

Prof. Wolfgang Glänzel
Editor-in-Chief
Scientometrics

In Prague, May 19th, 2021

RESPONSE TO:

RE: Predatory publishing in Scopus: evidence on cross-country differences, Vít Macháček and Martin Srholec, Scientometrics (2021) 126:1897–1921

Dear Prof. Glänzel,

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to **respond to a letter by Mr. Frederick Fenter, Chief Executive Editor of publisher Frontiers** (henceforth “Mr. Fenter”) **that asks for a retraction of our article** on “Predatory publishing in Scopus: evidence on cross-country differences” (Macháček and Srholec 2021). In the following, we explain why **we strongly reject his outrageous demand**. We hope that this response would help you to reach the same conclusion and dismiss the investigation.

Mr. Fenter’s letter contains a litany of allegations and insults. **His core claim** and the only substantial point that in our view deserves consideration is **that Beall’s lists (Beall 2016) are not legitimate sources of data for scientific inquiry**. In this response, therefore, we focus on this issue.

Beall’s lists are not without limitations, as has been acknowledged in our paper. However, this data source has been **established as a relevant input in scientific literature** and widely used in empirical research on predatory publishing. In this regard, **we follow the suit of a long line of papers published in respected peer-reviewed scientific journals that used Beall’s lists in essentially the same way** to identify what has become referred to as potential, possible, or probable predatory journals – see the list of examples below, including papers in Science, Research Policy, Journal of Informetric and three other earlier papers in Scientometrics. We are not using some new, fringe and untested dataset for the first time. In fact, it is fair to say that Beall’s lists have become the dominant source of data in this line of research. It is hard to understand why using this data should suddenly become a reason for retracting a published paper.

Examples of articles published in highly respected peer-reviewed scientific journals that rely on Beall's lists as the main source of data essentially in the same way as our contested paper:

- Baguess, M., Sylos-Labini, M., & Zinovyeva, N. (2019). A Walk on the Wild Side: 'Predatory' journals and information asymmetries in scientific evaluations. *Research Policy*, 48(2), 462–477.
- Berger, M., Cirasella, J. (2015) Beyond Beall's List Better understanding predatory publishers. *College & Research Libraries News*. 76: 132-135.
- Bohannon J. (2013) Who's afraid of peer-review. *Science*, 342 (6154). DOI: 10.1126/science.342.6154.60
- Bolshete, P. (2018) Analysis of thirteen predatory publishers: A trap for eager-to-publish researchers. *Current Medical Research and Opinion*, 34, 157-162.
- Cobey K. D., Grudniewicz A., Lalu, M.M., Rice D.B., Raffoul H., Moher D. (2019) Knowledge and motivations of researchers publishing in presumed predatory journals: a survey. *BMJ Open*, 9(3), e026516.
- Demir, S. B. (2018a) Predatory journals: Who publishes in them and why? *Journal of Informetrics*, 12(4), 1296–1311.
- Demir, S. B. (2018b) Scholarly databases under scrutiny. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 0961000618784159.
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- Shen C, Björk, B-C. (2015) Predatory' open access: a longitudinal study of article volumes and market characteristics. *BMC Medicine*. 13(230): 1-15.
- Shamseer, L., Moher, D., Maduekwe, O., Turner, L., Barbour, V., Burch, R., Clark, J., Galipeau, J., Roberts, J., Shea, B. J. (2017) Potential predatory and legitimate biomedical journals: can you tell the difference? A cross-sectional comparison. *BMC Medicine*. 2017; 15(28)
- Wallace, F. H., Perri, T. J. (2018) Economists behaving badly: publications in predatory journals. *Scientometrics*. 115, 749-766.
- Xia, J., Harmon, J. L., Connolly, K. G., Donnelly, R. M., Anderson, M. R., Howard, H. A. (2015). Who Publishes in "Predatory" Journals? *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*. 66(7): 1406-1417.

In addition, there are dozens, if not hundreds, of other published scientific articles that discuss, draw on and refer to Beall's lists in one way or another. For example, the central role of Beall's lists in the literature on predatory publishing is vindicated in the recent review by Krawczyk and Kulczycki (2021, pg. 2): "*When preparing this study, we did not explicitly focus on Jeffrey Beall, although we are aware that he is the one who invented the term. However, when conducting our study, we realized the importance of Beall to most of the publications on this topic, as he was mentioned in more than 80% of publications we analyzed. For this reason, using Beall's approach as the reference point for the discussion on predatory publishing...*". Scopus search of a keyword "Beall" yields 52 document results (download of May 12, 2021). Hence, **Beall's lists are an integral part of the scientific literature on the topic of predatory publishing.** Are these authors, papers and journals also "*flawed, defamatory, absurd, unscientific and unprofessional*", as Mr. Fenter labels our work, and should they be retracted, including the other three aforementioned papers published in *Scientometrics*? Predatory publishing is shady business and publishers do not have any "predatory badge" on their websites. Analysing fraudulent behaviour almost always comes at costs of inaccurate data and measurement errors. **Does Mr. Fenter believe that scientific progress should advance one retraction at a time now?**

Biagiolia, et al. (2019, pg. 407) in an introduction to a special issue of *Research on "Academic misconduct, misrepresentation and gaming: A reassessment"* stated that: "*Jeffrey Beall, a librarian at the University of Colorado, previously maintained a list of what he termed 'predatory journals, but in 2017, he discontinued the list following pressure from publishers on his employer (Basken, 2017).*" By corollary, it is widely understood in the scientific community that Jeffrey Beall pulled the plug on his lists, not to admit fraud or misconduct on his part, but because of unbearable outside pressure on him and his employer to shut him down, including legal threats. The letter by Mr. Fenter provides only a glimpse of what Jeffrey Beall had to put up with and actually improves our understanding why he has discontinued his work. Nevertheless, **the fact that Jeffrey Beall had to stop updating his lists under a gunpoint does not make them irrelevant for research.** Note that we obtained data for our paper from Beall's lists at a time, when they were still online and do not project their relevance significantly into the past or future. We hope that you would not yield to that pressure and do not start censoring scientific enquiry on the topic of predatory publishing by retracting our properly peer-reviewed paper.

Bohannon (2013) in an earlier article published in *Science* concludes that "*The results show that Beall is good at spotting publishers with poor quality control*" (pg. 64). **Beall gradually developed a list of criteria that he used to produce his lists** (Beall 2015) that according to Shamseer et al. (2017, pg. 2) was "*based largely on The Committee On Publication Ethics (COPE) Code of Conduct for Journal Editors and membership criteria of the Open Access Scholarly Publisher's Association*" and which became a benchmark of how to define predatory publishing in a handful of follow-up papers (Krawczyk and Kulczycki 2021). Beall's lists were not peer-reviewed, which was also highlighted as their limitation in our paper, but if this alone would become a reason for retracting a published paper that used such data, a large part of scientific literature, not only on the topic of predatory publishing, would have to go down the drain. Moreover, the aforementioned **papers that used Beall's lists were peer-reviewed before publication, so this data has been confirmed to be a credible source of evidence by the scientific community.**

In fact, we approach the fact that *Frontiers* appeared on the Beall's lists in a balanced and cautious way in our paper. First, we inform readers about the controversy surrounding

this inclusion: “*The greatest controversy was triggered by inclusion of the Frontiers Research Foundation on Beall’s list of publishers in October 2015. Beall defended this decision by pointing out several articles that, according to him, should not have been published. According to critics of this move. ... there is a question mark about their inclusion on the predatory list.*” (pg. 1902). We acknowledge that it is fair to ask whether Frontiers should have been included or not, which is why we come back to this issue in the empirical part of our paper and investigate whether this affects the results (see Tables 3 and 5). We found out that “*Frontiers does exhibit a noticeably different pattern from the other two sources. Authors publishing in Frontiers journals are distributed far more evenly across the country groups ... From this perspective, Frontiers truly does not look as a typical predatory publisher.*” (pg. 1910) and “*the results confirm that Frontiers has a different modus operandi than the rest of the pack... In fact, the model explains this outcome variable quite poorly, from which follows that a different approach is needed to get to bottom of what is up with this publisher. Although there is no evidence in the data presented upon which we can judge whether the inclusion of Frontiers on Beall’s list was justified or not, the results at the very least clearly indicate that Frontiers is atypical. Henceforth, therefore, we focus on the outcomes excluding Frontiers*” (pg. 1914). Hence, the reader is encouraged to put more weight on the results without Frontiers. However, this is the outcome of our empirical investigation, which we could not foresee before running it and presenting its results to the reader in a transparent way. It would be far more problematic to exclude Frontiers from the analysis at the outset just because its inclusion was controversial.

Admittedly, we do not understand, why Mr. Fenter objects to reporting these results about Frontiers in our paper, as they are generally supportive to his claim that in fact this publisher perhaps should not have been blacklisted. Could it be that he misread our paper (or that he is simply attacking this way just about any paper that is using Beall’s lists as a data source regardless of its content)? Ironically, when we presented a draft version of our paper at the 17th International Conference on Scientometrics and Infometrics (ISSI) 2019 in Rome, **we were asked publicly by one of the participants whether we had any affiliation to Frontiers, apparently because of suspicion of being overly favourable to this publishing house in our analysis.** As the result, we added to the published paper Footnote 16 stating: “*It needs to be emphasized that the authors of this article have never had any connection to the Frontiers Research Foundation or any of their journals in any capacity*” (pg. 1914). It would be absurd to retract our paper based on claims from Frontiers that we have not dealt with this issue adequately.

The COPE Retraction Guidelines stipulate that it is the editor who has an ultimate responsibility over a retraction decision. It is worrying that Mr. Fenter in his letter to you refers to an earlier phone call and “agreement to forward this letter to the publisher, to whom we request the swift retraction”. Why couldn’t you decide this matter yourself based on your authority as the Editor-in-Chief of Scientometrics? Why did Mr. Fetner urged you to forward the issue to the publisher? Scientometrics’ submission guidelines state that authors are contacted only “*If, after investigation, there are valid concerns*”. Frankly, it is daunting that these preposterous accusations have been admitted as valid and not “desk-rejected”. Any further punishment of our paper beyond that would simply be outrageous. **We hope that you would not face unduly pressure from the publisher to tarnish our research and reputation, but decide on the matter in hand solely on the base of reason, which clearly must be to absolve us from any accusations of misconduct.**

Overall, we deem the ultimatum by Mr. Fenter to retract our article within two weeks, thus without sufficient time for proper deliberation, to be quite arrogant and confirming his malicious interests. No doubt, scientific inquiries on the topic of predatory publishing touch his business, because Jeffrey Beall included Frontiers on his lists, but the topic of predatory publishing is far more important to investigate in order to protect integrity of scientific communication than anyone business interests. Even more importantly, the context of Mr. Fenter's letter turns this investigation into a case about no less than protecting freedom of scientific inquiry and potential censorship of scientific communication. **A retraction of our article based on such poor arguments would be most unfortunate and surely attract even more attention to this issue than before, because such decision would have to be defended publicly in the eye of the broadest scientific community; thus doing disservice to everybody involved.**

In our view, none of the Committee on Publication Ethics' (COPE) recommendations for retraction has been met and there is no clear evidence on misconduct with regards to our paper. We hope that Scientometrics would protect this line of scientific inquiry and fend off this attack once and for all.

Yours sincerely,

Martin Srholec and Vít Macháček

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