

A DIVE INTO THE MUDDY WATERS OF PREDATORY PUBLISHING REVEALS THAT ALL IS POSSIBLE, BUT NORMALITY: A LANGUAGE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. *Predatory publishers represent a menace for the scientific community. However, a less explored side relates to their linguistic impact, due to the fact that poor English is among their distinctive features. In order to provide more evidence helping scholars to identify the potential predatory publishers, this study analyzes some 300 calls for papers from predatory publishers, selected from among those over 1,400 received over the latest 9 months, focusing on distinctive English flaws. The results indicate that the common features include the use of boosting language without any discernment, an unusual use of names, aggressive requests for an answer, avoidance of using the term “call for papers” and its replacement, other less frequent issues, and numerous English flaws. Such features may be used as criteria for avoiding to become a prey of predatory publishers.*

Key words: *predatory publishers, call for papers, boosting language, e-mail*

1. INTRODUCTION

For 15 years since the American librarian Jeffrey Beall used the term “predatory journal” (Butler, 2013) for what we mean today by publications “that prioritize self-interest at the expense of scholarship and are characterized by false or misleading information, deviation from best editorial and publication practices, a lack of transparency, and/or the use of aggressive and indiscriminate solicitation practices” (Grudniewicz et al., 2019), predatory journals have become both a menace for the scientific community and a topic of interest for specialists from different disciplines. Many studies describe their effects, including ethical issues (Ferris & Winker, 2017; Petrișor, 2023), economic losses (Shen & Björk, 2015; Eve & Priego, 2017), and strong emotional impact against those deceived by the predatory publishers (Chambers, 2019). All these effects are summarized by Moher et al.

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(2017) as a “waste of people, animals and money”. Apart from them, other authors show particular effects of predatory publishers on different disciplines, such as nursing (Raws et al., 2020), humanities and social sciences (Shehata & Elgllab, 2018), dermatology (Shamsi et al., 2024), anesthesia and reanimation (Darraz et al., 2023), or economy and finance (Prorokowski, 2021), to name only a few. At the same time, there are studies dealing with those deceived by the predatory publishers (Gogtay & Bavdekar, 2019), but also with those who deliberately choose predatory publishers as a venue for their studies (Shaghaei et al., 2018). There are few studies trying to define predatory publishers (Grudniewicz et al., 2019) or identify their key features (Cobey et al., 2018).

Despite a rich literature addressing predatory journals and publishers, but also predatory conferences (Alnajjar et al., 2020; Pecorari, 2021), and the addition of or transformation into predatory proofreading services (Petrișor, 2017), there is a limited number of studies dealing with language issues, although poor English is a common feature of predatory publishers (Truth, 2012; Bohannon, 2013; Crawford, 2014; Petrișor, 2016, 2022). Among these, Soler & Cooper (2019) and Soler (2020) show the implications on novice English writers, while Petrișor (2022) shows that researchers from countries with a short western-style academic publishing tradition tend to take the poor English of predatory publishers for a standard. There are many studies focusing on the features of a “call for papers” that may indicate a potentially predatory journal (Petrișor, 2016, 2018, 2021; Soler & Cooper, 2019; Soler, 2020), involving linguistic analyses. Markowitz (2020) uses an automated language analysis technique specific to the social sciences and the analysis of meta-linguistic properties of predatory journals websites, and identifies more discrepancy terms and positive emotions, but fewer function words. Analyzing many features of predatory publishers, including language issues, Mills and Inouye (2021) conclude that they are based in the ‘global South’, including India, China and some parts of Africa. However, other studies point out that predatory publishers copy each other, including the calls for papers, and also change their strategies over time (Petrișor, 2016, 2018); thus, particular signs may not necessarily indicate a specific location. For example, Petrișor (2018) analyzes the frequency of calls for papers from predatory publishers during each weekday and the results show that less calls are received during the regular weekends, which may be working days in the ‘global South’. The same study yields inconclusive results when looking at the claimed location and the one indicated by the e-mail server.

In order to provide more evidence helping scholars to identify the potential predatory publishers, conferences and proofreading services), this study analyzes the calls for papers received during the recent period in an attempt to point out the numerous English flaws specific to such publishers. The results may be relevant in this regard, but also from the perspective of indicating the current strategies of predatory publishers.

2. DATA AND METHODS

The data used in this analysis consist of over 1400 e-mails received during May 9, 2023 and February 27, 2024 at the e-mail address alexandru.petrisor[at]uauiim.ro. It has to be stressed out that this address is an institutional address, and can be used only for institutional matters; publishing, reviewing, and editing, or answering surveys are considered private matters and cannot be handled via an institutional address. Nevertheless, there are

publishers requesting authors to provide an institutional address, and even condition the admission of a manuscript into the peer review process by the provision of such addresses, in an attempt to make sure that authors are those who claim to be, and their affiliations are correctly indicated. As a result of exposing the address, the address was overused by predatory publishers, allowing for collecting the information.

In an attempt to focus the analysis, the calls were selected based on several characteristics, and the analysis limited to the subject of the e-mail, although occasionally other parts of the message were used in the analysis. Nearly 300 out of the 1400 e-mails were actually used in the analysis, which consisted of looking up the text for specific features, and ascertain their repetition across different predatory publishers and time. The analysis includes calls for papers from predatory journals, publishers, and conferences, and, in addition, from some proofreading services. The inclusion of the latest is motivated by the study by Petrișor (2018), suggesting the transformation of predatory publishers and journals into such services, or the addition of proofreading services to their portfolio.

In the analysis, the ISSNs of some predatory journals are added if they were specified in the subject or text of the call, for a more precise identification of the journals. The study by Petrișor (2016) suggests that predatory journals may disappear and reappear under different names, or use the same name. One relatively common feature of the calls is the wrong, inconsistent, and sometimes random use of capitalization (and also of punctuation and spaces in relationship to punctuation), indicated by Petrișor (2021) as a possible indication of the ‘global South’ origin, since languages like Arabic or Chinese, to name only two, do not use capitalization. However, due to this issue, the names of predatory publishers are sometimes, perhaps purposefully, unclear. One such example is an earlier call from the “multidisciplinary WULFENIA JOURNAL” (still available on the Internet, e.g., https://vodici.fdv.uni-lj.si/assets/users/_borut.kirar/Wulfenia.pdf), which, if using the correct capitalization, “Multidisciplinary Wulfenia Journal”, indicates a predatory clone of the legitimate “Wulfenia Journal”; the different capitalization is used to hide the hijacking. Since the use of capitalization, punctuation, and spaces in relationship to punctuation is a distinctive mark, the article uses the original spelling.

3. RESULTS

The purpose of this study is to look at the “calls for papers” from predatory publishers in an attempt to prove that the wrong use of English is the first and clearest sign of potential predatory publishers. The title of article was used based on the overall indication that predatory publishers use either oversimplified English, or an abnormally verbose style. It would be unfair to say that this feature is common to all calls. Some of these calls may use relatively normal subjects, although flaws may be present elsewhere. Also, the choice of 300 out of the 1400 calls is due to the fact that many publishers send their calls repeatedly, sometimes even during the same day, and the analysis was resumed to the distinct calls. Several ‘threads’ or ‘thematic samples’ (Petrișor, 2021) were identified and used to organize the material. The results always indicate the journal name and date of call, occasionally its ISSN. To keep this article short, details are provided in Annex 1 at http://www.environmentics.ro/Papers/2024_ESPEAP_Appendix.pdf, referred hereafter.

1. Use of boosting language without any discernment. The use of a boosting language as a strategy for luring potential authors has been described before (Petrișor, 2016). Nevertheless, the analysis reveals that the boosting language is used without any discernment, pointing towards all possible directions, including the potential, yet unknown submission, referred in many ways, as indicated by the examples provided in Annex 1. Occasionally, some journals encourage constructions emphasizing the value of potential contributions by placing the journal in a lower position: “*Humbly invites to submit your valuable paper*”, repeating it in a different form in the message text: the Journal on Environmental Sciences uses “*Share Your Valuable Work In Our Journal!*” and continues with “*Have a nice day "Journal on Environmental Sciences," kindly submit your significant work.*” In other cases, the boosting language is identified with the potential (yet unknown) author, using in the subject of e-mail phrases like those presented in Annex 1. In other instances, boosting language is used in the e-mail text, such as “*Honorable Alexandru-Ionut Petrisor*”, usually used to address a judge, “*Esteemed Alexandru-Ionut Petrisor*” - written mistakenly as “*Estimable Petrisor Alexandru-Ionut*”, “*Distinguished Alexandru-Ionut Petrisor*”, “*Respected Professor/Doctor. Doctor*”, or complicate wording like “*We have been closely following your outstanding research and invaluable contributions to the scientific community with the utmost admiration. Your remarkable work has made a significant impact in the area, and we are truly impressed by the accomplishments you have achieved*”. A third category uses the boosting language with reference to the conference or journal advertised. Examples are provided in Annex 1. Occasionally, boosting language is used for more categories: “*Respected Prof. Petrisor Alexandru-Ionut- Join our prestigious community of authors and publish with Clinics in Surgery*”. This is seen in most calls from proofreading services: “*Elevate Your Research with Way2Edit: Editing, Proofreading, and Language Translation Services*”, “*Meticulous Editing for Impeccable Results*”, “*Your Best Writing Awaits: Unleash Our Proofreading Prowess*”, and “*Crafted for Excellence: Your Content Deserves Expert Proofreading*”.

2. The “name” - “no name” issue. Petrișor (2016) points out that predatory journals use two strategies. One is to make their call generic, without addressing to a real person, and another to give “calls for papers” a personalized look (although the invitation remains generic). Using this typology, several categories can be identified. First, there are many generic invitations: “*Doctor | Fully accessible open access articles submission | ReliabilityTech*” - notice the senseless fragmentation of information by separators; “*Dear Professor: Mega Journal of Case Reports*”, or, in the message body, the meaningless “*Respected Professor/Doctor. Doctor*”. Sometimes, messages are sent to a generic “you”: “*invite you as a Plenary Speaker*”. A separate category includes the hilarious results of most likely using a mass e-mailing software without mastering it properly. Although the original intention might be a personalized message, the result is generic. Examples include “*Dr. {firstname}--Get booking now for Future Virology 2024!*”, “*Prof. [NAME]: Annals of Clinical Case Reports*”, “*Indexed in all major platforms now Prof. Professor: Mega Journal of Case Reports*”, or, for the e-mail text, “*Greetings, Dr. "Doctor"*”. The use of parentheses or quotation marks may be required by the syntax of e-mail software.

The calls for papers with a personalized appearance fall also in some categories. Some of them use the actual name, written correctly: “*Alexandru-Ionut Petrisor | Worldwide research submissions are open | Ecology*” - note again the fragmented, senseless phrase, “*Dear Doctor. Petrisor Alexandru-Ionut*” - note using a period after the

full word “Doctor”, a “trademark” of many predatory publishers, “*Special Invitation: Details inside Dear Dr. Petrisor Alexandru Ionut*” - note the commercial appearance of the message, “*Dr. Alexandru-Ionut Petrisor: Coming to a city near you NANO Intellects 2024*”, “*Your article Dear Dr. Petrisor Alexandru Ionut*”, “*Hi Alexandru-Ionut Petrisor, Ready to submit your research?*” - notice the familiar tone, “*Dear Dr, Petrisor Alexandru Ionut, High Priority: We Need your Support to Our Journal: Annals of Clinical Cases*”, “*Hi Petrisor Alexandru-Ionut: Call for Speakers: AGRI 2023*”, or “*Send Us Your Paper Dear Dr. Petrisor Alexandru Ionut*”. The same category includes messages built up out of two parts, merged together in a meaningless sense, giving it a begging appearance: “*Upcoming Issue Dear Dr. Petrisor Alexandru Ionut*”, “*Optimistic Response Dear Dr. Petrisor Alexandru Ionut*”, “*Anticipation Dear Dr. Petrisor Alexandru Ionut*”, “*Author Association Dear Dr. Petrisor Alexandru Ionut*”. The same may be used in the e-mail body: “*Beloved Mr/Miss/Dr/Prof. Petrişor Alexandru Ionuţ*”. In this case, it is interesting to see the mixture between a personal look given by using a name, without any effort to search for the identity, so the person is addressed in a generic way. Also, the use of “Beloved”, inappropriate in the scientific world, suggests a typical “Nigerian scam”, proving again that predatory publishers use typical spamming strategies (Petrişor, 2018). Sometimes apparently personalized messages are sent via mass mailing software, as proved by extra signs, e.g., quotation marks: “*Dear Dr. “Alexandru-Ionut Petrisor”*” or “*Greetings Dr. “Alexandru-Ionut Petrisor”*” (Archives of Palliative Care - notice the use of Palliative instead of Palliative). Also, some journals use a misspelled name of the author contacted: “*Prominent Author Dear Dr. Petrisor Alexandruionut*”, while others address the author correctly, but make it part of the subject: “*To Dr. Petrisor- [Advances in Environmental and Engineering Research] Special Issue “Advances in Environmental Research” - Submit an article for publication*”. A special category is represented by the predatory publishers who pick the names from the suggested way of citing an article, without spending time to change its format: “*Dear Petrisor, AI; Sirodov, I; Ianos, I, you are invited to submit Original Articles/Review Articles to IJFSA for consideration*”, or, in the e-mail text, “*Dear Petrisor AI*” and “*Dear Dr. Petrişor, Alexandru-Ionuţ*”.

A separate category of calls for papers uses a different name. Sometimes such names are the e-mail subject: “*Prof. Ashok Kumar Baidya*”, “*Prof. NEAL SIPARSKY*”; it is hard to say what reaction such publishers would expect from an author to whom these names do not say anything. In other cases, when authors are chosen based on publishing an article with more authors, the message is addressed to the first author or to another author, randomly chosen, but sent to all authors. Occasionally e-mails are addressed to a person not connected to the recipient: “*Dr. Kaushal Sheth :: Enter in the researcher world*”, “*Dear Doctor. Kaszta ?aneta*” - please notice the question mark, probably replacing a special character, not corrected, or “*Dear Doctor. Spagnuolo Carmela*”. In the last two cases, the specific trademark of using a period after the full word “Doctor” is visible.

A distinct category of calls use not the actual name of an author, but the e-mail address to mimic a personalized look. In such situations, the messages are composed of more parts, merged together in an incomprehensible way. Examples include “*Attention to alexandru.petrisor@uauim.ro | OJEB*” - notice the inverted message, as probably the intended message is for the potential author to pay attention to the journal, “*Statement to alexandru.petrisor@uauim.ro | AHCR*” - note the use of “statement”, more appropriate for a bank than for a journal, or “*Notification to alexandru.petrisor@uauim.ro | AEST*” - note the entirely inappropriate use of a formal “notification”, and those found in Annex 1.

This discussion on names would not be complete if omitting the names of senders. Starting, among others, from “Grace Groovy” signing the e-mail mentioned by Butler (2013), Bell (2017) sees predatory publishers as a parody of science. Among those signing the invitations used in this study, some of them are worthy mentioning: *Ms. Ada* (sender’s name), “*This is Snowy*”, or “*Greetings from Rose!!*”.

3. Aggressively requiring an answer. While answering a message is a minimum sign of courtesy, answering predatory calls (or Nigerian scams and other unsolicited e-mails) is out of question (somehow, this article answers such calls indirectly), but predatory publishers do not give up. Examples of soliciting an answer include “*Good Discounts for Quick Submissions*” - typical commercial advertisement, “*Kindly Respond*” - note, again, a typical subject for a scam, “*Needful Article*” - note the poor English: the journal may be “needful”, but not the article, “*Optimistic Support*” or, similarly, “*Optimistic Response*” - again, in both cases the journal may be actually optimistic about receiving support or a response, but the broken English suggests something different, “*Urgent response to alexandru.petrisor@uauim.ro*” - notice the broken English, suggesting that the journal is answering the author, when in fact the journal is waiting for the author’s answer, and the use of “urgent”, a typical spamming strategy (Petrișor, 2016, 2018), “*Follow up- Appreciated for your response*” - again, as if the author would have answered, “*Author Assistance*” - notice again the poor English, as the journal is not offering assistance to the author, but solicits “assistance” from the author, and the examples in Annex 1.

In other cases, the call for paper implies that the author has already submitted an article or accepted an invitation; examples are found in Annex 1. Such subjects come along with a text like “*We have genuinely emailed you quite a lot of times but received no response, so we'd like to try once more as courtesy*” or “*Despite our numerous sincere emails, we have not received a response from you. As a gesture of courtesy, we are making one final attempt to contact you*”. Also, like other spammers (Petrișor, 2018), predatory publishers give the impression of replying to a message of the author using in the subject “Re”: “*Re: Reminder towards your submission on manuscript International Journal of Nursing and Health Care Research*”, or the wrong and hard to trace “Reg”: “*Reg: Your Valuable Research for First Issue-2024*”.

4. All but a “Call for Papers”. It seems that predatory publishers avoid the term “call for papers”, replacing it with a different phrasing, sometimes impossible to understand or wrong, e.g. “*Letter for the Article Submission*” - see the wrong use of definite article, “*Inquiry for an article to be published in Publishing Research - Publishing process*” - see the repeated “publish”, “*Manuscript Submission Request*” - also written as “*manuscript submission request*” or (wrongly) “*Manuscripts Submission Request*”, “*Notice*” (calls from “*Obesity, Diabetes and Metabolic Syndrome*” and “*Global Journal of Obesity, Diabetes and Metabolic Syndrome*”, both with same ISSN, but a name changed in 6 days), “*Possible Submission*”, “*Your Transcript*” - note the confusion with the paperwork related to a degree, and the examples in Annex 1. If using the term “call for paper”, predatory publishers seem not to understand it, e.g., “*Call for paper invitation*” - also “*Call for Paper invitation*” or “*Call for Paper Invitation*”, and “*Call For Paper Request*”.

Predatory publishers are often very inventive, and show endless possibilities to replace “call for papers” by subjects with more or less complicated phrasing, like “*Infectious life*,

drugs as a saviour” - note the nonsense, “*Submit Your Surgery Research Now - Call for Papers Open!*” - strangely included between quotation marks, “*Fallow Up Email : You Can Publish Your Any Kind Of The Manuscript Such As - Journal on Environmental Sciences*” - “fallow” used instead of “follow”, “*Flow Up Remainder: Get Published: Submit Your Article to Journal of Clinical Cases*” - “flow” used instead of “follow”, “*Follow-Up: I Am Announce Submit Your Article To International journal Of Gastroenterology And Hepatology*” - see many English mistakes, confusions and random use of capitalization, “*Present your work at our Journal*” - looks more like a conference invitation, “*Globalize your work with us*”, “*Participate in Upcoming Issue*” - again, suggests a conference invitation, “*Remainder: We Accept All Types Of Manuscript For Its Upcoming Issue*” - “remainder” used instead of “reminder”, “*Warmly invite you to contribute new works to journal REIE. Thanks*” - note the verb use, correlated with a lacking agent, “*We Request for Your Support*”, “*has sent a request for article submission-ACEE*” - agent lacking: who has sent?, and the examples presented in Annex 1.

Predatory conferences and proofreading services rarely use simple and straightforward phrasing, such as “*Gentle Reminder as Speaker: 2023*” - note the common subject of two invitations received the same day, and the examples in Annex 1. Most often, complicated phrasing is preferred, occasionally wrong, and/or looking like commercial advertisement: “*Let's Join and Promulgate your Knowledge at NUTRIFORUM2023*” - notice the wrong use of “promulgate”, appropriate for a law or decree, and the examples included in Annex 1. The same way a “call for papers” is everything else but a “call for papers”, predatory conferences are called in strange ways: “*Global Meet*”, “*Physics Experts gathering*”, or “*NEURO Conclave 2024*”. Do the organizers of the latest event know that the Oxford Dictionary of English defines a “conclave” as a private meeting, with the most common use as the assembly of cardinals for the election of a pope? Most likely, they don’t know.

5. The analysis of the “calls for papers” reveals other **less frequent issues**. One of them, mentioned by Petrișor (2021) is found in calls as “*One Article for Accomplishment Dear Dr. Petrișor Alexandru Ionuț*”, “*Single Manuscript Dear Dr. Petrișor Alexandru Ionuț*”, or “*One paper*”, all pointing out to requiring a single manuscript, but also in subjects like “*Please Submit Case Reports to our Journal*”, “*Opinion/Mini Review Dear Dr. Petrișor Alexandru*”, “*Short Communication Submission Request for Current Issue*”; in this case, the “innovation” is that predatory publishers request a shorter article, as indicated by the text “*We are in shortfall of one article for the newly launched issue i.e., Volume 5 Issue 5. Is it possible for you to support us with your article for this issue release on or before 6th October? If this is a short notice, please do send 2-page opinion/mini review/research article. We hope you wont disappoint us.*” - note the wrong spelling of “won’t”.

Messages from predatory proofreading services are usually written in high-level English to trigger the curiosity of a potential recipient opening them: “*My Paper Was Rejected – What Do I Do Now*”, “*The Positive Aspects of Negative Feedback in Academic Publishing*”, or “*Checklist for Publishing a Scholarly Journal Paper*”. However, such messages show the connection with predatory publishers: “*Is a Pay To Publish Journal and Is There a List of Them?*”.

Predatory journals advertise in strange ways: “*Peer-reviewed DOI - Google Scholar Journals*” - a DOI is an object identifier and not a journal, and Google Scholar a search engine, not abstracting and indexing service, “*Journal valid as per nmc february,2022*” -

it is not clear what “nmc” means, and how does it “validate” a journal. Others are not selective at all: “*We Are gratefully Accepting All Kinds of Articles - Gastroenterology And Hepatology*”, or do not charge some fee (while probably increase others) - “*No Page Charges - Asian Journal of Biological Sciences*”. Some journals perceive themselves as a club: “*Join as a member of potential Authors in JSciMed Central*”, “*Author Association Dear Dr. Petrisor Alexandru Ionut*” or “*Join our prestigious community of authors*”.

Finally, there are several elements which do not repeat, but are certainly worthy of being mentioned. An invitation to review becomes a “*Requisition to Handle a Manuscript*”. Another call replaces the Latin alphabet with special characters: “*Invite You to Submit Your Proposal for a Special Issue to Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning -- Assessing public opinion using self-organizing maps. Lessons from ur..*” - a strategy used by spammers to make their messages passing the spam filters. Finally, the text of a call attempts to put a smile on the recipient’s face: “*Make every day a great day by smiling*”.

6. Poor English as rule. The wrong, inconsistent, and random use of capitalization, punctuation and spaces in relationship to punctuation were already pointed out - e.g., “*International journal Of Gastroenterology And Hepatology*”. While presenting the results, such examples were indicated; in some cases, mistakes were present without being pointed out, especially for small flaws. Many of these concern the use of prepositions, used when not needed: “*Enter in the researcher world*”, “*Encourage with your Contribution*” or “*We Request for Your Support*”, “*Welcome to Join at AnalytiX-2024, Nagoya, Japan*”, lacking when required: “*Submit Your Valuable Manuscript [to] IJOAG*”, or confounding them: “*Please share your thoughts on 2024 Recycling Congress*”, “*Reminder towards your submission on manuscript*”. There are also many cases of inappropriately using the plural: “*Manuscripts Invitation*” or “*Requesting For The Manuscript Submissions*”. Mistakes include also subject-verb disagreements, article use, word confusions, and subtle mistakes, such as an inappropriate tone or vocabulary. Occasionally calls contain gross mistakes: “*Follow-Up: I Am Announce Submit Your Article To International journal Of Gastroenterology And Hepatology*” and “*Fallow Up Email : You Can Publish Your Any Kind Of The Manuscript Such As - Journal on Environmental Sciences*”, or text which, even if properly spelled, make no sense: “*Have a nice day "Journal on Environmental Sciences," kindly submit your significant work*”.

4. CONCLUSION

The analysis revealed that predatory publishers, conferences, and proofreading services write their “calls for papers” in a different language, striking through its low quality in the case of publishers and conferences, and high level in the case of proofreading services. Nevertheless, such messages are never credible, and the language issues may be used as an indication that the messages hide potential deceptions if given course, and the findings of present study may serve as defense against predatory calls.

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