

# The Razor's Edge of Predatory Publishing

## An Interview with Jeffrey Beall

Mary Kemper, BS / Medical Writer, Mayfield Clinic, Cincinnati, OH

### Predatory Publishing

At the time Beall stopped his blog *Scholarly Open Access* in 2017, he had been tracking scholarly publishing, the exponential growth of predatory publishers, and predatory stand-alone journals for nearly 10 years. He became immersed in researching this online aspect of deceptive and questionable scholarly communication while a faculty librarian at the University of Colorado Denver, where he worked as an expert in metadata for library discovery systems. Aiming to maintain the integrity of the academic record, Beall created a list of suspect scholarly publishers and shared it with the public on his blog. Beall's list was free; it exposed various types of deceptive practices, corruption of the editorial office and peer review, fraud, and hidden publishing fees. With evidence received from duped researchers themselves and gathered from the predators' websites, Beall uncovered how these publishers lured researchers into such trappings, which was exacerbated by institutional pressures such as the publish-or-perish mindset.

The path of academic publication became a razor's edge: would authors take the narrow and often hurdled path of legitimate scholarly publishing or be lured knowingly or otherwise by predatory journals?

Beall's commentaries examined flaws in open access, shortcomings of librarianship, and the effects of widespread library cancellations of subscription journals. He warned of a scholarly publishing industry that failed to regulate itself. As predatory publishers grew exponentially, so did the numbers of complicit authors who took the fast, easy route to publish and pay article processing charges (APCs) to advance their own careers. Beall's critics were not only the predatory publishers and the authors who published with them but those who dismissed the value of his work because he was a critic of open access.

During the 5-year period that Beall ran *Scholarly Open Access*, predatory publishers grew from about 20 in 2011 to

Jeffrey Beall is acclaimed for his work in alerting the global research community to the deep threats posed by predatory publishers in exploiting the gold open access publishing model. His work advocated for the protection of individual authors and the scholarly global community by maintaining the integrity of the academic record. He coined the terms predatory publisher, hijacked journals, predatory conferences, and misleading metrics and founded his blog, *Scholarly Open Access*, in which he maintained a list of predatory publishers from 2012 to 2017. AMWA readers can read his reflection on this period<sup>1</sup> and track his investigative work exposing predatory publishers in his nearly 40 publications on the topic since 2008, including interviews, the archived version of [scholarlyoa.com](https://scholarlyoa.com) (<https://beallsist.net>), and YouTube lectures.



>1,100 in 2017. The research community was jolted when he closed his list, which is still used today in an archived version (<https://beallsist.net>). As of September 2021, Cabells' Simon Linacre reported in the firm's blog *The Source* the unfortunate accretion of 15,000 predatory journals (a third of which are medical titles) and a gray zone of nearly 30,000 journals (<https://blog.cabells.com/2021/09/01/mountain-to-climb>).

I had the privilege to speak with Jeffrey Beall during a Zoom meeting in August of this year and later met up with him in Denver in September.

## Interview

**AMWA:** *We appreciate your taking the time to speak with AMWA and want to acknowledge your work against predatory publishing. While you sought to safeguard research integrity, you established a foundation for thinking critically about this topic. Many of us wonder how you have been since you stopped the blog. Tell us about how you are doing now.*

**Beall:** I retired in 2018 from my University of Colorado faculty position. I moved to southern Colorado, specifically Walsenburg, Colorado, in Huerfano County and the nearby Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

As for tracking predatory publishing, I keep up by reading Google alerts that I receive on the topic. Recently, Paolo Crosetto's blog piece "Is MDPI a predatory publisher?" piqued my interest, as I had spent years tracking some of this publisher's troubling tactics on my blog.<sup>2</sup> I occasionally accept invitations to speak, as I did earlier this year virtually for a university in Spain. My invited opinion piece, "Open access, research communities, and a defense against predatory journals" was published this year in a platinum open access journal for a medical society based in Kazakhstan.<sup>3</sup>

I'm also digesting several articles analyzing my work. It's both interesting and hard to read a critical analysis of one's work.

**AMWA:** *Readers may be interested your background. Most of your work on predatory publishing was done while you were a university librarian. What early experiences shaped your viewpoint and drew you to library science?*

**Beall:** I'm from California, earned a bachelor's degree in Spanish, and thereafter served in the Peace Corps in Guatemala. After completing a master's degree in English, I went to Saudi Arabia and taught English to employees of the Saudi government. Within a year, I wanted a change, so I got my master's degree in library science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

After working in the library at Harvard University for 10 years, I moved back to the west in 2000 to the Auraria Library at the University of Colorado Denver. Throughout most of my library career, I quietly worked in the library's back room researching issues related to library metadata, full-text searching, and information retrieval. The roles of academic librarians were taking on increasing importance with the advent of scholarly open access publishing.

My interest in scholarly publishing began in 2005 as a Scholarly Initiatives Librarian. In 2008, I began tracking spam email invites to publish in what I would later call predatory journals.

**AMWA:** *In your 2012 interview in the Open Access Interviews column by independent UK journalist Richard Poynder, you describe your metadata work in librarianship and research in scholarly communication (<https://poynder.blogspot.com/2012/07/oa-interviews-jeffrey-beall-university.html>). How were your role and interests changing at that time?*

**Beall:** As a faculty librarian, I studied bibliographic databases, including library catalogs, the effects of typographical errors in library databases, and the weaknesses of full text searching. In 2012, I gained tenure and was promoted to associate professor. Academic libraries play an important role in vetting publishers and maintaining online repositories of benefit to authors, but they largely failed to warn about the shortcomings of open access. Actually, the open access movement inspired many libraries to create new open access repositories; I've criticized them because they are expensive to operate (licensing fees, staff salaries) but are accessed very little. (Print repositories of journals have indeed been weeded from libraries, but the online counterpart versions offer great added value and have been backed up well.)

**AMWA:** *You came up with the term predatory publisher and became an activist for your faculty and the scholarly global community. What was that early period like?*

**Beall:** My first article on the topic, a 2009 review of Bentham Open, highlighted how this publisher was exploiting the gold open access model with its 200 journals, each with few articles, and charging authors high publication fees.<sup>3</sup> It was published in the *Charleston Advisor*, a journal that typically publishes reviews of electronic databases that librarians license. My review alerted libraries to the transgressions of this particular publisher and to the larger problem of linking to publisher sites like these, which flood the scholarly literature with poor quality work.

I understood this was a new concept that needed a name. I landed on the term *predatory publisher*. I knew it wasn't perfect but liked the predatory metaphor and felt the alliteration would help make it be easy to remember. I later learned in my travels that the term doesn't always translate well. Although others have advocated for a different term, *predatory publisher* caught on. I also coined the terms *hijacked journal*, *predatory conference*, and *misleading metrics*.

The Bentham Open article went largely ignored until late 2011 when the nursing research community, specifically the International Academy of Nursing Editors, took notice. They have since conducted extensive research and felt vulnerable, realizing that their many specialty nursing fields would be targeted by the predators. Discussion of Beall's list on this tight-knit community's listserv garnered significant attention, and interest spread to other research communities.

**AMWA:** *Your 2012 article in Nature entitled “Predatory publishers are corrupting open access”<sup>5</sup> was published the same year that you launched your blog Scholarly Open Access. You exposed their lack of transparency and their dishonesty, the effects of a lack of integrity on scholarly literature, the mutable nature of their deceit, and the public’s access to bad science.*

**Beall:** This invited opinion piece for *Nature*, published in September 2012, increased attention on this topic and led to the term *predatory publishing* going viral. After that, researchers from all over the world began forwarding me spam emails they received from newly appearing predatory journals, offering helpful tips on establishing criteria to evaluate them, and revealing their own misfortunes in dealing with these predators. These examples provided evidence for my blog posts and complemented what I uncovered on the websites of predatory publishers and stand-alone journals.

**AMWA:** *You issued serious warnings at a time when numbers ranged initially from about 20 to later hundreds of predatory publishers and stand-alone journals. Tell us about launching your blog Scholarly Open Access.*

**Beall:** My first list in 2010 was followed by *Scholarly Open Access* in 2012. I wrote 2 blog posts each week; I enjoy writing and had lots to write about in explaining why I listed a particular publisher. Some of the predatory publishers and journals were so clearly fraudulent or silly, and it was fun for me to write with a sardonic approach. Nonetheless, the harm was proliferating.

I noticed the medical research community was hit hardest. Predatory publishers targeted grant funds, knowing that scholarly authors could use them to cover their APCs. They took advantage of the pressure-to-publish culture of medical research and appealed to busy clinical researchers, offering a fast, easy route to publish.

**AMWA:** *You were bringing a lot of attention to your university. What was the response?*

**Beall:** The university was of 2 minds. It favored the positive attention metrics that were garnered through the numerous mentions I and the university received on various websites and publications.

However, the dark side of that attention emerged by 2013. Predatory publishers on Beall’s list began to lose income. They complained, asked to be removed, and began searching the University of Colorado’s website to harvest the emails of various administrators. In their mass emails, their claims, such as that I was a criminal, were initially difficult to deal with. However, the university counsel quickly understood the motivation of their baseless accusations.

My reviews on *Scholarly Open Access* were comparable to a book review. That is, I applied the same skills used in organiz-

ing reviews of books or electronic databases for various professional library journals. I was clear that the blog’s list and reviews were my opinion.

**AMWA:** *Beall’s list included predatory publishers and stand-alone journals that violated a number of traditional ethical norms in scholarly publishing practices. Your work critiqued a particular publisher, constructing a foundation about how they exploited the gold open access model. How did you come up with this strategy, and how did it evolve as the number of predators was increasing?*

**Beall:** Researchers sent evidence, often in a trail of emails, after having unknowingly submitted their papers to predatory publishers. Many became suspicious when, the day after submission, their article was accepted for publication and accompanied by an invoice for the APC. Obviously there had been no peer review. Researchers told me all kinds of stories of egregious practices by these predators and sent me the solid evidence related to transgressions of peer review integrity, editorial standards, business ethics, indexing, and archiving.

**AMWA:** *You wrote twice-weekly blog posts about select publishers, such as Frontiers or OMICS. You tracked their fake addresses to actual locations, found stolen identities, and detailed deceptive practices (eg, misleading metrics, claims of being included in prestigious scholarly indexes) to lure authors. Can you describe your process of investigation and writing these commentaries?*

**Beall:** For each blog post, I had evidence provided by researchers or evidence that I encountered myself. I also examined the publishers’ websites for the number and quality of published articles and identified their predatory practices that violated scholarly norms. From the start, rather than individual journals, I focused on publishers, many of which had a fleet of journals. Because these publishers would quickly add titles to their portfolio to generate income or remove others, tracking individual journals would have been impractical and time consuming.

Shortly after the launch of *Scholarly Open Access*, various mentors gave feedback urging me to document the criteria used to assess the publishers. As the criteria evolved over time, I eventually used 3 versions during the 5-year period of *scholarlyoa.com*.

**AMWA:** *What was noteworthy among the predatory journals that targeted medicine?*

**Beall:** I first noticed the spam emails from library science journals when I was looking for places to publish. Medical specialties, like nursing and ophthalmology, began to monitor activity in their fields. Predatory publishers proliferated in medicine,

often launching one journal per specialty based on a list of every specialty taken from a hospital's department listings. Big fleets of predatory journals were exploiting researchers, but there were also researchers taking advantage of their fast, easy, and often cheap publishing route.

Medical society journals contribute significantly to keeping societies afloat through a fair subscription price. These fees make a little overage that can help cover journal costs and pay for other services to benefit residents and students, for example. Open access doesn't work like that: APCs do not generate enough income for administrative services, such as managing peer review or providing high quality editorial support.

**AMWA:** *Besides providing highly detailed information, you framed the rise of predatory publishers in the context of the open access social movement and the culture of scholarly publications. How did your viewpoint about the open access movement evolve?*

**Beall:** I was always critical of the open access movement. Although scholarly open access publishing offers the benefits of being free to read for everyone and of allowing reuse and repurpose under the Creative Commons license, it had major flaws. From my position as a scholarly communication librarian, I argued that advocates for open access lacked foresight about its unintended consequences, such as open access threat to science or the pollution of research databases. Their promotion continued even after the problems of predatory publishing clearly emerged.

The open access movement attempted to stigmatize and shut down traditional scholarly publishers using the subscription model to publish high-quality vetted research. These publications appearing on library platforms also added value to research by increasing accessibility to resources and citations.

**AMWA:** *In 2013, criticisms included your review criteria, transparency of your methods for placing a publisher on your lists, and other alleged biases found in your blog Scholarly Open Access. OMICS threatened to sue. In 2015, some of your professional library colleagues cited bias. How did you weigh all these criticism and threats?*

**Beall:** Several publishers threatened but never actually sued. In 2019, a federal judge ordered the journal publisher and conference organizer OMICS International to pay \$50.1 million to resolve the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) allegations of deceptive claims and hidden APCs.<sup>6</sup> Although ordered to cease operations in the United States, the publisher responded by creating many smaller publishing brands, such as SunKris, to hide the association with OMICS International. Therefore, the action by the FTC, though significant, is not having any significant impact. For example, when a subsidiary of OMICS

International acquired society journals, specifically *Pulsus* in Canada and its 2 dozen medical society journals, including *Cardiology*, the journals' quality declined.

I discussed the strains of decreased library budgets, journal subscription cancellation projects, and the shortcomings of my own profession in ignoring the true causes of journal price increases to favor the more politically correct advocacy for open access.<sup>1</sup>

**AMWA:** *In 2014, you began a sabbatical at a time when there were more than 400 predatory publishers and more than 300 stand-alone predatory journals. What did you want to accomplish during that year?*

**Beall:** During that 6-month period in 2014, I wrote several articles and traveled for speaking engagements, including to northern Iraq. I enjoyed these engagements, which began in 2013, and eventually had traveled to dozens of states and 20 countries.

**AMWA:** *You shut your blog down in 2017 with a listing of 1,155 publishers and 1,294 journals. You must have faced some difficult decisions during that period.*

**Beall:** It was a very difficult period. Within the first 6 months, I wrote "What I learned from predatory publishers," my account about what I learned about scholarly publishing, the pressure that researchers face, and the aggressive strategies that some predatory publishers used to fight me.<sup>1</sup> There was a lot of emotion in this article. One of the main and unique points that I made in this commentary was that researchers who publish in predatory journals often become their defenders.

**AMWA:** *Since 2017, researchers have tried to update your list or create their own unique lists of predatory publishers and/or journals for developing countries (<http://kscien.org/predatory.php>). In 2017, Cabells Scholarly Analytics launched their subscription products that included their Whitelist and Blacklist of 4,000 predatory journals from 18 disciplines that violated their behavioral indicators.<sup>7</sup> Today Cabells has subscription products called Predatory Reports and Scholarly Analytics and a team of experts to evaluate an estimated 15,000 predatory journals (a third are medical titles) and 11,000 legitimate open access journals, respectively. Another 30,000 journals are considered to be in a gray zone. In his 2020 opinion piece "Why we should have listened to Jeffrey Beall from the start," Mike Downes says, "Misguided criticism of Beall himself was counterproductive in the fight against fraudulent publishers."<sup>8</sup> Downes advocates for policy and prosecution of these scam open access predators. What's the future of tracking predators and educating authors at a time when many may not have access to subscribe to those reports?*

**Beall:** I'm glad Cabells has taken on this effort. Additionally, the business of scholarly publishing hasn't adequately policed itself and needs to establish a credentialing system (eg, like the field of pharmacy) to separate bona fide journals and publishers acting in good faith from predatory journals and publishers. Before open access, libraries played an important role in not subscribing to junk journals and in preserving scholarly integrity.

**AMWA:** *Through Scholarly Open Access, you connected with academics and publishers from all over the world in exposing the high stakes on the razor's edge of scholarly publishing. You identified numerous scams and harms caused by predatory publishers in ethics, finances, and quality, and pursued getting these open access scammers out of scholarly databases. You warned of the dangers of citation contamination, corruption of public trust in science, and risks to high-quality medical journals and research funding. Thank you, Jeffrey Beall, for creating an outstanding resource for the academic community. Your activism is a model for upholding the integrity of scholarly publishing, examining the flaws of open access, and avoiding the dangerous path of predatory publishing.*

#### Acknowledgment

My appreciation to Barbara C. Good, PhD, and Qing Zhou, PhD, for their valuable review.

**Author declaration and disclosures:** *The author notes no commercial associations that may pose a conflict of interest in relation to this article.*

**Author contact:** [mkemper@mayfieldclinic.com](mailto:mkemper@mayfieldclinic.com) and [Jeffrey.Beall@ucdenver.edu](mailto:Jeffrey.Beall@ucdenver.edu)

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