



## I DON'T THINK WE SHOULD "COMBAT" PREDATORY PUBLISHERS: AN INTERVIEW WITH JEFFREY BEALL

Eu não acho que devemos "combater" as editoras predatórias: Uma entrevista com Jeffrey Beall

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### ABSTRACT

Beall's List was discontinued in January 2017. It catalogued potential predatory publishers, known for publishing non-peer-reviewed open access articles with profit reasons. This leads to a pollution of the academic record with poorly reviewed pseudo-scientific data, which is harmful for science in general. In this interview, Beall discusses some aspects and impacts of predatory publishing, as well as the dilemma of open-access research and what different entities can do to diminish the influence of predatory journals.

**Keywords:** Beall's list; Predatory publishers; Open access; Open Science.

### Presentation

Jeffrey Beall holds a Master of Science degree in Library Science from University of North Carolina, a Master of Arts degree in English from Oklahoma State University, and a Bachelor of Arts in Spanish from California State University. He worked as a librarian and Associate Professor at Auraria Library on the downtown Denver, campus of the University of Colorado Denver, and as librarian at Widener Library at Harvard University. Beall is recognized for Beall's List, which listed publishers and standalone journals that potentially engaged in predatory and unethical practices. His list was published on his blog, namely Scholarly Open Access, which was deactivated in January 2017. In his published works, Beall defends the subscription publishing model and criticises the gold (author pays) open access model, providing suggestions and guidelines to cope with predatory journals and Open Access practices within scholarly publishing.

In this interview with Jeffrey Beall (JB), several key topics related to scholarly publishing and predatory journals are discussed. JB argues that open-access platforms have to improve their reach and visibility. The interview then delves into the concept of predatory publishers and their impact on the academic community. The conversation continues with a reflection on the evolving role of open-access publishing,



the challenges faced by platinum journals, and the importance of eliminating author fees.

JB discusses the collective efforts within specific academic fields to combat predatory journals and shares his reasons for discontinuing his well-known "Beall's List" of predatory publishers in 2017. He acknowledges pressure from various entities but emphasizes that the primary goal should be to discourage researchers from submitting to predatory journals. The interview also touches on the existence of other listings of predatory publishing, the roles of individuals, organizations, and governments in combating predatory publishers, and the need for improvements in faculty evaluation policies in relation to faculty publications.

**Interviewers:** *Thank you so much for agreeing to this interview, Mr. Beall. Before we start with more specific questions, we would like to address a post from 2015 on your blog with the title: 'Is SciELO a publication favela?' This post caused a heated debate not only in Brazil - there were a few open letters against it - but also a fierce debate on the original post on your blog that diverted from the main points you were raising. The use of 'favela', a derogatory term that has been avoided in recent years, possibly helped spark the huge controversy. First, on what aspects did you base such an assessment, i.e., the quality of the publications within SciELO? And, second, do you still see local initiatives such as SciELO, Redalyc and Operas<sup>1</sup> to promote open science not having the impact they should?*

**JB:** *I used a metaphor to describe how articles published in SciELO platform-hosted journals are essentially isolated without realizing that the word favela is, apparently, a taboo term and a very sensitive topic in Brazil. In the United States, terms such as ghetto and slum are commonly used figuratively. There are many strong, high-quality articles in the SciELO journals, but they are essentially hidden because the platform lacks the value-added features such as those the major publishers use. Large, successful publishers have tools available to broadly share and promote content on their platforms. Simply being open access draws praise but is only a small part of the high-quality scholarly publishing process. Publishing platforms need to make articles salient, accessible, and readable in an increasingly competitive scholarly communication environment. Pretending favelas don't exist and pretending all open access is equal will not solve any problems.*

*I don't know much about Operas but am suspicious and sceptical of any government-based initiative that tries to solve problems in the scholarly publishing arena, especially one originating from the EU. SciELO and Redalyc need to be more than just websites that archive open-access articles.*

**Interviewers:** *Could you please elaborate in a few lines what predatory publishers are and their impact on the academic scientific community?*

**JB:** *Predatory publishers are scholarly open-access publishers that unprofessionally exploit the open-access model for their own profit. They use deception, are not transparent, and do not follow scholarly publishing industry standards. Their impacts are negative, including:*

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<sup>1</sup> Available in: <https://operas.hypotheses.org/>

- a. The publication of pseudo-science, polluting the scientific record.
- b. The enabling of earning unwarranted academic credit (i.e. publications in scholarly journals) given to academics from their published articles in predatory journals (students seeking degrees, academic faculty seeking promotion, graduates seeking jobs in industry and government).
- c. The explosion in the number of journals and the lowering of acceptance standards that competition among journals creates and the resulting explosion in the number of articles published, filling databases with articles of meagre quality and making it harder for legitimate journals to find qualified researchers willing to perform peer reviews.
- d. The imposition of author fees, including fees for retraction, which are unaffordable for many researchers, especially for those seeking to publish in top journals, and research grant funding is used less for research and more for paying publishing fees.
- e. The danger that poorly- and non-peer-reviewed research presents to society: medical research informs clinical practice, engineering research informs dam and bridge design and construction, and aeronautical engineering informs aircraft design. Published research in these and all other fields needs to be quality-controlled and carefully vetted, or fatal errors will occur in clinics, dams, and airplanes.

**Interviewers:** In other areas in Brazil, especially health, knowledge about predatory journals seems to be more consolidated, with a few publications on the topic (e.g., Barreto Segundo, 2019). However, in many others — and we focus on the linguistics and literature fields — this seems not to be the case. What are the risks and consequences for graduate students and novice researchers who unknowingly publish in these journals?

**JB:** During the period I published my lists (2012-2017), I regularly received emails from young researchers who had mistakenly published in a predatory journal. Often, they tried to have the articles withdrawn from the journal. Few were successful, and often the publisher would demand a fee to remove the article. Having communicated with many who found themselves in this situation, I learned that university committees and others are generally magnanimous with a young researcher who makes a single mistake publishing in a predatory journal. On the other hand, a pattern of publishing several or numerous articles over time in guaranteed-acceptance, pay-to-publish predatory journals is almost universally viewed as corrupt.

**Interviewers:** In a piece for Nature (Beall, 2012), in 2012, you start talking about the positive possibility of open-access publishing that turned negative with the advent of predatory publishers. In 2021, in an opinion article (Beall, 2021), you praised community-based journals. Considering the current push for Open Science from different organisations, do you see open access publishing having a different role nowadays?

**JB:** I think we will continue to see both open access and traditional subscription journals. The open access journals will be gold (author pays) and platinum (free to the author). It's unrealistic to think all scholarly publishing will convert to open access. We need to eliminate payments from authors to publishers and the conflict of interest that accompanies this exchange of money. The challenge is that platinum journals often operate on tight budgets and are hosted on skeletal platforms and are unable to afford

things like copyediting. High quality scholarly publishing is not cheap, yet most open access publishers generate insufficient revenue to maintain high-quality journals.

**Interviewers:** In this same piece for Nature (Beall, 2012), you wrote that “The research community needs to use scholarly social networks such as Connotea and Mendeley to identify and share information on publishers that deceive, lack transparency or otherwise fail to follow industry standards”. 11 years after, do you see any kind of development in collective efforts to tackle predatory journals within the scientific community?

**JB:** I now see most of the work being done within individual fields of study. For example, the nursing research community has published research articles, editorials, and other articles on predatory publishers, describing the problem and warning colleagues, especially emerging researchers, to avoid being victimized by the malevolent publishers. Similar work is being carried out within other individual fields, such as dermatology.

**Interviewers:** In 2017, Beall’s list was taken offline. Would you mind sharing with us the reasons for it and the impact it had on the academic community?

**JB:** I didn't feel safe continuing anymore. Moreover, I felt I had lost the support of my university. I am not aware of any impact my discontinuing the lists had.

**Interviewers:** Was there pressure from different entities to take the list offline? And, have you had to deal with this pressure afterwards?

**JB:** Yes, one thing I learned is that if you do something that affects a person's or an organization's revenue, they do everything possible to shut you down. I've been retired for over five years now and no longer feel the pressure.

**Interviewers:** Are you aware of other listings of predatory publishing, like Cabells<sup>2</sup> and Dolos (deactivated)? Do you have an opinion on them?

**JB:** Yes, I am aware of both websites. I think they are helpful and valuable.

**Interviewers:** Based on your experience, what roles can individuals, organisations and the government play to combat predatory publishers?

**JB:** I don't think we should "combat" predatory publishers. We need to stop submitting articles to them. That's why I created lists — to alert people to publishers that should be avoided. Now, I know that many researchers have intentionally submitted manuscripts to these publishers to take advantage of the easy acceptance they sell. My understanding is that this practice is increasing, unfortunately. Academic institutions need to improve their faculty evaluation policies and procedures to deal with this problem. Merely counting the number of articles published is not a valid evaluation method.

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<sup>2</sup> Available in: <https://noaa.cabells.com>

**Interviewers:** Have you noticed or heard of recent effective developments in the fight against predatory journals?

**JB:** No.

**Interviewers:** Not even some progress on what you termed academic editorial literacy? To some extent, the topic has been more discussed recently.

**JB:** Actually, I think the term I used was "scholarly publishing literacy." (I understand "publishing" may have been translated as "editorial.") This relates to my work as an academic librarian. In academic library circles, there was much discussion of "information literacy" and academic libraries' roles in teaching it to university and college students. It's basically another term for research skills. I built on this phrase and discussed scholarly publishing literacy in the context of predatory publishers, and the need to identify and avoid them.

**Interviewers:** Piotr Trzesniak, from ABEC (Brazilian Association of Scientific Editors, ABEC Brasil), thinks that it is impossible to get rid of predatory publishers, and the scientific community has to learn how to carry on with them. Do you agree with his take on the issue?

**JB:** I agree that it's impossible to get rid of them, yes. Academic institutions and grant-funding organizations must stop granting academic credit for publishing in predatory journals, and they must stop subsidizing payments to predatory journals.

**Interviewers:** Considering the Latin American context of journals that traditionally publish open access articles, do you think there are any good practices that the researchers, professors, and publishers should develop in order to communicate the impacts of predatory journals in Latin America and in the world?

**JB:** I think this work is already being done. If you search phrases such as "revistas acadêmicas predatórias" or "revistas predatórias" and the counterpart terms in Spanish, (or if you substitute the word "revistas" with "editoras") in Google and Google Scholar, you will find articles and other work showing that much work has already been done in Latin America to address the problem of predatory publishers and that researchers in Latin America are well aware of the problem and are effectively sharing helpful information and advice about it.

**Interviewers:** Finally, the scientific community has been facing new challenges with ChatGPT and the possibilities of AI-powered chatbots. How do you see the risks and implications of these resources in scientific publishing, especially regarding predatory journals and plagiarism?

**JB:** I think this new technology will increase the occurrence of plagiarism in scholarly articles, both in legitimate and predatory journals, unfortunately.





**Interviewers:** *Is there any question we did not ask or something else you think the readers might benefit from?*

**JB:** *I think it's interesting that predatory publishing has essentially become a field of study itself. There are books being published on this topic, in addition to hundreds of journal articles and conference presentations. Predatory publishers have opened the door to other forms of unethical scholarly publishing-related practices, including the significant problem of paper mills, corrupt companies that write authentic-appearing articles for researchers for a fee. Science and humanities are among humans' most important intellectual endeavors and must be protected from all forms of unethical publishing practices.*

**Interviewers:** *Thank you so much for this interview, Jeffrey.*

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