Reviewer's report

Title: "Predatory" Open Access - An overview

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Reviewer: Leslie Chan

Reviewer's report:

Please note that all my comments below could be grouped under “Discretionary Revisions”

1. Is the question posed by the authors new and well defined?
   I. The so-called “predatory” OA publisher has been a topic of much heated debates in recent years, though as the authors pointed out, little empirical research has been done on the phenomenon. So the present study to uncover the magnitude of the problem is timely and necessary, as it fills a significant void in the current literature.

   While the study aims to discover “the extent of the problem, its causes and possible remedies”, the research question and sub-questions focus primarily on the volume, growth and geographic extent of both the “predatory” journals and those who publish in them. While having a picture of the locations and distribution of the publishers is useful, it would be good if the authors provide an explicit rationale as to why this is important to investigate.

   II. The study is also interested in finding out the negative impact of the proliferation of “predatory” publishers, but some explicit measures of negative impact and how they could be measured would be helpful. (More on this point in regard to question 7)

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described, and are sufficient details provided to replicate the work?

   I. Given the large number of journals and the varying number of journals by different publishers, the stratified multistage sampling method seems appropriate. However, I am not familiar with this technique and I am also not competent enough to comment on the statistical aspect of the sampling process.

   Fig. 2 of the sampling process is very helpful indeed. In fact it was very difficult to understand how the total number of journals “11,873” were arrived at without the diagram. Perhaps the description of the sampling process could be reworded to improve readability.

   II. Another minor language issue: the last sentence in the Identifying Predatory Publishers section is somewhat confusing:

   “Another small pilot test in terms of articles volumes published in 2014 by 5 each
journal randomly selected from big and small publishers indicated that the journals from big publishers often publish fewer articles than those of small publishers.”

How many publishers were selected in the pilot test overall?
Are there some missing words?

3. Are the data sound and well controlled?
I. The Calculation on the average APC charged by sampled journals is reasonable.

In the section on Number of Journals, it is estimated that “7% of predatory journals are indexed in DOAJ.” How is this estimate arrived at? Would this need to be revised in view of DOAJ’s recent inclusion criteria?

With regard to the Field of Science, “Quite noticeable is the large share of Engineering journals.” Equally noticeable is the complete lack of publications in the area of “Physics and Astronomy” Could the authors provide an explanation for this?

Further to the Field of Science, the category “General” needs to be further refined, especially given the very high number in this category. Along this line, is it possible that authors publish in these journals because they are not confined to traditional disciplinary line? If that were the case, finding appropriate reviewers could indeed be a real problem.

Country of publishers – why is this of interest?
Does it matter and why?
India’s dominance – what does that imply?
(India and Nigeria are post-colonial state… legacy of

4. Do the figures appear to be genuine, i.e. without evidence of manipulation?
Yes, the figures look genuine without manipulation.
I. Not sure if Fig. 1 of the spam email is necessary.
II. Fig. 8 could be improved by lengthening the Y axis.

5. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?
The manuscript follows a standard format for reporting.
Not sure about data deposition.

6. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?
The data generated by the study indeed support the claim that “the problems
caused by predatory journals are rather limited and regional, and that the publishing volumes in such journals will cease growing in the near future.” However, some areas of the discussion could be better contextualized to provide better balance.

I. The authors acknowledge that it is problematic to rely on Beall’s list, but they do so for practical reasons, and they acknowledge that the list probably contains titles that are not “predatory”. Given the low volume of publications of many single title publishers and the low APC they charge, could it be the case that some of these titles are genuine attempt to start up a journal while experimenting with the APC model? In many low and middle income countries, it is common place for university departments to start up their own journals, often without financial sustainability. Could this partly explain the large number of single journal publishers from India?

II. The weakest area of discussion has to do with the potential harm of “predatory” publishers. This may have to do with the lack of a clear definition and ways of measuring harm, as indicated in my comment earlier for question 1.

In the introduction, the authors suggest that authors who publish in “predatory” journals are largely willing participants and so are their university administrations and so they are not “real victim” of this phenomenon. Later in the discussion, the authors suggests that “the major direct effect has probably been that some mediocre academics in a number of countries have met the research productivity metrics imposed by their universities and governments, and have passed evaluations and secured appointments that they would otherwise perhaps not have managed.” And since such developments are highly regional, mainly confined to places like Nigeria and India, it is of no great cause for concerns.

Earlier in the introduction, they claim that: “The real victim in this case is respectable open access publishing, the development of which may have been delayed due to the bad image predators have given to OA.” Even though the study did not provide evidence to support this claim.

I found this characterization of harm done by “predatory” publishers to be highly imbalance and somewhat insensitive.

The authors did cite some other studies that suggest that researchers in many developing countries, and particularly former colonies, are forced to seek publications in “International” journals because of demand by their administrations. These studies also point to long term “academic dependency” created by the global North as one of the key reasons why institutions in developing countries are unable to break free from the increasingly globalized and homogenized view of academic excellence based on “where” and how often one publish, instead of “what” is published and whether the results are relevant to local needs. In that sense, these authors and their institutions are part of a highly structurally unjustice global system that exclude them from publishing in “high quality” journals on the one hand and confine them to publish in dubious journals
on the other. They are therefore surely victims of a larger problem of misaligned incentives that is plaguing so much of science and scholarly publishing today.

Just because authors “choose” to publish in these dubious journals doesn’t make them less of a victim. This is much akin to those living in poverty who are often forced to consume highly packaged and high calorie food that are bad for their health, not because they prefer these food, but because they are too busy to make ends meet and have no time for proper food preparation.

I would also add that honest and hard working researchers from low income countries as well as legitimate and struggling journals from these regions are also victims, since they are often unfairly branded because they come from the same regions. Such harms are very real and serious indeed.

III. “An interesting finding is the very low share of South America both among publisher’s (0.5 %) and corresponding authors (2.2 %).” The authors suggest that the availability of the SciELO platform supporting Open Access for established local journals could have accounted for the low number of authors from the region publishing in “predatory” journals. SciELO was originally a state funded initiative in Brazil and its original intent was to provide an alternative system and platform to the northern system (ironically WoS) that have traditionally excluded publications from Brazil. The platform and methodology has since diffused to many Latin American countries as well as South Africa.

This distinct regional history and differences with other regions point to the importance of understanding local contexts and the caution needed in making generalizations about the impact of “predatory” publishers.

In addition, the difference between Brazil (and other Latin American countries) and countries like Nigeria and India could be highly instructive for comparative studies. It suggests that national policies (like those supporting OA and SciELO in Brazil) could have a decisive influence on the health of science and science dissemination within a country. Likewise, lack of coherent policies could allow the opportunistic development of dubious journals that cause further harm to local science.

7. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?
The abstract is comprehensive and accurately convey the findings.

The title however, is a bit generic. Given the authors reservation about the “misleading” nature of the term “predatory”, could the scholarly community collectively come up with a better term, instead of legitimizing an admittedly dubious term coined by an anti-OA individual?

8. Is the writing acceptable?
Yes, with minor exceptions pointed in the comments above.

Quality of written English: Acceptable
Statistical review: Yes, but I do not feel adequately qualified to assess the statistics.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.