Shea Swauger

Open access, power, and privilege
A response to "What I learned from predatory publishing"

In June 2017, Jeffrey Beall published an opinion piece in *Biochemia Medica* titled "What I Learned from Predatory Publishers."[1] While there are several elements of this publication that I find inaccurate or problematic, I'm choosing four specific themes within his piece to critique. In the interest of full disclosure, I am Jeffrey Beall's direct supervisor at the University of Colorado-Denver's Auraria Library and have been since I began working there in July 2015.

Dangerous nostalgia

At several points, Beall describes a history of scholarly publishing where authority and credibility were known and stable, and from which we have significantly regressed:

> At that time, most journals were generally respected and of good quality, and peer review was taken seriously and managed well.

> The once-proud scholarly publishing industry is in a state of rapid decline.

> There is a general sense among scholars that scholarly publishing is collapsing, falling apart, or whatever metaphor one might select that compares the industry to something that was once mighty and respected that later declined rapidly and unexpectedly into an embarrassing heap of debris.[2]

These statements portray a publishing system that I believe never existed. The history of scholarly publishing is less a meritocracy of ideas and more a reflection of who held privilege in society. Access to at least one, and often multiple, intersections of privilege[3,4] were almost a requisite for being considered to join in the scholarly conversation. Who and what got published was largely determined by established power structures that favored maleness, whiteness, cis-gendered heterosexuality, wealth, the upper class, and Western ethnocentrism. Note that these are still the dominant structures that control our social and scholarly discourse.[5,6,7,8]

More importantly, nostalgia for a time when these power structures were even more entrenched than they are now is dangerous and, if taken seriously, threatens the participation of people typically marginalized in our scholarly record. Beall's implicit call for a return to this previous imagined reality is by far his most concerning position.

Predatory publishing is an information literacy problem

Beall states, "I think predatory publishers

Shea Swauger is head of researcher support services at the University of Colorado-Denver's Auraria Library, email: shea.swauger@ucdenver.edu

pose the biggest threat to science since the Inquisition."[9]

Predatory publishing is at once a larger and a smaller problem than Beall claims, and while I believe there are legitimate threats to science, I disagree that predatory publishing ultimately holds the gravity that he suggests. The problem is larger in that his definition of predatory publishing articulates only one kind of unethical practice (the systematic abuse of the Gold OA model), when other practices like exclusionary pricing models, closed-access vanity publishing, the selling of public domain content, and others like them are not addressed.[10] The problem is smaller in that the broader discussion about how predatory publishing is an unprecedented or unique challenge to research or science is misplaced. While predatory publishing is relatively new (Beall coined the term in 2010),[11] the class of problem it fits into is not. The problem of predatory publishing is a problem of information literacy. Evaluating the credibility of a publisher or journal is a particular exercise in evaluating the credibility of an information source. Fortunately, a large segment of librarianship (sometimes in title, often in practice) is dedicated to figuring out how to teach people to become information literate. There is a vast body of literature and thousands of intelligent professionals that can help address the problem of identifying predatory publishers.

Beall's list was a useful resource, and his work calling attention to predatory publishing was a valuable contribution to research in almost every discipline, but a list was never a sustainable or ideal solution. Blacklists and whitelists share the same problem in that they attempt to externalize an evaluation process that is best internal, contextual, and iterative. It's unsurprising that researchers and librarians relied so heavily upon Beall's list, as it alleviated the burden of having to learn how to evaluate whether a publisher or journal was predatory.

Teaching and practicing information literacy is difficult. Questions such as What is authoritative? and How do I know if something is credible? are complex and unsettling, largely because their answers are constructed and contextual.[12] Just because something was published in a predatory journal doesn't mean that it's false or poor research. Just because something was published in a prestigious closed-access journal doesn't mean that it's true or excellent. Authority isn't about the containers that information comes in, and the solution was never a list of bad containers. The best thing librarianship can do to support science and research is to engage in the inherently messy, dynamic, and important work of systematic information literacy instruction in higher education and research.

Political correctness

Beall writes, "Librarianship slavishly follows political correctness and trendiness, so it's no surprise that the profession fell in line with the open-access social movement and attacked those seeking to tell the truth about it."[13]

The most insightful part of this remark is his centering on the idea of political correctness in librarianship. While I don't interpret Beall as sharing this definition, I define political correctness as the act of changing the terms of public discourse by challenging narratives and structures that benefit the powerful or the majority at the expense of the powerless or the minority. Oftentimes, critiques of political correctness manifest when words or ideas that were once acceptable by a dominant group of people aren't acceptable any longer, and when those words or ideas are expressed, the person who expresses them experiences some form of social pressure to stop. This is an uncomfortable experience for that person, and one response to that discomfort (which I believe Beall to be employing above) is to classify that social pressure as overly sensitive, intolerant, or even discriminatory.

Based on the above definition, political correctness is something that I aspire to and is something that I believe librarians have

a role in: changing the terms of public discourse and challenging dominate structures of power that disenfranchise the marginalized. In my opinion, this is also the single greatest merit of open access: it can shift the publishing system to expand its definition of whose voice matters and who can participate in the scholarly record.

Academic freedom

Beall wrote, "In January 2017, facing intense pressure from my employer, the University of Colorado Denver, and fearing for my job, I shut down the blog and removed all its content from the blog platform."[14]

At no time did I pressure Beall to discontinue his work, or threaten his employment because of his work. In fact, I did everything I could to support his ability to research and publish, and would continue to support him should he decide to publish his blog and website again. The University of Colorado-Denver, the institution for which we both work, released the following statement regarding Beall's website and is worth noting:

> CU Denver disagrees with Jeffrey Beall's assertion that he was pressured by the university to take down his website, scholaryoa.com, earlier this year. We are not aware of anyone at or affiliated with the university who asked Professor Beall to take down his website and blog. Additionally, CU Denver has defended and supported Professor Beall's academic freedom to pursue predatory publishing as part of his scholarship, but also respects the personal decision he made in January to take down the site. His tenured faculty position here at CU Denver was never in jeopardy because of his work researching open access journals or predatory publishers.[15]

Protecting academic freedom is essential for healthy scholarship, and I firmly support it, even for academics I profoundly disagree with, and I often profoundly disagree with Beall. That said, I have become alarmed by the acerbic nature of commentary from both Beall and his critics in the course of discussing open access and predatory publishing. When the academic community conflates a human being with something they've said, using ad hominin attacks as a way to discredit the ideas they present, the community becomes toxic. Beall has engaged in this on several occasions, in his publications,[16] on social media,[17,18,19] and on WorldCat.[20,21,22] He often uses hyperbole and condescension. This is both disrespectful and unprofessional. His critics have sometimes responded in kind.[23,24] To everyone involved: stop. It isn't clever; it isn't helpful.

I want to be part of a community that can separate the worth of a person from the worth of their message. Someone's message may be abhorrent. It may legitimately hurt people. When this happens, it's the responsibility of the community to respond, to urge them to stop, and to counter their narrative with something better. I experience an acute tension between supporting academic freedom and for protecting human dignity in our discourse. Our profession has to figure out a way to hold both. I don't have an answer for how to do this well when someone uses their academic freedom to attack another's dignity.

Conclusion

Our scholarly communication system is a representation of what and who we value as an academic community, and open access is one way to help democratize that system to include people who have historically been devalued through their exclusion. While predatory publishing is a problem, it's actually an information literacy problem for which we currently have the knowledge and skills to address. We should acknowledge that librarianship and publishing participate in social and political power structures and narratives, and we should challenge any structure that perpetuates discrimination. While we wrestle through the complicated issues that arise

in the course of this work, we need to affirm that both academic freedom and human dignity have a place in the scholarly conversation, and we must to do a better job practicing them in concert.

Notes

1. Jeffrey Beall, "What I Learned from Predatory Publishers," *Biochemia Medica* 27, no. 2 (2017): 273-9.

2. Ibid.

3. Frances E. Kendall Wijeyesinghe and Charmaine L., "Advancing Social Justice Work at the Intersections of Multiple Privileged Identities," *New Directions for Student Services* 157 (15 March 2017 2017): 91-100.

4. Kim A. Case, Jonathan Iuzzini, and Morgan Hopkins, "Systems of Privilege: Intersections, Awareness, and Applications," *Journal of Social Issues* 68, no. 1 (2012): 1-10.

5. Charlotte Roh, Emily Drabinski, Harrison Inefuku, "Scholarly Communication as a Tool for Social Justice and Diversity," in Academic and Research Libraries (ACRL) Conference, Portland, OR: Academic and Research Libraries (ACRL) 2017.

6. Elizabeth R. Cole, Lanice R. Avery, Catherine Dodson, Kevin D. Goodman, "Against Nature: How Arguments About the Naturalness of Marriage Privilege Heterosexuality," *Journal of Social Issues* 68, no. 1 (2012): 46-62.

7. Michael S. Kimmel and Abby L. Ferber, *Privilege: A Reader,* 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2010).

8. Leah R. Warner and Stephanie A. Shields, "The intersections of sexuality, gender, and race: Identity research at the crossroads," *Sex Roles* 68 (2013) (11): 803-10.

9. Beall, *Biochemia Medica,* 273-9.

10. Monica Berger and Jill Cirasella, "Beyond Beall's List: Better Understanding Predatory Publishers," *College & Research Libraries News* 76, no. 3 (2015): 132-35.

11. Jeffrey Beall, "Predatory Open-Access Scholarly Publishers," *The Charleston Advisor* 12, no. 2 (July 2010): 50-50.

12. ACRL "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education," www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework.

13. Beall, *Biochemia Medica,* 273-9.

14. Ibid.

15. John Elmes, "Journals Blacklist Creator Blames University for Website Closure," *Times Higher Education* (2017).

16. Beall, *Biochemia Medica,* 273-9.

17. Jeffrey Beall (@Jeffrey_Beall), "Duh, every librarian should know pred pubs add names to ed boards w/o permission. What library is unlucky enough to have you? #Antilibrarian," June 15, 2017, 10:25 a.m. Tweet.

18. Jeffrey Beall (@Jeffrey_Beall), "East Tennessee St. Univ. med faculty love to publish in predatory journals, e.g.: http://bit.ly/2s4tVMC and http://bit.ly/2ssC3qU #OA," June 15, 2017, 5:36 a.m. Tweet.

19. Jeffrey Beall (@Jeffrey_Beall), "This is fake news from an anti-librarian. Budget cuts affect library journal licensing much more than price hikes, #OA #FakeNews," June 14, 2017, 10:11a.m. Tweet.

20. Jeffrey Beall (DenverJeffrey), "The Worst Library Article Ever," [WorldCat.org]. OCLC, January 1, 2008, web, July 10, 2017, http://aurarialibrary.worldcat.org/profiles/DenverJeffrey/reviews/82648?reviewaction=fetchfull.

21. Jeffrey Beall (DenverJeffrey), "If You Hate Libraries, You'll Love This Work," [WorldCat.org], OCLC, January 1, 2008, web, July 10, 2017, http://aurarialibrary.worldcat.org/profiles/DenverJeffrey/reviews/1266?reviewaction=fetchfull.

22. Jeffrey Beall (DenverJeffrey), "Don't Buy This Book," [WorldCat.org], OCLC, October 4, 2016, web, July 10, 2017, http://aurarialibrary.worldcat.org/profiles/DenverJeffrey/reviews/2965214?reviewaction=fetchfull.

23. David Rothman (@davidlrothman), "Um...you just called @rachel_w .... 'anti-librarian? You've always been kooky, Beall, but you've lost your damn mind," June 14, 2017, 1:36 p.m. Tweet.

24. Funk, Mark (@funkme77) "[citation needed] Plus, calling someone names? What a snowflake!" June 14, 2017, 1:20 p.m. Tweet. ✄