How I became easy prey

I had heard about “predatory” journals during my graduate training but had no experience with them. The email appeared legitimate. It spelled my name correctly, referenced some of my previous work, and used correct grammar. The journal wasn’t on Beall’s List of Predatory Journals and Publishers. I thought I had done my due diligence. I submitted my manuscript. Shortly after, I celebrated the first round of favorable reviews. Things were going great—or so I thought.

Maybe it was the daily emails requesting my revisions, but something started to seem off. I rechecked Beall’s list—still nothing. I found that a postdoc at my institution was listed on the journal’s website as a member of the editorial board. I sent him an email asking about his experience with the journal, hoping he would confirm its legitimacy. That’s when the roof started to cave in. My colleague explained that he had never actually worked with the journal. He eventually realized that it wasn’t a reputable publication, but he hadn’t been able to get his name removed from the website. Then a trusted mentor suggested that I check up on the parent publisher. There it was, on Beall’s infamous list. My stomach tightened. I had fallen prey to a predatory journal. I worried that publishing in such a journal could hurt my tenure case and harm my reputation as a scientist.

I asked the journal to withdraw my manuscript from review, figuring that was the logical next step. They demanded that I justify my decision and debated my right to withdraw, insisting that I pay at least $400 to do so. After an exchange of emails—akin to “no way,” “yes way,” and “no way”—and one phone call demanding payment, I informed the journal that we were at an impasse and diverted all correspondence to the trash. I submitted the manuscript to a demonstrably legitimate journal, believing that I had put the mess behind me.

That is, until a few months later, when I noticed an email in my spam folder from the predatory journal congratulating me on my recent publication and requesting payment. I googled the title of my manuscript and found that it had indeed been published. I was horrified: My manuscript had been in review at the legitimate journal for months, and this revelation would jeopardize its publication.

To my relief, the editor of the legitimate journal agreed to continue the review process, provided my article was withdrawn from the predatory journal. I confronted the predatory journal again and received another demand for $400, this time for removing my manuscript from the online publication. This was pure extortion, and I refused. Bewildered about how to move forward, I again reached out to my mentor. His email reply simply read “Not good,” and we got to work on a plan. After a week’s worth of back and forth correspondence, including a document on official university letterhead and threats of legal action and wide exposure, we finally persuaded the journal to withdraw the work and dismiss the fees. However, 4 weeks later, the manuscript is still available online.

I fell into this trap because of my ignorance. I now ignore every invitation to publish my research in any journal. And I know to be wary of any offer that comes via email, whether from journals or international conferences. After all, time spent on manuscript hostage negotiations doesn’t count toward tenure.

Alan H. Chambers is an assistant professor at the University of Florida in Homestead. Send your career story to SciCareerEditor@aaas.org.
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