



LETTER

Proscription lists and predatory publishers: Pointing to careful certifications

Marco Cascella¹ , Alessandro De Cassai² , and Paolo Navalesi³ 

¹Division of Anesthesia and Pain Medicine, Istituto Nazionale Tumori—IRCCS—Fondazione G. Pascale, Naples, Italy

²Unit of Anesthesia and Intensive Care, Padua University Hospital, Padua, Italy

³Department of Medicine, University of Padua, Padua, Italy

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Corresponding Author:
Alessandro De Cassai
alessandro.decassai@gmail.com

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An article by Macháček and Srholec titled “Predatory publishing in Scopus: evidence on cross-country differences” was recently withdrawn by the journal *Scientometrics* (Macháček & Srholec, 2021). The motivations were the lack of a “control group,” and the restriction of the analysis “to publications in four languages.” Moreover, a letter from the *Frontiers* editor-in-chief largely criticized the use of the famous Jeffrey Beall’s list to identify predatory publishers.

Retracted articles should not be used as a source of information for future research, as they could present flawed data, possibly leading to unreliable and misleading conclusions (De Cassai, Geraldini et al., 2022). However, this retraction in particular has garnered a lot of interest and discussion among scientists (Abramo, Aguillo et al., 2023) and, consequently, it is necessary to solve several difficulties. Despite the inconvenience, the authors were able to republish their findings in *Quantitative Science Studies* (Macháček & Srholec, 2022).

First, it is necessary to decide whether to use Beall’s list in scientometrics studies and, if so, how. Many centuries have passed since, in 82 BCE, the Roman dictator Lucio Cornelio Silla published the first *Proscription list* to make public the names of those citizens deemed to be “enemies” of Rome: They could be put to death without reprisals. Undoubtedly, Beall’s list is biased by its subjectivity and not fully transparent methodology. Nevertheless, it has been widely used in scientometric investigations. Because journals and publishers have a code of ethical conduct and, above all, reference libraries have the tools to verify inclusion requirements, it is time to define the list as an instrument not to be used for scientometric analyses. The foundation of free information, on the other hand, is that a web page cannot and must not be erased; nonetheless, writers and readers must carefully assess the accuracy of the material it includes.

Secondly, the demonization of the open access phenomenon seems to be an excessive forcing towards an evolutionary process that, by its nature, cannot be stopped. Before the internet era, predatory publishing did not occur, as almost all scholarly journals were print-based subscription journals (Beall, 2017). However, the World Wide Web changed the practical and economic realities of distributing scientific knowledge and the open access model started to gain popularity. Several open access models exist, ranging from “article processing charge models” where authors or their institutions pay a charge in order to make research information available to readers at no cost (i.e., APC-based gold open access) to models where journals charge no fee to authors or institutions (i.e., diamond open access). The Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities, released on October 22, 2003, articulated the fundamentals of open access (Berlin Declaration, 2003). The declaration stated that open access is based on two pillars: The authors are the rights holders of the contribution and grant to all users a free and irrevocable right to access, use, copy, and distribute their

research; and a complete version of the work and all supplemental materials should be kept in at least one online repository in order to grant unrestricted access to all the users (Berlin Declaration, 2003). In the open access models, there are advantages for both readers, authors, and publishers. Readers can have immediate access to research without barriers and authors' work has a wider spread in the scientific community, leading to an increase in citations. However, the open access model has been exploited by dishonest predatory publishers. Such publishers set up websites closely resembling the sites of legitimate publishers to dupe inexperienced researchers and obtain the open access charge with the promise of fast publication. Predatory publishers publish journals of questionable and downright low quality. They use spam emails to solicit manuscript submissions and have a simple or fake peer-review process. The more manuscripts they accept, the more profit they obtain.

Finally, highlighting what we have learned from this story to further improve academic publishing's open access process is mandatory. Although predatory publishing exists and largely exploits the APC-based gold open access mechanism, we should not demonize the whole open access phenomenon. The scientific community should proceed to safeguard the correct and serious publishers. In this context, how can a publisher be defined as predatory? Jeffrey Beall used a series of criteria regarding editor and staff (six criteria), integrity (seven criteria), and other elements (six criteria). Someone should take charge of addressing the problem through a structured methodology. In our opinion, the proper strategy to achieve this goal is to establish a third party responsible for certifying open access publishers. This could be a combination of various stakeholders, including research institutions, libraries, funding agencies, and scholarly publishers, to ensure a transparent and fair decision-making process and that the certification criteria reflect the needs and expectations of the academic community. The third party should also have the necessary resources, including funding and staff, to carry out its responsibilities effectively, and should be subject to regular review and evaluation to ensure that it remains relevant and effective over time. The third party should also have the technical expertise to evaluate and assess the quality of open access publishing processes, including peer review and editorial policies. Organizations such as Cabells, which are well-established in the academic publishing industry and have a strong reputation for quality and impartiality, could be a good fit for this role. However, it is important to ensure that the governing body is representative of all relevant stakeholders, including researchers and authors, to ensure the transparency and fairness of the certification process. Contrary to those unfortunate ancient Romans marked on Sulla's list, the publisher should be guaranteed the possibility to appeal the decision.

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