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PREDATORY PUBLISHING AND BEALL'S LIST: LESSONS FOR THE COUNTRIES ADAPTING NOVEL RESEARCH EVALUATION CRITERIA

Academic publishing is important both for academics and research and educational institutions, since it plays a significant role in institutional evaluation and rankings. In most countries, the desirable academic output represents publications in journals indexed in Scopus and Web of Science databases. However, even some of these journals were included in the so-called "Beall's List", a blog that claimed to feature the list of open-access "predatory" journals (i.e. journals publishing scientific nonsense for money). Czech Republic was one of the Eastern European countries that was severely affected by this phenomenon. According to some estimates, between 2009 and 2013 many Czech universities and research institutions made about 2 million USD on payments from the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport for the papers and monographs published by the "predatory" publishers. Even though Scopus and Web of Science remain the main criterion for journals selection in the Czech Republic, some critics try to undermine the prestige of these databases. However, it become obvious that drifting away from Scopus and Web of Sciencein order to create local publication standards might lead to a situation in which a small group of local academics would make decisions on which articles (and which journals) are good and which are bad, and therefore control academic careers and job promotions for their own benefit.

Keywords: *academic publishing, Scientometrics, predatory journals, Bealls's List, Scopus, Web of Science*

Introduction

In today's globalized world, the pressure on researchers and academics about producing more scientific output in the form of journal papers and monographs is getting higher with every year. The competition for the low-paid jobs in the academic is getting tougher too.

The question "where" to publish is not an easy one. Luckily, there exist two prestigious academic databases – Scopus and Web of Science – that are international, unbiased and provide the conditions for fair competition amongst academics. If one author has more publications in these databases than the other, she or he is automatically considered to be a better and more productive researcher.

Some of the journals indexed in Scopus and Web of Science are the open-access journals. Open Access (OA) publishing model emerged as the alternative to the large publishing companies that controlled the vast share of the academic publishing market. OA model lets the authors pay for the publication of their papers once they are peer-reviewed and accepted for publication (so-called "author pays principle"). However, in spite of all its advantages, the OA became a target of many attacks from its critics who virtually blame all OA journals for being "predatory" (i.e. luring researchers and offering them to publish their papers for money without proper peer review or without any review at all) [1]. The invention of "predatory" journals led to the unprecedented witch hunts in many countries where the researchers who strictly followed the publishing guidelines of their academic institutions and published in the journals indexed in Scopus and Web of Science databases were blamed for violating the imaginary "ethical publishing standards" by their envious colleagues seeking to gain academic recognition and promotion for themselves in spite of their poor research output.

This **paper aims at** to summarize the discussion on the phenomenon of "predatory" journals and draw the lessons for the countries that recently adapted the requirements for publishing in journals indexed in Scopus and Web of Science databases.

Research methods

The term "predatory" journals was invented by Jeffrey Beall, a librarian from the University of Colorado

Denver [2]. Although Jeffrey Beall is considered to be an academic expert in questionable publishing practices by many scientists, one has to remember that he always acknowledged himself quite openly that his list included just "potential, possible, or probable predatory scholarly open-access journals". The choice of words "potential, possible and probable" speaks for itself – Beall's List never meant to be a definitive list of journals and only served as a reference point, a personal opinion of an individual expressed on his personal blog – and it was and is meant to be treated as such.

Moreover, "Beall's List" has never been officially recognized or made official, by any means, in most of the countries in the world, for instance in the Czech Republic where the researchers are recently preoccupied by the debates and mutual accusations of "predatory" publishing [3] and invent new publishing rules for themselves and among themselves that differ from the official publishing guidelines set up by the Czech authorities and by the Czech universities themselves. Beall's List featured "potential, possible, or probable predatory scholarly open-access journals" without directly accusing any of them. The list existed for several years and gained a notable number of supporters. However, it did not survive for long. On January 17, 2017, Jeffrey Beall mysteriously shut down his blog, removed it from the Internet and stopped all his online activities altogether (even though he is still invited as a speaker to various conferences on "predatory" publishing, most often to the countries that he used to blame for recognizing the papers published in the "predatory" journals).

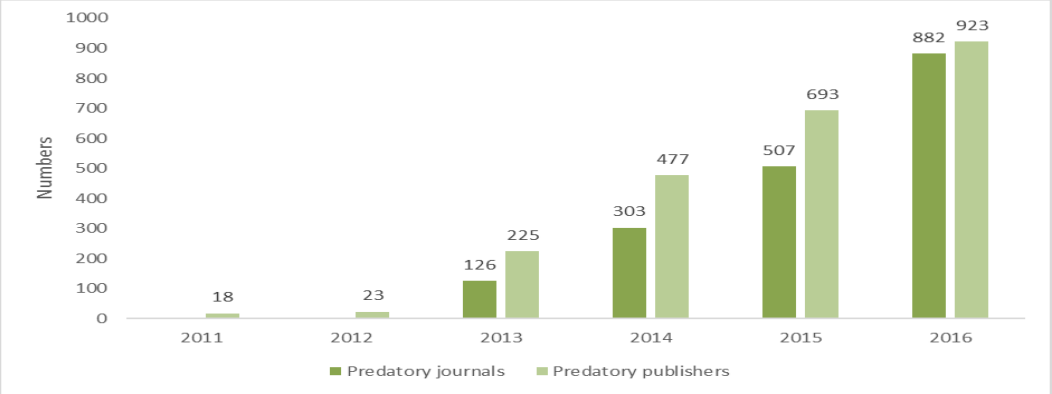

Fig. 1: Number of "predatory" journals according in 2011-2016

Source: https://scholarlyoa.com/2016/01/05/bealls-list-of-predatory-publishers-2016/ Accessed on: 30.10.2017

In spite of all its supporters, one has to acknowledge that Beall's List was full of many controversies. Charging a fee does not necessarily makes any given journal "predatory" - many reputable journals published by the reputable publishing houses charge publication fees based on their "author pays principle" or offering the authors to grant open access to their published papers (therefore helping to increase downloading and citations) in exchange for hefty sums. One of the most notable examples is the PLoS ONE journal published by the Public Library of Science (PLOS) or Scientific Reports published by Nature (now part of the Springer Nature group): the paper acceptance fee in both journals ranges from $1500 to $2000. In spite of the high fees, both journals are loved by many scientists who have to find grants or other means of support to publish their papers in these lucrative publishing outlets.

One has to remember and keep in mind that Beall constantly updated his list by adding and removing the journals or publishers. No one agreed on what had to be done with the journals and publishers who used to be on Beall's list but were removed. Also, it was not very clear what to do about the journals which were not on Beall's list previously, when someone published her or his papers in them, but appeared on the list recently. All in all, it was never clear whom to believe and how far the indexation went. For instance, there was a well-known case of MDPI, a publishing house from Switzerland. In 2014, MDPI was added to Beall's List. However, Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association (OASPA) investigation concluded that MDPI met the OASPA membership criteria. Subsequently, MDPI was removed from Mr. Beall's list on the 28th of October 2015. MDPI's journals currently appear in UK's prestigious ABS Academic Journal Guide 2015. Many Czech academics, including the highly-ranked officials of the most prestigious universities in the country publish their papers in MDPI journals such as *Sensors* and *Viruses*. They also publish extensively in *PLoS ONE*, a journal that pioneered the Open Access and that Jeffrey Bell repeatedly criticised calling it a failure [4]. Another example of a wrongly accused publisher was Hindawi, an Egyptian publisher which was once considered predatory by Beall and added to his list just to be removed a year later. Many academics (including those from the Czech Republic) published and are still publishing in Hindawi journals. Should they also be considered "predators" who are blood-sucking the state budget for science, research and publications till the last drop?

The issue of "predatory" journals seem to bother many academics but the Czech academics seem to be particularly preoccupied with it.

Until recently, Czech social scientists did not bother much about publishing in English and in top academic journals. Most of them published their research in Czech and in local peer-reviewed journals and proceedings. Locally-published books and monographs were considered to be of higher importance for boosting careers and acquiring academic position and degrees.

This situation changed about 7-8 years ago, when the stress started to being put on publishing in journals listed in Thomson Reuters ISI Web of Knowledge database. In those days, all academic journals listed in this database were considered "prestigious peer-reviewed journals" without distinguishing between the rankings of the journals.

In 2013, the situation fundamentally changed when the Research, Development and Innovation Council of the Czech Republic adapted its *Methodology of remuneration for academic publications in the Czech Republic for the years of 2013-2016*. In accordance with the new methodology, the remuneration was conducted based on the points assigned to each publication based on its weight and significance. Publications with an IF and indexed in ISI Web of Knowledge and publications indexed in Scopus gained similar status.

In accordance with the methodology mentioned above, Czech academics had to submit a list of their publications to their Departments or Institutes. The publications are then evaluated at the Department level, then the whole Faculty level, and then submitted via an electronic system to the Central Library (e.g. in the case of the Charles University in Prague) level. The library then compiled the lists and submitted them to the RIV submission system (a governmental scientific database that listed all research publications by all universities and research institutions in the Czech Republic – the database was shut down in 2016, allegedly for the financial and legal reasons – so it is difficult to check now who published which papers and who claimed what credit for them, even though the information and data in Scopus and WoS databases are readily available and can be easily mined).

Each publication was assigned a certain number of points (from 10 to 305). The monetary value of the single point in 2014 was set at about 4000 CZK (about 150 EUR) with the decline in subsequent years to 3000 CZK (110 EUR) and lower. Based on these criteria, the monetary reward was calculated for each Czech institution (the money is divided proportionally between the Czech institutions and the foreign co-authors were not rewarded). The money for each publication output went to the respective institution (University or the research institute), where about one half of it is kept at the Rectorate or higher management level for the institutional needs, and the rest went to the department or the institute where the respective author originated from. The departments and institutes took the money and paid the reward to the authors (quarterly or annually) in accordance with their internal guidelines. In most of the cases, a remuneration for the Scopus-indexed publication varied between 3000 CZK (110 EUR) and 10000 CZK (370 EUR), while a paper in a journal indexed in Web of Science would yield from 10000 CZK (370 EUR) to 20000-30000 CZK (750-1100 EUR), depending on the value of the impact-factor. Hence, the rules for academic publishing in the Czech Republic were that only publications listed in Scopus and WoS databases were acknowledged and rewarded. Moreover, the system of control (i.e. the system that checked which publication gets into the system) was very strict and had at least three upper levels of internal control. Furthermore, it was the University or the research institute that mostly profited from the publications, since the Czech authors received just a small margin of the money allocated and based on the points attributed to their publications.

With regard to the above, it seems surprising that in spite of such clear rules and guidelines for publishing there has been a big debate in the Czech media (which was without any doubt inspired and incentivized by the crooked Czech academics) about whether to punish those researchers who published their paper in the journals indexed in Scopus and WoS but also featured, at one point of time or another, in the Beall's List. There have even been voices raised by some (mostly left-wing) academic radicals who demanded those researchers should be expelled from their universities. However, as it appears, if the researchers were expelled from the Czech universities for publishing in predatory journals, the majority universities in the country would have to be shut down for the lack of staff. In the Czech academic community, everyone and his mother are publishing in predatory journals and vanity press outlets. The numbers and facts speak for themselves: according to the estimates made by *Věda žije* ("Science Lives"), a public initiative, between 2009 and 2013 almost all Czech universities made around $2 million from their researchers their papers and monographs in "predatory" publishing outlets [5]. Publishing diploma theses as research monographs with *Lambert Academic Publishing*, allegedly a "predatory" and "vanity press" outlet, was also very popular. However, as it often happens in this world, the darkest place is always under the candlestick. Publishing in the journal that were listed on "Beall's List" was a norm in the Czech Republic. Since many Czech academics are unlikely to survive outside the walls of their universities and research institutions and are unemployable elsewhere except for the corrupt academia, they are prepared to go to great length to hold on to their jobs and get their portion of the academic pie. Thence, the real question is who profited from this storm in a teacup and "predatory journals scandal"? The explanation can be probably found elsewhere than in the ongoing debates over the "Beall's List" and its disappearance: in 2009, the Czech government wanted to introduce dramatic cuts to the funding of the Czech Academy of Sciences. The whole situation resulted in massive protests by the employees of the Academy of Sciences led by the sociologists, philosophers, historians and other social scientists. Barricades were built and demonstrations were sum-

moned. The government revoked its decision but introduced a system of funding based on publication outputs in journals listed in Scopus and WoS. Now, 8 years later, it seems that the very same people who headed the protests and pledged to "save the Czech science" are struggling with the research criteria imposed on them by the Czech government and are looking for ways how to draw the public attention away from their own problems and to make money without producing any valuable research output. The tail is clearly wagging the dog.

Discussion

The main criticism of Beall's List is that Beall made it look like the predatory or low-quality publishing were a phenomenon of Open Access journals and never existed before it. Moreover, it is obvious that Beall favoured toll-access publishers, especially large publishing houses.

Beall's List never provided any clear recommendation on what to do about the journals suspected of predatory practices that were also indexed in reputable citation databases such as Scopus or the Web of Science. Should the researchers publish in them anyway or should they search for some other lists and publishing ethics committees' guidelines now that Beall's List is gone? And if so, who will appoint these committees or who will decide which journals are good and which are bad? One can rightfully ask: "*Who is going to guard the guardians?*". *Even though many criticize the uncritical treatment of bibliometrics and developments in "political economy of meta-data"* offered by Scopus and Web of Science, they fail to suggest a better alternative.

Many supporters of Beall's List actually made the good candidates for being included in it. A good example of that is Tereza Stöckelová, an Editor-in-Chief of the English edition of the *Sociologickýčasopis* (*Czech Sociological Review*) who fiercely supported Beall's List and all the nonsense it represented but published in the journal she edited bypassing the peer review and using it for her own agenda (for instance criticizing European Sociological Association for charging 40 EUR for the conference dinner in a luxury restaurant at Vltava River [6]). Another example was a "perspective" paper on "predatory" open access publishers that appeared in the Czech journal called *Acta Informatica Pragensia* in 2015 and was in fact written by the journal's technical editors, Zdeněk Smutný and Václav Řezníček, who also bypassed the peer review to spread their political agenda [7].

All in all, it becomes clear that Beall's List was used by its many supporters for their own purposes and often political and economic agenda. It was also used for academic wars and led to the deterioration from focusing on high-quality research and publishing in the journals listed in Scopus and Web of Science.

Conclusions

After the "Beall's List" is gone for good and its supporters are left without anything to use in their academic wars, everyone is in search of alternative measures to tackle "predatory" publishing. Perhaps, Beall's list was a good reference but it was never officially recognized by the authorities in most of the countries – including the Research, Development and Innovation Council of the Czech Republic. The main criterion always remained whether the publication was published in a journal listed in Scopus or Web of Science.

One has to acknowledge, however, that getting one's paper through all that troubles with the peer review process and acceptance for publication is a very painful and cumbersome process. Therefore, it is quite understandable that many researchers feel frustrated about it and prefer to enjoy the freedom of publishing book chapters and monographs rather than playing the publication game with journals indexed at Elsevier's Scopus and Clarivate Analytics' Web of Sciencedatabases, one of the few (and perhaps the largest) well-established and solid players on the academic publishing market today. However, everyone who went through the peer reviews and has dozens of papers in Scopus and WoS knows very well that journal peer review is often more rigorous than book proposals (especially if those books are published in local obscure publishing houses with colleagues as members of the editorial committees). Accusing the others of publishing too much in recognized journals only reveals the weaknesses of those who prefer writing nonsense on their personal blogs to creating valid academic output.

The sad story of how the Beall's List was used for academic wars and witch hunts can be used as a lesson for those countries that are thinking of or have recently introduced the novel research evaluation criteria. It appears that it would be better to leave it this way since any attempts to create local "lists" would only lead to the situation in which small groups of academic would have the power of sacking or promoting other academics based on their own opinion. This situation is clearly not democratic and violates academic freedom.

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«ХИЖАЦЬКІ» ВИДАВНИЦТВА ТА СПИСОК БІЛЛА: УРОКИ ДЛЯ КРАЇН, ЯКІ АДАПТУЮТЬСЯ ДО НОВИХ КРИТЕРІВ ОЦІНКИ ДОСЛІДЖЕНЬ

Академічне видання є важливим як для наукових працівників, так і для науково-освітніх установ, оскільки відіграє важливу роль в інституційній оцінці та рейтингу. У більшості країн бажані академічні результати представляють публікації в журналах, індексованих в базах даних Scopus та Web of Science. Проте навіть деякі з цих журналів були включені до так званого «Beall's List», блогу, який стверджував, що він містить список «хижих» журналів з відкритим доступом (наприклад, журнали, що публікують наукову дурницю за гроші). Чеська Республіка була однією з країн Східної Європи, яка сильно постраждала від цього явища. За деякими оцінками, за період з 2009 по 2013 рр. багато чеських університетів та науково-дослідних установ отримали від Міністерства освіти, молоді та спорту Чехії близько 2 млн. доларів за статті та монографії, опубліковані «хижацькими» видавцями. Хоча Scopus і Web of Science залишаються основним критерієм вибору журналів у Чеській Республіці, деякі критики намагаються підірвати престиж цих баз даних. Проте стає очевидним, що віддалені від Scopus та Web Science з метою створення місцевих стандартів публікації можуть призвести до ситуації, коли невелика група місцевих науковців прийме рішення про те, які статті (і які журнали) є добрими та поганими, і, отже, контролювати академічну кар'єру та просування по службі на власну користь.

Ключові слова: академічна публікація, наукометрика, хижі журнали, список Билла, Scopus, Web of Science.

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