

Flooded by Trash or Five Reasons to Stick with Us

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Today I found a mail in my inbox similar to other mails I find most days: ‘Dear Harald Walach, considering your expertise in this field, we hereby cordially invite you to submit your current research papers to *Open Journal of Philosophy* (OJPP, ISSN Online: 2163–9442), a peer-reviewed open-access journal’.

This is how Prof. Kuang-Ming Wu, Professor Emeritus of Wisconsin-Oshkosh University, invites me to participate in his journal. At least two invitations, sometimes more, I receive on a daily basis. I could also write or edit books, participate in review boards, become a journal editor, and be busy in a multitude of functions until the end of my days without doing anything else. What is happening here? Who is behind all that? What is the motivation, and what is the market?

Let’s start with the market: There is a growing crowd of researchers that need to publish their studies to foster their careers. They want visibility and fast access to publications, yet have problems getting past the review process of standard journals, be they print or open access. Sometimes they don’t get published easily, because their research topic is a bit outlandish, or they cannot afford to pay a native speaker for language editing; sometimes they don’t know how to write in the first place, or how to cut down on their 12.000 or so words to the required length; sometimes they just need a quick publication to make up a required number for the next career step, and, of course, there is also trash around. Often such authors are working in fringe areas, like complementary medicine – that’s why the topic is relevant for readers of FORSCHENDE KOMPLEMENTÄRMEDIZIN, as well. Whoever works on unusual topics, has found unexpected data, or wants to discuss unusual thoughts and opinions will have problems with mainstream outlets, because a majority of editors and reviewers will see those findings as ‘unscientific’, ‘not interesting’, or ‘irrelevant’. Even if a piece of research is methodologically flawless and reviewers can find no fault, publication is often barred by editors, because the topic is exotic and is labeled as ‘not of interest for the readers of this journal’. Apart from all that, the funnel to the top journals is very narrow, and only a few authors make it to the topmost tier of high-impact journals. But what about the rest? Here it seems, open access is the perfect solution.

Make no mistake here: there are very solid and serious, strictly peer-reviewed open access journals that are edited by foundations or

scientific publishers. ‘Public Library of Science – PloS’ is such a foundation that publishes a series of open access journals. Large journals, like *Science*, *BMJ*, and a lot of others publish open access versions. They are financed not by the readers, but by the authors, through ‘article processing fees’. In addition, there are traditional publishers, like Elsevier, Springer, Wiley-Blackwell, and also Karger, that check submitted papers through a traditional peer-review, but in addition to print make these papers also available online, if the author pays for it (Author’s Choice), or if editors decide to make it open (Editor’s Choice). This is also what we do in FORSCHENDE KOMPLEMENTÄRMEDIZIN / RESEARCH IN COMPLEMENTARY MEDICINE. Then, there is a whole group of journals in medical publishing that is exclusively online, like *Biomed Central* (BMC), and in psychology the *Frontiers* series. They also have a rigorous, transparent peer review and thus they operate on a clear, scientific basis, because it is not the publisher, but the editors and the reviewers that decide what is published. What is published by such journals is normally, within reason, scientifically reliable information.

But then there are also what have been called ‘predatory publishers’. As far as I know the American librarian Jeffrey Beall coined that term. He also publishes an updated list of such publishers and associated journals online at www.scholarlyoa.com/publishers.

It is quite an eye-opener to skim through the list of publishers: there are hundreds of them, the publisher of *Open Journal of Philosophy* who sent me the email I quoted above, *Scientific Research Publishing* (SCIRP), is one of them. This is very well camouflaged, because the links that come with the email lead first to respectable buildings and associations in the US until you find out who the real publisher is.

How Does Predatory Publishing Work, and How Can We Recognize It?

As you might have guessed by now, this simple entrepreneurial model makes profit from a flood of trash papers, and papers that are very difficult to publish, and also from the time pressure researchers have nowadays to show results published, for internal

reviews, funders, or promotions. One of the drivers might be the tendency of committees to keep abreast of the huge amount of information everyone has to deal with by simply using quantitative parameters – number of published papers, for instance – instead of quality, which would require reading, and thus time.

Like with solid and scientifically sound open access models, here also the authors pay the price of publishing. Only that there is nothing to be paid for here, no editorial staff, no expertise, no nothing, just an internet platform and a few low-level IT workers that do the layout. The author gets a ‘publication’, as the paper is available all over the world for free, wherever there is an internet connection. And seemingly, the publication is also ‘scientific’, because the journal mentions an editorial board and a peer review. But a growing number of studies show that the rigorousness of peer review is where predatory and scientific publishing divide. While with scientific publishing there is a peer review, in predatory publishing peer review is just a mock exercise and the editor decides in the end – and he publishes whatever he can get hold of, because he is interested in money, not in quality of information. Go to the scholarly open-access website: you will find exacerbating stories on the blog-rolls there. A classical one is this: a scientist invented a data-set from basic cancer research. He changed the narrative about what cells were used and which agent for each paper. But else all was the same, plus he built in clearly visible mistakes that every expert in the field would have spotted immediately. Then he sent it out to about 100 journals in the purported predatory open access field [1]. None of the journals seems to have seriously reviewed it, for all journals sent him acceptance letters, and all would have published his paper as ‘scientific information’, had he not withdrawn at the last minute and made open his real motive: to test the peer review.

This shows: a large number of open access publishers are not interested in information, but in making money. Article processing fees range from some USD 800 or so to over USD 2,500, depending on page length and number of illustrations. The point of distinction between predatory and scientific open access publishing is that in predatory publishing the price bears no relationship to the work to produce the paper. While in scientific publishing we have real people, in predatory publishing you have hardly any man-power except for the final layout. While in predatory publishing nearly everything, all the trash, is accepted, a good scientific journal rejects roughly the same amount of papers that it accepts, sometimes even more. While in real scientific publishing peer review is key – not an infallible one, to be sure, but at least a good enough review – in predatory publishing it is camouflage. That allows trash papers that would have never made it to publication in normal scientific journals to be published and available as ‘scientific information’.

The problem is: readers can rarely tell in times where we are flooded with information and do not have the time or the compe-

tency to check for quality themselves. The internet and massive online publishing (MOP) do not make our lives simpler but more complicated. This will lead, eventually, to readers’ adopting strategies for reducing complexity. They will ask: how trustworthy is the information *and* its source. Does the publisher organize a good peer review? But not even that is sufficient. For who will guarantee that other types of bias, like mental prejudices, certain ideologies, or the mainstreaming of some idea are operative in the background?

So, currently we can only follow our intuition and the list of predatory publishers and journals, quoted above; but also a little knowledge about publishing ethics and economy is helpful. Whenever profit is the highest goal, other values will be left behind, in publishing and in other areas of economy likewise.

And here we come to the reasons why FORSCHENDE KOMPLEMENTÄRMEDIZIN / RESEARCH IN COMPLEMENTARY MEDICINE will be important also in the future:

1) We organize a peer review that orients itself at current scientific standards and guarantees as much as is possible that the information we publish is reliable. If we are in doubt, we also reject papers, even if they come from authors with standing in the field. Predatory publishers cannot do that. They need their authors more than their readers.

2) The journal is published by a publishing house that is still privately owned and not part of a huge international conglomerate. The profile is coined by its reputation that has been earned by long-term strategies and not short-term profit mongering.

3) The late Steven Karger, previous head of the publishing house, had started this journal because he thought it was important. Those who are in charge now follow this line, because they share this opinion without looking at profit first. Had they done this, our journal would likely not have survived. FORSCHENDE KOMPLEMENTÄRMEDIZIN / RESEARCH IN COMPLEMENTARY MEDICINE testifies that some virtues of publishers are still alive: the belief in the importance of certain kinds of information.

4) The journal is produced by intelligent people, not by machines, and not by reviewers who with online journals often are misused as copyeditors, because there is no one to do the job.

5) While predatory publishers need authors who need publications, we need you, the readers, because you are the journal’s sustenance, who we hope want the information that we publish. Our information is for intelligent readers who, we hope, identify to some extent with what we do and who engage by writing reviews, guest editorials, letters, etc.

Thus, we are quite confident that our journal will keep its special flavor, even in times of MOP and predatory publishing and will be appreciated for it. This is not possible without you, our readers, and the publisher, who celebrates its 125th anniversary this year. I am grateful to both, as these build the fundamentals of what we do.

References

- 1 Bohannon J: Who's afraid of peer review? *Science* 2013;342:60–65.