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*Jeffrey Beall's "predatory" lists must not be used:
they are biased, flawed, opaque and inaccurate*

Jeffrey Beall wages war on predatory publishing and on open access

Mr. Jeffrey Beall, a librarian at the Auraria Library at the University of Colorado Denver, in the USA, became famous, not as a result of his librarian-related activity, but rather as a result of his hobby blog related to open access (OA) journals and publishers that cut academic corners, which he referred to as “predatory”. However, Beall is clearly unqualified to consider scientific content and/or the academic contribution or value of scientific articles and journals, both of which he frequently criticized, making his critiques irrelevant. This scientific incompetence frequently got mixed up with his absolute competence for assessing the indexing value of journals on his lists, with his librarianship, and with his bibliometric objectives of trying to identify unscholarly journals and publishers. The latter objective was certainly valid, and of importance to academia. Although Mr. Beall left his options very wide, by referring to these lists of hundreds of journals and publishers as «potential, possible, or probable», such wide variation and the non-existence of specific lists of criteria for each of those entries invalidated those lists and the conclusions drawn that Beall’s entire set of OA journals and publishers were in fact “predatory”. Beall

did list, however, a list of broad criteria based on which entries on those lists were based.¹ On that document, Beall thanks Bill Cohen² and Michael Firmin³ for assistance with the lists in that and earlier versions. One can thus extrapolate that the core architects of the lists were Beall, Cohen and Firmin. This important information is rarely discussed, but is important because nowhere does Firmin, a forensic psychologist, indicate on his institutional website any link to Beall, Beall's blogs, or assistance with the development of those lists. This constitutes a hidden professional conflict of interest (COI). Cohen is the publisher and editor-in-chief of Harrington Park Press, based in New York.⁴ This is important because this makes the relationship with a publisher a hidden conflict of interest, even more so because, on that page, the description for Cohen indicates curious deeper hidden COIs: «He jumped directly into the publishing industry with Human Sciences Press, now part of Plenum Press, a division of Springer Science+Business Media. Starting as a clerk-typist, Bill became Director of Marketing within a year, and was in charge of all publicity and sales efforts for academic journal and book titles, managing a direct mail campaign reaching one million pieces a year»; «At the age of 26, Bill left Human Sciences Press together with its president, Patrick McLaughlin, to launch The Haworth Press, Inc.»; «Haworth Press began in Bill's home office. From 1975 to 2006, the firm grew from publishing one peer-review academic journal to almost 200, and it published almost 5,000 monographs and texts» and «In early 2007, Bill divested the firm [i.e., Harrington Park Press, a Haworth Press imprint] to the Taylor & Francis Group/Routledge, and joined them as a consultant for two years». Harrington Park Press focuses on

¹ Beall 2015.

² <<https://www.linkedin.com/in/bill-cohen-401868a>>. Last website visited: 30/03/2017.

³ <<https://www.cedarville.edu/Academics/Psychology/Firmin.aspx>>.

⁴ <<http://harringtonparkpress.com/about-us/>>.

LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) literature. Beall is also widely fully credited for those lists, but what remains unknown is how much responsibility Fermin and Cohen have in the development and divulgation of those lists. More importantly, especially in the case of Cohen, it is unclear how much his own publishing interests and/or ties to the for-profit commercial publishing industry may have had an influence on the implementation and expansion of Beall's lists and blog that caused so much potential damage to so many who may have been innocently victimized through Beall's shaming blog.

Despite several requests to formally list the criteria for each of the journals and publishers Beall had profiled, no such details were ever released to the public. Trust in Beall and his lists began to fade as a result, and ample evidence of sometimes aggressive criticism can still be found on the web. Jeffrey Beall's lists, as well as his blog, suddenly went blank on January 15, 2017, without any explanation. Beall's silence and lack of a response to global academia, almost three months after his site's closure, and the failure of his employer, the University of Colorado, Denver, to offer a public opinion, reflects profound academic irresponsibility and opacity on the part of Beall, and his employer, two characteristics which Beall was highly critical of in the journals and publishers that he had shamed and profiled.⁵ Beall's failure and the set-back that the OA community suffered as a result of the existence of the Beall blog, and then after its demise, does not in any way undermine the risks that exist in predatory OA publishing. There isn't a single academic who has not been spammed with indiscriminate invitations to academically suspect journals or congresses.⁶ Yet, to date, no effective strategy has been devised as to how best to reign in this unscholarly, and in some cases, fraudulent activity that is causing considerable chaos in global academia, and which is undermining the

⁵ Teixeira da Silva 2017.

⁶ Teixeira da Silva - Sorooshian - Al-Khatib 2017.

efforts of valid researchers to bring their research and intellect to the public. Beall's efforts became sadly misdirected towards 2016-2017 as he and his supporters and followers increasingly pushed towards the formal implementation of the flawed lists as institutional policy, culminating in the call to ban predatory journals, presumably those on his lists, indicating in one wild generalist swoop that «they pollute the scholarly record with fringe or junk science and activist research».⁷ That radical approach was surely the straw that broke the camel's back.

Beall's lists were fundamentally flawed, and thus unscholarly

For several years, there were increasing concerns about the criteria that Beall had used to develop his lists, which he claimed to be increasing annually, recording over 1000 in his latest 2017 "Beall's lists". This is reflected by some conflicting entries, including Swiss-based Frontiers,⁸ which is a member of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). Requests to Beall, Frontiers and COPE to explain how an apparently ethically (i.e., COPE)-listed publishing entity was listed as predatory have regrettably not received any response for several months, casting further doubt on the criteria that led to the listing of this publisher – and other COPE member journals – on Beall's lists. Such listings have drawn concern that the criteria for inclusion on those lists may be biased, decided exclusively by Beall himself, and not based on any transparent or clear policies or parameters.⁹ Crawford found, in his damning report and analysis of Beall's lists,¹⁰ which were essentially black lists, that for only 35% of 223 publishers on his 2014 list, did Beall provide a rationale for listing while about 90% of the 605 new listings on Beall's 2016 lists showed no published

⁷ Beall 2016.

⁸ <<http://home.frontiersin.org/>>.

⁹ Crawford 2016.

¹⁰ <<http://citesandinsights.info/civ16i1.pdf>>.

or publicly available rationale for inclusion. This frustration with Beall led Crawford to establish a grey list in January, 2017.¹¹

In a personal communication with me, Anatole Klyosov, who was highly critical of Beall on the comments section¹² of Beall's 2016 *Nature* paper because Beall had been critical of him and the publisher for which he served as an editor, SCIRP, dismissed Beall's list as «scientifically insignificant and bureaucratic by its nature and presentation». Klyosov's core argument was that entire journals were being banned without giving academic consideration to individual papers published therein. In essence, authors should have the liberty of selecting their publication venue, provided that they understand the risks, and cite the literature that they feel they need to cite to support the claims that they make. It is then up to the journal's editor to approve that submission, or not.

Beall's dead lists live on, through WAME

There is even evidence on the Beall blog, of his inclusion of journals within a few hours, overnight, or after a single-handed decision, after being tipped off by “concerned” readers. Scientists were thus concerned by Beall's practices and his lists, and began to question Beall's true objectives. Some claimed that Beall was fundamentally anti-OA, stating, in Beall's book,¹³ «The OA movement is an anti-corporatist movement that wants to deny the freedom of the press to companies it disagrees with». It is very possible that there may have been valid academic and scholarly papers in journals on those lists that had been published following a peer review process that was fair, unbiased and rigorous. However, academically valid literature continues to be overshadowed by Beall's lists, which continue to be promoted, as if

¹¹ <<http://citesandinsights.info/civ17i1.pdf>>.

¹² <<http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v534/n7607/full/534326a.html>>.

¹³ Beall 2013.

valid, by the World Association of Medical Editors (WAME)¹⁴, which is grossly misleading the biomedical community. By insisting that these lists are valid, they are in fact promoting literature that is not published in journals on these lists, i.e., WAME is indulging in citation manipulation. In times when scientists are seeking alternative – but safe – publishing venues, robust and credible “white” and “black” lists would certainly aid their choice of publishing venue. But misguided, poor and even false or discriminatory advice by WAME, following in the footsteps of Beall, does not help scholars better appreciate what is valid literature, and discern it from unscholarly literature.

Unlike Beall, WAME does not include black lists, but the criteria that it lists as being “predatory” criteria are verbatim those used by Beall, and with many questionable aspects. Beall’s opaque lists, which live on through WAME’s citation of them as being valid, as well as Beall’s call on the scientific community in the 2016 *Nature* paper to indiscriminately ban potentially hundreds, if not thousands, of journals and publishers,¹⁵ with or without academically valid literature, represents a danger to the academic community if those lists were, or continue to be, used in any formal way by scholars, or academic institutes. The silence that is met when valid questions are asked also reflects a lack of accountability for those lists and thus decreases trust and confidence, not only in those lists, but in Beall himself as the creator and manager of those lists.¹⁶ A valid ban can only stem from a valid list with valid criteria that are defined in detail. Beall’s call to ban predatory journals – which he does not even indicate are limited to the OA movement – represents a challenge to the freedom of speech and choice that scientists have in selecting their venue to publish their results, even if that choice is bad, because Beall has

¹⁴ <<http://www.wame.org/identifying-predatory-or-pseudo-journals>>.

¹⁵ Beall 2016.

¹⁶ Teixeira da Silva 2016a.

created a permanent negative stigma that is associated with journals and publishers on his lists, even now after his blog has been retracted. Ultimately, scientists should have the freedom of choice to publish wherever they please, but they are perceived as publishing in a journal or publisher on Beall's lists, an automatically negative stigma may be attached to such a scientist, even if their work is perfectly valid, and academically sound. The correct way to assess the academic validity of a paper is not by assessing the journal in which it was published, or by the publisher that published that journal, but by its content.

Can something be salvaged from Beall's lists or blog?

Beall is occasionally correct in stating that there are some risks posed by imperfect or non-existent peer review in such journals and publishers, and in fact this may be true in some of the journals and publishers he listed. Even so, Beall rarely provided tangible proof. However, these risks that Beall alluded to were no less than those that exist in traditional journals of established publishing houses that are witnessing a rise in fake or compromised peer reviews, or increasing cases of imperfect and permeable peer review.¹⁷ Banning, as suggested by Beall, is not a viable solution, as equally as observing Beall's flawed lists as some sort of a "black list" is not a solution, also since no balancing "white lists" exist that show journals that are fully scholarly, and free of bias and imperfection. Most importantly, since Beall's blog was officially shut down, the lists are now dysfunctional and should not be used. Applying the inaccurate Beall lists in an exclusionary (i.e., discriminatory) way by editors on their authorship, or selectively banning certain literature from authors' reference lists is not advised as this constitutes non-academic behaviour, and calls into question the validity and good judgement – possibly even the

¹⁷ Teixeira da Silva 2016b.

ethics – of editors who impose such decisions based on Beall's lists¹⁸ or WAME's criteria. In his *Nature* commentary, Beall called for better scrutiny by stakeholders (universities, colleges, companies supplying services to publishers, and scholarly databases) to identify predators that are 'threatening the credibility of science' and to ban them with the objective of ultimately phasing them out of circulation.¹⁹ There is some merit in that approach, but naturally not using Beall's lists, and even more importantly, by not relying on Beall or his subjectivity and bias. Such decisions should be made by collective academic councils, who would be responsible for scoring a journal or publisher's academic weaknesses, while recognizing academically sound literature, so that each case may be fairly compared, then judged using quantitative measures that can be independently measured, and validated.²⁰ Beall's lists were always created in secrecy, and appeals were often rejected by an elusive – most likely non-existent – appeals panel.

Beall's blog raised awareness of dangers in the OA movement. Expanding the discussion, for example through blogs, is praiseworthy, because such actions increase accountability in science, but to extend Beall's act of activism to a formal ban of the choice of venue where an academic can or cannot publish their work – limiting that ban exclusively to OA, while ignoring the ills and predatory and/or unscholarly behaviour of some of the larger mainstream publishers – is clearly biased. Beall never clearly stated his COIs.²¹ Authors already have minimum protections when it comes to the predatory publishing practices, and adhering to the flawed Beall lists or WAME criteria will endanger them further and reduce their academic freedoms and choices.²² However, it is incumbent upon the

¹⁸ Teixeira da Silva 2015.

¹⁹ Beall 2016.

²⁰ Teixeira da Silva 2013.

²¹ Teixeira da Silva 2016a.

²² Al-Khatib 2016.

global academia to provide a suitable white list of academically sound journals and publishers, and a set of criteria that are not determined by factions within the publishing industry that have their own agenda to fulfill. Solid proof that the Beall lists were inaccurate came from a report²³ who noted that elite economists published in journals that Beall considered to be “predatory”, emphasizing that great caution is urged if scientists and regulatory agencies plan to use Beall’s lists or WAME’s criteria.

Even though the Beall blog suddenly had all content blanked out on January 15, 2017, Beall has not offered any explanation or apology to the public, to those he misled and to those he may have victimized because of his false lists. However, several blogs, including Retraction Watch, a watchdog like Beall,²⁴ continue to flaunt his lists as important, and valid. While they continue to be promoted, it is important for the community of OA journals to carefully assess those lists and prove to those who continue to promote them, that their actions are as wrong, and misleading, as Beall.

²³ Wallace - Perri 2016.

²⁴ Teixeira da Silva 2016c.

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ABSTRACT

A commentary published in «Nature» by Jeffrey Beall called for the ban of “predatory” journals from the scientific record. That call for a ban was deeply flawed since the lists on which the term “predatory” were based, were themselves flawed. Many papers published in such journals are valid, having been peer reviewed, and acting in an academically responsible manner, making Beall's call unfair, and discriminatory. Beall's blog served as a useful alert system, but in no way were Beall's black lists, which failed to indicate precise inclusion criteria for each entry, validated by scholars around the globe, much less suitable for use in any policy-making. Even though the Beall blog suddenly went blank on January 15, 2017, with no explanation to the public by Beall, the lists continue to be flaunted as de facto publishing black lists by several academics and websites.

Jeffrey Beall, Predatory journals, Open access, Scientific publishing