

Predation, Plagiarism, and Perfidy

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abstract: This article presents the personal story of an author who twice found himself a victim of plagiarism. The most recent development in the story is that a journal, possibly predatory, published a version of the author's article on predatory journals, plagiarized and incorrectly paraphrased. The occurrence prompted reflections on whether such stories are common to the developing world. The answer is hard to determine, but clearly there is a strong need for educating people about research ethics. Libraries can play a key role in the process by increasing the awareness of novice and experienced scholars about issues of research ethics, including plagiarism and predatory publishing.

Doctoral Education in Romania and the United States

Getting education abroad can be challenging, and when scholars return to their home country, they may encounter unanticipated difficulties and experience reverse culture shock. The author of this article, for example, received his master's and first doctoral degree from an American university, preceded and followed by education in his home country, Romania, where he currently lives and works. American education exposed him to certain research ethics, and part of the author's cultural shock was due to the difference in ethical values, especially those related to academia and research.

Romania has encountered problems related to academic and research ethics, most visibly when a number of politicians, including a former prime minister,¹ were proved to have plagiarized their doctoral dissertations. Their examples are only the tip of an iceberg; the list is unfortunately longer. The causes are worth exploring. Romania was governed for almost half a century by a political regime that limited access to doctoral studies. There was essentially no doctoral education; PhDs were usually awarded to people in their 40s and beyond, crowning a full research career. The number of doctoral degrees was limited, but such qualifications were not required for teaching in the universities. The restrictive conditions turned the few PhD holders into an elite. Plagiarism was nearly impossible, given the restricted access to resources, but Romanian academics observed strict ethical standards and would not try to steal someone else's work.

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After 1989, these unwritten rules began to change as the political system transitioned. Doctoral education became more accessible, and starting in 2011, an instructor in any accredited higher education institution was required to hold a doctoral degree to teach. These changes created a demand for doctorates. Moreover, the law granted any holder of a doctoral degree working in the public system an initial 15 percent increase of base salary, and an advanced degree facilitated promotions in public positions. These incentives lured many people to the universities in pursuit of doctoral studies. Additionally, those who had been interested in an advanced degree but could not get one due to the lack of available education now enrolled in doctoral programs.

At the same time, two other changes occurred in the education system. During accession to the European Union and NATO, Romania became part of the Bologna Process, a set of educational reforms intended to standardize Europe's higher education systems and facilitate the mobility and employability of students across the continent.² Essentially, this meant that PhDs became merely the third stage of a scholar's education, after the bachelor's and master's degrees, and not something different or special. Earning a doctoral degree indicated that a student had learned how to do research. The PhD degree was the confirmation of successfully taking the first steps in becoming a researcher and did not necessarily add to the existing knowledge in the field. As a result, in some fields, the doctoral dissertation did not require more than a literature review, a summary of the academic work already done in relation to the dissertation topic. The second change resulted from the global technological revolution. Access to resources (such as international scientific literature) became possible and was even free in most cases; there was a significant shift in emphasis, from finding information to selecting the best and most trustworthy sources.

When doctoral education transitioned from elitist to readily available, combined with the increased attractiveness of doctoral degrees and the greater availability of information through technology, the informal but strict ethical standards held by the older elite began to loosen. The author of this article returned to Romania as these changes took place and thus experienced a reverse culture shock. His doctoral degree from the United States was not recognized automatically but had to undergo a process involving the review of his dissertation by Romanian professors. This experience, along with the changes in the education system, caused him to become knowledgeable and strict with respect to research ethics.

Thus, the author's experience illuminates the changes in the Romanian education system. In the United States, ethical constraints are the rule and not the exception. After his return in 2005, things had already begun to change in Romania. Scandals involving

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plagiarism were common. In subsequent years, opportunistic people took advantage of higher education in Romania, and ethical standards changed in response to such exploitation. Nowadays, plagiarism is strictly punished. Scholarly works and theses are screened for plagiarism, and academic journals examine their submissions as recommended

by international standards. Some legislative incentives (not finalized) would hold the entire university responsible if a certain number of plagiarism cases were detected. The proposals would also hold the doctoral adviser and advisory committee responsible if a doctoral candidate were found to have plagiarized her or his dissertation.



A Victim of Plagiarism (Twice)

The author's personal interest in research ethics and plagiarism began when he taught a course on academic ethics in his home institution. He became even more engaged with the topic after he was plagiarized not once, but twice. Neither of the two plagiarized articles had Romanian authors. In both cases, the plagiarists came from developing countries, which may be more prone to plagiarism, according to some authors, including Saqib Saeed and his colleagues.³

The first experience occurred when the author's 2010 article on the structure, functions, and dynamics of the urban ecosystem was published in 2015 in its entirety, unaltered except for a different title and authors. The publisher was a Moldovan journal called *Noosfera: Revistă Științifică, de Educație, Spiritualitate și Cultură Ecologică* (Noosphere: A scientific journal on education, spirituality, and environmental culture). Many e-mails were exchanged with the authorities of Moldova, only to find that nothing would be done because the plagiarists were master's students. Apparently, the authorities found the request for justice too harsh for the students. Even more amazing, the editors of the journals where the author tried to publish the story about his experience stated that academic dishonesty was no longer an issue of interest and so declined the submission. One of the most astonishing reasons for rejection was that "plagiarism is not so uncommon these days." The story was eventually published by the official journal of the European Association of Science Editors.⁴

The second saga started with the 2016 publication of the author's article "Evolving Strategies of the Predatory Journals" in the *Malaysian Journal of Library and Information Science*.⁵ This article, focusing on the strategies of predatory publications analyzed through the lens of the ecological stages of predation, was read and cited. The journal's editor received threats from a predatory journal mentioned in the article.

In 2020, the author was asked to review an article titled "Predatory Journals: Techniques to Identify and Stay Away" for the *International Journal of Research in Education and Science*. He had a sense of déjà vu when reading it and realized that the piece plagiarized his own 2016 article. The plagiarists used a method called the "incorrect paraphrase," lifting passages from his article, changing a few words, and then claiming the work as their own. They even distorted the initial message in some places. The author of this article informed the chief editor, who declined the submission.

Nevertheless, an article almost identical with the one rejected by the *International Journal of Research in Education and Science* was published in 2020 by the *American Journal of Research* under the title "Predatory Journals: The Underlying Strategies."⁶ The *American Journal of Research* has many features itself of a predatory journal:

1. It advertises fast publication, completing the review process within 10 days.⁷
2. It charges hidden fees (often called "nominal processing fees"), while stating that there is no publication fee.⁸
3. It has the word "American" in its title and lists a United States address, though it is not affiliated with any American higher education or research institution.⁹
4. Its bibliographic information lists several little-known impact factors, such as the Universal Impact Factor, Global Impact Factor, and Journal Impact Factor.¹⁰

In addition to these features, although the journal advertises assigning a DOI (digital object identifier) to each published article, it did so only from 2017 to 2019. Newer articles, starting in 2020, lack a DOI.



Several journal editors declined to publish the author's story about the 2020 plagiarism, not sharing his belief that it might be important for the scientific community. Editorial feedback asserted that the issue of plagiarism

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Although predatory journals are now part of the research landscape and little about them is new, the irony of this story is that a journal (seemingly a predatory one) accepted and published a plagiarized paper about the characteristics of predatory journals. The takeaway messages are that (1) the predatory journals have reached a low point where they publish materials incriminating their own practices and (2) if a writer decides to plagiarize someone else's work there will be a journal, perhaps a predatory one, that accepts the plagiarized piece eventually.

Predatory Publishing, Plagiarism, and Libraries

The issue of predatory publishers deserves a separate discussion. Some authors stress that the concept of predatory publishing lacks clear-cut definitions and criteria.¹¹ Many experienced researchers, however, can identify a predatory call for proposals, enticing authors to send papers for publication. Most predatory publishers seem to be based in developing countries and aim to attract local authors.¹² These countries may lack strict academic standards, and authors are credited even if they publish in predatory journals. Predatory publishers reportedly charge lower fees to authors from developing countries. Farrokh Habibzadeh and Ana-Maria Simundic speculate, moreover, that legitimate journals from developing countries may eventually consider adopting predatory practices in response to decreased funding for their operation.¹³

Jeffrey Beall, a librarian at the University of Colorado in Denver, coined the term *predatory publishing*. Beginning in 2008, Beall developed a list of journals that charged publication fees to authors, often without providing the customary editorial services. One of the main criticisms of Beall's list was its inclusion of legitimate journals that charged publication fees.¹⁴ In 2017, Beall deactivated without notice the blog where he posted his list, leaving many open questions about the usefulness of lists for discerning predatory publishers and journals.¹⁵ Lists of exploitative publications like that created by Beall did not solve the problem.¹⁶

A core issue is that predatory journals advertise a level of quality that does not exist because they have a poor or nonexistent peer review process. One of the roles of peer review is to judge whether an article is worthy of being published; only articles passing

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a certain threshold advance to the second phase of the process, in which the article is edited and presumably improved. Obviously, plagiarism provides sufficient grounds for the rejection of a manuscript, but such dishonesty may be recognized only if the review is carried out by quali-

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fied people, and sometimes not even then. Predatory journals seem more interested in filling their bank accounts than in filtering or appraising the quality of the articles to be published.

There are many flagrant examples of predatory publishing in action. A Romanian case is probably among the most famous: in 2013, the Romanian-based journal *Metalurgia International* published a bogus paper that three Serbian academics had written to expose the journal's slipshod practices. The paper's list of references included a work allegedly by the pop star Michael Jackson and a 2011 article by Daniel Bernoulli, who had been dead for more than 200 years. The paper's publication led to the journal being dropped from the Clarivate Analytics listing.¹⁷ While a reference like "Jackson, M." might have gone unnoticed, the photos of the authors, wearing wigs or false mustaches, should have been enough to cause alarm.

The author of the present article was asked to review a paper titled "Fishiness of Piscine Birds Linked to Absence of Poisonous Fungi but not Pizza." Although he declined the invitation, a Twitter posting indicates that other scientists received the same solicitation. The article was eventually published by a predatory journal.¹⁸

That predatory journals "employ" fake editors¹⁹ and accept articles lacking scientific plausibility²⁰ clearly indicate a lack of quality control. One journal even published a phony research paper reproducing the plot of a *Star Trek: Voyager* episode after the author paid \$50.²¹ In the paper, as in the TV show, two humans mutated rapidly after they were exposed to what the paper called "the theoretical maximum celerity (warp 10)." When plagiarized articles are published, or other ethical issues are manifest, predatory journals constitute a serious threat to academic integrity.²²

Academic libraries not only educate scholars and potential scholars on the ethics of using information and avoiding plagiarism but also should coach them on how to steer clear of predatory journals.²³ Libraries support researchers both through their collections (excluding predatory journals) and their services. Scholarly communications librarians help with the creation, evaluation, dissemination, and preservation of research.²⁴ Libraries promote information literacy,²⁵ which can reduce the chances of falling prey to predatory publishers.

Educational efforts have begun to increase awareness and help researchers distinguish between predatory and legitimate publishers. Twelve organizations, including the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), founded a public relations campaign called "Think. Check. Submit." The initiative aims to help authors choose reputable outlets for their work. Similar efforts include Project Cupcake, the TRANSPOSE (Transparency in Scholarly Publishing for Open Scholarship Evolution) project, and the assessment checklist "Journal Publishing Practices & Standards."²⁶

Libraries are well-suited to educating future researchers from the very early stages of their career. For example, nearly half of the libraries in the United States and Canada

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offer workshops on predatory publishing, and most of them provide information about them on their websites,²⁷ suggesting a need for similar actions in the developing countries. The author of this article attended courses taught by librarians dealing with issues related to research ethics, including predatory journals and plagiarism. Those plagiarizing his work and publishing it in a potentially predatory journal probably did not take such courses. Libraries themselves may need to increase their ability to identify predatory invitations to authors.²⁸ They should direct their efforts against predatory practices rather than predatory publishers, as suggested by Jairo Buitrago Ciro and Lynne Bowker.²⁹

The services libraries provided to researchers can also address the issue of plagiarism.³⁰ Shipra Awasthi holds academic libraries responsible for educating students and researchers on the consequences of dishonesty. Awasthi calls for libraries to frame specific guidelines and increase awareness of them, to implement a policy for curbing plagiarism, to provide specialized courses on plagiarism, and to show zero tolerance for it.³¹ Courses and workshops on appropriate referencing, use of anti-plagiarism software, and interpretation of the software's results might be used by libraries in deterring plagiarism. Moreover, libraries could play an important role in detecting plagiarism.

Unfortunately, the author's experience as a victim of plagiarism was especially bitter because the perpetrators suffered no consequences. In the first case, the Moldovan authorities had the sole power to act according to local laws, and they showed only indifference. In the second, the predatory journals operated with impunity since they were not associated with a university or other entity that could punish them. This is a lesson also learned harshly, among others, by researchers who realize they have fallen victim to predatory publishers and attempt to withdraw their article and submit it elsewhere.³²

The author believes that education is important to help prevent plagiarism and predation. Novice and experienced researchers may, by means of education, become less likely victims of predatory publishers. Education is also required in developing countries so that the advancement of science is accompanied by the development of

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adequate research ethics. According to a Latin saying several universities have adopted as their motto, *Emollit mores nec sinit esse feros* (Learning humanizes character and does not permit it to be cruel). The motto means that education not only addresses the acquisition of knowledge and skills but also encourages a more humane attitude toward others.

Conclusion

This story has discussed two issues, plagiarism and predatory publishers. The harsh lesson learned from the author's experiences is that, in a global context, both terms will likely become commonplace and lose their ability to shock. Plagiarism cases continue to be detected everywhere in the world, especially where publication of any kind is prized above ethics. Predatory publishers ceaselessly send their spam calls for papers to would-be authors. Some scholars are lured and deceived; a few mock them; and others simply



take the opportunity to publish low-quality articles and obtain publication credit. Most people, however, simply ignore such calls now. Both plagiarism and predation have become part of the dark side of daily academic life.

Complacency about these issues seems ominous for the future of research. Famous words from the German pastor Martin Niemöller say:

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.³³

Niemöller's warning might perhaps be interpreted as a prediction that ignoring plagiarism and predation makes the dark side of research look normal rather than extraordinary. If we shut our eyes to such issues and no longer consider them remarkable or of broad interest, they will more likely proliferate. The worldwide academic community must take a vigorous approach to avoid their spread.

Summing up, the only solution is to educate scholars and rising academics on the ethical issues and increase their awareness, with a hope that goodness will ultimately prevail and that unified resistance will cast out plagiarism and predation. In this process, libraries can play a key role, educating both novice and experienced scholars on research ethics, including plagiarism and predatory publishing.

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