Predatory publishing has become increasingly ubiquitous across the sciences and beyond. Importantly, Dr Nicola Alberto Valente, Adjunct Assistant Professor at the State University of New York at Buffalo, compiled and studied the barrage of invitations he received over the course of an academic year. He then attempted to quantitatively assess the impact these invitations had on him and his work. Research Outreach spoke to Dr Valente about his findings, and about the impact of these publishers more generally.

Many researchers may now feel the influx of suspicious journal ‘invitations’ via email have become a kind of background noise, to be filed away in ‘spam’ without a second thought. Yet these invitations can be far graver than mere inconveniences. Young researchers, or those who are flattened by the promises made by the predatory journal, may succumb to the temptation of publication – only to find the promises were unfounded, and the costs attached were not remunerated. In other circumstances, it may be difficult to confidently separate the genuine from the predatory, which seriously affects a researcher’s willingness to proceed with publication. This context only breeds distrust and anxiety.

Dr Valente is in a great position to shed light on the troubling allure of these publishers, and to impart some much-needed advice on how to make informed and confident decisions about journals.

Could you please give us an introduction to your experiences with predatory publishers, and explain why these experiences led to your recent study?

My first experience with predatory publishing took place when I was still a resident. I had already published a couple of articles in reputable journals, and it was through these that the first predatory journals began to contact me (publishing an article is the first step in getting the attention of these kind of publishers).

So, a couple of journals contacted me, asking me to join the editorial board – you can imagine how flattering the proposal was for a young resident. I accepted and published a couple of articles, literature reviews, with them. Sometime later a new journal contacted me inviting me to publish an article with them, and no publication costs were mentioned in the email. I accepted and sent an opinion article; after the very fast acceptance and the equally rapid publication the requests for payment began to arrive. It was at that point that I began to suspect the scientific validity of these journals. If I invite you to my house for a dinner, I will certainly not ask you for the bill at the end. Well, over the course of 4 years I have received 197 emails from this journal with requests for payment. Each time the email sounded like a desperate plea for help, a heartfelt appeal for survival “If we don’t get your payment we won’t be able to publish the next issue ...” etc. In short, my $499 was apparently essential to the survival of this journal. After 4 years they eventually gave up.

Did your analysis reveal any surprising results about the identity or strategies of these publishers?

Over the years, the number of emails began to grow so much that I decided to start keeping track of all of them.

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Dr Nicola Alberto Valente.

It’s interesting and funny was the story that happened to me a few weeks ago, when I received an email from a predatory journal, which read exactly like this:

“Dear Dr. Name,

Greetings from Scientific Archives of Dental Sciences (SAODS)!

I’m Ms. Susan Rose, Managing Editor at Scientific Archives of Dental Sciences. It is an honour to contact you once again after going through your article entitled ‘Title’. We are currently preparing for the May issue and I hope your participation will raise the journal quality.”

…
This was my reply:

"Dear Susan,

thank you for contacting me. Yes, the article entitled “Title” is one of the best I have ever written. I gladly accept your invitation and send you a new article whose title will be: “Title of the new article”.

Best regards,

Dr Name, Last Name, title, second title - Affiliation, City, Country"

A recent email was also very interesting: an invitation to publish in a predatory journal based on my recent article “Predatory publishing in dentistry. An analysis of its impact and potential risks”.

You work in dentistry. Is there anything unique about the relationship between predatory publishers and the field of dentistry, or do these publishers target scientists from various disciplines in similar ways?

Dentistry is made up of multiple branches (orthodontics, periodontology, prosthesis, etc), therefore there are many scientific journals across the dental discipline, as well as countless articles that are published every year. The number of dental journals that have an official impact factor according to the Journal Citation Reports (Clarivate) is 150 this year, and many other dental journals are still without impact factor but indexed in authoritative scientific databases and therefore reliable. Despite the plethora of journals available, however, predatory dental publishing is thriving; publishing an article in a few days and without going through the peer-review process remains very attractive to many colleagues.

It is difficult for me, having no direct experience, to be able to make a comparison with other disciplines in the medical area, but my life partner is a rheumatologist with several publications in her discipline, and I assure you that she also receives a fair number of emails from predatory journals.

Could you suggest a process or series of criteria with which researchers can ensure a publisher’s ‘invitation’ is genuine and not predatory? Are there key things to look out for when deciding whether to respond or ignore?

Based on my experience there are a few simple identification criteria to distinguish genuine invitations from predatory invitations. There are identification criteria based on the invitation itself such as e-mails written with poor grammar, thematic areas far from your specialty, generic and nonaffiliated to the journal e-mail addresses (google.com, yahoo.com, etc.) and often they declare that they are in need of one article for the publication of the next issue.

In addition, the criteria one can use based on the homepage of the journal are the absence of reputable indexing databases, the use of unknown indexing databases, and impact factors attributed by fanciful institutions.

What are some of the risks attached to these predatory publishers, and how might they affect the quality of scientific publishing more generally?

The most evident risk derives from the absence of a real peer-review process, this can lead to the publication of poor-quality articles as well as plagiarism. Secondly, and on the opposite side, articles of potential scientific value could be lost because they are published in those journals, this can happen especially if the companies operating in the field of biomaterials and dental products (and medicine in general), which finance research and studies, are attracted by the faster publication of the results that can be guaranteed by predatory publishing. All this would result in a serious pollution of the scientific evidence provided by the literature.

Is there anything the scientific publishing community could be doing to ward off the advances of these publishers?

First of all, the email addresses of the authors should be hidden on the articles frontpages, anyone interested in contacting the authors should go through the editorial office of the journal. Those preparing to write and submit a scientific article should find support in their institution through editorial assistance, help with scientific writing, translation for non-English speakers, etc. Finally, scientific societies should draw up lists of approved and recognised journals (lists of predatory journals would be useless as their number grows day by day).

You have received an incredibly large number of invitations from predatory publishers. How have these invitations affected you personally? Have they reduced your trust in the process of academic publishing?

True, I have received and continue to receive an incredible number of invitations. In some cases, as shown, they arouse my hilarity, while most of the times I simply trash them. My trust in the academic publishing process has not diminished but something should be done to make the peer review process of scientific journals clearer, but this is a topic for another interview.

Do you have any further advice or guidance for researchers dealing with these email invitations?

Don’t lose confidence, don’t get tired. Very often the journal to which you have submitted your article, in which you believe very much, rejects it with reasons that you do not understand or that you consider unfounded. Do not get nervous, do not lose hope. Try to reply to the editor even if the rejection letter does not leave room for re-submission, show your point of view and immediately move on to the next journal. But don’t let yourself be attracted by the sirens of predatory publishing; there are many serious and reputable journals, just have a little patience.

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