When Is a “Journal” Not Really a Journal?*

So-called “predatory” journals (also known as fake journals, sham journals, and pseudojournals) exist for the sole purpose of profit, not the dissemination of high-quality research findings and furtherance of knowledge. They typically generate profits by charging author-side fees (often called article processing charges, or APCs) that far exceed the cost of running their low-quality, fly-by-night operations.

An author-side fee is not itself a red flag. Many reputable open access journals use APCs to cover costs, especially in fields where research is often funded by grants. And many subscription-based journals also charge fees, sometimes per page or illustration. However, predatory journals are primarily fee-collecting operations—they exist for that purpose and only incidentally publish articles, without rigorous peer review, despite claims to the contrary.

Low-quality publishing is not new. There have long been opportunististic publishers (e.g., vanity presses and sellers of public domain content) and deceptive publishing practices (e.g., advertisements formatted to look like articles). It is also not unique to open access journals. There are many mediocre subscription-based journals, and even respected subscription-based journals have accepted deeply problematic submissions (e.g., Alan Sokal’s nonsense article in Social Text).

Not all low-quality publishers are ill-intentioned. Some intend to deceive visitors and defraud authors. Others are honest but amateurish, either unaware of best practices or unable to adhere to them. There are similar continua for book publishers and conference organizers.

To protect yourself, inform yourself. Research and evaluate any unfamiliar journal you’re thinking about submitting to. (Ditto any book publisher or conference.) Evaluate the quality of the articles it has published. Investigate its editors’ affiliations, peer review process, copyright policy, and fees. Transparency is paramount: be suspicious of any publication that is not transparent and honest on these matters.

For help evaluating a journal:

- Use the website Think Check Submit (thinkchecksubmit.org).
- Consult the list on the other side of this handout.
- Contact your librarian!

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Characteristics & Tactics of “Predatory” Journals†

1. **Spam emails sent to .edu addresses to attract potential authors:** These fawning solicitations seem to be personalized but often misstate the recipient’s specialty.
2. **Promises of fast peer review and publication:** The peer review process may be poorly explained, and the peer review itself may be fake or low quality.
3. **Extremely broad scope:** Many predatory journals lack a feasible scope.
4. **Lack of transparency about author fees:** Fees may not be disclosed until after acceptance, or may change after acceptance.
5. **Contradictions and inconsistencies:** Geographic indicator in journal title may not match its location. Many predatory publishers claim a bogus address in the US, UK, or Canada, or use a residential address as their business address. Use Google Maps to investigate.
6. **Editors are not editors:** Academics may be listed as editors without their knowledge or involvement. Journal proprietors may be listed as editors, or editors may not be identified. Look for editors lacking academic email or affiliation.
7. **Newness and quantity:** Most predatory publishers are new businesses. They often launch many journals at once. They may have a large number of articles per issue, suggesting lack of peer review and over-eagerness to earn revenue. Alternatively, they may have extremely few articles, suggesting difficulty attracting authors.
8. **Copycat names and websites:** Some predatory journals have titles that sound strangely familiar. Some even “hijack” other journals, exactly or closely copying the name, look, URL, and ISSN of an established journal.
9. **Standards and identifiers missing or faked:** Check for journal identifiers (ISSNs) and linking standards (DOIs). But be aware that ISSNs can be stolen or fabricated.
10. **False or invented bibliometrics:** Invented journal metrics are common, as are false claims of inclusion in legitimate bibliometric services.
11. **False claims about indexing:** Journals may falsely claim inclusion in library databases, or may claim to be indexed in services that are not actually indexes. Also look for meaningless boasts about inclusion in Google or Google Scholar.
12. **Amateurish website:** Poorly designed, difficult-to-navigate websites with dead links or “coming soon” notes can signal a predatory publisher. Excessive and aggressive advertisements are also signs.

**Nota bene:** Many legitimate journals that are small and/or poorly funded lack the hallmarks of their shinier, well-supported counterparts. Legitimate journals may lack ISSN, indexing, impact factor, and other qualities of larger, monied journals. Less-than-stellar English may or may not be a meaningful indicator, depending on the stated geographic location of the journal, its publisher, and its editors.