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STOP PREDATORY PRACTICES

REPORT FROM THE DISCUSSION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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Increasing Awareness of
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INTRODUCTION TO THE INITIATIVE

Predatory journals, publishers and conferences are a pressing problem for the entire academic community. Predatory practices can manifest in poor quality or incredibly fast peer review, imitation of reputable publishers, falsification of editorial boards, constant spamming of invitations to attend profit motivated conferences or to publish in similar journals, inclusion of false or fabricated citation indicators, and much more.

Our initiative aims at raising awareness of predatory practices across the research community. We will first identified the danger that predatory practices pose to the scientific community using discussions with the key stakeholders. From this, we will develop ready-to-go teaching module for training on predatory practices. Specific modules will be designed for Master's and PhD students, and both early-stage and senior researchers.

The initiative also includes popularising awareness of predatory practices across the Czech scientific community and beyond. We will create videos for TikTok and Instagram, presenting the issue of predatory practices in interactive and innovative form. A natural diffusion will be supported by a campaign on social networks (as mentioned above, plus on Twitter) and a module presentation on the web (the project website will serve as a repository for the outcomes created in this project). The project and its outcomes will also be discussed and presented to the professional community.

Our initiative is currently being realised with three months support of the IAP Grants Programme on Increasing Awareness of Predatory Academic Practices. After the end of the project it will be possible to use the created teaching module (it will be available on the project website) and the created videos/posts will still be available on social media.

The initiative is being undertaken in collaboration with the Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences, the Library of the Academy of Sciences, as well as Library of the Czech University of Life Science and members of the Information Education and Information Literacy Working Group (Assoc. of Libraries of Czech Universities).

MOTIVES FOR ORGANIZING A DISCUSSION

Goal of the discussion was to identify the needs of the scientific community in order to help shape a teaching module on predatory academic practices. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we changed our round table discussion plan into an online meeting. We held an online meeting of key stakeholders to gather information on predatory practices that plague the scientific community, that are not adequately covered in current information sources, and that are not but should have been taught in universities and research organisations.

PROMOTION OF DISCUSSION

We promoted our meeting through a variety of means, both online and offline. As part of the online promotion, we created an invitation on social networks (see Figure 2). The invitation was promoted via Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. We have also created a project website (available at www.stoppredatorypractice.com).

As we can see in the Figure 1 we organically reached over 7,000 Facebook users, 1,137 users on Twitter, 136 on Instagram and 28 through our website (data collected on 23 January 2022). We also sent out email invitations to existing networks (members of Information Education and Information Literacy Working Group of the Assoc. of Libraries of Czech Universities, as well as our other colleagues).

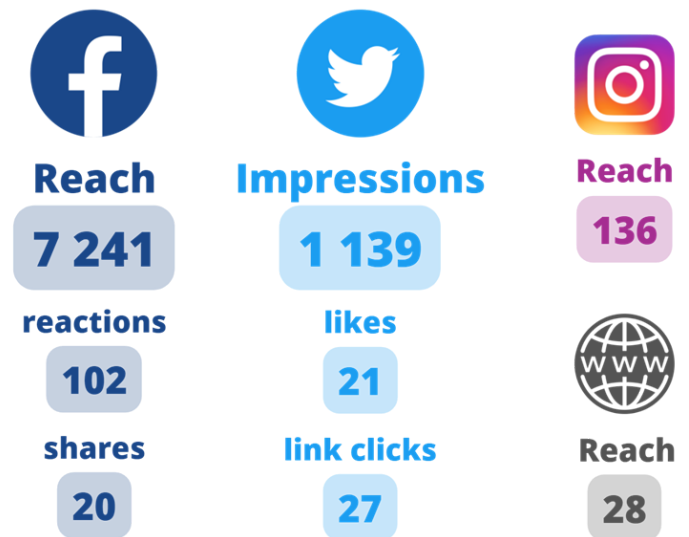


Figure 1 - Social media engagement

ONLINE PROPAGATION

An invitation for discussion (in Czech), which was disseminated via social networks, emails, etc.



Figure 2 - Invitation

OFFLINE PROPAGATION

As part of our offline promotion, we arranged for our event invitation to be projected on banners in the Czech University of Life Science in Prague (see Figure 3). As this happened on the university's open day, our invitation was seen by approx. 1000 people.

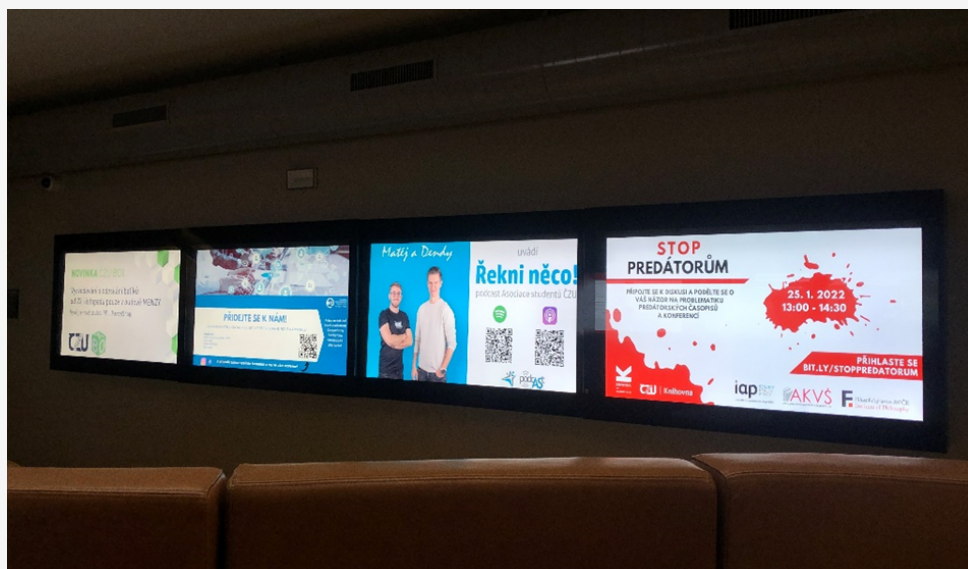


Figure 3 - Promotion on banner at the Czech University of Life Science in Prague

STAKEHOLDERS DISCUSSION

More than 50 participants from all over the Czech Republic took part in the discussion (see chapter Follow up questionnaire survey). As we have already mentioned, this was an online discussion because of the pandemic situation. The discussion took place on January 25th 2022 and lasted approximately 90 minutes. A member of our project team Kristýna Paulová led the discussion (see Figure 4). The rest of the team provided the necessary background.



Figure 4 - Photo from the stakeholders discussion

KEY THEMES IDENTIFIED BY STAKEHOLDERS

The discussion opened with questions **defining predatory practices**. As the participants mentioned, it is too complicated to make a distinction between a predatory and a trustworthy journal. Participants noted that Beall's list of potential predatory journals and publishers was a possibility, but now is out of date. Participants also mentioned that there is currently no reliable methodology to specify this boundary. At the same time, the increasing creativity and diversity of predatory practices creates a complex entity that is difficult to define. Discussants also pointed out that there is currently no methodology for detecting predatory journals and publishers that covers all aspects of predatory practices.

Discussants also expressed their perceptions of predatory practices which is illustrated in a word cloud (see Figure 5). The most used phrase was Poor Quality.



Figure 5 - Perceptions of predatory practices

Participants of the discussion also indicated that the issue of **predatory conferences** is currently neglected despite the fact it is a growing issue. Therefore, when defining predatory practices it is important to focus not only on predatory journals and publishers, but also on predatory conferences. **Special issues** of journals that show signs of predatory practices (e.g. rapid and questionable peer review, topics that are unrelated to the journal's main focus, etc.) are also an issue. Another problem mentioned by the discussants was the problem of **auto-citation of journals**.

Another interesting concept that deserves further specification is the term "**predatory researchers**", as researchers who e.g. deliberately fabricate data, conduct data dredging, p-hacking or deliberately publish in predatory journals. This term emerged from a Twitter discussion under the STOP Predators invitation. Although the term has been used several times, there is still no more information or a precise definition as to what makes a researcher predatory.

The second part of the discussion dealt with current and future issues and threats related to predatory practices. The discussion turned to research assessment in the context of the **publish-or-perish** environment. One discussant pointed to the issue of research and development funding in the Czech Republic, where some researchers have in the past tried to "milk the system" by focusing more on the quantity than the quality of their articles. There is also the problem of chasing the journal's impact factors, which is the deciding factor for some funders. As other participants in the discussion pointed out, this problem should already be solved by the current **evaluation of research and development** in the Czech Republic (Methodology for Evaluating Research Organisations and Research, Development and Innovation Purpose-tied Aid Programmes). However, the problem remains with journals and publishers that cannot be described as pure predators - for the purposes of this report, we call them **shady journals and publishers**.

One shady publisher that garnered frequent mention in our discussion is the **Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute (MDPI)**. Over 50% of the participants in the discussion are currently addressing MDPI at their institutions. The problem that the discussants see in the MDPI is the violation of the peer review process, its shortening and simplification. As one discussant stated, "the way MDPI tries to shorten the review process, the tactics they use - hiring a lot of reviewers often outside the field, often PhD Candidates or postdocs who are easily accessible, that is the main problem. Technically, the review process does go through, but it does not actually improve the quality of the manuscript." Another participant noted that not only in dealing with MDPI, but overall, it is not appropriate to generalise based on one or two experiences.

The discussion also addressed the **ethical level of publishing**, especially in regard to predatory practices. One discussant raised the question of differentiating cases in which publishing in predatory journals is due to ignorance and those in which it is due to the intent to get published easily. Another discussant brought up the interesting question: how should a researcher who accidentally published in a predatory journal proceed? Yet another recommended that the module should include negative examples of what can happen if someone publishes in a predatory journal, or examples of people who have clearly spoken out against predatory practices (Open Access Superheroes). Discussants also noted that predation, along with the shady journals and publishers that practice it, will be with us as long as the scientific community contributes to them, supports them with the publications, and declines to stand against them.

Discussants recognise a strong role for librarians to provide **scientometric support** to institutions (in terms of analysing questionable journals and publishers for institutional management; consulting scientists on the selection of appropriate journals; and monitoring developments on the European and global scene – not only in terms of predatory assets). As one participant pointed out – librarians' role is not to prepare lists of "recommended" journals, but to provide consultative services on journal selection. At the same time, it is not appropriate to rely only on bibliometric and scientometric measures, but to consider science from a broader perspective. It is also advisable to open up questions about the assessment of science, and constantly to look for new solutions on how to assess science (see e.g. DORA).

Part of the discussion was also devoted to the intended target audience of the upcoming teaching module. In this respect, the discussants did not find a clear answer. Some argued that evaluating and selecting journals is a matter for senior researchers (typically heads of departments, supervisors of PhD Candidate, deans, rectors), while others argued that the new generation of researchers should be educated in this area. One participant even noted that it is not appropriate to underestimate PhD Candidate because they have revolutionary potential.

The discussion aimed at capturing the key themes that our module should address. We noted down all the ideas, remarks and comments that were made during the discussion. After the discussion, we sent out a follow-up questionnaire (see chapter [Follow up questionnaire survey](#)) to all participants to identify the most important themes raised in the discussion (see Figure 6).

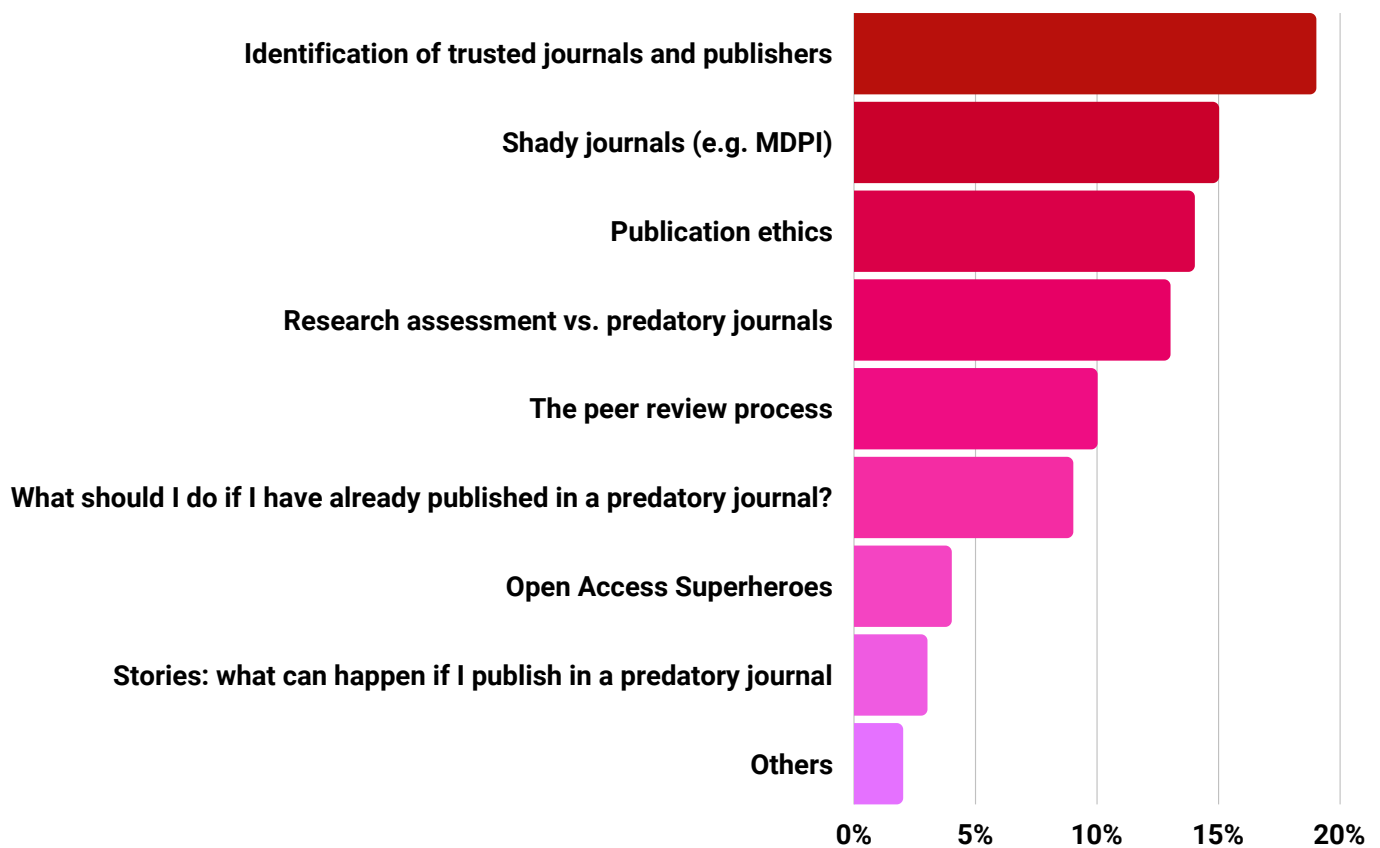


Figure 6 - Key topics from the discussion and it's relevance

The most important topics identified in the discussion were “Identification of trusted journals and publishers”, “Shady Journals” and “Publication ethics”. The result of this vote, the expertise and resources available on this issue will become the basis for a forthcoming teaching module.

PRACTICAL FEATURES OF THE PLANNED TEACHING MODULE

By contacting experts across different departments, we also got better ideas for preparing the teaching module. The aim is to make the module both easy to use and easy to adapt to different situations and the differing needs of individual trainers. In a follow-up questionnaire to the discussion, we asked participants about their preferred form of teaching, in terms of both the teaching format itself as well as different teaching methods.

According to the questionnaire results, the teaching module should be usable for face-to-face and online lectures, and should also support a combination of these forms. We will adapt the materials that will form the content of the teaching module to meet these requirements.

As you can see from the Figure 7 the most requested materials include presentations, reference materials, and worksheets for students. However, interactive methods, videos or suggestions for group exercises are also in high demand.

In the teaching module, we also provide methodological instructions for working with the entire module.

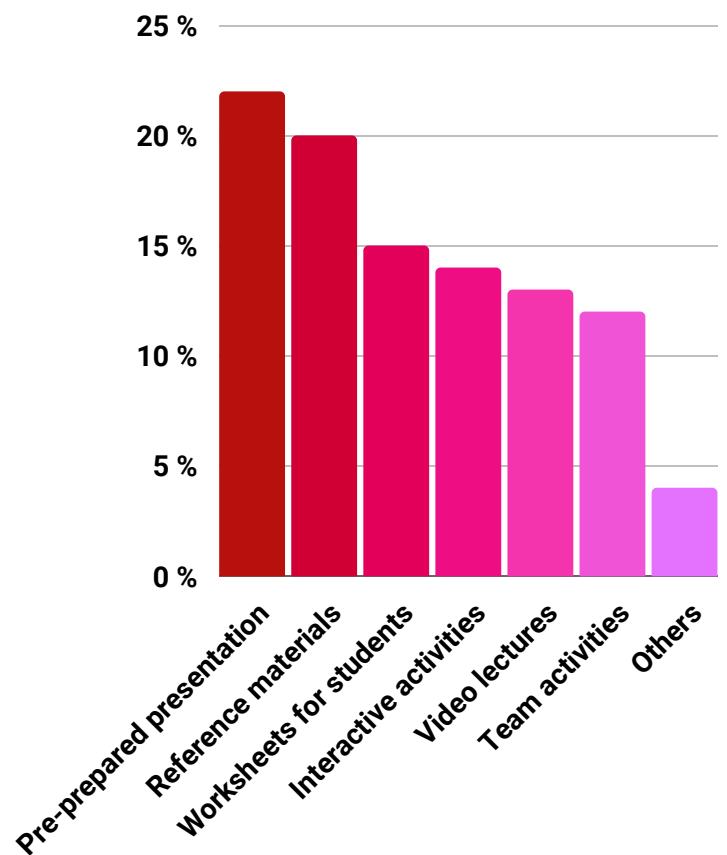


Figure 7 - Requested materials

All created materials will be embedded under a Creative Commons license on the project website (see link below).

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FOLLOW UP QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY

After the discussion, we sent out a short follow up questionnaire survey to the participants, which specified position and fields or research and development of participants. In the questionnaire, we also asked participants to indicate the most important themes that had emerged in the discussion. The return rate of the questionnaire survey was 56 %. The results of this survey are used as the basis for the graphs below. Data were collected from the end of the discussion (January 25, 2022) to January 28, 2022. We used Jamovi software to analyse the data (and Canva for graphical changes).

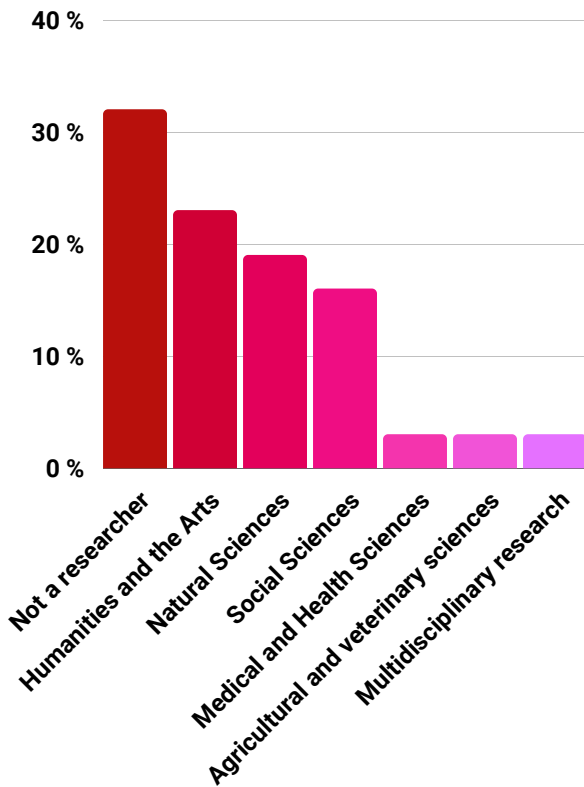


Figure 8 - Participants by Fields or Research and Development

Disciplines from across the spectrum were represented (see Figure 8). The Humanities and the Arts were the most represented group, followed by researchers from Social Sciences and Natural Sciences. Unfortunately, none of the representatives of Engineering and Technology completed the questionnaire survey (even though some representatives of this field were present at the discussion).

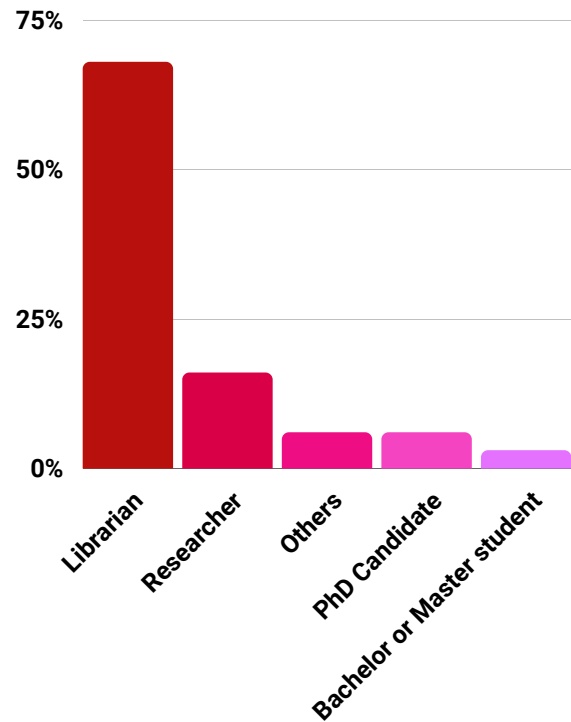


Figure 9 - Participants by position

Representatives of many groups participated in the online discussion - from BS and MS students, through PhD Candidates to researchers (see Figure 9), though librarians dominated the discussion. University support staff, and other anti-predator enthusiasts also participate in the discussion.

CONCLUDING SUMMARY AND FUTURE STEPS

The aim of the discussion was to identify the needs of the scientific community in combating predatory practices. Representatives from across the spectrum of the scientific community participated in the discussion.

Discussants perceive predatory practices at the level of individual journals, publishers and conferences, and even at the level of individual researchers (identified as predatory researchers). One of the biggest problems discussants see in determining a clear distinction between a predatory and a trustworthy journal. They perceive the concept of predatory practices primarily as a problem of low quality, scientific parasitism, and a matter of profit.

According to the participants, the most important topics of the discussion were "Identification of trusted journals and publishers", "Shady Journals" and "Publication ethics". However, other important topics were also raised during the discussion, such as research assessment and the peer review process. Some participants also felt it is important to share situations that arise when a scientist (perhaps inadvertently) publishes in a predatory journal.

Participants would like to see that the forthcoming teaching module is useful for both face-to-face and online lectures, and support a combination of these forms.

The next steps in our initiative are as follows:

- Explore available resources on the issue of raising awareness of predatory practices.
- Prepare a ready-to-go-teaching module that reflects this discussion, the available resource material, and the insights of experts in the field of anti-predator activities.
- Raise awareness of predatory practices on social media (TikTok, Instagram) to contribute to combating predators.

Predatory journals, publishers and conferences parasitize open access principles, which our initiative sees as a major problem in contemporary academia.

We believe that our initiative will spark combat against predatory practices, not only in the Czech Republic but also abroad.

Finally, we would like to thank all participants in the discussion and the [IAP Grants Programme on Increasing Awareness of Predatory Academic Practices](#) for supporting this project.

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