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The Changing Nature of OA Journals: Helping Scholars Identify the Good, the Bad, and the Political

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Abstract

When the Open Access (OA) movement began at the beginning of the 21st century, librarians and select scholars saw it as a way to level the playing field by disseminating scholarly work freely, by easing the financial burden placed on rising subscription costs, and by offering alternatives to the traditional publishing model. Predatory and opportunistic OA publishers were quick to arrive on the scene, however, leaving faculty and researchers scrambling for a new and updated vetting process for selecting their publication targets. Jeffrey Beall's blog and Beall's List, along with other important publication directories, have become an important part of the effort to provide oversight and information to scholars about OA publishers. This paper will discuss OA controversies and review sources and opinions on the transformation of academic publishing efforts in the context of OA issues. Recent trends in librarianship demonstrate the need to educate authors on how to comprehensively research journals before submitting manuscripts to them, how to avoid predatory OA publishers, and where scholarly communication is going in terms of oversight and reputability of OA journals. This paper will briefly summarize many of the possible roles of the librarian, as well as discuss and evaluate the impact of Beall's List on both the publishing world and librarianship.

Introduction

The three (3) sections below outline the major topics for this paper, which parallel the discussion held at the Charleston Conference on November 5th, 2015. In order to review and debate the issues related to open access (OA) and Beall's List, the authors divided the issues into following categories: The politics of OA in the lives of faculty and researchers, the politics of Beall's List and its use, and the pragmatic solutions and possible responses to deal with emerging issues in OA publishing.

Typically, the types of OA Journals are defined as follows:

- Hybrid—Subscription journals that are supposed to offer free access to some articles for which extra, usually very high, fees have been paid
- Green—Self-archiving: Option of an author self-archiving the manuscript version after a 12-month embargo period from publication

- Gold—Assigns costs to the authors with no charges for the library or readers
- Platinum—OA journals with no fees

See the (Open access Oxford (OAO) glossary, n.d.)

The last of these types, labeled "Platinum," is a bit more theoretical. While mentioned in the literature by a number of writers, this paper will define these types of OA materials as described by Beall in his work, "Scholarly publishing free for all" (2013b). In this paper, he groups these "Platinum" OA publishers as those that do not require any form of author processing charge (APC), or fees from the institution.

The Politics of Open Access (OA)

Noble causes often have unintended consequences, and the history of OA is rife with these occurrences. The rise of OA and OA politics initially appears to be a response to the ever-increasing and unsustainable pricing of traditional journal publishing models. OA proponents feel that corporations are greedy and that scholars are offering their work for free only to then have the

libraries at their institutions pay outrageous prices for their work. Moreover, there certainly are a number of benefits the OA model offer to authors, including increased exposure and sharing of their work, and the speed of publication. The OA movement is focused on the free exchange of knowledge; one question to answer is “how can such a model be sustainable?” Currently, OA journals of all types are difficult to evaluate in terms of quality, especially without uniform or well-defined criteria. Without consistent criteria and tools, how can we effectively separate the wheat from the chaff?

With the OA movement and increasingly inexpensive methods of online publication and dissemination, there has been a rapid explosion of new OA titles. Many of these, however, often exhibit questionable characteristics. This new environment requires that our profession address in some way the qualities and standards for this increasingly popular form of publishing. A good number of vocal proponents in the OA movement are established and trusted scholars, but some have not addressed the problems and pitfalls of gold OA titles as they relate to promotion/tenure and their impact (Beall, 2013a). Groups and other entities, such as the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association (OASPA), the Directory of Open Access Journal (DOAJ), and the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC), have provided some information about OA and journal quality, but perhaps increased effort and attention by librarians can help to protect and educate our faculty even more about emerging OA journals and publisher misconduct. Academic librarians are well poised to offer more training and consultation. That being said, leadership in the library profession will be required to maximize the benefit of these efforts.

OA proponents have indicated that all outcomes of publically funded research should be free to the public. Is this a valid argument and are all public goods free? Not in all cases, as stated by Beall in his work “The open-access movement isn’t really about open-access” (2013a). Jeffrey Beall, a librarian at the Auraria Library, University of Colorado, Denver, is someone that is both concerned with and motivated by the rise of

unverified open access publishers. He argues that: “People who are not experts in a given field generally lack both the ability to understand the most complex research in the field and the ability to distinguish between authentic and bogus research in the discipline” (Beall, 2013a). Despite the many benefits of open access, some are questioning the value of technical articles and materials meant for a specialized discourse community being mandated as open to the public. Furthermore, the cost of open access for many authors in the sciences is also skyrocketing.

Academics and researchers are also increasing their scrutiny regarding the value provided by OA in the sciences and the evolution of the current model. In a recent work by Van Noorden, questions regarding costs are debated, along with estimates by the publishing community as to the cost of producing and publishing an article (often \$3,000–\$4,000) and its relationship to the new world of APCs (2013). In another piece, Wolpert portends the “inevitability of open-access.” The article provides the telling quote, “The extent to which access to knowledge is constrained and controlled by publishers’ business models is at the heart of the discontent researchers have for the current journal-publishing system” (Wolpert, 2013). While some clearly see the rise of OA as a natural or inevitable path, there is plenty of debate about the cost-effectiveness of both traditional and OA models. Cost and politics are, and will be, linked going forward.

Predatory OA Journals and the Politics of Beall’s List

Despite the lofty goals of the open-access proponents, the movement itself has given rise to some unsavory practices by open-access publishers only interested in taking an author’s money and copyright, and then quickly publishing articles. Many of the worst of these do not have transparency about author fees, preservation, or other practices that ensure an author’s work will be shared and maintained by a reputable source. The work of Beall and others that contribute to the identification of these titles and publishers are centered on categorizing what traits and practices define a predatory journal. In 2015, he published

his “Criteria for Determining Predatory Open-Access Publishers,” which sets forth many of the characteristics of these types of titles and publishers (Beall). In creating his criteria that defines predatory publishers and the candidates for inclusion on Beall’s List, his goal is to assist librarians and scholars in recognizing scholarly publishing scams and avoiding them, as well as to expose academic misconduct in scholarly communications (Butler, 2013). While these criteria have started the debate, and figures like Jeffrey Beall are playing a major role, there needs to be more clarity from the various organizations that publish and disseminate these open-access works.

One of Beall’s arguments against gold OA has to do with the fact that “junk science” has been published in a few disreputable OA journals (anti-climate change articles, ones that support corporate misconduct, etc.). As more bogus research continues to be published in open-access venues, the public will access it more and many will accept it as valid research. This bogus research will poison discourse in many scientific fields and will create a public that is misinformed on many scientific issues” (Beall, 2013a). At present, OA proponents don’t seem to wish to address this issue.

Due to his frequent and vocal opposition of APCs, critics claim that Beall’s List is openly hostile to all APC models and virtually all types of OA journals (Berger & Cirasella, 2015).

In many cases, Beall asserts that the APC process is inherently exploitive because it undermines journal quality (2013a). If the publisher’s goal is only to garner as many fees from authors as possible, then why not accept everything and publish as many articles as possible, with only bogus peer-review practices? Thus, the rise of the “megajournal” with no focus other than to serve as a pay-for-publish digital repository.

In the ideal model, authors would not be required to pay, which Beall (and others) term the “Platinum” model (2013b). Even if there are no fees charged by the publisher, or publishing body, there ultimately must be some outlay of time or money from the staff required for these efforts.

Removing the fee(s), however, does reduce the appearance of a “payola” environment. One question librarians grapple with is whether the APC model is inherently a bad alternative to the traditional model that receives revenue from library and public subscriptions, which rely more on the good will of subscribers and the reputation of the publisher as being a quality source of information. Beall argues that the “author pays” model can appear to work well for certain disciplines and titles, but not in all cases (Beall, 2015b). Beall believes the potential for exploitation of authors and publishing staff is higher with OA, but not that all gold OA is exploitive. He asserts that ethics and quality are often sacrificed with the gold OA model, hence his desire for the “Platinum” model, devoid of APCs (Beall, 2013b). This is a lofty goal, but one that is difficult to meet without strong support of libraries and other institutions and organizations.

Beall’s critics assert that OA publishers in developing countries are unfairly targeted (Butler, 2013). According to Shen & Björk’s recent work, which relied heavily on Beall’s List, most of the more recently identified predatory publishers are in these developing regions (27% from India and 75% from Africa and Asia) (2015). These fraudulent journals are worse than greedy corporations, as they have no commitment to preservation and archiving, stewardship, quality, or long-term reputation. The same study estimates that \$74 million went to predatory OA journals in 2014. In addition, “predatory journals have rapidly increased their publication volumes from 53,000 in 2010 to an estimated 420,000 articles in 2014, published by around 8,000 active journals” (Shen & Bjork, 2015). Despite the reliance on Beall’s List, what remains to be seen is whether OA advocates are willing to acknowledge Beall’s work as legitimate and support it.

The Pragmatic

As stated earlier, the “author pays” (APC) model can appear to work well for certain disciplines and titles, but the costs (if not subsidized by grants or university funding) can be daunting. Solomon and Björk’s study of APCs in OA and other journal publishing indicates that “seventy-one percent of journals with an ISI-impact factor charged more

than \$1,000 USD, whereas the corresponding figure was 15% for journals without an impact factor. The journals charging the highest APCs also have the highest impact factors (*Plos Biology* APC = \$2,900, impact factor = 12.9; *NucleicAcids Research* APC = \$2,770, impact factor = 7.4)” (2012). In the absence of Beall’s List, something would immediately be needed to replace this tool, as librarians increase their efforts in guiding and training faculty in the selection of quality publication targets, based on price, quality, and other important characteristics.

Thus, unless an author has grant funding, he or she cannot afford the high-end APC titles, or publisher hybrid-type fees, for the high impact and established OA titles. One solution to the problem is demonstrated by Texas A&M’s OAK Fund, which supports author fees and publishing venues for their faculty (Open Access to Knowledge (OAK) Fund, n.d.). These types of academic and other publishing-support bodies will increasingly rely on Beall’s List and other similar sources of information going forward, and libraries continue took for new ways to support their faculty and fund new and hybrid OA models.

Publishing is often a profitable endeavor, however, in both traditional and (some) OA forms. As stated above, the traditional groups have started to adopt hybrid and new funding models. Some universities have found excellent ways of addressing high costs and APC fees by forming teams, or committees, to evaluate the titles and to pay the processing charges for qualified authors and publications. As Beall points out in another of his recent works, “to make up for the low author fees they charge (sometimes as low as \$100–\$200), [predatory publishers] increase the volume of papers they publish” (2015b). Beall’s List provides something not otherwise offered by the library or publishing community and has a great deal of validity (Shen & Bjork, 2015). A vetted whitelist may be a better solution than Beall’s blacklist, but whose job is it to create such a list? Additionally, librarians need to distinguish between new and emerging journals and markets from the true predatory titles, and some entity should take up this cause.

The role of librarians as advocates to support their faculty and graduate authors has the potential to be vital to their efforts to achieve publication, promotion, and tenure. If Beall’s List disappeared tomorrow, how would the library community perform this duty and protect scholars? As librarians increase their efforts in guiding and training faculty in the selection of quality publication targets, they need to distinguish new and emerging journals and markets from the true predatory titles, and some entity should take up this cause. Librarians have a clear role to offer training, support, and other consultations on publishing options and must position themselves as experts regarding journal quality. As pointed out by Vardi in a recent editorial, it’s not just OA journals that can be predatory; it can also be those in the commercial world (2012). As librarians shepherd students and faculty through the various publication processes and choices in both new and emerging OA and traditional publishing firms, there is an increasing need for vigilance.

Conclusions and Future Directions

At the moment, there is mostly silence in the professional library community about predatory journals that are generally destroying the reputation of open access, and there is silence about Beall’s List in particular. Many librarians use Beall’s List but do not promote it, and when one queries them about that question they say, “Well, I use the list but it shouldn’t be just one guy that we rely on for this information.” So, the question becomes who should step up to the plate to support Beall’s efforts to address the issue of predatory OA journals and begin to solve the problem of publisher misconduct? It is clear that librarians can and should play a role. Digital repositories and academic library supported journal publications offer one solution related to creating OA titles. Another solution might be to increase instruction, consultation, and workshops on desirable publishing practices and options with faculty and graduate students. The University of South Florida Libraries, for example, offers active outreach to faculty (via LibGuides and other

sources) to market journal selection and promotion/tenure readiness. This guide is available online at:
<http://guides.lib.usf.edu/promotion-tenure>

Finally, OA advocates need to address the “elephant in the room,” regarding predatory OA journals, the emergence of “junk science,” and

offer potential solutions, or they may risk losing credibility. Continued vigilance in the evaluation of all journal titles is even more important with the growth of OA and OA publishing; librarians, libraries, and research faculty are poised to play a role in defining and redefining standards to evaluate these publications.

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