open access has become the new norm and social media is the tool driving it. I'm wondering, what is Sci-Hub's role in open access?

[Response] Sci-Hub is not open access. Maybe it's a bit of grit in the oyster, helping to rock the boat. I completely agree with [Dr Martin Eve](#) who [recently tweeted](#) "I can't condone and I don't think it's the answer, but it is a symptom of the problem. Pure open access business models would be immune to it".

"Sci-Hub is not open access." No, it isn't.

Sidebar: There's another Skitch article in my list—and damned if I can bring myself to cite it or to read through the even *longer* set of comments (341 of them), even if they include another vociferously anti-OA chef claiming to be pro-OA. And although I'm bemused by mention of Skitch's "three most prominent trolls," I'm probably misreading—since to my mind those three trolls include the author of the piece. And I can't narrow down the other two—but I'm pretty sure the author had in mind commenters, not bloggers. Although, as it turns out, at least one of them isn't currently a "chef."

Sidebar 2: I must give credit to *the scholarly kitchen*, and in particular Kent Anderson, Joe Esposito, David Crotty, David Wojick and Harvey Kane. [No, they're not all "chefs" but Skitch is where I mostly encounter them.] To the extent that I can be considered an OA supporter rather than an interested observer, I've gotten there largely as a result of reading their anti-OA screeds (including those that purport to be pro-OA). I think I'm still mostly an observer, but it's hard...

Sci-Hub is a scholarly litmus test

I think I have to quote all of [this March 4, 2016 post](#) by Mike Taylor at *Sauropod Vertebra Picture of the Week* (typically cited as SV-POW)—and yes, SV-POW does have a CC BY license.

Whatever else [Sci-Hub may or may not be](#), it's becoming apparent that it functions as a litmus test. It focuses people's thoughts on the problems of scholarly communication, and draws out their ideas in their clearest form.

Who is sympathetic?

For example, on one side, you have Duke librarian Kevin Smith, whose [radical thoughts about Sci-Hub](#) are radical in the literal sense of the word: [going to the root](#). He goes back to what the actual purpose of copyright is — [To promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts](#) — and discusses the consequent moral and legal standing of copyright:

Laws come in different forms and carry different kinds of moral authority. Lawyers distinguish, for

example, between illegal acts that are “wrong in themselves” (*malum in se*) and those that are only “wrong because prohibited,” or *malum prohibitum*. [...] Copyright infringement is, of course, the latter; a violation of the law but not of any moral imperative. Such a law merely enshrines a decision about the distribution of resources, and it can be changed without causing the collapse of human society. Precisely the kind of situation where acts of civil disobedience to provoke discussion and change are most supportable.

Very interesting stuff, and carefully argued. While it would be overstating things to say that Smith is pro-Sci-Hub (at least based on what he’s said in the linked post), he is certainly sympathetic. Maybe more important, he’s interested in what Sci-Hub has to tell us about the present situation in scholarly communications.

At the more radical end, we have Björn Brembs, who writes of [Sci-Hub As Necessary, Effective Civil Disobedience](#). He points out that while twenty years of careful, polite negotiations with publishers have won only slow, incremental progress for the open-access movement, Alexandra Elbakyan has simply blown right past the barriers. He characterises her as a David taking on the Goliath of Elsevier:

Collectively, these two decade-long concerted efforts of the global OA community, to wrestle the knowledge of the world from the hands of the publishers, one article at a time, has resulted in about 27 million (24%) of about 114 million English-language articles becoming publicly accessible by 2014. Since then, one single woman has managed to make a whopping 48 million paywalled articles publicly accessible. In terms of making the knowledge of the world available to the people who are the rightful owners, this woman, Alexandra Elbakyan, has single-handedly been more successful than all OA advocates and activists over the last 20 years combined.

Let that accomplishment sink in for a minute.

There’s no ambiguity about where he stands:

Clearly, two decades of negotiations, talks and diplomacy have led us nowhere. In my opinion, the time to be inclusive has come and passed. Publishers have opted to remain outside of the scholarly community and work against it, rather than with it. Actions of civil disobedience like those of Aaron Swartz and Alexandra Elbakyan are a logical consequence of two decades of stalled negotiations and failed reform efforts.

But is it fair to characterise publishers as enemies? I’ve [done it myself](#), and been [criticised in response](#) by publishers ([not that I accepted](#) that criticism). But have things changed since 2012? Have scholarly

publishers started to come round to the idea that they have been entrusted with a mission rather than merely handed a cash-cow?

Who is hostile?

Sadly, publishers’ responses to Sci-Hub do nothing to suggest any softening of their position. Unsurprisingly, *The Scholarly Kitchen* is leading the way — not so much with its posts ([a mostly pretty thoughtful piece](#) by Angela Cochran, and [a more reactionary one](#) from Joe Esposito) but with the comments.

Esposito likens Elbakyan to Mafia accountant [Meyer Lansky](#) — [a completely inappropriate comparison](#) which I hope he is ashamed of. And he makes this bizarre assertion:

A PDF is a weapons-grade tool for piracy: a fixed document that can be passed around the conversational channels of the Internet without alteration (it is the Portable Document Format, after all).

But it’s in the comments that things get really weird. Even the usually reliable [David Crotty writes Elbakyan off](#) as:

... a criminal [who] visits a professional forum and tries to spread misinformation in an attempt to justify her criminal actions to the very people she is stealing from.

A grotesque misrepresentation that is not worthy of him.

Meanwhile, [Sandy Thatcher suggests retaliating with unambiguously criminal acts](#):

How about mounting a “denial of service” attack on her website? What would she do—go to court to challenge such action? [...]

Seems ironic that DoS attacks would be illegal against sites that are themselves illegal. If those harmed cannot fight back, what are they to do? Gee, maybe drone attacks? Hire Blackwater operatives?

(To be fair, in a later comment he claimed that the latter part of this [was a joke](#); but it should give pause that it’s not easy to tell. As far as I can tell, the suggestion of a DoS attack was deadly serious.)

In response to [Boris’s description](#) of the problems of getting copies of older papers — especially those whose authors have died, so can’t be asked for copies — [David Wojick offers](#) perhaps the most bizarre suggestion of the thread:

Boris, I suggest you try to get a grant to dig up these old papers.

The comments on the second piece are, in places, simply inexplicable. [Harvey Kane asks](#), apparently with a straight face:

In what manner are publishers and holders of copyright denying anyone access to their materials?

[He argues](#) that access is not denied because:

I can go to my local university library with my drivers license in hand and access all their holdings and all the holdings they have access to...

For a person in a third world country lack of access was and is a matter of economic decisions on behalf of the government in power.

Got that? Because [magic building syndrome](#) provides a “solution” in Kane’s case, the lack of even that stopgap for third-world researchers can be ignored because it’s the fault of their own country.

It’s worth taking a moment to think about that. From this perspective, it’s more important to obey a copyright law which is achieving [the exact opposite of what it was intended for](#), than to help a third-world researcher struggling under an oppressive government.

But as before, it’s [David Wojick who takes the biscuit](#):

I personally doubt that there are large numbers of people who (1) have the expert knowledge required to read and benefit from the scholarly literature but who (2) cannot find a way to access what they need. The arguments I have seen to this effect are completely unconvincing.[...]

This is one of the fundamental fallacies of OA, namely that non-experts should read journals. [...] Only a few people can understand the typical journal article. (Local government officials are certainly not among them.)

This is the kind of arrogance and elitism that makes so many people want to throw up their hands and walk away completely from the encumbents in scholarly publishing. That leaves people wanting to say “Well, screw you then” and go straight to Sci-Hub. I find it literally incredible that the [Everyone Who Needs Access Has It myth](#) still lives on in some minds. If all the people on [Who Needs Access?](#) and the millions like them truly mean nothing to publishers, then I guess the publishers mean nothing to them, either.

But the last word [undoubtedly belongs to Joe Esposito](#):

I do not agree that unaffordable access is a problem for many. Access is a privilege of membership (e.g., being a student at a university), not a right. Can we stop this debate now and simply agree that we have no common ground upon which to base a conversation?

No common ground? That’s certainly how it looks. (Björn Brembs’ response to this comment simply takes Esposito at his word: [Academic Publishers: Stop Access Negotiations](#).)

So what should we think about Sci-Hub *now*?

[As previously noted](#), my position on Sci-Hub has been “Heck if I know”. It’s complicated. Sci-Hub offers real value, and also poses a real danger. There

is no reliable way to estimate how great either the value or the danger is, so it’s hard to land on a firm position. [Emphasis added.]

But I’m getting there. Reading recent pieces, both for and against, is helping me start to condense the cloud of ideas into some more solid and defined thoughts.

I found it very helpful when [David Crotty pointed out](#) that parents of sick children can gain some free access through [PatientInform](#) and [PatientAccess](#). It crystalised my thoughts. It made me realise that, as with HINARI and its kin, we’re seeing a very fundamental problem here. All these programs, laudable though they are, amount to special boons handed down from on high by the grace of publishers who still maintain ultimate control. Researchers, teachers, doctors, parents and all the rest are reduced to the status of peons, going cap in hand to the almighty publishers in the hope of picking up some of the scraps from under the table. That is simply not acceptable.

Sandy Thatcher [rightly says](#) “It is not the purpose of private enterprises to serve the public interest; it is to serve the interests of their stockholders”. That is precisely why private enterprises must not be handed control over scholarship.

What we see at the Scholarly Kitchen is that [Esposito’s post](#) is the work of someone who believes the whole purpose of scholarly publishing is to make money for publishers. At least you have to credit him for not hiding his position: as he’s argued before, [“Scientific and technical publishing is a business.”](#) But we simply *cannot* entrust the critical process of scholarly communication to people who don’t, or won’t, see that it’s a mission — and that the publishers are servants of that mission, not its masters.

So all in all, I am finding myself increasingly lacking in sympathy for publishers whose arrogance and sense of entitlement doesn’t generate a lot of warmth; and increasingly inclined to be positive about Sci-Hub, which ultimately is about providing something that people need.

Hmm. I guess I’ve indirectly linked to a post I decided to ignore—but Taylor offers so much good sense here that I couldn’t help it. I still regard Sci-Hub as both illegal and not the right solution, but...

I won’t quote the handful of comments, which include some good ones. Nor do I wish to annotate this article. It stands on its own, and you’ll find some of the links enlightening.

The academic-library climate around Sci-Hub

Damn, but it’s tempting (and legal) to *also* quote the Library Loon’s [March 6, 2016 post](#) at *Gavia Libraria* in full—especially since the Loon starts by quoting Taylor’s post.

I won't—but I strongly urge you to go read the whole thing. (What? You don't subscribe to *Gavia Libraria*? That can be fixed...)

Mike Taylor did a [rather good summation](#) of various players' stances with respect to Sci-Hub. The Loon thought it might be useful to add a few notes about stances (yes, plural) in academic librarianship.

As lawyer-librarian [Kevin Smith briefly notes](#) and librarian Wayne Bivens-Tatum [explores at greater length](#), some toll-access publisher mouthpieces are playing the library-discourse game out of their [standard abusive playbook](#): publishers are above reproach, librarians are the handmaidens of toll-access publishing (highly-gendered term chosen advisedly), how dare librarians cross or even question toll-access publisher behavior, much less the mighty law of copyright. None of this is new; it is the same entitled, gaslighty garbage toll-access publisher mouthpieces trot out every single time a librarian even mildly defies them in public.

Why point this effluent at librarians specifically rather than academe generally? Because publishers are not stupid; *libraries are their gravy train* and they know that. The more they can convince librarians that it is somehow against the rules (whether “rules” means “law” or “norms” or even merely “etiquette,” and this does vary across publisher sallies) to cross or question them, the longer that gravy train keeps rolling. Researchers, you simply do not matter to publishers in the least until you credibly threaten a labor boycott or (heaven forbid) [actually support librarian budget-reallocation decisions](#). The money is coming from librarians.

There's a lot more—and I'd have to agree with the Loon that librarians' contributions to OA tend to be overlooked by OA advocates.

Let's Talk about Sci-Hub

So says Margaret Janz in this [March 4, 2016 post](#) at *missepoints*—and just to be clear, Janz is a librarian. She accurately labels Sci-Hub as a “repository of stolen research articles” and feels that the sometimes-cranky discussions about Sci-Hub seem to be missing or glossing over some points.

She doesn't object to crankiness about big publishers, finds much of the crankiness about libraries and librarians unfair (a discussion worth reading), and has this to say about Sci-Hub itself:

Sci-Hub. So Sci-Hub is making some folks cranky and others cheer for joy. The joy is due to the sticking-it-to-the-man-iness of it and, you know, the making stuff free. That's fine. Those are things to be joyful about. For the huge number of researchers who otherwise don't have access it's an invaluable service. The crankiness is

for a few things. Firstly, what Sci-Hub is doing is definitely illegal. Not only are the articles generally owned by the publishers, but they are stealing log-in credentials from people at universities to get the articles through the libraries' subscriptions. It's that latter thing that makes me cranky, and not just because of the security risks involved. And this is the point that I don't think others have really driven home that upsets me most: *Sci-Hub still relies on the broken publishing system we have*. Sci-Hub requires that publishers keep publishing stuff and libraries keep paying for it. This is not a solution. It also has the potential to exacerbate the problem as publishers could certainly raise their prices claiming the need to recoup the costs lost to Sci-Hub.

Another major problem that isn't being talked about as much as it should be is how *Sci-Hub joins libraries paying the bill and access to ILL in obscuring the extent of our broken system* from the privileged researchers who, ultimately, are the ones who could fix it. If they have access to everything they need, and everyone else has access, too, then they don't need to change their behavior, right? Spoiler alert: They do need to change their behavior.

Last but not least, Sci-Hub's founder and runner, Alexandra Elbakyan is upsetting me by tweeting and commenting on things about how she's making these works open access. Sci-Hub is not making anything open access. Things that are open access are not stolen and not under the copyright that these works are under. You don't have to steal open access works because they were born free. Don't believe this nonsense that having your work in Sci-Hub means you've met public access or open access policies set by your funder or your institution. There are legitimate ways to make your work open access like publishing in open access journals, paying author fees to make your work open access in a closed access journal, or self archiving in reputable IRs.

Good stuff. I'm bemused by the first comment, by David Wojick, who asserts that universal self-archiving would eliminate articles, journals *and libraries*. In case you thought that libraries, even academic ones, might serve purposes beyond funneling articles from authors to readers, Wojick's here to set you straight.

Access to research: Nobody in the history of the world has ever liked raisins. NOBODY!!

Having earlier quoted all of a Mike Taylor post, I'm not going to quote much of [this March 8, 2016 SV-POW](#) post at all—but I suggest that you read it, and his pithy selection of Skitch comments explaining why nobody really wants or needs to read scholarly articles. Nobody. There's even a comic strip.

I will quote the four steps that Taylor finds constitute the entire basis for arguments that access really isn't a problem:

1. Make claims that are so outrageous that your opponent will be left sputtering in disbelief rather than refuting your claims.
2. Make them prove their point beyond all possible doubt. When they can't, take it as proof of your point.
3. (Not pictured) Simply ignore all evidence.
4. Later, even if you lost the argument, say that you won.

Read the comments as well. There aren't too many.

Sci-Hub and Academic Identity Theft: An Open Letter to University Faculty Everywhere

Rick Anderson posted this on [May 19, 2016](#) at the *scholarly kitchen*—and it's well worth reading, pointing out some of the dangers Sci-Hub can pose to academics. Not because Sci-Hub is illegal...but because it builds its database by borrowing credentials to gain access to article databases.

At some time in the last year or so, you may have been contacted by an organization called [Sci-Hub](#), which has been providing free access to published scholarship by (among other strategies) gathering the network authentication credentials of faculty members at institutions around the world and using those credentials to copy licensed scholarly publications and create an open database of them. Sometimes Sci-Hub's representatives gather these faculty credentials by simply asking for them, and sometimes they [reportedly send deceptive "phishing" messages](#) designed to trick you into sharing those credentials. (Sci-Hub's founder denies that they do this "through the Sci-Hub website"; an interesting three-way email exchange between Sci-Hub, a university administrator who believes his faculty were targeted by Sci-Hub, and an interested third party can be found [here](#).)

The problem? Anderson spells that out in some detail: somebody with your authentication credentials may have access to your email, might get into your class information (including grades), and might gain access to all sorts of other confidential information.

It's a good discussion, well worth reading. The close:

Please note that the important question here is not "Why would Sci-Hub want to change my tax withholding, or hijack my departmental budgets, or mess around with my students' test scores?". The important question is "Do I want to give Sci-Hub the *capability* to do those things — and if so, do I trust Sci-Hub to safeguard my network credentials from abuse by others?"

"But Sci-Hub's people wouldn't do those things"? Tell me: do you believe Wikileaks doesn't leak stuff that endangers or embarrasses people (especially women) with no beneficial effects? Been paying much attention lately?

Some of the comments are worth reading. Some are not. And this time around I'm not necessarily on Mike Taylor's (or David Crotty's) side.

We now skip over several months (in which I deliberately ignored all sorts of Sci-Hub stuff) to land in August 2016—a few weeks after Gabriel J. Gardner gave a presentation during ALA in which he discussed Sci-Hub and said it was easy to use. He also said that Sci-Hub engaged in massive piracy and illegal actions.

Thomas H. Allen, president of the Association of American Publishers, heard about this speech and went ballistic, sending a critical [letter](#) to Gardner's boss, the Dean of Library Services at Cal State Long Beach. And with that...

Supporting Sci-Hub vs. Explaining Sci-Hub

This [August 8, 2016 article](#) by Scott Jaschik at *Inside Higher Ed* lays out the story pretty clearly, including appropriate links.

Via email, Gardner said that he never endorsed Sci-Hub or its methods, but that in discussing the site, he said it was easy to use. He said it's important for librarians to be aware of that fact.

"I believe the letter was an attempt at intimidation; my deans certainly interpreted it as such," Gardner said. "The pretext that the purpose of the letter was to educate us about the severity of intellectual property violations is laughable. Every librarian in the country knows that they shouldn't advocate piracy, to do so is a clear violation of the American Library Association's Code of Ethics."

That dean, Roman Kochan? The article has a link to Kochan's letter, standing behind Gardner and "asking why the publishers' group is not doing more to help university libraries deal with journal costs."

The very first comment says a lot: "If studying something is declared tantamount to endorsement then historians have a lot to apologize for." Meanwhile, Sandy Thatcher goes way overboard, suggesting that circulating Allen's letter is itself a copyright violation. Apparently Thatcher doesn't think quoting for commentary is fair use.

Who's afraid of the big bad librarian?

The Library Loon [on August 8, 2016](#) at *Gavia Libraria*, and this time I will quote the first part in full:

It all seems so innocuous: authors research attitudes toward Sci-Hub, authors write article, authors submit article to well-respected journal, journal accepts article, journal posts [early preprint of article](#), authors discuss article at major professional conference. So far, so perfectly normal. Then the Association for American Publishers got involved, touching off a descent into phantasmagorical bizarrerie.

No, really, the Loon is having significant difficulty cudgeling her birdbrain into some vague understanding of this Streisand-Effect-inviting gaffe.

The basic story is simple enough even for the Loon's birdbrain: AAP sent one author's library dean (the top of the author's workplace reporting chain) [a letter objecting to the author's purported remarks at the conference session](#). To his everlasting credit, library dean Roman Kochan [fired back a delightfully intransigent reply](#), and there the matter remains for now.

The Loon has so many questions about why the AAP thought this was a good idea. So many!

1. Why did the AAP decide to twist its collective knickers about something as ephemeral as an off-hand conference remark?
2. Why did the AAP think it could successfully muzzle a librarian over an offhand conference remark?
3. Why did the AAP think its behavior would not go public? If it did think its behavior would go public and simply didn't care, why didn't it care?
4. In what world do the risks entailed by one librarian's offhand conference remark outbalance the Streisand-related risks of an attempted silencing?
5. What is the AAP so afraid of?

Answers the Loon has none. Hypotheses, perhaps one or two.

Questions two and three appear related. The [tattle-to-the-big-boss tactic](#) is an ancient well-honed anti-librarian [silencing tool](#) in the [content-vendor toolbox](#); the Loon has both dealt with it herself and heard any number of instances from other librarians. This is such an old, well-used tool that the Loon must surmise that it has been known to work. All the more credit to Kochan that it did not work this time! Library administrators, kindly take note of Kochan's strategy here: you properly defend your people from the tattle-to-the-big-boss tactic by *shutting it right down*, in public whenever possible.

Also worth noting with respect to the danger of public disclosure of the attempted silencing: few librarians can expect [their local faculty and administrators to defend them](#) in any way whatever. This contributes no little to why tattle-to-the-big-boss tends to work. Faculty and higher-education administrators:

defend your librarians, please; you do no one any favors by throwing them to the vendor wolves.

The best answer the Loon has to the first and fifth questions derives from the one conference remark the AAP saw fit to quote directly: "Try it [Sci-Hub], you'll like it." The Loon must guess from this that the AAP greatly fears the remark is true, for values of "you" that include academic librarians but go well beyond them.

There's more; go read it. And as always, there are *many* more articles on Sci-Hub and even on this side-show—but that's enough for now.

Identifying "Bad Guys"

The set of ethical issues surrounding questionable publishers and journals is increasingly complex, as this and the next two or three sections may suggest. For example:

- Is "predatory" a useful term at all—especially when qualified so much that, realistically, the best way to get a list of ppppredatory journals (that is, potential, possible, or probable predatory) is to open Ulrich's, restrict to peer-reviewed, and regard 100% of the result as ppppredatory? (What? You disagree? Other than possibly some governmental publications—and I'm not sure about those—show me any peer-reviewed journals that have never engaged *and will never* possibly engage in behavior that could be labeled "predatory" or questionable. Take your time.)
- If you like "predatory," who's the prey? Apart from journals that don't reveal their APCs—clearly bad practice, but there were only 112 such journals in *DOAJ* as of 12/31/15, and 68% of those were delisted in May 2016—I find it naïve to suggest that scholars are being preyed upon, that they're unable to look at journals and see whether they meet their standards. I strongly suspect that most authors submitting manuscripts to journals that claim seven-day review cycles (or less) and charge modest APCs know *exactly* what they're doing.
- Sticking with the somewhat better term "questionable," does one questionable journal or one questionable article make all journals from a publisher questionable and to be avoided? If so, shouldn't nearly all journals from major subscription publishers be regarded as questionable?
- Or, worse, if the claim is somehow that *only* OA journals can be predatory or questionable,

isn't that a grotesque abuse of the English language?

- Is it ethical or legitimate to label a publisher or journal as predatory or questionable without providing some evidence to back up the assertion?

Now, on with the citations and comments (“insights” may be too strong a word).

How to avoid predatory open access publishers

Melanie Schlosser posted this [on December 24, 2015](#) at OSU Libraries' *Digital Scholarship @ the Libraries*.

The lede:

When you're a librarian working with open access publishing, there is a question that comes up a lot. It's one that many of us dread, because it tends to come with a lot of baggage, and it can be tricky to answer in a way that satisfies the querent. The question is, “*What about predatory open access publishers?*” Sometimes it's asked as an attempt to discredit OA publishing as a whole, in which case it's likely that no amount of logical argumentation and no set of facts will be acceptable as a response. More often, though, it's asked in the context of problem-solving. Predatory OA is a threat – to vulnerable junior scholars, to authors in developing countries, to the enterprise of scholarly publishing as a whole – so what should we do about it? It's tempting to toss off a quick, “Don't give them your work to publish. Problem solved!” It has the advantage of brevity, but it doesn't do much to address the very real fears of scholars who don't have the training and the experience to confidently evaluate the worth of a given publication. To give me something to point people to when the question comes up, and to provide a useful alternative to lists of predatory publishers (more on this in a minute), I decided to share my own understanding of what constitutes a ‘predatory’ publisher and offer a set of criteria by which authors can evaluate publications. It doesn't provide any easy answers, but hopefully it provides some useful guidance.

Setting aside the problem of “predatory” as a term, what follows is worth reading—carefully. Schlosser points to DOAJ and OASPA's membership as possible “nice” lists (whitelists) but with these caveats:

Inclusion in a “nice” list is a good sign, but there are three major pitfalls in leaning too heavily on them: 1. Because they are opt-in, you can't assume that a publisher isn't legitimate if they don't appear. 2. No system is perfect, and it's always possible for a bad egg to slip through the cracks. 3. Just because they meet *some-one's* criteria, doesn't mean they would meet *yours*.

The first caveat is especially useful with the mass DOAJ delisting and the five-articles-a-year criterion; the other two are also excellent.

Better yet, Schlosser neither names nor links to the blacklists or “naughty” lists:

There are some fairly well-known ones, but I'm not going to link to any, because I find this list category especially problematic and I don't want to throw my link-support around. The pitfalls are similar to those of the “nice” lists: 1. They are not comprehensive. No one could possibly catch every scammy publisher, and the landscape shifts too quickly to stay on top of reliably. Just because it's not on the list, doesn't mean it's good! 2. Publishers change. There have been well-intentioned organizations that started off with low-quality offerings but managed to turn things around, just as there have been reputable ones that followed the slippery slope to exploitation. Knowing what a publisher was doing *then* doesn't always tell you what they're doing *now*, and it's not always clear how often a list is updated or under what circumstances. 3. The same criteria issues apply to “naughty” lists as “nice” lists, with some added potential for malfeasance. As with any public take-down, they can be a useful vehicle for grudge-settling and agenda-pushing. “Naughty” lists can be a useful piece of evidence as you evaluate a publication, but take them with an especially large grain of salt, and learn what you can about the person or organization that created them.

I'll just applaud this set of caveats.

Then Schlosser sets out to her actual task—starting with this refreshing paragraph:

You may notice I have yet to define the phrase “predatory publisher.” That wasn't an accident. It's a tricky thing to do, and I wanted to give the definition the breathing room it deserves. Some people will tell you that any journal that charges its authors a fee to publish is predatory. They tend to be from fields where author charges are unheard of (unlike many disciplines in the sciences, where authors regularly fork over page charges to publish in subscription journals), grant funding is scarce, and well-established OA journals are thin on the ground. They also tend to have a rosy view of the subscription model of publishing as being free from the degradations of market capitalism. (Obviously, they tend not to be librarians.) Other people work from lists of positive and negative publisher attributes, asserting that a publisher that lacks one or more good qualities, or has one or more bad qualities, is “predatory.” Still others offer a vague statement along the lines of, “They take your money and don't give you anything in return.” [Emphasis added, although there's at least one clear librarian exception.]

Schlosser has three categories of journal: “good” (in scare quotes), “bad” (ditto) and scams. She discusses each category in some detail.

The discussion of scam journals is brief and pointed, and I'll just say "go read it." The other two discussions are especially interesting because of her conclusion:

I can't tell you if a journal is "good" or "bad." I can probably help you avoid a worthless scam, but only you know what you want to get out of any given interaction with the world of scholarly publishing. Take the time to think about your situation and what you want for your work, and to look closely at any publication you are considering submitting to – the time invested will pay off in spades.

There's a little more, also good. Other than my mixed feelings about the term "predatory," I find little to criticize here and much to praise. Worth reading.

Schlosser points to a list of "[Open Access Journal Quality Indicators](#)" at Grand Valley State University, and it's a good one, with the caveats that (a) good journals may not have all the positive indicators but shouldn't have any of the negative ones and (b) the indicators could apply equally well to subscription journals. That general recommendation does not apply to the last section, which includes two models of publishing that I don't regard as OA (hybrid and "embargoed"—the latter being *clearly* not OA).

Where not to publish? Do we need a list of pseudo-journals?

This piece by Witold Kieńc appeared [December 15, 2015](#) at *Open Science*, and it's an interesting discussion on the need for such a list—with appropriate commentary on the existing list. The key conclusion appears as part of the tease before the story:

Even if so, it should be crowd-sourced and not focused on open access only.

Some interesting argumentation:

I have two major arguments supporting the need for some kind of quality-centered list of journals.

- 1) The myth of low quality of open access journals has gained some popularity by now, and it is too late to simply ignore it. So if there is no easy and credible way to determine the quality of a journal, every open access journal could be seen as a suspicious one. So we need to develop good criteria to judge all kind of journals, including new ones. This does not necessarily mean that we need a blacklist, but it is an argument for any kind of easy-to-use judging solution.
- 2) It is a fact that there is a large group of pseudo-journals, started just to make money quickly without providing any valuable services to the academic community. A big part of these journals claim to be open access, but "(...) a lot of subscription based journals, set up by major publishers in narrow fields

are very low quality. They exist only thanks to the big subscription deals, and would not be able to survive on the market as stand alone journals" – as told me [Bo-Christer Björk](#), one of the most cited open access researchers. This problem has already been widely publicized. People are afraid of the possible negative impact of pseudo-journals on research. So this problem has to be solved somehow.

While I have issues with Björk, especially with his defective study of "blacklisted" journals that has been, *predictably*, used to beat up on OA, he makes a good point about low-quality subscription journals.

There's more here, and it's worth thinking about. I'm generally opposed to blacklists on philosophical grounds, and I don't see how you could maintain an up-to-date list that allows for publishers to improve their standards, but there are some interesting ideas here.

Getting Published: Journal Articles: Predatory publishing

Unfortunately, this [relatively brief webpage](#) at the University of Queensland's UQ Library is an example of how not to it, in my opinion.

First, it begins with an incorrect definition of gold OA:

Predatory publishers seek to take advantage of the Gold Open Access model of publication, whereby the author pays to have an article available open access.

Most gold OA journals do not charge fees. Most gold OA journals do not charge fees. Most gold OA journals do not charge fees. I have said this three times because it is true and important—and, by the way, outside of a small group of large publishers that I call "[APCLand](#)," most *articles* appear in journals that don't charge fees.

Then there are the criteria to consider. Some are fine, but this one would seem to make *PLOS One* (for example) predatory:

Are the publisher's rejection rates comparable with other publisher's rates?

There is *nothing* predatory about accepting based on scientific merit rather than aiming for some level of "selectivity"—and, after all, the "news" about arsenic-based life forms appeared in a highly selective journal.

But the worst advice comes after the set of six bullets:

[Check if the publisher appears on Jeffrey Beall's list of predatory publishers](#) and view the [criteria](#) he has used to determine which OA publishers are predatory.

Notably, the [Directory of Open Access Journals](#) is neither mentioned nor linked to.

Perhaps I shouldn't be surprised. Another page on the site, discussing OA, uses "Open Access myths?"—with that undermining question mark—before mentioning Peter Suber's myth-debunking list.

8 Indicators of a Reputable Open Access Journal

This [listicle](#) (not dated) appears at Edigo's *Research Matters*, and it's a mixed bag. Good: it mentions DOAJ and calls for clarity on editorial and ethical issues.

Less good:

3. The journal publishes regular issues with a decent number of papers in each issue.

Besides indexing database coverage, it is always good to get a better picture of a journal by looking at some key statistics. To establish a regular readership, a journal has to publish a certain amount of content and regularly put out new issues. Look at the table of contents of the current and last volume of the journal to get an idea of how many issues the journal publishes per year, and how many papers the journal publishes in an average issue. Journals with a regular readership will typically publish 10 items or more per issue, and put out at least quarterly issues (four issues per year).

So you should avoid journals that (a) don't group articles into "issues" or (b) appear semiannually or (c) publish fewer than 40 articles per year? So much for all of Hindawi and PLoS (and many other OA publishers who don't do "issues" for online-only journals)—and, by the way, a majority of medical journals in DOAJ, a majority of STEM journals, and nearly three-quarters of humanities and social sciences journals in DOAJ.

Also somewhat questionable unless the goal is to dismiss as many journals as possible:

4. The journal has a reasonably-sized editorial board with a chief editor.

The journal should clearly identify an academic chief editor in its editorial board who is in charge of the academic standards of the journal. The editorial board should typically consist of full university professors or senior scholars from research institutes.

So only the most senior folks (by traditional methods) are qualified to be on editorial boards?

And here's the flip side:

8 Ways to Identify a Questionable Open Access Journal

[This one's](#) from Chrissy Prater and appears at American Journal Experts, which, like Edigo, sells editing and other services to article writers. Overall, it's not bad. Prater scare-quotes "predatory" and states that her warning signs are only potential indicators and may also happen for some perfectly fine journals. She

fails to mention DOAJ, instead linking to a resource maintained by an AJE sister company.

She also says this in the very first point:

The majority of open access journals are supported by contributions from authors.

I won't bother to repeat it three more times...this is simply false.

But there are some good discussions here. I'll quote the numbered items without the discussions:

1. The journal asks for a submission fee instead of a publication fee or tries to keep the copyright to authors' work.

2. The editorial board is very small or "coming soon."

3. A single publisher releases an overwhelmingly large suite of new journals all at one time.

4. The journal says an issue will be available at a certain time, but the issue never appears.

5. The website is not professional in quality.

6. The journal title notes a national or international affiliation that does not match its editorial board or location.

7. There are fundamental errors in the titles and abstracts.

8. The content of the journal varies from the title and stated scope.

The expansions are worth reading.

Predatory open access journals: Avoiding profiteers, wasted effort and fraud

There seem to be a lot of editorials assailing "predatory" journals, frequently in ways that make all OA look bad. This one, by Mary Grace Umlauf [in April 2016](#) at *International Journal of Nursing Practice*, is generally not too bad—although there's one sentence that raises my hackles:

This is important because not all OA journals are fraudulent or predatory.

"Not all"? How about "most actual OA journals that actually publish articles are neither fraudulent nor predatory"? "Not all" tends to be read as "most."

Otherwise, this is one of the better anti-"predatory" editorials I've seen—and it does link to DOAJ as one place to find credible journals.

An Expanded Approach to Evaluating Open Access Journals

[This article](#) by Margaret Ray appears in the *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* (47:4, July 2016). I guess it's peer-reviewed, although the presentation doesn't indicate that. Here's the abstract:

The advent of open access publishing necessitates evaluating the quality of a plethora of new journals. The problem of ensuring quality is inherent in the

benefits and goals of open access publishing, which attempts to establish a system for reporting research findings that is inclusive and expeditious. However, inclusivity and speed may run counter to the goals of quality and reliability, and the pressure for researchers to publish creates incentives to participate in a fraudulent system. This paper presents an alternative approach to evaluating the legitimacy of open access publications. Those concerned about the quality of open access publishing have attempted to evaluate journals based on criteria that refer to externally available information. The approach used here provides additional, internal information about participation in journals' review processes. This additional information, namely, documentation of the process from submission through review to acceptance, is crucial for evaluating potentially fraudulent open access journals that might appear legitimate based on publicly available information.

It's a long article and I won't attempt to excerpt or analyze it. She quotes Beall rather a lot while writing off his critics with this:

But proponents of OAP criticize attempts by Beall and others to identify predatory or fraudulent gold open access journals. Much of that criticism can be viewed as an admonition not to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Some critics are reluctant to evaluate the quality of open access journals for fear that creating standards will diminish the openness of access.

I find that second sentence objectionable, but then I would, wouldn't I?

Ray wants to do even more—and suggests an “expanded approach” that seems based on the idea that papers written by high school students should be rejected by any legitimate journal. She took four such papers and submitted them to ten journals—notably including *herself* (a full professor and dean) as a coauthor and contact.

Nine of the ten submissions received an editorial decision; one did not. Six journals accepted the submission without revisions; one accepted the paper with revisions; and one decision was ‘revise and re-submit.’ Only one submission was rejected, based on the paper's word count, which was below the required minimum. The journal suggested that the paper be expanded and resubmitted.

She says:

For each of the ten article submissions, there is evidence that the journal did not provide a rigorous or useful review process. The journals did not provide a peer-review process that served the interests of the authors, the journal's readers, or the general public. Any doubt about the legitimacy of the journal that remained after evaluating it with externally available

information was eliminated after considering the results of the peer-review process. The timing and content of the author's correspondence with these journals provided conclusive evidence that they are not legitimate peer-reviewed journals as claimed on their websites, and any similar record of author correspondence with a journal would indicate a fraudulent publication.

And then concludes (the first paragraph of the Conclusions section):

The experiences reported here support several important conclusions. First, there is a wide range of predatory/fraudulent open access journals, and authors are paying to have their articles published in them, resulting in a proliferation of this segment of OAP. Second, it is possible for qualified, experienced academic researchers to ‘know them when they see them’ or at least to identify them when they participate in their peer-review process (*them* being fraudulent open access journals). It was very easy for this author to identify potentially fraudulent journals among the large and increasing number of email solicitations for open access journal submissions. And even if a journal appears to be legitimate prior to submitting an article for publication, participation in the review process gives an author enough evidence to identify the journal as fraudulent before paying a publication fee—for example, if the results of the peer-review process are received three days after a paper is submitted, if multiple peer reviews are not received, or if reviewers do not provide any suggestions for revisions to improve the paper. If an author is aware of predatory publishing and decides to publish a paper in a journal even after experiencing a perfunctory or nonexistent review process, then predatory publishing becomes fraudulent and unethical publishing. It is important that inexperienced researchers be made aware of the difference between an acceptable review process and a fraudulent one.

Some of those conclusions may be reasonable—but nine accepted papers is a bit thin as evidence for the first conclusion. (There is the little matter that multiple simultaneous submissions of the same articles is, at best, questionable behavior, but apparently the Bohannon Rule means that ethics don't matter if you're trying to demonstrate unethical behavior.)

Science communication: The predatory open access “journals”

Here's another case where I have distinctly mixed feelings: by Victor Morais [on February 5, 2016](#) at *naturejobs*.

Morais (a postdoc at Uruguay's University of the Republic) looked at the “publisher's” site for an email invitation he received and found more than 30 journals,

most empty and none with more than ten articles. He offers some pointers to determine whether a journal is legit. Two strike me as especially troublesome: check the impact factor and check the publisher. The first is problematic because it rules out any journals too new for an IF and those that Thompson Reuters chooses not to track—e.g. many humanities journals.

The second is worse, and I'll quote the paragraph:

Recognised publishers are a good guarantee of a trusted journal. Traditional publishers such as Springer Nature, Elsevier, Wiley and others have more than a century of history in science publication. Unfortunately, many new journals belong to new publishers that haven't had the time to build a reputation yet.

I'm a little uneasy about "check the support" which seems to say you should avoid journals that aren't affiliated with universities or societies—although I believe that is at odds with "check the publisher" in some cases.

Questionable?

Another group of items related to so-called "predatory" journals—including one emerging story related to a publisher about which almost nobody (including myself) has good things to say.

Facts about the critique of questionable publishing practices at the Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism, Faculty of Social Sciences at Charles University, Prague

I can't provide comprehensive comments about this item, which appeared [on November 17, 2015](#) at *Za Etické Publikace a Svobodu Kritiky na IKSŽ* (Ethical Publications and freedom of criticism at IKSŽ, which appears to be the Faculty of Social Sciences at Charles University). But it's interesting enough to cite.

On its face, it's about the reality of some questionable publishing: it allows a scholar to pad their publishing record, which can directly or indirectly lead to higher pay. It also appears to be about the perils of whistle-blowing.

That something funny was happening seems fairly clear, given that the scholar in question had as a coauthor on several papers a "person" who was at prestigious universities—and was an *admitted* pseudonym for the scholar.

Beyond that...well, read it for yourself. In this case, if the facts are as stated, the predator isn't the journals: it's the scholar.

How big is the problem?

That's my title, because "Re: Predatory Publishing: A Modest Proposal" covers a whole discussion that doesn't seem to reach a useful conclusion. The post I'm linking to here, [on September 9, 2015](#), is from Falk Reckling at the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), who undertook to see how many of the articles with APCs paid by that fund between January 2014 and August 2015 appeared in questionable journals.

Paraphrasing, 37 of the 683 OA articles appeared in journals on Beall's lists, or 5.4%—about the percentage one person suspected.

But—and it's an important "but"—33 of the 37 are from MDPI journals, all of which were in DOAJ (and MDPI's no longer on Beall's list). Further, the fund—properly, in my view—does not regard Beall's lists as official and does regard DOAJ as a suitable resource. Thus, the *real* total is four articles out of 683, or 0.6%. (The post incorrectly says 0.06%; that would be four articles out of 6,830.)

To sum up, we see no empirical evidence, at least not for the FWF, that the problem is higher than in former times where the FWF funded "dubious costs" for colour figures, covers, page charges e.g. from subscription journals listed in WoS or Scopus, especially since the exemption criteria of WoS and Scopus are still less transparent as for DOAJ.

Sounds right to me—in practice, serious scholars are unlikely to submit to questionable journals.

As for the actual number of articles in such journals compared to overall OA publications? We have one set of numbers based on sampling, a set I regard as extremely inflated. There will be a full-sample set...after I finish this essay and go back to visiting publisher and journal sites. Best guess is that the number will be less than half as high as DOAJ-listed gold OA—but I don't know yet.

[Predatory open access journals and a crank mutual admiration society](#)

Since the title for this January 26, 2016 post by "Orac" at *Respectful Insolence* is hyperlinked, I left it that way.

I suggest you read this yourself; it's about, well, cranks, but also how questionable journals serve not so much as predators but enablers for conspiracy theorists and others.

Beyond that—and the note that everybody's favorite five-letter OA giant is involved—I won't comment. Although, as Orac notes, it's fair to say that a seventy-year-long global conspiracy to depopulate

Earth has to count as one of the most incompetent conspiracies of all time.

'Predatory' open access: a longitudinal study of article volumes and market characteristics

And here's the article, by Cenyu Shen and Bo-Christer Björk, [published October 1, 2015](#) in *BMC Medicine*, that I've been grumping about—the one that claims that “predatory” journals (no, the authors don't even use the scare quotes) published 420,000 articles in 2014—a conclusion based on a 6% sample and one that simply assumes that Beall's list consists entirely of legitimately predatory journals.

When a colleague complained about the conclusions, referring to some preliminary figures of mine, Björk simply waved it aside by saying the study used proper statistical methods and passed peer review. Since then, as Björk must have known would happen, the article has been cited repeatedly as proof that “predatory” OA is out of control (frequently with the suggestion that most OA is defective): it's become a valuable weapon for the anti-OA folks.

Oddly enough, the conclusions are more benign:

Despite a total number of journals and publishing volumes comparable to respectable (indexed by the Directory of Open Access Journals) open access journals, the problem of predatory open access seems highly contained to just a few countries, where the academic evaluation practices strongly favor international publication, but without further quality checks.

I'm very nearly certain that the 2014 total was nowhere near 420,000 or “comparable” to the 560,000-odd articles in *DOAJ* journals in 2014. What are the real numbers? I'm working on it; best guess right now is somewhere between 125,000 and 175,000, but it could be somewhat lower or significantly higher.

I also wonder how this article fits the purview of a medical journal, but never mind...

The OMICS Case Begins

I'll just note four reports related to this newish story, involving OMICS Group—a publisher that also operates under several other names, has no *DOAJ*-listed journals (as far as I can tell), and seems generally regarded as a special case.

First, look to the source: “FTC Charges Academic Journal Publisher OMICS Group Deceived Researchers,” posted [August 26, 2016](#) on the Federal Trade Commission's website. It's a press release from the Federal government, so it's clear I can quote the whole thing—which also seems appropriate:

The Federal Trade Commission has charged the publisher of hundreds of purported online academic

journals with deceiving academics and researchers about the nature of its publications and hiding publication fees ranging from hundreds to thousands of dollars.

The FTC's [complaint alleges that OMICS Group, Inc., along with two affiliated companies](#) and their president and director, Srinubabu Gedela, claim that their journals follow rigorous peer-review practices and have editorial boards made up of prominent academics. In reality, many articles are published with little to no peer review and numerous individuals represented to be editors have not agreed to be affiliated with the journals.

According to the FTC's complaint, OMICS does not tell researchers that they must pay significant publishing fees until after it has accepted an article for publication, and often will not allow researchers to withdraw their articles from submission, thereby making the research ineligible for publication in another journal. Academic ethics standards generally forbid researchers from submitting the same research to more than one journal.

“The defendants in this case used false promises to convince researchers to submit articles presenting work that may have taken months or years to complete, and then held that work hostage over undisclosed publication fees ranging into the thousands of dollars,” said Jessica Rich, Director of the FTC's Bureau of Consumer Protection. “It is vital that we stop scammers who seek to take advantage of the changing landscape of academic publishing.”

Among the deceptive statements OMICS made to researchers, according to the complaint, were descriptions of its journals as having a high “impact factor,” a term that describes approximately how frequently articles in a particular journal are cited in other research. Thomson Reuters' proprietary measure of journals' impact factors is the widely accepted standard, but OMICS allegedly calculated its own impact scores and did not clearly disclose that fact to consumers.

The defendants also tell researchers that their journals are indexed by federal research databases, including the National Institutes of Health's PubMed and MEDLINE services, when in fact that is not true, according to the complaint.

In addition to misrepresentations related to their journal publishing services, the FTC's complaint alleges that the defendants regularly deceive consumers while promoting academic conferences they organize. The defendants allegedly include the names of prominent researchers as participants and presenters at the conferences, which charge registration fees that can cost more than \$1,000, when in fact many of those researchers often did not agree to participate in the events.

The FTC's complaint charges the defendants, OMICS Group Inc., iMedPub LLC, Conference Series LLC, and Srinubabu Gedela, with multiple violations of the FTC Act's prohibition on deceptive acts or practices.

The Commission vote authorizing the staff to file the complaint was 3-0. The complaint was filed in the U.S. District Court for the District of Nevada.

NOTE: The Commission files a complaint when it has "reason to believe" that the law has been or is being violated and it appears to the Commission that a proceeding is in the public interest. The case will be decided by the court.

Next, there's Carl Straumsheim's [August 29, 2016](#) "Feds Target 'Predatory' Publishers" at *Inside Higher Ed*, which summarizes the complaint, quotes Jeffrey Beall and—unfortunately but not inappropriately—quotes the "420,000 articles in predatory journals" figure.

There's a comment from "Kumar OMICS legal" denying the charge:

Omics Group submitted all the required documentation and facts to FTC. Based on the facts and documentation supplied to FTC, all of their allegations are baseless. Further we understand that FTC working towards favoring some subscription based commercial publishers who are earning Billions of dollars from scientists literature.

Based on the documentation, Omics hopes FTC understand the transparent business services and contributions to make the scientific and health care information open access.

Omics Group earnestly demanded FTC to drop all the proceedings against us as otherwise we may be constrained to effectively defend as well as in the event of the case of FTC being struck down Our client may be constrained to seek for damages and malicious prosecution. kishore@omicsgroup.org, legal

I swear that I copied-and-pasted that without modification. The response of a "Ph.D. Librarian" is charming...but you can read it yourself.

Marcus Banks published "OMICS is a Symptom of Twisted Publishing Incentives" [on August 28, 2016](#) at *Medium*. Banks finds some troubling items in the FTC brief itself, items that appear to favor traditional over OA publishing. Then there's this:

Beall's own hands are far from clean in the overall debate about open access publishing. From his useful beginnings in tracking "predatory" open access publishers, Beall has devolved into a tiresome scold about the supposed evils of open access publishing. [People have noticed](#) the fundamental duplicity and sleight of hand in his arguments, in which he uses the rotten fringes of the publishing world to stand in for all of

open access publishing. But despite my general unease about quoting Beall, he is right about OMICS. By all evidence the FTC is as well, as the complaint's specific claims against OMICS are very well substantiated. I hope this suit prevails, that OMICS pays all the damages due, and that OMICS and all its subsidiaries are shuttered from business forevermore.

Yeah, OK, so the hyperlink is to another *C&I* essay.

For now, I'll close with "Are 'predatory' publishers' days numbered?" by Ivan Oransky and Adam Marcus [on September 2, 2016](#) at *Stat*.

On one hand, there's this additional background:

OMICS, which has offices in Los Angeles and Hyderabad, India, has been on the government's radar for several years. In 2013, the Department of Health and Human Services accused the company of abusing the good name of the National Institutes of Health and its employees by, among other things, improperly listing NIH scientists on the mastheads of some of its journals. Others have noted that some of the journals have names that are awfully similar to legitimate publications, further confusing potential authors.

On the other, the authors quote Beall at length, never suggest that his lists might be less than authoritative, suggests (by omission) that all gold OA is "author pays"—and, yes, quotes the Shen/Björk article uncritically.

There will be a lot more virtual ink before this is settled—and lots more efforts to smear all of OA with the failings of one publisher (which the FTC definitively does *not* do).

The Aginners

That is, those agin' OA journals—or that look that way to me, even as they're addressing "predators." You could call this "the anti-OA brigade" if you prefer. I tagged eight items (and could have tagged many more—a separate "oa-anti" tag has another 13 items at the moment) but probably won't note all of them.

Total Open Access: the new gospel of scientific communication

This fairly astonishing piece by Rafael Ball (director of Zurich's ETH-Library) appeared [February 8, 2016](#) at *Research Information*.

Why astonishing? Well, a library director uses the phrase "so-called journal crisis" and proceeds to assert that gold OA is the "author pays" model. Then:

The astonishing thing is that all these proposals stem from the very group least affected by the upheaval in publication conditions: librarians. After all, how and where scientists publish their results had never in-

terested anyone in the libraries. But if libraries suddenly decide on the form of scientific communication and look to dictate how the scientific community should publish, this takes on a new quality. And a very negative one at that.

Um. Yes, librarians have been involved in OA for a long time—involvement frequently minimized or ignored by others. Saying they originated all OA proposals is...well, I don't have the words. Saying that librarians are the group "least affected" is...again, my English fails me. As does the concept that librarians never cared where scientists published: I guess real libraries subscribe to *everything* so it doesn't matter?

Then Ball goes on a philosophical rant:

The latest open access initiatives tend to come across as a new ideological movement of the post-1968 generation: unyielding, one-sided and unwilling to compromise.

Moreover, the open access gurus succumb to the illusion of simply wanting to replace an existing market-based system of scientific communication. It degenerates into a pure surrogate religion of insulted and humiliated librarians. The movement has its priests, its pilgrimages and its own Holy Grail.

The new gurus travel up and down the country preaching free access to information and knowledge. And they have already reached the long march through the institutions.

Wow. After which we're informed that "neither the libraries nor science benefit from the result of Total Open Access." And then one of those Very Special Disclaimers:

Just to clarify: I am not against open access and I am not against new forms of scientific communication. And I am certainly not against libraries and librarians.

No, that's not it:

What gets my goat, however, is the vehemence with which open access missionaries not only proclaim their gospels, but also want to implement them. What appalls me is how the entire industry is painted as black and white, and the fact that librarians want to decide for the whole of science here.

The last sentence is, as far as I can tell, pure nonsense (unless Brembs and a few others turned into librarians when I wasn't looking).

Open Access: Business or Pleasure?

This one's a bit odd as well, by Katrina Wong and Robert Gooding-Townsend [on April 12, 2016](#) on the *Science Borealis* blog. The authors tell us "our enthusiasm for open access shows in this piece"—but they seem to treat Sci-Hub as part of the OA movement and then say this:

But open access isn't a panacea. While it does provide a quick route for researchers who want their work freely available, there are costs and tradeoffs. The most frequent criticism is that open access entails a loss of credibility. The rigour of peer-review is not easily forgone. Informal review is inconsistent and it can be [especially problematic](#) if media sources (or the researchers themselves!) seize on and promote flawed work. And the elimination of some costs entails introducing new ones, such as [controversial](#) fees, because someone still has to pay for a paper to have 'open access' status.

I was unaware that OA automatically (or normally) involved abandoning peer review and substituting "informal review."

Rise of the predators: Business is booming in the murky global market of suspect and sham publishers and journals

Another article in a subscription Wiley medical journal raising alarms about all that predatory OA stuff, with lots of quotes from Beall, uncritical repetition of the Shen/Björk article, and it's only part one of three. The author is Bryn Nelson and it appeared [April 14, 2016](#) in *Cancer Cytopathology*—and I frankly lack the energy to discuss it further.

Debasing the Currency of Science: The Growing Menace of Predatory Open Access Journals

Maybe instead of medical journals, you think anti-OA screeds, er, peer-reviewed scholarly articles are related to shellfish? That seems to be the case for Peter G. Beninger, Jeffrey Beall and Sandra E. Shumway, authors of [this April 2016 piece](#) in *Journal of Shellfish Research*.

While the article deserves a good flogging, I'll only quote a couple of remarkable passages:

Like most manifestos, the BOAI statement is a cleverly designed document that substitutes "motherhood and apple pie" dogma for critical thought. It can be summed up in the "Vision statement" of the "Open Access Academy" website: "Freely available research results for everyone" (<http://www.oacademy.org/vision-and-mission.html>)—apparently accustomed to gratuitous luncheons. The BOAI statement exploits human cognitive and moral weaknesses and provides a platform for members of a vocal social movement. Those wishing to announce their adhesion to the OA social movement simply repeat the ideas and concepts presented in the original Budapest statement or the ensuing copycat statements. The continual and collective repetition of the OA mantras has assumed the status of a consensual truth.

The fact that OA restricted access to publishing scientific information ([Frank 2013](#), [Burchardt 2014](#)),

and therefore further disadvantaged legitimate scientists with small research funding, both in developed and developing countries, seemed to be lost in the “free access” euphoria. It was proposed that these scientists need only send a letter to the OA journal declaring their impoverished state, and all would be fine. Intentionally or not, it apparently occurred to nobody that this was a demeaning process, which would constitute a very real barrier to publishing for many scientists, not least of them from European countries with great pride and small resources.

The “fact” heading off the second paragraph is, of course, *simply wrong*—and that’s par for the course. These scholars managed to sample Beall’s list (which is, of course, not to be questioned) and arrive at a figure of 10,153 predatory journals in 2015 (which, if you include web pages that don’t represent *any* articles as “journals,” might be right).

To date, the Directory of Open Access Journals lists 11,315 OA journals (<https://doaj.org/>). Before 2016, the only requirement for inclusion in the DOAJ list was that the journal be OA, which obviously qualified many predatory journals. Minimum quality criteria were introduced in 2015, such that the degree of overlap between the journals in the DOAJ database and Beall’s list is currently not known, although if a reader has approximately 1 y of free time, this could be ascertained. Notwithstanding, the conservative estimate of the number of predatory journals in 2015 was 7,623, or ~75% of the number of DOAJ listed journals in 2015 ([Fig. 1](#)).

Fact is, the degree of overlap between Beall’s list and DOAJ not only wouldn’t take “1 y of free time,” it’s not difficult—and there’s relatively little overlap. In any case, the underlying suggestion that such overlap means there are predatory journals in DOAJ makes sense only if you grant Beall’s authority as The Ruler of Good Journals.

The prescriptions in this article boil down to “shut down OA for good,” and the attitude toward OA is made pretty clear by one point:

5. *Encourage the few quality OA journals to reconsider the company they keep*, and progressively disengage well-established, high-quality publishers from the OA model, rather than sponsor it, as currently do Wiley, Taylor & Francis, and Springer Nature—although most of their journals are, in fact, non-OA. Although not all OA journals are predatory, all predatory journals are OA. Open access is not the cause of predatory journals, but it is the unconditional prerequisite. There are currently very few high-quality OA journals, so it is not too late to stem the tide of predatory journals by disengaging from this business model.

Got that? There are “very few high-quality journals” so we should *get rid of them all*. And, of course, all predatory journals are OA because Jeffrey Beall says so. And his coauthors apparently agree.

Awful, just awful.

Is Access to Research Easier with Open Access?

Here’s “enago academy” on [January 15, 2016](#) with a brief item that tips off its bias and veracity with a big graphic tease: “Open for All...Free for None!”

Huh?

Well, you see...

In fact, in the OA model, authors are charged a processing fee in order to get their papers published, which is also the case with traditional publishing; however, unlike traditional publishing, under OA, the readers are not charged for reading the study. So, although this model is not exactly transformational, it still provides greater access as there is no subscription cost for the readers.

Except that most OA journals don’t charge APCs, most APCs (probably) aren’t paid by authors...and it is certainly not the case that author-side charges are “also the case with traditional publishing.” Other than that...

How can it be “free for none”? It can’t. The remaining paragraphs are garbled enough that I can only suggest you read them yourselves and see if they make sense. I do find it interesting that PLoS’ 23% revenue surplus seems to be called an “unethical practice” (indirectly)—but maybe I’m confused. Or maybe enago is.)

Speaking of Beall...

A small set of items directly related to the self-appointed scourge of OA publishing (and that shellfish article makes it abundantly clear that it’s *all* OA that Beall wants to shut down).

Response by JMIR Publications to Jeffrey Beall’s Blog Post

Most of the time, Beall adds publishers to his list without bothering to offer any reasons why—but this one’s different: Beall [railed at length](#) against JMIR in December 2015, but did *not* add it to the list—still making it abundantly clear that he thinks authors should avoid it.

Gunther Eysenbach of JMIR (and a cofounder of OASPA) responded in a comment, and at greater length [here](#). The longer post is worth reading—as are the full set of comments on Beall’s post, with Beall’s tendency toward *ad hominem* attacks coming out very

quickly. The post has some interesting guilt-by-association (not quite as baldfaced as “like predatory publishers, JMIR publishes journal articles”—I made that up—but not too far away: “Like many predatory journals, some (or all) of the JMIR journals offer a [fast-track peer review](#) for an additional fee.” Response:

Like other leading publishers (eg. [Nature Publishing Group](#)), [JMIR experiments with an optional fast-track fee](#), where we guarantee a rapid decision within 3 weeks, by tightly monitoring reviewer responsiveness. JMIR invented this model - we were the first publisher experimenting with it (long before Nature did), developed the code and contributed it to the OJS platform ([see more information on fast-track data here](#)). If this is used by what Beall calls “predatory” publishers, then this is unfortunate, but it is nothing we have control over. The fast-track option is much appreciated and heavily used by some of our authors who have a specific deadline for a rapid decision, eg. a grant proposal, deadline for tenure & promotion, or PhD defense date. Pointing out the additional costs is a bit like criticizing that some researchers prefer to take the plane rather than a Greyhound bus to a conference. And, Mr Beall, don't worry, these costs don't come out of library budgets (which, as librarian, seems to be his primary concern).

To phrase his critique about the fast-track fee in the way he did (“like many predatory journals, some (or all) of the JMIR journals offer a fast-track fee”) is misleading and borders on slander, as it is suggestive of JMIR being a predatory journal (without saying it). It is not just “predatory journals” experimenting with fast-track.

There's a *lot* more here: it's a strong takedown of Beall's comments along with discussions of how and why JMIR does things—and where it has or hasn't made changes.

It's certainly not a perfect article. For example:

He also criticizes “**high article processing fees**”, but the truth is that JMIR sister journals were created as free or lower cost alternatives to JMIR, have the same APF as for example Plos One (\$1500) and are much less expensive than in fact the majority of other OA journals (see figure below).

That last phrase is, of course, wrong: since the majority of OA journals don't charge APCs, the \$1,500 fee of the sister journals (JMIR itself is *much* higher) is higher than all but 730 DOAJ journals and, for that matter, higher than at least 79% of biomed journals (and at least 80% of medical journals). The erroneous claim is justified by a graph showing the average APC paid by UCL to the 20 highest-paid publishers: that's like saying that Porsche

prices are below average by comparing Porsche to the world's ten most expensive cars.

Sometimes it's just bizarre, as when Beall slams JMIR for the “shameful practice” of calling its journals “leading journals”—a “shameful practice” that's followed by pretty much every publisher able to make a tenuous case for having leading journals.

Worth reading.

Hunters and hunted

Maybe it's cheating to include this Martin Paul Eve [January 28, 2016 letter](#) to *Times Higher Education*, since Eve cites my work—but I'll also link to the [January 21, 2016 article](#) Eve is responding to, a little piece dominated by a Big Scary Graph showing a very rapid rise in “predatory” publishers and journals from almost none in 2011 to huge numbers in 2016.

The graph, of course, as Eve points out, really shows two things: Beall started the lists around 2011 and has become much more aggressive in adding things to the lists in recent years, usually without any argumentation and frequently adding a publisher under more than one name or adding firms that aren't journal publishers at all.

To use one of Beall's insults, I'm no sycophant of Martin Paul Eve, and the reverse is true: we've never met but have had some spirited discussions. And his mention of my work is only one point. To quote the portion of the letter that *follows* that mention:

Third, Beall is ideologically motivated in his list, hoping to discredit open access, writing publicly that the open-access movement is “anti-corporatist” [*sic*] and that it “wants to deny the freedom of the press to companies it disagrees with”.

Finally, much of Beall's rhetoric is pejoratively Anglocentric; he has publicly asked whether the well-respected South American publication platform, SciELO, is “more like [a] publication favela”.

For these reasons, among others, a number of institutions (such as the [University of Manchester](#)) are explicitly advising their authors not to use Beall's list.

Good for Manchester. Would that more institutions did the same.

Dangerous Predatory Publishers Threaten Medical Research

We'll give Beall himself the last word for this section—in yet another article, this one in the *Journal of Korean Medical Science* and published online on [July 25, 2016](#).

The venue is interesting: a gold OA journal that charges APCs (~~₩~~900,000, \$822 at September 6, 2016 exchange rates, plus another ~~₩~~200,000 for each page

of color figures). It clearly offers very fast peer review in some cases, as evidenced by this information for the Beall piece:

Received July 14, 2016; Accepted July 14, 2016.

How does this piece qualify for a medical journal?

By far, predatory publishers damage science more than anything else. They do not faithfully manage peer review, allowing questionable science to be published as if it had passed a strong peer review. We know that peer review often results in papers being rejected for publication, but this rejection is contrary to the business model of many open-access publishers, because they only want to generate as much revenue as possible.

Peer review also helps authors find and eliminate errors before the final version of the scientific article is prepared and published. Peer review benefits authors and benefits science itself. We also know that research is cumulative, and new research builds on the foundations established by earlier research. When writing scientific articles, many researchers first search the scholarly literature to discover what earlier research has been published on the particular scientific question they seek to answer. Because of predatory journals and their negligent peer review management, now many unscientific articles have been published. The scientific literature has become polluted, bringing the cumulative nature of research into doubt.

Later he gives examples of the harm done by “predatory” journals:

Now many predatory journals accept and publish ‘advocacy research’. This type of research supports a particular political, religious, or social agenda using questionable science that normally would not pass through peer review. For example, some have written that asbestos is non-toxic, but the articles making this claim originated from the asbestos industry. Anti-nuclear researchers have published research ‘concluding’ that nuclear power plants are more harmful than honest science has found. Others have written articles claiming a newly-discovered drug is efficacious, hoping to attract investors and even selling the drug over the Internet without government approval.

Just at a guess, some or most of those industry-supported articles appeared in subscription journals, but I can’t prove that. I do know that Beall has elsewhere cited articles claiming that glyphosate may cause cancer as examples of pseudoscience in predatory journals—but that was before the World Health Organization took that position. Similarly, Beall assails as pseudoscience any OA journals covering Ayurveda or other alternative medicines—but has no trouble at all with Elsevier’s homeopathy and, now,

Ayurveda journals. After all, they *can’t* be predatory: they’re not OA.

Note again that this is unusually mild rhetoric for Beall—a far cry from his triple-C days. And I assume that Beall is as much of a medical expert as he is an expert on shellfish.

Miscellany

This final section is, of course, “all the items that didn’t cluster neatly into some other grouping.”

Citable Items: The Contested Impact Factor Denominator

Phil Davis posted this [on February 10, 2016](#) at the *scholarly kitchen*—and, as usual with Davis, there’s clear thinking and careful methodology at work even if you (or I) may disagree with his conclusions at times.

In this case, he’s looking at an ethical issue that may affect subscription journals as much or more than OA ones: Can a journal’s Impact Factor be manipulated by reducing the number of citable items?

From time to time, Thomson Reuters will receive requests to re-evaluate how a journal section is indexed. Most often, these requests challenge the current classification schema and maintain that papers presently classified as “Article,” which are considered citable, should really be classified as “Editorial Material,” which are not. A reclassification from Article to Editorial Material does nothing to reduce citation counts in the numerator of the Impact Factor calculation but reduces the number in its denominator. Depending on the size of the section, this can have a huge effect on the resulting quotient. For elite medical journals, Editorial Material now greatly outnumbers Article publication (see figure above).

He offers examples of plausible changes:

If we reclassified Hindsight papers in the *Journal of Clinical Investigation* as “Editorial Material” and recalculated its 2014 Impact Factor, the journal’s score would rise marginally, from 13.262 to 13.583. The title would retain its third place rank among journals classified under Medicine, Research & Experimental. If we reclassified Commentary and Perspective papers in *Science Translational Medicine* as “Editorial Material,” the journal’s Impact Factor would rise nearly 3 points, from 15.843 to 18.598. The journal would still retain second place in its subject category. However, if we reclassified Perspective, Policy Forum, Essay, and Health in Action papers in *PLOS Medicine* from “Editorial Material” to “Article,” its Impact Factor would drop by nearly half, from 14.429 to 8.447 and have a standing similar to *BMC Medicine* (7.356).

He offers suggestions for improvement. Read the comments as well. I lack standing to offer thoughts.

PLOS, open access and scientific societies

By Michael Eisen, [on March 21, 2016](#) at *it is NOT junk*—and cited here because it raises some interesting issues.

Several people have noted that, in my previous post dealing with PLOS's business, I didn't address a point that came up in a number of threads regarding the relative virtues of PLOS and scientific societies – the basic point being that people should publish in society journals because they do good things with the money (run meetings, support fellowships and grants) and that PLOS is to be shunned because it “doesn't give back to the community”.

Skipping over some of his comments, we get to a key paragraph:

I also have long wondered whether it's good for societies in a more general sense when they are reliant on publishing revenues for their funding. Societies are supposed to be organizations that represent their members, and yet the concept of being a member of a society has been weakened by the fact that few people actively choose to become a member of a society to support their activities and have a voice in their policies. Rather people become society members because it gets them access to journals and/or discounts to meetings. I love the Genetics Society of America, but they and many other societies do this weird thing where, if you go to one of their meetings, the cost of attending the meeting as a non-member is greater than the cost of attending as a member plus the cost of membership, so of course everyone “joins” the society. But this kind of membership is weak. And I wonder whether people wouldn't feel more engaged in their societies, and if societies wouldn't be more responsive to their members, if they became true membership organizations once again.

Hooray. This nicely complements my long-argued point that it is simply *wrong* for libraries to be expected to support non-library societies. Eisen's saying that it may also be bad for the societies. I agree.

There is no such thing as self-plagiarism

I certainly hope Mike Taylor is right in this very brief *SV-POW* [April 13, 2016 post](#)—since if “self-plagiarism” is unethical (and when you read the comments, which are much longer than the post itself, you'll see claims that they are) then I'm unethical—except, of course, that this isn't peer-reviewed scholarship.

The post, in full:

I [keep](#) reading [pieces](#) about [self-plagiarism](#). the whole idea is idiotic.

Plagiarism is “[presenting someone else's work or ideas as your own](#)”. So self-plagiarism is presenting your own work or ideas as your own. Which is nonsense.

Can we please abandon this unhelpful and misleading phrase?

The comments and linked articles will take much longer to read.

What quality controls are utilised by PLOS ONE when selecting reviewers? Who is deemed eligible? In some ways, this Richard Poynder post [on July 25, 2016](#) at *Open and Shut?* isn't about PLOS ONE at all—it's about degrees, affiliation and who's qualified to review a paper.

To wit: Poynder received an email invitation from a PLOS ONE academic editor inviting him to review a paper on open access. He was surprised “since I am a blogger/journalist rather than an academic.” After he asked about the situation, he writes:

Let me be quite clear at the outset: I had and have no interest whatsoever in reviewing this or any other scholarly work, not least because there is absolutely no incentive for me to devote my time to reviewing papers. Moreover, the one time I did agree to review anything for an academic journal (an editorial rather than a paper), my suggestions were all rejected on the grounds that “the author says he is too busy to make the changes you suggested.” Clearly I had not made very good use of my time!

But as I say, my first response on receiving the PLOS ONE invitation was to wonder whether it is inappropriate for non-academics to review scholarly papers. With these thoughts in mind I [tweeted](#) the invitation under the strapline “PLOS ONE invites journalist to review scholarly paper”. Somewhat to my surprise, everyone who responded said that they saw no problem with my reviewing a scholarly paper on open access (although it could not presumably be defined as “peer” review). Their reasoning was that they are confident that I have the necessary expertise. And Roger Schonfeld [commented](#), “I'd like to see expertise welcomed into the scholarly conversation without regard to academic affiliation.”

There's quite a bit more, including this question:

Does PLOS ONE allow or not allow people to review a paper where they are not a member of a university or other research institution?

He eventually got a response that, broadly, says it's complicated. The invitation was withdrawn, by the way, after Poynder asked about it.

Among the letters is one from an editor at *Learned Publishing* (COI: I've published an article there, or, rather, republished something that appeared here first, at the journal's invitation) that starts:

I can understand your concern, but as a journal editor myself (Learned Publishing), I frequently (almost always?) use non-academics to review articles

due to the nature of the content. Maybe they do have a PhD, but that is irrelevant to me - I choose them because they have knowledge in the area that the author has written on and can therefore judge its validity. Sometimes I select people specifically because they are not experts but I want their opinion as a general reader (“is this interesting/sufficiently informative” etc.).

Just before he tosses off *PLOS ONE* as not being a journal at all, Stevan Harnad comments that Poynder is indeed an appropriate reviewer for some papers on open access. Mike Taylor says much the same thing (without maligning *PLOS ONE*, of course).

Just for fun I’m going to quote one paragraph in Wim Crusio’s excellent comment:

3/ I know a lot of idiots with a PhD. I know a lot of qualified people that don’t have one. Although in most cases an editor will invite a reviewer who does have a PhD, this is certainly not a rule written in stone and, as far as I am concerned, totally irrelevant. What counts is whether the reviewer has the necessary expertise.

After I tagged this post for possible use, but before I started writing this roundup, I received a request to peer-review an article on an aspect of open access for an OA library science journal. I do not have a Ph.D. (or an ML[IS] or any other advanced degree). I am not affiliated with an academic institution and haven’t been since 1979. And yes, I’m qualified to review this particular paper and have since done so (favorably). So I guess my response is obvious.

The Holy Grail of Crackpot Filtering: How the arXiv decides what’s science – and what’s not.

Let’s finish with a little crackpottery—or, rather, notes on how crackpottery gets detected. The piece is by Sabine Hossenfelder and appeared [May 19, 2016 at BackReaction](#).

It’s well worth reading on its own. To summarize, it appears that the automated filters at arXiv, designed to sort papers into subject classifications, also do a good job of flagging papers that are significantly out of line with current scientific consensus—which can either be crackpottery or strikingly original research, but is usually called the former.

About crackpottery:

Science doesn’t operate with randomly generated hypotheses for the same reason natural selection doesn’t work with randomly generated genetic codes: it would be highly inefficient and any attempt to optimize the outcome would be doomed to fail. What we do instead is heavily filtering hypotheses, and then we consider only those which are small

mutations of ideas that have previously worked. [Scientists like to be surprised, but not too much.](#)

Indeed, if you look at the scientific enterprise today, almost all of its institutionalized procedures are methods not for testing hypotheses, but for filtering hypotheses: Degrees, peer reviews, scientific guidelines, reproduction studies, measures for statistical significance, and community quality standards. Even the use of personal recommendations works to that end. In theoretical physics in particular the prevailing quality standard is that theories need to be formulated in mathematical terms. All these are requirements which have evolved over the last two centuries – and they have proved to work very well. It’s only smart to use them.

But the business of hypotheses filtering is a tricky one and it doesn’t proceed by written rules. It is a method that has developed through social demarcation, and as such it has its pitfalls. Humans are prone to social biases and every once in a while an idea get dismissed not because it’s bad, but because it lacks community support. And there is no telling how often this happens because these are the stories we never get to hear.

It isn’t news that scientists lock shoulders to defend their territory and use technical terms like fraternities use secret handshakes. It thus shouldn’t come as a surprise that an electronic archive which caters to the scientific community would develop software to emulate the community’s filters. And that is, in a nutshell, basically what the arXiv is doing.

There’s much more to this discussion, which ends:

Conventional science isn’t bad science. But we also need unconventional science, and we should be careful to not assign the label “crackpottery” too quickly. If science is what scientists do, scientists should pay some attention to the science of what they do.

An even hundred comments as of this writing, definitely worth reading.

Masthead

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Comments should be sent to waltcrawford@gmail.com.

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