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# Caution with Journal Selection: Spam, Copycat Journals, and Predatory Publishing

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**ABSTRACT**

The modern scholarly journal is currently faced with the challenge of upholding its principles in order to attract a continuous stream of authors to maintain its publishing status. Further, it also needs to be weary of unscrupulous players (including competitors) lurking in the global knowledge stream that pose an existential threat by diverting academics away from legitimate journals using underhanded or unfair practices, such as the use of spam or journals that employ copycat names. It is not always easy to distinguish predatory from exploitative journals, or underhanded from unfair practices, and even the use of or reliance on publishing blacklists does not offer potential authors a safe selection of journals to publish in. Authors and journals thus live in a volatile publishing environment in which they are confronted with constant threats. In biomedicine, these can translate into reputational damage to the journal and publisher if fake science or pseudoscience is published, since it puts at stake the journal's reliability for biomedical information. For authors, particularly younger or less experienced ones whose careers depend on publishing advances, a mistake such as making a submission to a hijacked or copycat journal that impersonates the original journal may carry long-term negative reputational consequences. So, such a decision can be career altering.

**Keywords:** blacklists, copycats, hijacked journals, predatory publishing, unwanted emails, watchlists

**Highlights**

- Authors have a wide range of ideals and motivations when selecting a target journal.
- Unscrupulous players threaten global journal publishing by using unfair or underhanded practices.
- Strategies include spam and the use of copycat names to mimic legitimate scholarly journals.
- Young researchers publishing in hijacked or copycat journals may damage their reputation.
- Researchers must self-assess the risks and benefits of publishing in unknown venues.

## 1. HOW DO AUTHORS SELECT A TARGET JOURNAL?

The irrational or erroneous choice of a journal to which an author makes a submission depends upon multiple factors, including the individual author's personality traits (urgency, impatience, greed, and others), excessive or unrealistic

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pressure placed on them by their research group, superiors, institutes, and funding agencies, as well as restrictive clauses in employment contracts that require them to be ultra-productive [1]. This may induce the classic "publish or perish" dilemma, which risks authors placing greater focus on quantity rather than quality, and with insufficient focus on creativity and professional themes [2]. Authors' choice of journal might also be driven by the respective journal's fame/prestige, rank, and metrics, as well as the simplicity or complexity of their research. Thus, to publish in a journal with a certain rank, authors should realistically view the simplicity or complexity of submission-related processes, the level of difficulty encountered during peer review (based on prior experience or word of mouth), and the journal's acceptance or rejection rates [3]. Ultimately, the amount of autonomy an author has [4] to select a target journal for submission may determine whether they decide to submit to unknown, low-quality, unscholarly, or predatory publishing venues, rather than selecting journals with an established status [5].

## 2. JOURNAL IDENTITY AND INTEGRITY UNDER THREAT

Conversely, to meet a wide range of personal and professional expectations of authors related to publishing, many scholarly journals and publishers make efforts to establish publishing ethics principles and to fortify industry standards of quality, while tapping into the diversity of the reasons to submit as a way to expand their market range. In some cases, this has resulted in a large publication surge. In case of open access publishing, this surge has lead to the publishing of journals referred to as "mega journals", although publishing in them also carries risks, for both the journals and authors [6]. Conversely, unscholarly and morally or ethically dubious players have exploited the same knowledge stream to create publication venues that seemingly offer the same quality/ethics values at face value, although engage in divergent practices and value systems in reality. *A priori*, absent prior submission to a journal, a prospective author has no idea of the quality of publishing service that awaits them.

The struggle for journals to maintain their unique identity, while safeguarding the intellectual content they publish, cannot be understated, nor should it be underestimated. A constant state of vigilance by editors and publishers now seems to be a permanent requirement in scholarly publishing, since the knowledge ecosystem has in its midst both honest and dishonest (or not so honest) players. More extreme forms of dishonesty and deception are broadly referred to as "predatory" behavior, though multiple criteria must be satisfied before definitively classifying a journal or publisher as "predatory" [7]. Except for extreme and legally recognized cases of predatory behavior [8], it is reasonable to expect that many journals and publishers demonstrate a mixture of positive (strong) and negative (weak) aspects of peer review, editorial handling, and management behaviors that could fall into a gray zone [9], with the former tending to be guided by academic community principles, established codes of conduct, and publishing ethics principles. Moreover, it is not always easy to differentiate exploitative from predatory behavior because predation obligatorily involves a measure of exploitation, though not all forms of exploitation are necessarily predatory [10].

Within this complex landscape of threats to journals, or the threat of unscholarly journals to the wider academic

community via the dissemination of pseudoscience (information that is claimed to be science but has not been thoroughly vetted) [11], authors have to find ways to protect themselves so as not to be tricked by unethical or exploitative players. Conversely, journals have to protect themselves against both dishonest authors and unscrupulous competitors. After all, both ethical and unethical, scrupulous and unscrupulous, as well as predatory and scholarly journals and publishers vie for the same pool of global knowledge, intellect, and authors, each according to their own style and ability. Thus, easy-to-be-preyed-upon authors may be unsuspectingly drawn to journals by savvy marketing campaigns, slogans or pitches on journal websites, social media, or via email. There is no greater risk posed by fake or manipulative information or the publication of deceptive science than in biomedical sciences. This is because people's health and well-being is ultimately at risk, especially when cures for diseases or treatments require stringently conducted research [12]. The struggle for the legitimacy of medical information and the integrity of medical research could not have been more apt than during the COVID-19 era [13].

## 3. AUTHORS EXERCISING CAUTION: PREDATORY JOURNALS AND SPAM

As was briefly noted above, journals might attempt to attract new authors by email. However, established journals might employ more advanced marketing techniques to draw new authorship and clientele. Thus, they rely little (or not at all) on emails to achieve their marketing objectives. New or relatively unknown journals struggling to become established among fierce competition may turn to email as a cheap and easy strategy to reach an untapped source of authors. So, within email-based journal advertising, there may be a mixture of both academically legitimate and unscholarly entities.

Consequently, a prominent threat to authors is in the form of spam or unwanted emails, especially those from journals that are relatively unknown and are desperate to gain authorship and intellect at any cost, even at the cost of stated principles. For example, journals may advertise peer review but might not conduct any, or only conduct a mild or superficial commentary on submitted papers, thus violating or reducing the validity of their claim of being a "peer-reviewed" journal. Such journals are willing to engage in a range of suspect or dishonest behaviors to ultimately attract, by any means possible, authors and fees [14]. Seasoned or experienced researchers who publish widely have sufficient experience to distinguish a suspect invitation to publish in a journal from a legitimate one. On the contrary, younger or less experienced researchers might be duped or entrapped by praise-laced invitations that appeal more to their vanity, rather than focusing on academic value and scientific substance. The cost of spam to academics globally mainly takes the form of wasted time and energy. However, it may also translate into an economic cost because the recipients of emails must screen them for validity before deciding on which ones are worthwhile pursuing or exploring further, drawing time and effort that could or should be applied to other more essential tasks related to research or publishing [15].

For these reasons, authors either have to fend for themselves, seek advice from their colleagues or trusted mentors, or rely on information that can offer them guidance as to which journals are safe to publish in versus those that may pose a risk, either to their funding or their reputation. In

the case where funding agencies demand a certain volume or level of publication before funding is assigned to a research project or disbursed, one or more publications in journals of low academic stature or of suspect scholarly standing may reduce their chance of receiving such funding, thus damaging the advancement of their research projects and careers. In some cases, the recipients of unwanted emails might not be able to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate players (journals, publishers).

Broadly speaking, academics have in the past decade or so relied on third parties to offer them guidance regarding where to publish, including safe and unsafe venues. Popular publishing blacklists (or watchlists) have provided such a service to academics globally, as exemplified by two popular blacklists. One of these was established by a US librarian Jeffrey Beall [7, 10] and the other by a for-profit company Cabells [16], although both have demonstrable limitations [17]. Biomedical students and early career researchers with limited practical experience (or at least less than their more established superiors, principal investigators, or research team leaders), might feel the need to rely on such blacklists despite their limitations and thus have the most to lose, at least reputationally. In other words, blind trust might be placed in existing websites or services that host publishing blacklists simply because this is an easy and simple solution. When there is little or no critical assessment of these websites, and if tough questions regarding why such entities are blacklisted are not asked, then erroneous journal choices might occur. Conversely, a rising number of retractions from ranked journals with respectable metrics should induce more critical reflection about what differentiates a ranked journal with flawed peer-review from an unranked or non-indexed journal that conducts weak peer-review. Thus, absent critical thinking and assessment, authors are alone responsible for any bad choices that they have made and that might negatively impact their job security, funding opportunities, and reputation.

From the perspective of journals, when their identities are hijacked [18] or when copycat websites exist [19], the targeted journals, as hapless victims, can suffer reputationally. This is especially true if less-than-astute potential authors are not able to differentiate the original version of a journal from its copycat or hijacked version. Moreover, when copycat or deceptive journals that are not well-established "borrow" the names and reputations of more famous journals that have an established reputation, then potential authors risk erroneously submitting their work to an incorrect (hijacked or copycat) journal. If that journal charges a fee, then those authors would also be financially supporting the sustainability of deceptive publishing operations.

When responding to an uninvited email to submit to an unknown journal, potential authors are advised to use common and openly identifiable parameters to ascertain a journal's veracity (ISSN number, listing in JCR, publisher's unique name, and others), established and refined criteria to judge a journal's quality [20], as well as reevaluated blacklist criteria [16, 17]. Further, the recipients of such emails should assess the content of published issues and the editorial board of a journal to assess whether fake or undeserving individuals serve as editors, journal website and publishing/ethics clauses to appreciate their completeness or weaknesses, and then make an objective judgement for themselves regarding the journal's legitimacy before they decide to

submit to it. Despite all of these checks, submission to a "safe" journal is never guaranteed.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author of the manuscript has no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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