

Predatory Publications in the Era of Internet and Technology: A Comment

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In an article published in this journal entitled “Predatory publications in the era of internet and technology: Open access publications are at risk”, Akhilesh Kumar, Ravi Gupta, Krishna Kant Tripathi & Rajani Ranjan Singh argue that the definition of predatory publications defame the open access journals putting the sustainability of these type of publications at risk which mushroomed in the age of internet and electronic freedom in disseminating academic and non-academic information. This note comments on their paper by arguing that (a) predatory practices are ubiquitous in the academic world, not only in publications; (b) charging a fee does not make an academic practice predatory; and (c) in the long-term no publication or an academic practice can survive if it does not offer some sort of “satisfaction” to users (readers and authors). The argument of peer review or not is irrelevant because a publication, once it becomes available, is constantly reviewed by its readers who are the ultimate judges of its quality. At the end of the day, what counts are the number of readers and the number of citations of a published work. Thanks to the internet these are now easily measurable.

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There is no question that the internet and the electronic means of communication have changed the way academics share their work. It has become much cheaper to make an academic work public. There is no need to publish it at all. Researchers can upload their work and through their network, invite many people to read—and most importantly cite—these works. This type of “publication” does not depend at all on paying any fee to any publisher and/or being blind reviewed. For example, I have uploaded an article, which has not been peer-reviewed and was never submitted to any journal for publication. Nevertheless, I have received many notes and remarks through the open process of comments, which has existed since antiquity, as is demonstrated by Plato’s *Dialogues*. Many academics have heard my ideas in the various symposiums organized by the Athens Institute for Education and Research (ATINER) and even more academics have read my article and have expressed their views.¹ My assessments are strong and many expressed strong disapprovals. As part of the long tradition of academic isegoria,² they can hold onto their opinion as I do for mine.

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¹For an example, see <https://www.atiner.gr/events/2July2018ECO.pdf>.

²Isegoria is one of the five criteria of true democracy as explained in Papanikos (2022b). In publishing what is important is the freedom of speech and not so much when and how an opinion

Within this context, I found the paper by Kumar et al. (2022) published in this journal extremely informative. However, what motivated me to write this comment is the link they make between paying a fee to publish, the open access of the paper and the peer review quality. I think this relation is irrelevant and should become a non-issue. However, there are other issues which I want to clarify in this commendatory.

The authors aim at defining what they call the "core features of a predatory journal" and distinguish it from what they call a "legitimate journal".

I should start with the use of the word "predatory".³ I would like to point out that such "predatory" academic practices go back at least to ancient Athens when Socrates accused the sophist Protagoras of charging ("predatory") fees for his teachings. Protagoras, quite naturally, responded that he is worth any penny of it because his students receive useful education, i.e., they can become better citizens and household managers. On the other hand, it is well known that Socrates did not charge a dime for his teachings. In using today's jargon, Socrates' lectures were "open access" while Protagoras' were not. As we learn from Plato's dialogue *Protagoras*, both Socrates and Protagoras were in high demand. Many wanted to listen and learn from them. This is the first evidence we have that "predatory" practices have nothing to do with the quality. I strongly believe that this holds true even today and I think the authors should have emphasized this point of view even though my reading of their paper gives me the impression that this fact underlines their arguments.

Let me start by saying (as an economist) that when there is an unimpeded function of a market, as the market of ideas and knowledge is today, the word "predatory" has no meaning whatsoever. However, for the sake of the arguments made in this literature, I will accept to mean whatever is understood to many, which implies that some unidentified people are cheated (readers? authors?) by paying for something of low quality. From an economists' point of view, such practices have no future because there will be no market for them. In a free market nobody is cheated, especially in the long-term.

The authors deal only with "predatory" publications and leave out more important "predatory" practices that have been applied for ages in the academic world; especially in those countries which are pioneers in defaming independently-published academic journals. By the way, defaming a competitor is a practice which is followed by many, but it is the bad face of competition. Saying that you publish a good journal is good practice. Saying that others are bad is a bad practice, and it does not make you good or better. Historically, these countries have been the protagonists of creating practices of unfair competition including unethical means to achieve it.

made public. In other words, it requires democracy. However, democracy requires education as explained in Papanikos (2022c).

³Throughout my paper here I will be using quotation mark to indicate that the word predatory has no meaning in this context. Charging a fee is legitimate economic practice as long the competition is fair. As I argued in Papanikos (2022a), the problem with academic publishing is that a few oligopolies control the industry.

What are the various types of “predatory” academic practices? In my non-peer reviewed paper mentioned above, I have categorized “predatory” academic practices into four types: “predatory” publishing, “predatory” academics, “predatory” conferences, and “predatory” universities. Kumar et al. (2022) discuss only “predatory” publishing, ignoring the other three, which are more important because they have been around for a very long time and the money to be made are much more than by “predatory” publishing. Since this is a comment on their work, I will restrict my notes to “predatory” publishing only. My thoughts on the other three types of “predatory” academic practices are expressed in my paper, Papanikos (2022a).

The authors’ first task is to define what “predatory” publications are within the context of open access. They state that, “Open accessibility and peer-review are two defining features of an open-access journal, and failing any one of which excludes an article/journal/publication to be considered as an open-access journal.” After citing the Budapest Open Access Initiative, they write that, “It is vital here to note that mere accessibility to everyone free of cost does not confirm an article/journal/publication to be called open access, rather, additionally it needs to be peer-reviewed too.”

I disagree with the link they make between open access and peer-review. I guess the authors mean blind peer-review as being more credible. My article on “predatory” publishing has been uploaded without any peer review. Their paper has been uploaded after a peer review. Both are open access but they differ in their peer-review. Does this say anything about the quality of the two papers? Does this make my paper a “predatory” publication and theirs not? Who decides anyway? The authors I think do not emphasize the self-defamed process by publishing something. My reputation is at stake—whatever it is worth—when I make a writing of mine public that does not meet some minimum academic standards. My “name” is exposed to the international academic community by publishing something which is of low quality. Thus, what counts is not the publication outlet and the process of accepting it, but whether my paper can stand on its own in the world of knowledge. If academic people find it useful, then the process of publication is irrelevant. This process includes both accessibility and review. If my paper is ignored by the academic community, let’s say within five years, i.e., nobody has read it and no one has cited it, then where and how it was published is a useless discussion. In the academic world, what counts is not where and how you publish, but how many reads and citations you have and of course your h-index or any other objectively determined index. In the old good days, the same applied to a Ph.D. thesis. A good thesis, irrespectively of the university and the supervisor, is only good if publications came out of it. I remember at that time the threshold was five years. If, in five years, no publication came out of it, then it was considered that your Ph.D. had no worth and it was considered as never awarded. I think this still holds true today.

The authors make a link between lifelong learning and open-access. Their argument I think is weak if by lifelong learning they mean the institutionalized supply of lifelong knowledge and practice. In this case, the issue is completely different and refers to the other types of “predatory” academic practices. Many

educational institutes—including well-known universities—supply courses and programs (seminars) which aim at all those who demand systematic lifelong learning, which in almost all cases is very specific and aims at a particular profession/vocation. This discussion is not relevant to “predatory” publishing. On the other hand, if by lifelong learning they mean my continued learning as an academic, then I never faced a problem with open access because my university affiliations always paid for my access to books and journals. In addition, over my lifelong learning my network of professors and researchers provided me with open access to their work. I am the rule and I never heard of an exception. As a matter of fact, the older an academic gets, the wider his/her free access to learning material becomes. This is a non-issue.

Then the authors discuss a disreputable case of a librarian who developed a black list. Reputable academics develop only white lists. I think the authors make a mistake to pay attention to a truly predatory⁴ “academic”. I will ignore this discussion, but I pose the following question to the authors: do they know that one of his criteria is not if a journal is NOW “predatory”, but whether it has the POTENTIAL to become predatory in the future, according to one man’s opinion, which is applied to all journals independently of its subject matter? His website and many others are what I call in my non-academic, Aristophanic and Socratic ironic paper, “academic pornographic sites”. This is the end of this discussion.

Unfortunately, the authors fall into the same trap, I am sure unintentionally, to uncritically state that, “... several low-quality publications”. Who are we to judge if a journal is of low or high quality? What are the criteria? Is a policy journal of low or of high quality? Is a journal which accepts opinion papers a low or a high quality? Is a journal of case studies of a high or of low quality? I offer one economic criterion to judge all journals: Journals whose readers and authors pay money to have access to them (read and publish) are good-quality journals. The value of the journal increases with the number of years of its publications and most probably at an exponential trend. Thus, a good-quality journal depends on the number of people who read and nothing else.

The authors then proceed by presenting 10 studies which in one way or another classify “predatory” journals as the ones which charge a fee, are not peer-reviewed and provide poor editing services. All these are very weak criteria. Let me discuss these criteria in brief. Firstly, charging fees cannot be used to distinguish between a good and bad journal. Usually, top-quality journals (many readers and citations) charge very high fees. Secondly, the peer review is not very important. What counts is how many read the paper, and most importantly cite it, i.e., how many use the paper to produce new knowledge. Thirdly, one of the useless criteria is editing services which has nothing to do with the quality of the paper. Assume I write and publish an economic mathematical paper which makes a major contribution to knowledge, but my English is very poor and the journal cannot afford professional editing services. Is this a bad or a good journal? Is my paper good or bad? I get many citations and readings and nobody cares about my bad English. Editing is very tricky business especially when you write a “political”

⁴Note that I do not use quotation marks because he is a classical example of a predatory case, i.e., he makes money by blackmailing independent publishers.

paper in English and it is not your mother tongue. Good English may give a different meaning to what someone wants to say. A controversial issue by itself. This important issue deserves a separate paper, but I do say something in the concluding sentences of this note.

The last two sections of their paper discuss the issue of pay and peer review. They observe the obvious. Open access is neither necessary nor sufficient to classify a journal as being “predatory”. However, they leave unanswered the most important question: who has the divine right to decide which journal is “predatory” and which is not? A predatory librarian? The answer to this question is very easy and economics can help because the whole issue is about money. If a journal is demanded, then it is a good journal. What does it mean that it is demanded? It simply means that academics read it and researchers submit papers to be considered for publication. This is the only objective fact which can be used to determine if a journal is good or bad. After all, only the academic community has the right to choose which journals to read and which journals to submit papers to be published. Nobody else. Paying or not paying, peer reviewing or not has nothing to do with this objective fact. Nobody, and especially not “predatory” academics, has the academic credentials to subjectively evaluate journals; any journal. The authors come very close to the same conclusions when they correctly state that we should stop talking about “predatory” publishing and start talking about deceptive and low-quality journals. However, who has the academic authority to make such a judgment? Nobody is my answer. Let the academic community decide by reading and citing the papers. It is the only objective criterion. All the others are subjective, biased and in many cases deceptive and predatory, the latter word without quotation marks.

I would like to conclude by stating my own experience with publishing with ATINER. All ATINER’s publications charge no fees whatsoever. They are blind peer reviewed, but my feeling was always, and still is, that this needs serious improvement. To solve this problem, we open up the process of reviewing by inventing a unique process. All papers which are desk accepted⁵ (not a blind review stage) are uploaded onto the website as papers-to-be-reviewed. We then invite the world community of academics to comment on the papers. Some get no reviews whatsoever, in which case ATINER returns the paper stating the obvious: we cannot evaluate the paper because nobody wanted to review the paper. Others get many reviews. It is amazing the diversion of the reviews we get; from accepting without any change to vehemently rejecting it. And this refers to the same paper. On the other hand, we make clear that English is not a reason to reject a paper. Good English does not determine quality. I should tell a story about this. The late Professor and Dean Yorgo Pasadeos was the editor of our series of books on mass media and communication and in 2014 he inaugurated, as chief editor, the Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communication. Pasadeos was fluent in Turkish language as well as in Greek, French and English. In many cases, articles

⁵This process of first desk accept/reject and then the blind peer review is by itself an indication of the stupidity of the whole effort. Why the review is blind? How can I be biased as a reviewer if I know the author? I am commenting the paper by Kumar et al. (2022). How would my judgments differ if I did not know their names? Mysterious processes that I do not want to take it further.

submitted in English from academics whose mother tongue was one of the three languages, had serious English language problems. Since he understood the way that these authors thought in their own language, he did not desk reject the paper, but always gave some suggestions to improve them. The point is the English editorial service by professional publishers who do not understand both languages fluently cannot really do justice to the paper’s contribution to the literature. I prefer bad English to proper English when this misrepresents what the authors want to say.

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