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Voices from the Field

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Studying 'predatory publishing' in the context of research evaluation: conceptual and methodological challenges

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Abstract

Over the past years, the phenomenon of 'predatory publishing' has undergone fundamental changes raising pressing methodological and conceptual challenges for its study, particularly in the context of research evaluation. The complex constellation of commercial, evaluative, and scholarly actors and logics now involved necessitates an interdisciplinary, geographically-diverse, and collaborative approach to studying scholarly – and especially 'predatory' – publishing. In this piece, we outline four key conceptual and methodological dimensions that, we argue, scholars must account for when studying this phenomenon. Firstly, the constantly changing dynamics of who and what constitutes predatory publishers and practices. Secondly, disentangling the complex relationships between evaluation and practice, accounting methodologically for the myriad factors that influence these ties, and recognising that scholarly practices are not a unidirectional effect of evaluations. Thirdly, scholars must recognise that evaluation regimes are embedded in distinct political economies of academia and that the notion of predatoriness is not universal but culturally, methodologically, and institutionally contingent. Finally, the common practice of using quantitative analyses alone to study questionable publishing practices risks reproducing existing biases and overlooking structural dynamics, and thus mixed approaches incorporating qualitative methods are necessary to ensure a nuanced understanding of the topic. We argue that scholars' approach to 'predatory publishing' crucially shapes what empirical dynamics are observed, and consequently call for scholars to take a holistic approach to studying this phenomenon.

Keywords predatory publishing, research evaluation, methodological innovation

Over the past years, the phenomenon of 'predatory publishing' has undergone fundamental changes, raising pressing challenges for its study, particularly in the context of research evaluation. The complex constellation of commercial, evaluative, and scholarly actors and logics now involved necessitates an interdisciplinary and inclusive approach to investigating scholarly – and especially 'predatory' – publishing. In this piece, we outline four key methodological and conceptual challenges in studying 'predatory publishing', drawn from our research experience as social scientists and criminologists in Global North and South contexts investigating scholarly communications, evaluation systems, and science policy. We argue that scholars' conceptualisation of the phenomenon crucially shapes what empirical dynamics they subsequently observe. Consequently, we call for a more holistic perspective of 'predatory publishing'.

First, a note about terminology: we refer to this phenomenon as 'predatory publishing' as an emic concept—meaning we treat it as the native vocabulary used by the actors themselves rather than as an analytical category. However, we recognise that this is a value-laden and imprecise term that has been used to stigmatise or delegitimise non-mainstream journals (Perera 2025). We use this term not because we agree with or wish to perpetuate its widespread usage, but *because* of its ubiquity. In conversations with policy-makers, media, and other academics – either

as colleagues or study participants – they all immediately broadly understand what 'predatory publishing' entails. Like 'white collar crime' (Green 2004), 'predatory publishing' carries connotations that oversimplify circumstances and (mis)attribute blame, sparking debate amongst academics seeking more appropriate terminology. Nonetheless, the term has pervaded speech in both academic and general audiences and serves as a shorthand in discourse between diverse communities. Our call for a holistic and geopolitically nuanced approach to 'predatory publishing' reinforces that our perspective of this complex issue goes beyond this simplistic terminology.

1. Changing dynamics of 'predatory publishing'

'Predatory publishing' is an evolving landscape. When the debate on predatory journals emerged in the early 2010s following Jeffrey Beall's blog *Scholarly Open Access*, we were dealing primarily with small-scale journals, published mostly in English from non-Anglophone peripheral countries. Their business model relied on low Article Processing Charges (APCs) – sometimes as little as 50 or 100 USD – and they typically operated for only a few months or years, often ceasing activity soon after being included on Beall's list (Kulczycki et al. 2021). This now historical situation can be regarded as the *first phase* of predatoriness and its associated business practices. In contrast, over the past few years, we have entered what we describe as the *second* and *third phases*.

In the second phase, the label 'predatory' (or questionable) began to be applied to large new OA publishing houses such as Hindawi, Frontiers, or MDPI, primarily due to their business practices, including charging high APCs, conducting rapid editorial processes, aggressively soliciting researchers, and publishing a disproportionate number of special issues compared to traditional publishers (e.g. Oviedo-García 2021). We now, however, observe developments that increasingly justify a third phase. On one side, questionable publishers are becoming legitimised by, for instance, acquiring journals from renowned publishers or entering into national or institutional agreements, and mega-journals have been normalised. On the other side, publishers traditionally considered reputable are mimicking the practices typical of 'predators' in the second phase. Take the case of Springer Nature's Discovery series adopting MDPI's aggressive solicitation, fast review,[1] and practice of cascading submissions through journals,[2] but with cheaper APCs (Strain Team 2025). Additionally, Springer Nature's Cureus was delisted from Web of Science and Elsevier's Heliyon's indexation paused over concerns about their publication practices and content quality (Retraction Watch 2024, 2025). Classifying journals as questionable because they prioritise commercial interest over academic logics is now unreliable given the high APCs and corresponding profit margins of many so-called reputable publishers (Haustein et al. 2024).

These developments are reflected in scholars' attitudes: when we recently interviewed researchers about questionable publishing practices (QPPs), they immediately raised the practices of commercial publishers (e.g. unaffordable APCs, excessive delays in publication) rather than individuals engaging in plagiarism, p-hacking, etc. With the rise of social media, researchers are now calling out QPPs immediately, often directing their criticism at publishers' profit-driven practices and their disregard for maintaining the quality of scholarly knowledge (e.g. Sample 2025). Nowadays, the QPPs most at the forefront of researchers' minds and affecting their daily work lives are seemingly those of publishers rather than their peers. We thus emphasise the importance of adopting a diachronic perspective that understands the dynamic nature of the actors, their roles, and the practices involved in the 'predatory publishing' phenomenon.

2. Linking research evaluation and 'predatory publishing'

'Predatory publishing' appears intricately linked to the central role of publications in research evaluation. The ongoing metricization and economisation of academia has generated significant publication pressures, incentivising quantity over quality and encouraging scholars and institutions to maximise measurable outputs rather than meaningful contributions (Kulikowski et al. 2026). Publication quotas, for example, might motivate scholars to publish in outlets offering quick peer review (Mills and Inouye 2021). Further, evaluation procedures that rely on classifications of journals, such as in black/white-lists, are challenged with distinguishing reputable from questionable journals (Pölönen et al. 2021), potentially resulting in mismatches between evaluative bodies' and research communities' valuations of journals and subsequent publication choices. Consequently, QPPs are not an aberration of the system but an unintended consequence of how highly metricized systems function. Further, the cumbersome nature of evaluation systems, often embedded in national science policies, means they are always playing catch-up to the more agile actors in the market-based publishing system, perpetuating an asynchronous interaction between evaluations and QPPs. The campaign against predatory journals may thus obscure a deeper problem: the dissolution of scholarly communication into journal metrics and citation counts, with little attention to the actual knowledge claims being made.

Despite the apparent links, establishing a causal relationship between research evaluation and QPPs is challenging. Experimental conditions are rarely feasible and complications arise related to, for example, observation periods, lags in effects, and covarying factors in highly inter-dependent systems (Aagaard and Schneider 2016). Further, the relationship cannot be seen as unidirectional. While scholarly practices are often assumed to be an effect of evaluation measures, scholars are simultaneously evaluating and being evaluated in different contexts, such as peer review and funding panels, thereby actively shaping evaluations and not always in accordance with steering policies by external actors (Cramer and Reinhart 2026). Myriad potential factors influencing (Q)PPs must thus be considered to empirically and theoretically disentangle the complex relationships between evaluation and practice. For instance, establishing the effect of the availability of comparatively less-scrutinised outlets, such as mega-journals that emphasise accuracy over novelty, or the strategic pursuit of

high positions in global university rankings by national governments to achieve political goals. Furthermore, as QPPs may be considered deviant behaviour and could be expected to receive negative social reactions, the (in)existence of negative consequences for authors who engage in them implies looking at the evaluation ecosystems in order to understand the reactions to author's and editor's decisions about publishing in so-called predatory journals. We assert that such disentangling efforts require experts – ideally multidisciplinary and geographically-distributed teams thereof – embedded and socialised in the local context and, as we later explicate, utilising mixed-method approaches.

3. Geopolitical dimensions of predatoriness

'Predatory publishing' is also fundamentally linked to global asymmetries in the science system, both on the material and symbolic level (Cramer 2025). The dynamics and logics of both reputable and questionable publishers address certain science systems and scholars in the Global South particularly aggressively as emerging markets. Regardless, the dominant publishers, editors and peer reviewers, who gatekeep the validation and circulation of scholarly knowledge, are still largely based in the Global North (Alatas 2003). This structural inequality frames the problem of predatory publishing, insofar as researchers from less favoured regions face greater difficulties – both due to economic costs and their 'remoteness' from centres of decision-making – in publishing in traditional journals (Monroe-White and Woodson 2016). Given that research evaluation measures often construct 'international' publications as superior (Vasen et al. 2023), scholars are incentivised to publish in outlets that market themselves as such or use predatory outlets or mislocated centres of scholarly communication to fulfill their evaluation requirements (Krawczyk and Kulczycki 2021). For example, in some contexts, a journal's prestige may arise simply from including terms like *International Journal of…* in its title (Shah et al. 2024), by publishing in English outside a domestic academic market (Kulczycki 2023), or being indexed in commercial databases like Web of Science or Scopus. In addition, on a symbolic level, scholars from the South are disproportionately suspected of QPPs and their contributions framed as 'substandard'. This dynamic must be situated in the context of younger and still-consolidating science systems, colonial legacies and Occidentalist paradigms that impose epistemic hierarchies (Rodríguez Medina 2014; Vessuri et al. 2014; Hesselmann 2019; Kreimer 2019).

We must acknowledge that what is considered 'predatory' in countries central in the science system may be viewed as legitimate, or even desirable, in the contexts of (semi-)peripheral countries. Prestige and credibility are often pluralistic and locally defined (Mills and Branford 2022). Additionally, research on 'predatory publishing' must consider that evaluation regimes are embedded in distinct political economies of academia, and that the notion of predatoriness is not universal but culturally, methodologically, and institutionally contingent.

4. The necessity of mixed-method approaches to a contestable concept

Bibliometrics is frequently used to examine QPPs, particularly in determining their scale and distribution. However, such quantitative approaches typically necessitate some form of standardisation and definition: certain outlets or scholarly practices must first be classified as questionable in order to explore them bibliometrically. Unfortunately, these classifications are often characterised by biases against content that does not conform with the Western perspective of scholarly communication (Teixeira da Silva and Kimotho 2022). Quantitative analyses that rely on pre-defined blacklists or whitelists then risk reproducing existing biases and overlooking structural dynamics. In contrast, inductive, qualitative approaches based on 'spontaneous' definitions of behaviours capture scholars' or policy-makers' meaning-making around what counts as QPPs in a given context. Through interviews, we can unearth scholars' perceptions and experiences of QPPs and their consequences in their local context, and the disciplinary or institutional norms invisible in document analysis or publication records (e.g. Satalkar and Shaw 2019). For instance, hiring processes in which the publishing activity of scholars is considered are often disclosed, yet crucial instances in which scholarly communities collectively discuss what constitutes bad publishing are invisible, highlighting the need for qualitative investigations.

Given the geopolitical undercurrent to the predatory publishing discussion, using qualitative methods affords the extra sensitivity necessary to contextual and cultural differences, and allows both a closer look into power dynamics, at personal and institutional levels, and ways of working within or against the hegemonic model of what science should be that is imposed by the Global North. The contestable nature of what constitutes a QPP thus calls for a pragmatic approach that complements and triangulates qualitative accounts incorporating this context-dependency with quantitative data to develop quasi-generalisable models of the relationship between evaluation and QPPs (e.g. Bloch et al. 2014). Finally, while a mixed-method approach bridges the divide between descriptive and indicative and personal and experiential, a multidisciplinary and geographically diverse team can also identify and connect dimensions not easily identified in a mono-disciplinary approach, further strengthening the holistic approach to studying 'predatory publishing'.

5. Conclusion

We have highlighted four conceptual and methodological challenges to studying 'predatory publishing'. We argue that scholars' framing of this phenomenon in relation to these dimensions has direct consequences for the results and recommendations that emerge from their research. As a result, we encourage researchers to take a more holistic perspective of 'predatory publishing' that accounts for its dynamism, complex connection to research evaluation, and geopolitical dimensions, and utilise pragmatic, mixed methods approaches.

Conflicts of interest

None declared.

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Notes

1. E.g. promoting a median of 5-21 days from submission to first decision for biological science journals, https://link.springer.com/brands/discover/journals/biological-sciences accessed 7 November 2025
2. E.g. 'Discover journals share in a Springer Nature-wide mission to provide a home for all research', 'A home for all good work across the diverse research community', 'Your work will find the community it needs'. from https://link.springer.com/brands/discover/about, accessed 7 November 2025.

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