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Brigitte Burris, Julia Gelfand, Lisa Macklin, and John Sherer, "All About Predatory Publishing: Need for Librarians and Publishers to Better Inform Authors" (2017). *Proceedings of the Charleston Library Conference*.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.5703/1288284316715>

All About Predatory Publishing: Need for Librarians and Publishers to Better Inform Authors

Presented by Brigitte Burris, University of Pennsylvania; Julia Gelfand, University of California, Irvine; Lisa Macklin, Emory University; John Sherer, University of North Carolina Press

The following is a transcription of a live presentation at the 2017 Charleston Conference.

Julia Gelfand: We are here today to explore predatory publishing. And what kind of responses can the library and publishing community make to the efforts that are underway and how common predatory publishing has become. So, I'm Julia Gelfand. I'm from the University of California at Irvine, and lots of things prompted why we assembled this topic and thought we would share it and get some insights from all of you. So, just for some definition, we'll start and everybody on the panel will introduce themselves as they kind of go through.

What does "predatory" mean in the library and publishing ecosystem today? So, if you kind of look where everybody begins outside of us, but I just chose that route, the Wikipedia, and we think of it in the OA context, we can sort of agree that it's probably an exploitative publishing model that involves charging publication fees to authors without providing the full range of editorial publishing services that we come to think of as associated with traditional, legitimate journals, and at the top of that is the rigorous peer review standards that encourage the replication of science, the replication of methodology, and the ability to conduct experiments again to determine legitimacy and outcomes.

So, last week the *New York Times* published an article on October 30 entitled "Many Academics Are Eager to Publish in Worthless Journals." So, even if the mainstream press like the *New York Times* is exploring how this suggests that the academic workforce increasingly dictates the fierce competition that has come to be associated with promotion and tenure and academic review and how challenging it is to publish in leading high-impact journals, we're really worried about what the consequences of this are and what the library and scholarly communities and the publishing communities can do to help entering scholars and the next generation of scholars in determining what options they might have to make better selections

and to get their ideas and scholarship published in nonpredatory sources.

The increasing publications that are now contacting academics and writers at large are, in often very flattering ways, perhaps encouraging them to submit titles and submit work to journals with similar titles of the austere and legitimate mainstream press are leading one to conclude that the number of such journals has pretty much exploded and that's been taken on as a title of articles in *Nature* and other journals to access it, an increase of more than 10,000 titles worldwide defining it as an organized industry, and that's why we're here to help explore what options there might be.

The values of legitimacy are rooted in the practice of peer reviews as I stated, but implication for pseudoscience is what worries us or pseudo-anything. Okay? So, pseudo-medicine is very dangerous or where published content cannot be replicated and what those consequences might be. We bring a panel together today to present different stakeholders of libraries in the library community, from the collections perspective, scholarly communication, licensing, IP, and a publisher at a university press. We are all committed to working with our communities of students, faculty, and researchers to create pathways to partner, to better inform these prospective authors about, and future generations of authors about, predatory publishing and practices and the changing ecosystem of academic and scholarly publishing that we want to affirm. So, with that, I'm going to share some, encourage my co-panelists to share some ideas of how they're handling this at their institutions, within their organizations and what the big picture is, and then we will open it up for comments, questions, and your ideas.

Brigitte Burris: Good morning, everyone. Hi, thank you for joining us today. I'm Brigitte Burris. I'm at University of Pennsylvania Libraries, and like many of you in the audience, my background is in collections and I'm hoping to bring that focus to the discussion today. I really do feel that the knowledge and experience that

we bring as collections librarians is entirely relevant to addressing the predatory publishing issue. I think the solution to the problem of predatory publishing and really the lack of understanding of issues related to open access in general is one of awareness, and that's essentially an information literacy issue, and it's not just awareness among authors but also among promotion and tenure committees, among faculty search committees, and among readers.

As the publication of journals as open access necessarily removed some of the curatorial function that we perform as librarians through selection, through acquisition, and through discovery, there's now a need and really an opportunity for us to share some of that curatorial knowledge among these other bodies. So, in particular, librarians who develop collections, we've developed a deep, practiced expertise in how to assess the quality and various characteristics of journals, open access and otherwise, and these skills can be shared with our authors and committees as they consider the merits of various publishing venues. Most authors really have very little understanding of the consequences of one choice over another.

At my institution, the University of Pennsylvania, we're currently expanding what started as a small program, is an advisory program geared toward authors, in particular new and early career faculty and graduate students, that provides various data to allow an author to choose the best publishing venue for his or her work. So, teaching authors to identify predatory journals is just one component of that service. The program features liaisons who've been trained to provide various descriptive criteria to our authors such as the scope of a journal and the niche it fills within its field, various journal metrics relevant to that field, how broadly a journal is indexed and in which databases, if the journal's scholarly trade are popular, if it's peer-reviewed, the journal's availability of format, the journal's price, and hopefully this is an opportunity for us to give an explanation of how excessive price can influence the breadth of availability of a journal to its audience.

As we're raising the consciousness of our authors that they have choices they can make when it comes to publishing, I think the most important thing that we need to keep in mind is that the average author is going to be motivated primarily by personal interests, and these interests really vary widely depending on the individual. So, for example, early career scholars may be pressured to publish in particular journals in order to satisfy tenure requirements. That's a reality.

Some authors may have fewer research funds to cover APCs and therefore be limited in their choice of open access publications. Some researchers may have their publication venue mandated to be open access by a funding agency, and for others, simply publishing quickly is going to be the most important factor in their choice of publication. So, as librarians we are in a position to advise our authors in ways that speak to those individual interests. So, for example, some types of data we can provide include a journal's acceptance rates, the time to publication, submission policies, the cost of any APCs, types of Creative Commons Licenses out there, types of open access that are available. Many authors are surprisingly uninformed of the benefits and the potential risks of publishing in open access journals.

And that brings me to my final point, which is basically the subject of our talk today, and that's teaching authors how to identify specifically predatory journals, and I think my answer to that particular question is relatively brief because I feel like it's just one component of a much broader service that we should be providing. I don't believe there's a panacea for identifying predatory journals, but critical thinking and basic fact checking can go a long way, and both of these need to be informed by the types of data that we as librarians are in an ideal position to provide. Go ahead.

Lisa Macklin: Good morning. I'm Lisa Macklin. I'm director of the Scholarly Communications Office at Emory University and I would second everything that Gitte has said and take us in perhaps a slightly different direction in talking about some of the partnerships that we have been able to form on campus. We have a Medical School, a School of Public Health, a Nursing School, and we are hearing from our faculty and their administrators real frustration of the bombardment that they feel from a lot of these publishers that we would deem to either be predatory or I prefer the term, quite frankly, deceptive, and that they are concerned primarily for newer scholars who are not as familiar with publishing, they're not as experienced with publishing, and they're the ones who often are feeling the pressure, not only of promotion and tenure, but also of grants and getting grants and building that dossier and that CV to get not just this grant but the next grant and the grant after that. And so some of the conversations that we have had on campus have been with the Office of Compliance, which you probably do have on your campus. If you haven't reached out to them, this is an opportunity to do that. They are concerned

because their role around compliance gets into how federal monies are spent and so they don't want to have federal grant money spent publishing in a journal that is not reputable, and they have a way to outreach to people who have grant funds on your campus and reach them in ways that maybe perhaps in the library you cannot.

The other partnership that we've had has been with our School of Medicine. Myself, the director of the Health Sciences Center Library and a deputy CIO for our campus, had a meeting with the dean of the School of Medicine, specifically around this topic, and it was at his request and basically his concern was reputation. It was his younger, newer faculty but also reputation, and it centered not simply on predatory publishing but also on invitations to conferences that are being offered by less than robust, shall we say, scholarly groups and then also invitations to editorial boards, which for many faculty is a wonderful thing. It's a way they built their reputation, but if the editorial board is for a journal that isn't itself robust and scholarly, then that's actually a mark against them, and he gave an example of being on an advisory board where one of his faculty members was on the editorial board of a journal that had published an article that had been proven to be false. And he was very concerned about her reputation in relation to that journal and the fact that she was listed on that editorial board.

So, the education is not simply around publishing, but it is around this kind of ecosystem in general and really a concern for reputation building. So, we have information on the scholarly communication site. There's information on our Health Sciences Center Library site. There is information from the Office of Compliance site and there's information on our school's medicine site. So, we're really trying to kind of reach faculty in as many ways as we can and provide, not just the services that Gitte was talking about, but really work with faculty one-on-one if they have a question. I mean, really it can be a librarian in my office and our subject librarians, our Health Sciences Center librarians. I think really librarians do have a critical role to play in this analysis of journals. It's very easy to say, "It'd be nice to have a blacklist to just go to and say 'this is a bad journal,'" but we all know that the reality is actually more nuanced than that and it can be difficult, quite frankly, for faculty to really be able to discern these journals that have titles so similar to very reputable journals, and it can be hard to really determine what the publishing practices of that publisher really are. So, with that, I will turn it over to John for a different perspective.

John Sherer: The publisher.

Lisa Macklin: The publisher.

John Sherer: I'm not sure how I got looped into this, but, although watch how I play a Zelig-like character and suddenly I'm going to be on their side very shortly [Laughter].

Publishers look more predatory today because they've had to expand their value proposition. In the world of information, you know, abundance, we're no longer the gatekeepers, right? So, it used to be that people came to us and we had this very clear role and value proposition, we owned the printing presses, it was kind of a great gig to have. But, in the world of information abundance, publishers have had to figure out new ways to add value and more complex ways of creating tools for access and the walls are down and we're in what's called a "mature" business, which is a polite way of saying that it's never going to grow again, right? There's no more money to be added to the business and squeezing collection development budgets might be a good short-term strategy for publishers, but it's just not a sustainable long-term one. And that's why publishers are expanding into services, so you're feeling this kind of creep from publishers in lots of different ways than simply we used to be content providers and now we are doing services and all types of things. I think that makes us all a little uncomfortable.

I work at a university press. I didn't introduce myself. I'm John Sherer. I'm the director of the University of North Carolina Press. We sit on the Chapel Hill campus but we are an affiliate of the UNC system, so I technically have a relationship with 17 higher education institutions in the state of North Carolina, but we've also done work with other places. We've done some work with Emory and we work with a lot of people. And I think university presses have a great opportunity in this kind of chaotic space. We are mission driven. We're on the side of the angels but honestly we've not been up to the task.

So, presses have the luxury of insulating themselves slightly from the scholarly communications ecosystem. We need some independence to do the credentialing and peer-review that we do so we can't be too closely tied to academic programs because we need to have the independence so that we can be a fair arbiter and PNT, but, frankly, I think a lot of presses, by the way, UNC Press literally sits on Boundary Street in Chapel Hill, like we are on campus but not of

campus in this strange way. But, we've I think kind of used that independence and embraced it too much not to be part of some of the problems and the solutions that are going on on campus, and I think frankly our business model is cost recovery for books and journals and, as I was saying before, that's mature. That's really not going to grow, and so we also at university presses have to get in the business of services, and I think one of the services that we can do is helping to solve some of these problems. So, but presses are—we're just not set up to do that. We need to do what you would call "capacity building." We have to become more prepared to do other types of things.

At UNC, and I'm just going to talk for a minute about what we've tried to do. We're not there yet, but we're directionally correct. We created something called the Office of Scholarly Publishing Services. All the books that get published under the UNC Press imprint are peer-reviewed by the Press editors and then credentialed by my Board of Governors, which is made up of academics. At OSPS we created an office that partners with an institution within the UNC system, so we're not doing what I would call "vanity publishing." If an individual comes to us and says, "I want to publish this," we say "Great. Go find a department at the UNC system that will be the publisher." And the press will do kind of the back end, "the plumbing" I always call it, of publishing. And so I was able to hire somebody. I went to the president of the UNC system and I said, "I've got this idea. I think there's publishing going on throughout the UNC system, and here in Chapel Hill we're just doing our little bespoke monograph program and we want to be better partners." And he actually gave me grant funding to hire somebody and this person did kind of an environmental scan of everything and three years later it's almost a two and a half million dollar topline business. We've done projects with 13 of the 17 campuses and this is a range from open access journals, paywall journals, conference proceedings, there's a couple of monograph programs that were actually going on that we didn't even know about throughout the UNC system. We've helped do it. And so at the Press we're learning how to do lots of different things. Every project is kind of a snowflake, and it takes a lot of effort to learn what's the business model? What's the sustainability plan? If we're selling something, how would the splits go? But we've had this great experience where we started writing checks to institutions in the UNC system, and it's a very funny thing to send a check to a library because they literally call me up and say, "What am I supposed to do with this check?" And I

tell them about our donation program where they can give it back to the Press.

In fact, we've had a program with the Chapel Hill Library, the UNC Chapel Hill Library, called "A Documentary in the American South," which is this very interesting program. They have PDFs of these 19th-century slave narratives, among other things, on their website, and they used to get lots of people who would come and ask them for print copies and they're like, "We're not in the business of print." But they talk to us. So, we, I think we've published, republished I think about 30 books in this program, so these PDFs are totally available, completely discoverable on the Dock South website on the library. We've sold about 4,000 print and ePubs. We're selling ePubs of free PDFs and we are writing the five-figure check back to the Chapel Hill Library every year.

There are real opportunities to think creatively and I think the first challenge, like I said at the Press, is to be prepared to do things besides traditional imprint publishing and that's a hard thing for presses to do. It's hard enough to do that well and to say we're also going to do other things is a real challenge, and frankly I had to have lengthy conversations with my board about how would the Press's imprint be affected by this? They wanted to make sure I was not diminishing that brand in any sort of way and so it's been a delicate thing, but it's been incredibly positive, and frankly I think it's a completely extensible model and I think, Charles, how many university presses are there in North America? 120?

Charles Watkinson: There are about 100 university presses.

John Sherer: Right. Right. And so every librarian should have a press either in their orbit or very close to their orbit and my advice is work with them.

Julia Gelfand: So, we've raised some questions and we hope we've kind of given you some ideas of how different libraries of different sizes, private and public, are addressing these complex issues, and if anything we predict that there's going to be more of it and the ecosystem is going to complicate itself. The ecosystem will continue to change and to develop and we'll have different spikes and lulls in this, but we raised some questions and we hope that you have others as well. But we'd like to hear from your experiences with, that might be, and Charles is going to help us by encouraging you to come to the mikes, or will pass the mike around for you to share with us.