November 1, 2015

Letter to the Chair of the Biology Department
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Winfried S. Peters

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/winfried_peters/73/
Dear Frank,

This past Friday I brought to your attention that several papers published with predatory publishers were listed in the most recent issue of our departmental newsletter *Bioscope*. You will remember that I had noticed similar papers on display in one of our showcases in the department in the last spring semester. Now I have had several lengthy telephone conversations with friends who hold senior faculty positions at research universities in the US, the UK, and Germany. These knowledgeable colleagues agreed that our most recent issue of *Bioscope* gives evidence of unacceptable, even scandalous practices, and has a significant potential for harming the reputation of our institution, particularly the Biology Department, and everybody associated with it. Based on the advice I have received, I have decided to write this letter in order, first, to establish a paper track of my concerns, and second, to create awareness of the situation. For now, I have not copied colleagues who in my opinion will have to be informed at some stage, namely the entire Biology Faculty, our Dean, VCAA, and Chancellor. Please feel free to forward this document to whoever you think should be involved at this stage.

What is the problem? Please examine the “Recent Biology Publications” on pages 10/11 of the *Bioscope* issue that became available last Friday. Imagine we had a visitor interested in the research activities of our department. This individual could be an NSF representative, an external reviewer of a P&T case, a potential applicant for a faculty position, or a parent of a prospective student. Imagine she decides to browse through a
few representative papers, and attempts to access these through their DOIs (digital object identifier) provided under “Recent Biology Publications” in Bioscope. This works as expected with the DOI given for Rapp et al. (2015), but in all other cases the DOIs do not seem to exist. Our visitor concludes that Bioscope is a poorly edited product as almost all DOIs seem to have typing errors. To obtain the papers anyway, she navigates to the journal’s web-site of the first paper in the list with a dead DOI, Hough et al. (2015). There, to her surprise, she finds the exact same DOI, so the problem is not one of typos in Bioscope – the DOI claimed for this paper really does not exist. Confused, she browses the journal and finds that while all items published in Bioengineering and Biosciences claim to have a DOI, not a single one is live. Something seems wrong with this online-only open-access journal, so she checks it out in the Directory of Open Access Journals. The DOAJ was founded by respectable open-access publishers in an attempt to distinguish themselves from scams, frauds, and pseudo-science sites on the internet. Searching the database, she finds that Bioengineering and Biosciences is not included – something seems seriously wrong with this journal. Irritated, she takes a look at the other journal whose DOIs reported in Bioscope are dead. Reaching the web-site of Poultry, Fisheries & Wildlife Science, she is struck by the name of the publisher. OmicsInternational rings a bell – wasn’t there something in the news not so long ago?

She searches Wikipedia for Omics and finds this:

OMICS Publishing Group is a predatory publisher of open access journals in a number of academic fields. It is part of the OMICS Group, based in Hyderabad, India. It issued its first publication in 2008. According to a 2012 article in The Chronicle of Higher Education about 60 percent of the group's 200 journals had never actually published anything.

Academics and the United States government have questioned the validity of peer review by OMICS journals, the appropriateness of author fees and marketing, and the apparent advertising of the names of scientists as journal editors or conference speakers without their knowledge or permission. As a result, the U.S. National Institutes of Health does not accept OMICS publications for listing in PubMed Central and sent a cease-and-desist letter to OMICS in 2013, demanding that OMICS discontinue false claims of affiliation with U.S. government entities or employees.

Now fully alarmed, she checks the list of predatory journals and publishers known as Beall’s List (a database run by University of Colorado librarian Jeffrey Beall). In fact, Beall’s List includes both of the publishers (and all of their numerous journals) behind the journals with non-existing DOIs in Bioscope. She concludes that this probably explains the non-existing DOIs. Predatory publishers are fraudsters who set up web-sites that
masquerade as open-access scientific journals. One common trick is presenting invented metrics. *Omics* for instance lists impact factors for many of their journals, when in fact no *Omics* journal is included in the Thomson Reuters’ *Journal Citation Report*, the only legitimate source of impact factors. Evidently, these publishers also make up fantasy DOIs that look like the real thing.

At this stage of her inquiry, our visitor may draw various conclusions, depending on what she really is. The NSF representative will conclude that we are a bunch of nutcases, a fact she’ll remember when she has the next grant application from IPFW on her desk. The external reviewer of a P&T case will conclude that anything is good enough for IPFW, regardless of what the P&T criteria that she received may say, and judge the candidate accordingly. The potential applicant for a faculty position will, if she is worth her salt, delete IPFW from her list, because she would rather drive a cab than accept a faculty position at an institution that has given up on academic standards. The parents of a prospective student will wonder why windbags like us are supported by tax money at all (*I Paid For What*?), and send the kid to Ball State.

Today, I see reprints of three papers in Beall’s List journals in our showcase next to the Departmental Main Office. Only one is included also in the current *Bioscope*, which presents at least four, giving a total of six. When I first became aware of predatory publications in our showcase last April, there were three of them on display, none of which is there still or is listed in *Bioscope*. This brings the tally to nine. Coincidentally I found yet another one on the website of *Bioengineering and Bioscience*, raising the total to ten. Several but not all of these can be found on *Opus*, and three were included in our last *USAP* report (which opens up a bag full of problems for us). Three faculty members and two department staff appear as authors on these papers, but only one faculty (in the rank of full professor) is co-author on all of them; the surge of predatory publications from our department seems to originate from a single lab. There are at least ten student co-authors on these papers.

The latter fact is alarming. As confirmed by my scientist friends mentioned above, the listing of papers published in predatory journals in an application for grad programs, PhD programs, and postdoctoral or professional scientific positions is an exclusion criterion. **As a rule, at research universities, applications that present publications in journals on Beall’s List as scientific achievements go straight into the bin!** By tolerating publications in predatory journals, and even promoting student authorships on such publications, we are ruining the career prospects of some of our most promising
students. Maybe this is an argument that can convince those among us whose academic integrity has become so porous over the years that they find nothing objectionable in paying money to “publish” on web-sites that disguise as “journals” and provide fake “peer-reviews”.

A related problem already has occurred this semester and will occur regularly in the future in our capstone course, Biol-491. In this course, both the faculty in charge and the librarian (David Dunham, in our case), who visits the class to introduce databases and search tools, are teaching students how to distinguish sound sources from bogus. We stress that predatory and other junk journals are not reliable and therefore are unacceptable sources. If some students, misguided by naive supervisors, have already published in a predatory journal and insist to use their paper as a source, what are we supposed to do? In order to avoid embarrassing anyone, are we expected to have students discuss junk science in 491? I’m not going to.

As the media coverage of the legal dispute between US Governmental Agencies and Omics demonstrates, one cannot just assume that the public does not and will never understand the problem with unethical publication practices. Presenting proof for such unethical behavior in departmental newsletters obviously has a potential to produce drastic consequences in the long, or maybe not so long run. Voluntarily exposing to the public the fact that we have lost our academic bearings is maybe not a good idea. In my opinion, the following measures are imperative at this time:

⇒ the current version of the Fall 2015 Bioscope should be retracted and replaced by an update in which references to articles in predatory journals have been removed
⇒ reprints of papers published in predatory journals should be removed from departmental showcases and from other locations, wherever they may be found
⇒ all faculty should be urged, and all grad students and TAs should be directed to attend the Library Workshops (which will address predatory publishing) on November 20 and 21
⇒ all students from our department that have co-authored papers in predatory journals must be educated about the problem, especially regarding the hazard of being removed from the applicant pool due to the listing of such papers in application documents
⇒ a departmental policy that bans papers in predatory journals from being considered in promotion and tenure cases, and from the inclusion in annual
reports and other reports such as *USAP* as well as informal reports such as *Bioscope*, should be developed as soon as possible. This policy must also explicitly ban student authorships on any papers in predatory journals, because this practice jeopardizes the students’ career prospects and thus is unethical.

⇒ we should consider forming a departmental “Publication Ethics” task force charged with educating faculty, staff, and students; with the monitoring of publication practices in the department; with the generation of an annual publication and citation report; and with supporting the chair in the compilation of productivity reports.

Let me end on a personal note. I have built myself a reputation in the international scientific community, which is expressed, among other indicators, by the fact that I am personally invited on a regular basis to contribute review articles in top journals of my main field of expertise.12 I have all intentions to preserve my professional reputation and credibility, and therefore cannot tolerate situations in which my name becomes associated with unethical practices, deteriorating academic standards, and scientific bogus. For this reason, I removed my own reprints from departmental showcases as soon as I noted that articles from predatory journals were being displayed. I further decided to abstain from contributing to *Bioscope*, because I anticipated what now actually has happened. I am appalled by the fact that the current *Bioscope* contains a lengthy article on the Bahamas field course which I teach jointly with Ben Dattilo from our Geosciences Department. We are proud of this interdisciplinary project, and we certainly would prefer if our achievement would not be praised (nor even mentioned, for that matter) in a medium that also celebrates “Recent Biology Publications” in predatory journals.

Thank you for your time reading and considering my arguments. I will be happy to contribute to a solution of this situation within the department.

Best wishes,

(Dr. Winfried S. Peters, Associate Professor of Biology)
NOTES

1 Pages 10 and 11 of that Bioscope issue are attached below as an Appendix

2 Please verify this by copying the DOI of Rapp et al. (2015), 10.1007/s00709-015-0838-x, into the search field of a DOI resolver, for example http://www.doi.org/index.html

3 http://www.hrpub.org/journals/jour_archive.php?id=1&iid=689

4 https://doaj.org/

5 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/OMICS_Publishing_Group; for links to the original sources summarized in the quoted Wikipedia entry, please go to the entry itself

6 http://scholarlyoa.com/

7 For the complete list, see http://scholarlyoa.com/publishers/; for entries on Omics, see http://scholarlyoa.com/?s=Omics; for entries on Horizon Research Publishing, see http://scholarlyoa.com/2013/05/02/horizon-research-publishing-corporation/#more-1625

8 For example here: http://www.omicsonline.org/agri-food-aqua-journals.php

9 The current list of journals with impact factors, i.e. journals covered by the Journal Citation Report, is published here: http://scientific.thomsonreuters.com/imgblast/JCRFullCovlist-2014.pdf

10 Jeffrey Beall provides examples of how these “peer-reviews” typically look: “The study focus on contemporary issue. The analytical section is excellent. The paper is based on sound grammatical knowledge. The presentation of thoughts in the paper is clear. It can be published in IJER with no important modification.” This is not an excerpt. This is a complete “peer-review”. http://scholarlyoa.com/2015/04/16/fake-peer-review-more-documentation/#more-5274. See also http://scholarlyoa.com/2014/07/17/peer-review-reports-from-questionable-publishers-three-examples/

11 For the announcement, see e-mail from David Dunham that we all received on October 28 at 4:07 PM

12 Please see the (almost complete) lists of my publications in peer-reviewed journals at my Selected Works site (http://works.bepress.com/winfried_peters/) or at my ORCID site (http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5061-1497).