

Masaryk University's (MU) statement on scientific publishing

The publishing landscape has undergone significant changes in recent years, resulting in an increase in the volume of scientific literature and considerable disciplinary and technological diversity and openness. While this development is inevitable and undoubtedly desirable, it can be disorienting for some members of the wider scientific community and the general public. The benefits of open science, but also the cornerstone of scientific publishing – i.e. reliable peer review – may be undermined by parasitic practices that prey on the scientific publication system, such as predatory journals and publishers.

There is no doubt that journals and other publication channels referred to as predatory are a major problem in academia, both for the system as a whole and for the careers of individual academics and researchers. Masaryk University takes an uncompromising stance against all scientific practices that go beyond the ethics of academic work and is also critical of practices that use predatory publishers. At the same time, however, such a rigorous stance must not be based on inappropriate, unfair or reductive arguments that do not take into account the full context of the matter in terms of time and the content itself.

Predatory publications

In 2008, Jeffrey Beall, a librarian at the University of Colorado, began compiling a list of “potential, possible, and probable predatory scholarly open access publishers” based on his personal experience with generic emails inviting academics to join the editorial boards of obscure journals. While he developed a set of criteria for including publishers on the list, it was maintained as a purely personal project and was never institutionalised or systematised. Although Beall was subsequently forced to abandon the project as a result of pressure from several publishing houses on his home university, he provided an invaluable service to the academic community, primarily by raising awareness of the issue and drawing attention to potentially problematic publishers and journals. Naturally, the list has been the subject of some controversy. Its inconsistencies and the need for more objective methods were also pointed out to Beall by his academic colleagues. His project was never able to overcome these limitations, and the list was removed from the website in 2017. Its out-of-date copy has since been maintained by an anonymous operator.

While the contribution of Beall's work is undeniable, it must be emphasised that it represents only a historical snapshot, which is becoming increasingly outdated as scientific publishers and journals evolve and undergo organisational change, and can therefore no longer be considered authoritative. **For this reason, Masaryk University rejects as a matter of principle any unqualified application of the historical Beall's list to current problems – which is unfortunately being done more and more often – and as a tool for assessing scientific work by people who lack the expertise and knowledge to understand it in its complexity.** Inexpert assessment of complex research problems and processes is not only inappropriate, but can be destructive to further scientific inquiry and the presentation of its results to the professional community and the general public. We therefore feel it is our duty to explain and dispel some of the misconceptions that have emerged in Czech public discourse.

The most common example of a predatory publisher is one that preys on scientific publishing to maximise its financial profit while circumventing a systematic peer review process, often through practices such as creating fake editorial boards and imitating the names of reputable and trusted scientific journals. On the basis of some fairly straightforward characteristics (such as demonstrably untrue information about the journal), certain journals can be identified as clearly predatory in the established sense of the word, but the problem can also extend to book publishers. **Masaryk University considers the phenomenon of publishing in journals and non-periodicals owned by predatory publishers to be unacceptable for its**

staff and students and believes that it should be avoided as a matter of principle. However, publishers do not always act in a clear-cut manner and there is a grey area between predatory and non-predatory journals where publications cannot be clearly marked as fraudulent or of poor quality. This grey area usually includes publishers that adhere to peer review as the fundamental principle of scholarly publishing, but use various other methods to increase their profits. For example, they try to reduce the rejection rate, use aggressive marketing practices, or flood the publishing landscape with too many “special issues”. Some members of the academic community are adamantly opposed to publishing in journals owned by such grey zone publishers, but most institutions only make recommendations and try to educate members of their community about them. It is up to each institution to determine the degree of rigour with which it approaches publication in such journals when assessing the performance of its staff and their research outputs. Recognising the potential negative consequences for individual researchers’ careers and for external research assessment, MU provides targeted support and training to its researchers to prevent publication in low quality journals. The example of MU and many other universities shows that the academic community already has effective tools for distinguishing quality, setting publication standards and establishing organisational culture. Examples include the authoritative recommendation to refrain from publishing in MDPI journals in 2023 (see <https://muni.cz/go/MDPI>), or the provision of university support services (including online learning tools) to help researchers assess whether a particular journal or publisher adheres to the principles of transparency and good practice. **Masaryk University welcomes the current public debate on this issue and will continue to promote good publishing practices. However, it calls on all parties to leave the assessment of academic work to professionals and experts, not only in terms of assessment methods but also in terms of disciplinary focus.**

Research assessment

Masaryk University takes the principled position that the quality of a scholarly work cannot be assessed solely on the basis of the journal- or other publication channel-level indicators, while at the same time respecting that academic work depends on a high degree of freedom and diversity for the pursuit of innovation, the development of individual talents and interdisciplinary cooperation. Evaluating research solely through the prism of the journal devalues the pursuit of diversity and relevance in areas that are not primarily based on the prestige of journals, which can lead to misinterpretations with serious consequences for science and research policy. The context of research evaluation is also important for understanding the issue of parasitic phenomena in scientific publishing. Inappropriate national and institutional research evaluation processes can have a reductive effect, leading to undesirable incentives in scientific publishing and research, but also creating the conditions for these parasitic phenomena to emerge. The Czech academic environment, including Masaryk University, has been affected by this problem in the past. The global initiative for more responsible research assessment was launched in 2012 with the *Declaration on Research Assessment*, which was only symbolically adopted by the Czech Academy of Sciences. MU has developed the values it has today by interacting with the international environment and finding ways to create conditions for research excellence and researcher satisfaction.

We believe that traditional assessment practices based on the prestige of journals, while still appropriate for some disciplines, also carry certain risks for society. With the change in national evaluation methodology since 2017, there has been a gradual shift in the culture of science and research evaluation from quantitative to qualitative methods. At the institutional level, in accordance with the international ***Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment*** of 2022 and its participation in the ***Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment*** (CoARA), **Masaryk University promotes the principles of assessment based on the meaning, content, relevance and quality of scientific work**, which it also applied in its

Internal Research and Doctoral Studies Evaluation in 2022. For doctoral studies, individual careers, habilitation and appointment procedures, MU has developed a system focused on the qualitative assessment of scientific work, which is enshrined in the founding documents of Masaryk University and its individual faculties and cultivated by a common university culture. The system is based on objective criteria, but takes into account the specificities of each discipline, and includes a set of tools and control mechanisms that ensure a critical approach that rigorously takes into account quality markers (functional disciplinary and scientific councils, multi-level checks of formal requirements and content), which are continuously revised as science evolves. In the near future, however, it will be necessary to intensify the discussion on functional areas, following the example of successful universities abroad, while at the same time revising the approach to scientific quality and its evaluation.

Masaryk University is demonstrably taking steps not only to cultivate its internal environment, but also to reduce incentives for academics and researchers to engage in undesirable behaviour in scientific publishing. At the same time, however, MU believes that the quality of scientific work cannot be assessed on the basis of a reductive selection of certain superficial characteristics. **Current attitudes to publishing in predatory or otherwise controversial journals cannot be applied retrospectively without further consideration.** For individuals, the extent, motivations, career implications and impact of such activity need to be assessed, and all relevant research activities need to be included in the overall verdict. For example, individuals should not be stigmatised because of a few publications in controversial journals if they have achieved significant scientific results, regularly produce high-quality content, and if it is reasonable to assume that they would have achieved scientific success even without publishing in such journals. Such an assessment needs to remain in the hands of experts in the particular discipline and information science specialists.