



# Caution with the continued use of Jeffrey Beall's "predatory" open access publishing lists

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## Beall "predatory open access" blog: rise and fall

Mr. Jeffrey Beall, a librarian at the Auraria Library, University of Colorado Denver, with an MA in English and Spanish, but no PhD, became famous because of his blog, [www.scholarlyoa.com](http://www.scholarlyoa.com). Beall's blog thus became synonymous with Beall, and Beall with his blog, and both are used interchangeably in this paper. Thus, praise or criticisms that one regularly reads in social media or blogs that refer to one, in general refer to both. Beall was the sole author—save for a few "guest" posts—of the entire blog content, and must thus be held accountable for everything that he published, just as equally as academics who publish are always accountable through post-publication peer review (PPPR) (1). On January 15, 2017, Beall's blog suddenly went blank and all content became invisible even though the blog URL remains. The fragmentary content of that blog can now be found on the internet archive (<https://archive.org/index.php>). For almost six months, Beall, who is a public figure, a librarian at Auraria Library, and an associate professor at the University of Colorado, Denver (2), had remained silent about the precise reason(s) for the shut-down of his blog, but in a recent paper, Beall alluded—in a sad lamentation against his employer, the University of Colorado, other librarians, academics and those he profiled—to a few plausible reasons for the shutdown of his blog (3). Despite this, he and his research institute failed to not only offer a formal public statement and apology for the sudden erasure of information that many academics around the world had (erroneously) relied on, Beall has yet to face consequences for the potentially

erroneous and falsely—or defamatory—accusatory entries on his lists (4). In several cases, those profiled on Beall's lists felt falsely accused, and were marginalized or ignored when they challenged their inclusion by Beall on his lists, without ever receiving any indication of the precise reason for listing.

## Reliance on Beall's lists is flawed

A search on some data-bases such as Scopus or PubMed will reveal a considerable number of publications that have relied on Beall's lists to base their assumptions. For example, there are potentially serious flaws and misconceptions in a letter to the editors of the *Journal of the Neurological Sciences* (JNS) regarding the validity of Beall's lists, which were also used by the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) to clean up its own list of open access (OA) journals (5). These authors mislead academics by requesting them to refer to Beall's lists to determine "whether the open access journal they are considering for their manuscript is a predatory rather than a genuine gold open access journal". However, any member of the public can freely access Beall's archived lists of "potential, possible, or probable predatory scholarly open-access journals/publishers" (6), and clearly observe that absolutely no specific or detailed criteria are listed for any of these so-called "predatory" journals or publishers, even though there were supposedly a broad list of criteria for inclusion on the lists. Even if select criteria may have been used to initially select these journals or publishers for inclusion on those lists, no entry shows specific criteria for each journal or publisher, making the list unreliable, and not allowing the public to validate those claims, which were

made based on unstated criteria. The attitude by Beall was thus also farcical: expecting the “predatory” journals and publishers to be open and transparent to the public while Beall himself remained opaque about inclusion criteria, leading a group of anonymous academics to critique and mistrust both Beall, and his lists (7). Beall’s hypocrisy is both astonishing, and of great concern, as many academics and institutes have and continue to refer to, rely on, or use the Beall lists blindly as some sort of a guiding blacklist to limit their choice of publication venue, or to limit the choice of journal in which an academic can publish their results. Had Beall quantified predatory practices for each entry in his list, relative to some mainstream model publishing journals or publishers as the controls, then such lists might have been useful, and could have served as a useful screen for sieving out unscholarly, unreliable or exploratory journals or publishers. In 2013, I suggested such a system to quantify “predation” in publishing (OA and traditional) (8). Beall purposefully ignored my advice. The Beall lists are inaccurate (9), and thus misleading and dangerous to academics than they are useful. Thus, the basis for Beall’s call for a ban (10) was deeply flawed because of the lack of clearly defined and quantifiable criteria for each entry in those lists, making calls by others (11) to formalize “predatory” journals in *curriculum vitae* dangerously unscholarly and discriminatory, and leading to considerable criticism on PubPeer (12).

Academics, especially those with long tenure, or rich in experience and expertise, enjoy the challenges and pleasure of publishing in an array of journals and publishers, not only those that carry the highest impact factor, or that are (in some cases erroneously) most lauded by their peers. Such individuals most likely could (relatively) easily publish their work in high level journals, but on occasion, they may try new publishing venues, as part of an enriching scholarly experience that all academics should experiment with. Individuals with little experience are unable to appreciate this quest for diversity, either because they have little intellect to contribute, or they will undoubtedly aim to publish the precious little intellect they have to contribute in more reputable indexed journals. However, such a choice of publishing venue is personal, and rather than observing Beall’s “predatory” lists that stigmatize all contributing scholars because they have published in any one journal or publisher, seasoned academics should observe several aspects of the journal and/or publisher, including already published papers, to ascertain whether that publishing venue is suitable, and

a safe or useful repository for their intellect. Without a doubt, relatively unknown journals by smaller emerging publishers might have more lax quality control than more reputable journals, and may thus serve as an easier medium for publication. In OA publishing, this choice comes at a price, and it is likely that this is where the concept of “predatory” publishing emerged, in which vanity publishing was seen as an opportunity by weak academics to process anything, provided that they were willing to pay the price in the form of an article processing charge (APC), leading some journals and publishers to exploit the extraction of APCs from unwitting academics, while providing little or no academic or scholarly value, i.e., the so-called “predators” (13). On Beall’s lists, journals or publishers that did not charge APCs, but that apparently exploited academics with unscholarly or deceptive behavior, such as spamming, use of false metrics, or lax or no peer review, were also slapped with a “predatory” label, but it was never clear if just one of these criteria was enough to merit listing by Beall. Umpteen calls to Beall to clarify this issue were never answered. As many seasoned academics know, not all publishing experiences are positive, but even negative ones can be enriching, serving as a learning curve. Many academics will also know that peer review, even in top impact factor journals and mainstream publishers (14), can be flawed and that APCs by some mega OA journals are exorbitant. Democratic liberal publishing prides itself in that no institute or individual should be able, or allowed to, forcefully override the choice that an academic makes regarding their choice of publishing venue, even if it is subject to scrutiny or ridicule. And yet, one of the serious problems with the pro-Beall movement was to seek the shaming of academics for publishing in journals or publishers on his flawed lists, i.e., Beall and his lists were stimulating discriminatory and highly unscholarly policies and attitudes. The same independence that authors and academics have in selecting their choice of publishing medium is the same level of editorial independence that a journal or publisher has in establishing their own rules and guidelines for publication, and applying it to authors and editors.

For example, in 2015, the *Journal of Threatened Taxa* (JOTT)—an OA journal that is not listed on Beall’s lists—decided to use Beall’s lists as formal criteria to forcefully limit the choice of references that authors submitting to their journal could cite, in essence using the Beall lists as black lists to which their authors had to conform, i.e., a blanket, obligatory and non-democratic choice. Similar

to the Manca *et al.* letter to the JNS editors (5), the JOTT editors were using a flawed set of criteria to forcefully curtail JOTT author's democratic choice of literature in the reference list of their submitted papers. I formally protested this editorial imposition (15) as I felt that it constituted a blatant infringement upon authors' academic rights (16) and because almost certainly the JOTT editors were not completing a thorough PPPR screening of all of the literature that authors were listing in their reference lists. That does not imply that the JOTT editors should not carefully screen the reference list for unsuitable or academically invalid citations that do not support the claims being made within the manuscript. However, to impose a blanket rule based on the lists created by one highly biased individual—when there are likely (many) valid papers with real academic value in journals on Beall's lists—made and continues to make the JOTT rule discriminatory and unfair to its authors, eroding their academic freedom and rights. Editors who operate a discriminatory editorial policy as that employed by JOTT should consider the following: there are likely poorly vetted, fraudulent or problematic papers in highly ranked journals, as documented widely at Retraction Watch and PubPeer, even in journals with a high impact factor, or non-OA, so the assumption that all papers in journals that are not on Beall's lists are valid, is clearly false. The merits or demerits of any paper have to be observed individually, not based on the journal where they were published. It is evident that the likelihood of finding flawed papers in some nascent journals on Beall's lists may be higher than in reputable journals due to their relative lax editorial policies or inexperience, but does that make them “predatory”? Even so, has the “predatory” nature of entries on Beall's lists been quantified to confidently state that so-called reputable journals and publishers i.e., automatically those not listed on Beall's lists, are in fact bearers and publishers of robust research, editorial functionality and non-exploitative practices? Why would journals and publishers profiled by Retraction Watch and PubPeer not be “predatory”, and why did Beall not list those journals or publishers on his lists if they satisfied even just one criterion on his list of criteria? These are the gaps in transparency and logic that made Beall, and his lists, untrustworthy. The final nail in the coffin of Beall's blog was Beall's lax use of the term “predatory”. Initially, Beall had coined the term exclusively for OA journals and publishers, as exemplified by his lists (6), but in some of his latest publications, Beall conveniently, or purposefully, eliminated the limited characterization of OA, simply referring to them more

broadly as “predatory” journals or “predatory” publishers (17), and in essence invalidating his own lists.

### **OA publishing must not rely on, or use, the Beall lists**

The Beall blog and papers and letters like those published by Manca *et al.* (5) raise awareness, and this is good because it furthers the discussion among academics about the important issue of unscholarly journals, or journals that abuse conventional ethical practices, or who try to extract money from authors, as APCs, in exchange for something that has no intrinsic scholarly value. Such journals are lowering the academic bar in science publishing, diluting the concept of editorial quality control, hurting the validity of scientific results, and thus damaging science's credibility and society's trust in those findings (18). One thing is a healthy and open discussion, but it is a totally different thing to use flawed, inaccurate and unspecified lists, as those created by Beall, to allow authors, editors and publishers to implement a new system of academic discrimination and that allows academic institutes to impose or restrict their faculty's choice of publishing venue.

Solid proof of the Beall straw man came in a study by Wallace and Perri (19), which showed that 27 highly ranked (i.e., in the top 5%) economists published almost 5% of all their papers in Beall-listed “predatory” OA journals. This indicates that even if some in the academic community may have doubts about the publishing venue, that true merit must be assessed not by the status of the journal or publisher, but rather by the inherent quality of individually published papers. This statistic might also indicate that even those who produce high quality work also produce low quality work, or work that is marginalized, via unfair desk rejections, by mainstream publishers for arbitrary reasons (20). Finally, some “predatory” journals that had been included in the REPEC rankings discussed by Wallace and Perri were considered to be problematic, leading REPEC to create a committee to evaluate “predatory” journals. Another unintended consequence of Beall's lists is the potential of peer slander, which was insinuated in a recent paper by Pyne (21), who vilified the vast majority of academics in his department for having published in journals on Beall's lists, i.e., a department-wide classification of competing colleagues as unscholarly was published by Pyne based on Beall's flawed lists. As for JOTT, this indicates that some academics are using Beall's lists, even after they have ceased to exist, for discriminatory policies

against other academics, possibly their competitors.

Even though the first paragraph on Beall's list of journals and publishers (6) stated "criteria for determining predatory publishers are here", it is not clear how many of those criteria, or in what permutation, were needed for a journal or publisher to appear on his lists. Beall is still expected to respond openly and publicly to queries and criticisms of his shuttered blog and now defunct lists. This would allow scientists and the public to independently assess those lists and their inclusion/exclusion criteria, and thus validate or invalidate them in a PPPR process. Validated lists with verifiable criteria could in fact serve as useful and valuable white or black (i.e., inclusionary or exclusionary) publishing lists for a global academic community. However, as they currently stand in an archived state, the Beall lists are invalid, inaccurate, and thus academically misleading.

## Conclusions

Academics and scientists are cautioned about the use of Jeffrey Beall's now retracted and defunct lists of "potential, possible, or probable predatory scholarly open-access journals/publishers". Although authors in general would want to aspire to publishing their work in journals with a good impact factor or in reputable journals published by equally reputable publishers, *sensu lato*, in several cases, this is not always possible for multiple reasons. Thus, seeking alternative venues that are safe (i.e., not as reputable, but offer reasonable to solid academic support and quality control) to publish their intellectual ideas can be challenging since several new (and not-so-new) OA journals that have emerged in the past few years have non-academic (i.e., purely for-profit) objectives, and may thus mislead authors into contributing their papers, at a cost. In this sense, the Beall blog—which became defunct in January of 2017—stimulated the discussion about some possibly risky publishing venues. However, the lists provided by Beall were broad and contained errors, misclassifications, and false negatives. Thus, those extant lists should not be used in any formal capacity to limit authors' choice of publishing venue. Furthermore, pressure should still be applied on Beall by academics, in a PPPR examination, to reveal the precise criteria for each journal or publisher on his lists that continue to be espoused by groups like World Association of Medical Editors (WAME) (22), and to make him fully accountable for offering unsound academic advice using inaccurate information. Incredulously, a new "predatory" journal black-list, which was apparently developed in

consultation with Beall since 2015, was launched in mid-June by a US editing service provider, Cabell's International, but access to that list will be behind a pay-wall (23), which will surely lead to a fresh crisis of trust and fortify that Beall, his lists, and his allies, such as Retraction Watch (24), cannot be trusted.

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