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POINT OF VIEW

The scholarly publishing market has been disrupted by several recent innovations, amongst which has been open access (OA) publishing. OA publishing is rapidly growing in popularity amongst authors and readers, and in keeping with trends seen in other rapidly developing markets, a flood of new players of varying quality has recently entered the industry. It seems certain that as the industry consolidates many of these players will drop out or merge with their larger competitors, but in the meantime scholars are faced with the challenge of having to identify and avoid low-quality publishers. Unfortunately no commonly accepted set of criteria has yet arisen to aid scholars. One prominent set of criteria has been devised by University of Colorado librarian Jeffrey Beall,¹ but as noted by Mehrpour and Khajavi,² Beall's criteria are somewhat problematic in the sense that any *reactive* blacklist inherently fails to provide a comprehensive response to the problem. Other responses include crowd-sourced ratings websites reliant on users to provide reviews of individual journals such as JournalGuide.³ However these websites are reliant on assessments by small, self-selected groups of reviewers so ratings may not originate from representative cross-sections of scholars. These websites are also reliant on scholars being aware of their availability.

Various sets of criteria intended to allow scholars to assess unfamiliar journals have also been put forward. Use of such criteria allow scholars to make informed objective assessments without the drawbacks of the other methods described above. However, criteria must first be identified and then communicated to scholars.

In this brief article I present my views on what criteria could be used. My opinions on this topic have come about through having worked in open access scholarly publishing for more than 10 years, correspondence with opinion-makers in the field, and several

Identifying legitimate open access journals: some suggestions from a publisher

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Key points

- *New publishing models lead to new players – not all of them good.*
- *No commonly accepted criteria aid scholars to select 'good' journals.*
- *Journals (and publishers) need to assert their good practice.*
- *How do publishers serve their different customers – readers, authors, reviewers, and the public?*



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instances of having attempted to assist authors who have been disadvantaged by questionable publishers in various ways. Scholarly publishers best fulfil their role when they pursue continual refinement of their systems both through their own observations and through discussion with scholars and other publishers. This article is intended as a contribution towards this important discussion.

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In formulating these criteria I have been mindful of the need to provide a list that is sufficiently short to be memorable and readily communicated, but at the same time applicable to a wide range of journals. I have also sought to make allowance for legitimate variation between publishers, whether this arises from innovation or the inevitably imperfect nature of newer legitimate players: it would be highly retrograde should either of these come to be viewed as a sign of illegitimacy.

Consideration 1: who is the ‘customer’?

Legitimate scholarly publishers should demonstrate a focus on both authors and readers. Readers should be regarded as ‘customers’ in recognition of the importance of publishers’ role in dissemination of information to scholars. Does the publisher or journal provide services that are not directed towards attracting submissions, and therefore article publishing fees, from authors? Although every publisher may not provide all of these, their website should demonstrate that they offer most of the following:

- New article notification services. These might be provided by opted-in email services, RSS feeds, social media channels, or other functions.⁴
- Article citation export functions.
- Commenting and discussion functions.
- A policy on publication of corrections, expressions of concern, and retractions. These are sufficiently unusual occurrences that a small or new journal might never have actually published any. In their absence a clear policy on them may have to suffice.
- Use of Digital Object Identifiers.
- A clear statement on the applicable copyright license in the PDF or HTML of each article, to make it clear to readers what they may and may not do with an article.

- Pre-submission consultation and manuscript matching services.
- Involvement in permanent article archiving databases such as CLOCKSS, LOCKSS, and Pubmed Central.
- Publishers should respond promptly and constructively to inquiries within no more than one or two working days and offer a range of communication options not limited only to email: phone and fax numbers, and a postal address should be present. Other options such as skype, social media channels (most of which permit private messaging), and ‘live chat’ functions are also positive indicators that the publisher wishes to engage with all of its customers, fee paying or otherwise.

Consideration 2: inclusion in databases and indexes

Having journals evaluated for inclusion in bibliographic databases and – where the database provider requires it – subsequently providing article metadata on a continuing basis is a significant commitment requiring substantial investments of time and funds as well as robust technical knowledge. The National Library of Medicine (NLM), for example, evaluates journals with the assistance of a literature evaluation committee composed of scholars working in the fields of journals under evaluation, having first ascertained that journals meet basic criteria.⁵ Following this evaluation period there is a further period of technical evaluation wherein the article metadata provided by the journal is evaluated to ensure compliance with rigorous technical standards. Publishers are also required to continue to adhere to these standards by executing a contract with the NLM. I am aware that the NLM has declined to work with publishers who were caught in John Bohannon’s recent ‘sting’ on OA publishers.⁶ Other leading database providers, including EBSCO, Elsevier, Thomson Reuters, and the Directory of Open Access Journals,⁷ which recently introduced a very robust evaluation process for all journals including those previously added to it, exercise similarly stringent evaluation processes.

Newer journals may not be included in these and other databases for entirely legitimate reasons, such as not having the required

quantity of published papers to permit evaluation according to the database provider's standard, and established journals may also not be included for equally legitimate reasons such as not being within the scope of a database. It can sometimes also require a considerable period of time for eligible journals to complete evaluation. Nevertheless, it would be highly unusual for an established publisher not to have any involvement with any of the recognized bibliographic databases.

Consideration 3: awareness of ethical and legal issues

Being a scholarly publisher differs from other areas of commerce in the sense that the 'customer', in this sense meaning only the author, is not 'always right'. Legitimate publishers must take steps to ensure that authors meet ethical and legal obligations to maintain the integrity of the literature. Where necessary they must also act retrospectively to address ethical or legal issues with due recognition to the fundamental reality that after a paper has been published it cannot be 'unpublished' or 'republished'. This is a vast topic that I cannot hope to fully cover here but I will note that legitimate publishers should demonstrate the following characteristics:

- The publisher must have a policy on how it guards against plagiarism, which must involve plagiarism scanning.
- Membership of bodies such as the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) that provide guidance on how to address common ethical problems.
- Membership of other industry bodies that require compliance with ethical standards such as the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association (OASPA).
- Clear criteria on what constitutes authorship and contributorship, and a section in each published paper containing a clear statement delineating types of contributions made by each named author.
- A policy on declaration of funding sources and potential competing interests. Published papers should also contain this information.

- A policy on ethical requirements around human and animal study participants.
- Difficult to validate but nevertheless very important is that every named author is asked to provide signed consent that the paper bearing his or her name is, to the best of his or her knowledge, fully compliant with ethical and legal requirements. Even some well-established publishers do not do this.

Consideration 4: awareness of open access conventions

OA publishing embraces many of the standards of conventional publishing, including independent editorial decision making and peer review. There are several OA-specific conventions that legitimate publishers should demonstrate:

- Fees, or a statement that there are none, should be clear and prominent. If a journal is sponsored by a third party, such as a scholarly society, and fees are consequently discounted or eliminated, then this should be clearly stated along with any eligibility criteria.
- Fee waivers or discounts to reduce publication barriers for authors in the developing world. Does the publisher's website contain details of their fee waiver or discount services? Inevitably it will be difficult to verify that waivers and discounts are being given: publishers are highly unlikely to identify papers receiving them, authors are unlikely to be forthcoming, and unfortunately higher rejection rates may mean that quantities of papers published by authors in developing countries may significantly underrepresent the scale of waivers or discounts initially assigned. Nevertheless the presence of papers by authors working in developing countries together with a stated fee waiver and/or discount policies could well be considered indicative of the publisher's legitimacy in this respect.⁸
- Authors should be permitted to archive their work in external depositories and the use of a commonly accepted Creative Commons license (typically CC-BY or CC-BY-NC) is also important.
- There should be no access barriers such as

indexing indicates compliance with technical and publishing standards

requiring registration by readers prior to accessing articles.

Consideration 5: peer review and editorial procedure

Peer review is an immensely valuable and constructive element of scholarly publishing, and a recent survey demonstrates that scholars recognize its importance and wish it to endure.⁹ I estimate that in the past 10 years I have read more than 8,000 completed peer-review reports and when doing so I am consistently reminded of the immense investments of time and knowledge made by peer reviewers, and the overwhelmingly positive contributions these reviewers make to scholarly discourse. Unfortunately the nature of the review process makes it difficult for scholars assessing a new journal to determine the integrity of the review process being used. Other considerations, such as an assessment of the quality of recently published papers or inclusion of the journal in databases likely to have resulted from an expert assessment of the quality of published papers, can be strongly suggestive of the integrity of the review process employed.

In the near future we can expect to see the introduction of external review verification services such as PRE-val¹⁰ to provide further insights into the editorial process of journals. To determine the legitimacy of a journal's editorial process a selection of editorial board members could be contacted and confirmation sought that they have been actively involved in the editorial process. The provision of information on the nature of the peer-review process and conduct guidelines for reviewers are also important indicative factors. Promises of very fast peer review should be treated with caution: internally conducted research has shown that a minimum of 18–21 days is needed for reviewers to complete their work, and of course any guarantees of peer-review outcome are clear signals of illegitimacy.

Conclusions

In this brief article I have sought to outline a set of criteria by which authors and readers can distinguish legitimate publishers from their illegitimate counterparts. I have sought

to demonstrate that scholars can be readily equipped with the tools they need to arrive at informed decisions on journals unfamiliar to them. For those readers concerned with the deleterious impact of illegitimate publishers it is also important to acknowledge that the best means available to combat the harmful effect of illegitimate publishers is to prevent scholars from submitting papers to them by equipping them with suitable assessment tools. New but legitimate publishers should not be disadvantaged by this filtering process. It is a time of significant change in scholarly publishing; let us hope that change and diversity are embraced for the benefits they bring to all scholars.

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