

*Editorial*

# Who are the real parasite publishers and journals? What prevents all medical data from being open access in real-time?

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There are two important recent publications that question dogma. Both have titles that are provocative and eye-catching. “Against Parasite Publishers: Making Journals Free” and “Stop Congratulating Colleagues for Publishing in High Impact-Factor Journals.”<sup>[1,2]</sup>

What they are referring to are the elitist and profit-focused publications and their biased performance metrics. We have been programmed to respect and follow them, in a manner cleverly camouflaged by the publishing houses that want to ringfence their leadership role and resultant revenue streams. We researchers are in pursuit of career growth, respect in the eyes of our peers, and wider recognition of our scientific work. We are thus blinded to the fact that the current system of publication and its convoluted system of evaluation is obscure and needs a radical change.

What researchers and scientists look for are academic positions, smooth promotions, and funding of their grant applications – which will be engines of professional growth. So, is there no avoiding the trap of high-profile journals brought out by successful international publishers? Let us first open your eyes to the dirt hidden behind their ivory tower façade.

Although there are many publishers that have journals that charge for access (e.g., Wiley, Taylor and Francis, and Springer), we will focus on Elsevier for this editorial. This publishing house (owned by RELX group) is one of the richest publishers. In the year 2019, they published 3000 journals, had a revenue of 9.8 billion USD and a profit margin of nearly 40%.<sup>[3]</sup> This makes their profitability more than Apple or Google.

Richard Horton (ex Lancet editor) and Marcia Angell (ex editor of New England Journal of Medicine) have claimed that journals have become “information laundering” or “marketing” machines.<sup>[4,5]</sup>

On top of bringing out journals whose content is behind a paywall, Elsevier has also admitted to publishing six fake medical journals between 2000 and 2005. All of these were sponsored by pharmaceutical and published without proper disclosure of sponsorship. All they contained were a compilation of articles “borrowed” from other Elsevier journals that presented data favorable to some pharma products.<sup>[6]</sup>

These journals’ contents were manuscripts routinely prepared by the employees of pharma companies. They recruited academically affiliated researchers to be authors for these manuscripts, replacing the names of company scientists who actually wrote them. In addition, most such manuscripts did not have any disclosure regarding the industry affiliation or support.<sup>[6,7]</sup>

The culmination of this blatant misuse of their position led to the Elsevier boycott movement.<sup>[8,9]</sup> Timothy Gowers’s blog post-mobilized support for the pledge to refuse to be part of the editorial board, publish or be a referee for any Elsevier journal. This is now supported by about 18,000 researchers.

By definition, predatory journals or publishers are entities 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.<sup>[10]</sup> Thus, it is clear that some Elsevier journals are predatory in nature, fulfilling all of the above.

Their holier-than-thou attitude stands exposed for its hollowness.

The next option is open-access journals. They do not charge a subscription for access to their full text articles (for academic purposes, commercial use is still charged). Such journals claim that they are forced to charge authors the so-called

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**Received:** 15 December 2022 **Accepted:** 28 December 2022 **Published:** 02 January 2023 **DOI:** 10.25259/IJMS\_283\_2022

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“processing fees” to meet their expenses. This seems to be another devious method of protecting their profits while passing on the expenses to the authors. Take the example of Nature (which is now part of Springer). They claim to be committed to moving their journals to open access so that the global scientific community gets access to the contents of their high-quality content. However, they find great difficulty in making this transition because they have to pay the salaries (plus other expenses) of their highly qualified full-time staff working on research content (supposedly this means 284 staff members including 193 trained Ph.D. editors).<sup>[11]</sup> We are left wondering when prospective authors are doing the primary research and submitting their completed manuscripts, what are these 193 PhDs doing regarding research content? In fact, they find that transition to open access is not easy (probably not easy while protecting revenue and profits). No wonder they had the audacity to start open access option to Nature journals, where authors will have to cough up Euro 9500 (USD 11,400) if they want their papers to be available free to readers (in place of subscription-only access).<sup>[11]</sup> Isn't this price gouging by greedy publishing businesses?

[Table 1] gives the correct perspective of what this means.

So what options do we have?

In 1989, there was the “Journal Declarations of Independence.” The editorial board of one of the journals of Kluwer Academic Publishers (Vegetatio) revolted and set up the competitive Journal of Vegetation Science (IAVS).<sup>[13]</sup> Their action was defying the high prices and lack of control of the board. Unfortunately, the new journal was only old wine in a new bottle. They became another predatory parasite.

In 2000, we had another declaration signed by 34,000 scientists. This time to establish a Public Library of Science that will “grant unrestricted free distribution rights to all original research reports that they have published, through PubMed Central and similar online public resources, within 6 months of their initial publication date.”<sup>[14]</sup> Once more, we were flattered to be deceived. Despite their not-for-profit entity, publication fees are still very high (approximately \$2137 in 2019).

**Table 1:** What does Euro 9500 mean in different circumstances?<sup>[11,12]</sup>

S. No.	Description	Country
1.	Annual salary of assistant professor in medical school	India
2.	Annual salary of microbiologist	Bangladesh
3.	80% of annual salary of a full professor	Cambodia
4.	25% of maximum federal research grants	Brazil
5.	50% of Africa Oxford's new collaboration grant	Kenya
6.	Cost for open access publishing in nature	Globally

However, all is not lost. The explosion of digital technology and the social media tsunami has provided other options.

Zenodo (which is where one of the provocatively titled article was published) is a portal that accepts all types of digital research files (publications, posters, videos, codes, datasets, etc). Launched in 2013 by OpenAIRE, to implement the European Commission's policy of Open Science, it now provides access to more than 2 million records.<sup>[15]</sup>

arXiv.org is a similar online repository that has gained prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic. It started in 1991 and currently also has about 2 million articles.<sup>[16]</sup> It is owned by Cornell University and hopefully will continue its great work. BioRxiv, PubMed Central, and CiteSeerX are it's me too examples.

Founder of Reddit, Aaron Schwartz initiated another movement – helping share knowledge by hacking the information hiding behind the paywalls. He was instrumental in commencing mass-scale copyright infringement (from JSTOR digital repository).<sup>[17]</sup>

This was followed by the establishment of Sci-Hub in 2011 by Alexandra Elbakyan.<sup>[18]</sup> This website provides free access to millions of research articles – that were hitherto behind paywalls. By 2022, it contained 88 million articles, in other words, almost all articles were ever published and available online. Every day, it typically has received more than 2 million search requests. Surprisingly most of the requests are from the USA (10 million) and China (30 million). Typically, requests from India are about 1.8 million.

Four publishers (Elsevier, Springer Nature, the American Chemical Society, John Wiley, Cambridge University Press, etc.) sued Sci-Hub in many countries, including India. Consequently, this site got banned in many countries – including France, Sweden, Germany, and the UK. In the past month, Delhi high court rejected one plea from the Sci-Hub founder, but the case is still sub-judice.<sup>[19]</sup>

Library Genesis was created in Russia in the year 2008. Similar to Sci-Hub, this stores full text, but of books. Till 2021, it had a repository of 8 million books in several languages. Once more publishers have used legal recourse to sue Library Genesis, and their websites have been blocked in several countries, including France, Germany, Russia, and the UK.<sup>[20]</sup>

The fight to support free access to scientific and medical content continues. The underdog is fighting the big publishers who want to protect their wealth worth billions of dollars. No wonder this is a fight akin to David and Goliath. Fortunately, a dedicated few are mobilizing support, optimizing meager resources, and carving out a crucial path for the future generations.<sup>[21,22]</sup>

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**How to cite this article:** Parikh PM, Vora A. Who are the real parasite publishers and journals? What prevents all medical data from being open access in real-time? *Indian J Med Sci* 2022;74:109-11.