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"Fake" Journals and the Fragility of Authenticity: Citation Indexes, "Predatory" Publishing, and the African Research Ecosystem

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the contested politics of academic authenticity within the African research ecosystem, with particular reference to Nigeria. We show how a fear of "fake" journals is cultivated amongst African academics, with international journal citation indexes being used to adjudicate the credibility of African journals and publishers. The article juxtaposes an ethnographic vignette of a major publisher's training webinar with detailed case studies of two Nigerian commercial publishing houses. Established by entrepreneurial academics in response to limited local journal capacity and the exclusions enacted by Northern editorial gatekeeping, their journals have low article processing charges and, in some cases, minimal peer-review. One publisher was labelled as "predatory" in Beall's list, leading to its journals being removed from Scopus, the Elsevier-owned journal citation index. The other has struggled to get its journals listed in alternative journal databases, such as the Directory of Open Access Journals. The article explores how these citation indexes become contested markers of academic authenticity. We end by reflecting on the implications of this index-linked credibility for the future of African journals and the circulation of research knowledge across the continent.

KEYWORDS

"Predatory publishing"; authenticity; journal citation indexes; Nigeria; Beall's list

Introduction

June 2020, and amidst Covid-19, representatives from Elsevier are presenting a webinar entitled "Avoiding predatory publishing using Scopus and SciVal" to researchers from universities across Africa and the Middle East (Elsevier 2020). The publicity email for the webinar states that academic publishing has become "treacherous" because of a "surge in predatory journals", with "fraudulent journals causing vast damages" to researchers' careers. The aim of the webinar, it explains, is to "better guard researchers against falling prey" to predatory journals by telling researchers about the "checks" that they can use to "avoid these publications", and why Scopus (the Elsevier-owned journal citation index) is a "trusted source".

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With more than 4000 registered sign-ups, 600 log on to hear from Elsevier's "Customer Consultant Research Intelligence" team. The first slide quotes a headline from an Australian radio programme – "The predatory publishers sucking science's blood" – accompanied with a picture of a great white shark. The second slide cites an *Inside Higher Ed* article (Straumsheim 2015) that uses estimates by Shen and Björk (2015) as evidence that predatory journals "dumped more than 420,000 articles into the market in 2014, up from 53,000 in 2010".

The presentation goes on to summarise the outcomes of a 2019 convention sponsored by the journal *Nature* that sought to define "predatory publishing". Another slide reuses the cartoon from *Nature* of a wolf hidden under an open journal, with the front cover depicting a sheep (Grudniewicz 2019). Explaining the history of Beall's list, the presenters describe "deviant" and "fake" practices of these journals, such as the "hijacking" of journals (by creating a clone site that closely replicates the original), along with their characteristics, including "false or misleading information", and "aggressive and indiscriminate" solicitation. These journals are portrayed as "preying on" and exploiting "inexperienced" and "unsuspecting" young scholars "with the sole purpose of making money". The pedagogic tone seems designed to create an atmosphere of suspicion and fear.

The presentation takes a didactic turn. Participants are given a detailed explanation of how to recognise "spam" emails, noting that these emails are "often sent from low/middle income countries", and make false claims that the journal is indexed. The presenters highlight that even many journal indexing services are "fake". Several examples of "deceitful" journal websites are displayed and one is analysed closely. We learn that use of free online clip art to create a "fake" image is a danger signal, along with any mention of "fake" impact factors or references to "fake" indexing services. We are given a particularly blunt assessment of one Poland-based citation index: "*Index Copernicus* is completely fake". The emphasis is on careful visual detective work, and on "spotting the give-aways". These clues are hard to identify, especially for those new to publishing. With a strong emphasis on making the "right" rather than "bad" choices, questions from webinar participants highlight the challenge of identifying "authentic" journals.

The second half of the webinar offers one solution to the dangers of exploitation and fakery – using Scopus as a "trusted source". Participants are given a detailed technical introduction to the Scopus index and its rigorous use of metrics. The evaluation criteria, scoring procedures and decision flowcharts for admitting journals are used to emphasise the index's rigour and authenticity. The presenter describes the Scopus procedures for deciding to include journals in its index, and its approach to spotting and managing "outlier" journals. We learn about the appointment of the 17 independent members of the "Content Selection and Advisory Board" and the metrics Scopus uses to monitor journal quality, including the number of citations and self-citations, volume of downloads, the geographical and institutional diversity of editorial boards, and any sudden changes in the volume or frequency of publication or membership of editorial boards.

Not every participant is convinced that they can "trust" Scopus. The webinar has sought to offer guidance, but uncertainty quickly fills the chat box. The presenters have not explicitly mentioned that of the 23,000 journals currently indexed in Scopus, only 300 are published from Africa. One hundred and sixty are published in Egypt (mostly by Hindawi, now an imprint of WIley) and another 90 in South Africa. Nigeria has only 20 journals in Scopus, Kenya has 6, and Ghana only 3. These figures

highlight the limitations of using Scopus to determine whether an Africa-based journal is "predatory". The index offers but a limited guide to the quality of journals published in Africa.

Participants raise a range of questions. Some ask if long-established "local" institutional journals are predatory, others if charging APCs (Article Processing Charges) is predatory, and others about whether Open Access journals are predatory. "Since many predatory journals are new, does it mean all new journals are predatory?" asks another. Several query whether Beall, as a librarian, can be trusted. Why, she goes on, if his blog-site has been removed from the web, is his list still used by universities? One participant asks if there is an "app" to spot predatory journals. A team of four staff members from Elsevier's Research Intelligence team respond to each query via the text chat, offering helpful guidance and clarifications. Other participants bemoan the challenges African authors face in getting published in what they call "Northern" journals. Many ask about the differences between the various (and competing) commercial indexes. One asks if Elsevier owns Scopus. The Elsevier team emphasise the importance of the index as a "trusted source", but also acknowledge that non-indexed "grey literature" and "local sources" may also be "valuable for reaching your audience".

A few participants make comments critical of the broader inequalities within the academic publishing economy. One asks about the discrimination that many Africa-based scholars experience when they send work to "high impact" international journals. A Nigerian scholar bluntly points out that "so-called top journals too have become predatory themselves", noting that some "charge fees as much as $5000 to publish papers after acceptance … where on earth will an author in Nigeria like me get the money from?". In response, the Elsevier team highlight the low APC of $200 charged by the Elsevier's new journal *Scientific African*, founded in 2018, and also draw attention to Elsevier's Africa YouTube channel.

The Elsevier webinar and its frank question and answer session are revealing. Many African universities, focused on growing their research productivity and improving their global rankings, have made publication in "internationally" accredited journals a requirement for promotion. At the University of Ghana at Legon, for example, promotion to senior lecturer requires six publications in what the university calls "reputable peer-reviewed journals". University libraries promote these training resources and webinars to support researchers keen to make "good" publication choices. The webinar's popularity reveals people's desire to understand the phenomenon of so-called "predatory publishing", aware of the career consequences for publishing in non-indexed journals. In a complex, rapidly expanding global science system and regional research landscape, it can be hard for both new and experienced researchers to know how to assess the reputation of scholarly journals. Elsevier is keen to guide them.

Elsevier is one of the most profitable of the five major international academic publishers, with its science division regularly recording annual profit margins of between 30% and 40% (Larivière et al. 2015). The company actively promotes its data platforms, analytical tools and indexing services to African universities and research networks. Tools like its Science Direct journal database, Scopus and SciVal are readily available on the library websites of Africa's research universities. It has also developed a bespoke institutional repository "solution". Through its partnership with the World Bank, the publisher has provided data for a range of country and regional reports on research and development,

informing the design and evaluation of capacity building initiatives, such as the African Centres of Excellence (ACE) programme (Stallinga 2019). Its philanthropic arm, the Elsevier Foundation, has funded a range of projects across the continent, including the African Journal Partnerships Programme, partnering ten African medical journals with six "Northern" journals.

Training webinars, writing workshops, and the range of resources on the Elsevier Africa YouTube channel are also part of this "service" to African universities. Our argument is that these webinars, intentionally or otherwise, amplify the academic discourse about "predatory publishing", generating uncertainty and anxiety about the boundary between "fake" and "real" journals, and undermining the fragile academic credibility of African publishing initiatives.

In this article we unpack the different elements (historical, political and economic) of this discourse of fear and academic "fakery", and show how it requires attention to the struggle for academic "authenticity". Whilst grounded in existing concerns about academic research integrity and fraud, Beall's neat, moralising and provocative list-making polarised the debate. Writing off a whole swathe of online and Open Access journals that supported emerging research ecosystems, as well as viewing the publishing strategies of global South academics in simplistic and patronising terms, Beall's list has had profound consequences for journal cultures and the circulation of academic knowledge.

Theorising the Academic "Fake"

In *Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality* (1995), Eco describes his fascination with American pop culture and its fabrication of the "real", not just reproducing but improving on reality. He describes a trip going from the faked nature of Disneyland to a "real" riverboat ride on the Mississippi, and then feeling disappointed about the lack of crocodiles, and realising that "technology can give us more reality than nature can" (Eco 1995, 42). A trained semiotician, he is at once dazzled and percipient: "the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake".

Unlike Baudrillard, whose pessimistic vision of America reduced it to mere simulacra, an endless chain of referential copies, Eco remains attached to the possibility of an authentic and "real" historical original, even if this original can never be recovered, but only striven after and recreated. Eco's investigation of deception within US marketing cultures aims to demonstrate the "practice of mistrust" as a critique of ideology, and draws attention to the interweaving of explicit persuasion (e.g. marketing) with what he suggests are the embedded and implicit (and so more deceptive) techniques of "suasion" embedded within scientific and academic rhetoric, leading us to lower our guard (Rodríguez-Ferrándiz 2019). Eco's title for these essays captures the long history of concern with religious and personal authenticity (Trilling 1972; Lindholm 2013) within the Christian tradition and Western philosophy. But this history also acknowledges the positive social role of deception, traced back to Plato's notion of the "noble lie", a fiction told for altruistic purposes.

Kroes (1996) rightly points out that both Eco's and Baudrillard's conceptualisation of American hyperreality remains quintessentially European, and by extension, colonial. Whereas, on the one hand, Europeans tend to perceive American culture as "empty" (thus shallow, superficial, lacking the historical and artistic depth that allegedly

constitutes traditional European culture), on the other, the 'emptiness' of America enables Europeans to fill up this space with their own images of an imagined America' (Kooijman 2008, 101). Eco is only one of a long line of social theorists who have written about the power of the "copy" and its relationship to the original. One could go back to Tarde's early work on imitation as a fundamental social practice (1895), Benjamin's work on the loss of an art work's aura of authenticity in an era of mechanical reproduction (2008), or Goffman's writing on the misrepresentation and performativity that accompanies all social interactions (1959).

Recent anthropological work on the "fake" and the counterfeit has focused on the scandalisation that accompanies accusations of fakery, positioning objects or practices within a simplified moral landscape (Beek, Kilian, and Krings 2019). No objects are essentially fake, Beek et al. argue, but some "practices become fraudulent and objects fake by actors producing them as such", leading to the raising of suspicion and accusing others. Jeffrey Beall's intervention is a perfect example of this combination of cultural work and ethical accusation: before his exhaustive list-making and journal shaming, the publisher Academic Journals had not been defined as inherently "fake". Whilst work by Gieryn (1983, 1999) explored academic practices of "boundary-making" between science and non-science, Beall moralised this true/fake division.

If journal "fraudulence" arises from a combination of moral attribution and technical classification, we equally need to study what Beek, Kilian, and Krings (2019) call the "fragility of authentication practices". The Elsevier presenters had to prove to their audience that the metrics used in Scopus for proving journal authenticity were robust and beyond reproach. If a "fake" journal is objectified through the iterative performativity of technical classification and moral attribution, then so too is an "authentic" journal. The organisational technologies of measuring, establishing or testing academic authenticity can be used to label some publishers and journals as "outliers" and so fraudulent or fake. Technologies and measurements become sites of contestation, with rival indexes offering different approaches, and even established journals constantly under pressure to perform the necessary markers of "authenticity".

This article has four sections. The first part describes the growing focus on research integrity within global science, and the impact of the "predatory publishing" discourse. We show how the editorial and commentary sections of major scientific and medical journals promote an affective rhetoric of fear about academic "fakery", warning of the "exploitation" of young, vulnerable and naive researchers by so-called "predatory publishers". This messaging is amplified and institutionalised by African universities, whose researchers are required to publish in "reputable" journals if they are to progress their academic careers.

The second section reflects on the discursive power of labelling something as an academic "fake", the work such attributions do, and the fragility of journal authentication practices in the face of this pedagogy of suspicion. In the third section we use detailed case studies of two Nigerian publishers to explore the rise of entrepeneurial academic publishing in Africa and the impact of these affective discourses of "predation" and "fakery" on their work. Rather than make normative judgements about these publishers, our research involved careful empiricism. As well as carrying out a documentary analysis of their publications and business models, we interviewed editors, authors and publishers via WhatsApp and email. The final section brings together our argument about the

contested politics of journal credibility, illustrating it through the work of the not-for-profit Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) and its more nuanced and inclusive approach to journal authentication and certification.

Beall, Editorialising and Fear of the "Fake"

The steady expansion of the global science system over the last 50 years has posed major challenges to "traditional" models of assuring credibility and integrity, including peer-review. One estimate suggests that the number of peer-reviewed academic journals is growing at approximately 6% a year (Johnson, Watkinson, and Mabe 2018). The Mertonian ethos of a self-governing "republic of science" is harder to sustain in a dispersed and fragmented set of academic communities motivated by a growing diversity of institutional drivers and commercial rewards. The inequalities within and across this global system make the politics of measuring and assessing academic quality and reputation more fraught and contested. The commercialisation of publishing, the use of digital technologies, and the rise of Open Access, have all transformed the landscape of academic publishing.

Concerns about academic integrity first emerged in the 1960s, and were fanned by journalistic accounts of scientific fraud (Broad and Wade 1982). After a series of high-profile controversies in the biological sciences, the US established an independent Office of Research Integrity in the early 1990s, with a mandate to investigate allegations of misconduct in organisations awarded government research funding (Resnik 2003). Concerns about academic integrity in the humanities and social sciences led to a series of high-profile scientific stings and scandals (Sokal and Bricmont 1998) about cultures of peer-review, what became known as the "science wars" (Ross 1996; Ashman and Barringer 2000).

In 2009 a University of Denver data librarian called Jeffrey Beall began blogging about Open Access journal publishing. In a 2010 article he labelled nine Open Access publishers "predatory", suggesting that their "mission is to exploit the author-pays, Open-Access model for their own profit" (Beall 2010, 15). Two were described as scholarly "dumping grounds" (ibid 16). By 2011, his blog listed 23 publishers, with annotations referring to one as a Pakistani "storefront" operation and a second – Academic Journals – as "another Nigerian scam". A later piece controversially referred to Brazilian "publishing favelas" (SciELO 2015). His column in *Nature* in 2012 entitled "Predatory Publishers are Corrupting Open Access" (Beall 2012) has been cited more than 700 times. The blog's list of predatory publishers reached more than 1600 when it was finally taken down in 2017 for legal reasons. Beall was particularly critical of Open Access journals, seeing them as vulnerable to commercial exploitation (Beall 2013). The debate had profound implications for journals across the global South, including many in Africa, and this affective about "predatory publishing" continues in the editorials of influential scientific and medical journals (Mills and Inouye 2020).

Beall politicised existing debates about journal quality, and his lists became increasingly controversial and disputed (Crawford 2014; Esposito 2013; Teixeira da Silva and Tsigaris 2018), given the aspersions they cast on researchers and journals. Critics pointed out that the discourse over-simplified a far more complicated issue (Bell 2017, 2019), namely the commercialisation of the research and publication ecosystem. Some legitimate

journals also shared the characteristics of "predatory" journals (Anderson 2015), and journal indexes were increasingly contradictory in their assessments of authenticity (Strinzel et al. 2019). Credibility becomes increasingly difficult to define and value in this "grey zone".

Through repeated efforts to develop a more precise definition of "predation", the discourse continues to be perpetuated in journals such as *Nature*, accompanied by op-eds and commentaries warning readers of the dangers of publishing in the "wrong" journals (e.g. Cobey et al. 2019; Grudniewicz 2019). Brought together, these different literatures highlight the importance – and fragility – of the academic credibility economy for researchers, and the increasing challenge of sustaining shared reputational markers and quality signals in an inclusive research system.

Since the first appearance of Beall's list, "predatory publishing" has been a regular theme of editorial commentaries in scientific and medical journals. An analysis of 229 editorials in scientific journals published since 2012 reveals that 84% deploy one or more affective discourses of fear, fakery and exploitation (Inouye and Mills, forthcoming). Almost a quarter of editorials deploy all three, often in the same sentence, such as the *Nature* editorial calling for "help to eliminate the scourge of fake journals that is threatening the scientific enterprise" (Goodman 2018). A few influential journals publish a disproportionate number of these op-eds and commentaries.

The metaphorical association between predatory publishers, danger, and deception is powerful, rhetorically positioning these journals as being difficult to identify, outwit and escape. "Fakery" becomes their most dangerous quality. Not only do "fakes" lure in naïve academics, but they also hinder the circulation of "legitimate" scientific knowledge. Echoing Beall, these editorials reinforce the discourse around "good" and "bad", "legitimate" and "illegitimate" journals.

Very few of these editorials offer alternative explanations, highlight the structural or economic challenges "Southern" academics face in getting published, or develop a more contextualised understanding of the publishing ecosystem. Instead the discourse gets amplified in the global higher education media, including *Times Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Education*, and *World University News*. And, as we have shown, webinars, videos and YouTube channels are an influential way to share these messages with academics, librarians and research managers across Africa and the global South. Why does this matter, and what are the implications for African journals and publishers?

Academic "Fakery" and the Fragility of Credibility

Credibility and authenticity are key to scientific truth-claims. As Shapin puts it: "no credibility, no knowledge" (1995, 258). But what are the "mundane processes" (Shapin 1995, 259) and everyday practices through which academic credibility is established and journal authenticity assured? Where once academic reputations were established through personal connections within a close-knit disciplinary community of peers, this is harder in a fragmented and complex global academic system. Instead we turn to numerical proxies. Lists of accredited journals, citation indexes and impact metrics all act as technologies for assuring credibility. Rottenburg et al. describe such indicators as a "globally circulating knowledge technology that can be used to quantify, compare and rank" (2015, 5). Whilst they are often presented as "taken for granted facts", behind

the scenes they are "intensely negotiated and contested". The resulting numbers are "novel epistemic objects of regulation, domination, experimentation and critique" (Rottenberg 2015, 5).

In their reflections on pseudo global health, Kingori and Gerrets (2019, 380) show how "ambiguous, uncertain and unstable phenomena" – such as fake vaccination trials – offer insights into the "crisis of authenticity" within the field of global health, and resulting efforts to "assess, authenticate and certify". A flourishing audit culture (Strathern 2000) of journal evaluations and standards seeks to provide assurance and proof (Jacob 2019). A similar process is visible in the growing number of different journal indexes and databases.

To fully appreciate the fragility of academic authenticity requires attention to the co-constitution of the real and the fake, and the "indeterminate, blurry and messy spectrum" that lies in between (Kingori and Gerrets 2019, 381). From Tarde's early work on imitation as a fundamental social practice (1895) to Benjamin's reflections on the authenticity of art in an era of mechanical reproduction (2008), and from Hurston's ideas of creative mimicry ([1934] 1994) to Eco and Weaver's search for the perfect fake (1995), the "real" and the "fake" are relational terms. For Hurston, writing in the context of the Harlem Renaissance, to be marginalised invites a creative mimicry of the powerful, and that "[mimicry] in no way damages [the mimic's] standing as an original. Mimicry is an art in itself" ([1934] 1994, 28).

Why are accusations of academic "fakery" so powerful? Eco's investigation of deception in US marketing cultures explores the interweaving of explicit persuasion – such as marketing – with the embedded and deceptive techniques of "suasion". He sees these suasive techniques as exemplified by scientific and academic rhetoric, and its ability to convince us to lower our guard (Rodríguez-Ferrándiz 2019). Eco is particularly interested in ordering and list-making. He notes how "in their own way, practical lists represent a form, because they confer unity on a set of objects that, no matter how dissimilar, are subject to a contextual pressure" (Eco 2011, 123). Beall's list-making is similarly effective in its construction of a shared unity – "fake" and "predatory" journals.

Anthropological work on the "fake" and the counterfeit focuses on the moralisation and scandalisation that accompanies accusations of fraudery, positioning objects or practices within a simplified and heightened moral landscape (Beek, Kilian, and Krings 2019). Beek et al. argue that "practices become fraudulent and objects fake by actors producing them as such", through the nurturing of suspicion and distrust. Work by Gieryn (1983, 1999) explored academic practices of "boundary-making" between science and non-science. Beall's list of "predatory" journals exemplifies these arguments, combining the seemingly objective technical work of list-making with normative value judgements.

If journal credibility can be questioned, and "fraudulence" arises from a combination of moral attribution and technical classification, we need to study the "fragility of authentication practices" (Beek, Kilian, and Krings 2019) and the "geographies of credibility" (Allman 2019). The Elsevier webinar presenters sought to reassure their audience that the metrics that Scopus used to assure journal authenticity were robust and beyond reproach. They closed down suggestions that any journal listed in Scopus might also be predatory. If a "fake" journal is made visible through the combination of technical classification and moral attribution, then so too is an "authentic" journal. Aggregating publication metrics will by default lead some journals to be viewed as "outliers" and so

potentially fraudulent or fake. Technologies and measurements become sites of contestation, with rival indexes offering different approaches. Even established journals are under constant pressure to sustain publishing and editorial targets (issues per year, turnaround times, diversity of authorship) that assure "authenticity".

Beek et al. (2019, 426) acknowledge that the very act of doing research on fakes and frauds reproduces "regional stereotypes" by "locating deviant practices in the Global South". Their own work on African fakery risks just such a move, reinforcing a globalised imaginary of Africa as the source of fraud and deviance. We have shown how the pedagogic discourse of the international publishers and the editorials of major European and American journals locate predation and fraudulence as most likely to emerge in Africa and Asia (Shen and Björk 2015). Echoing Hegel's dismissal of Africa as a continent with no history, the "predatory publishing" discourse reinforces a spatial "geography of credibility" (Powell 2007). At worst, it promotes suspicion of "journals-without-histories" from "places-without-histories". In a reputational economy which trades on credibility and the performance of authenticity, citation indexes become one way to patrol the boundaries between the academic real and the journal "fake".

The Struggle for Authenticity: Journal Publishing in Nigeria

In this section we explore the rise of African Open Access commercial publishing and its struggle for financial sustainability and scholarly authenticity. The early postcolonial period saw an efflorescence of literary journals and scientific societies across the continent, spurred on by the opportunities for nation-building and the promise of an African scientific modernity (Livsey 2017). National universities launched academic presses and disciplinary associations started journals. A pioneering UNESCO-sponsored conference on academic publishing at the University of Ife marked the launch of several Nigerian presses (Oluwasanmi, McLean, and Zell 1975; Zell 2017), and others flourished in East Africa.

Political instability, the oil shock of the 1970s and the austerity that accompanied the World Bank "structural adjustment" programmes in the 1980s left many indigenous academic publishing initiatives struggling to survive (Zell 1990). University presses closed down, journals folded, and researchers found it increasingly difficult to access scholarly literature from other African countries (Mlambo 2007). With the exception of the publishing arm of councils such as CODESRIA, there were few pan-African publishing initiatives in the 1980s. Many authors resorted to self-publishing in order to disseminate their work, as Umezurike (2020) demonstrates in the case of Nigeria.

By the 1990s, and with global educational policy informed by theories of human capital, higher education once again become a priority for African governments and donors. New publishing initiatives emerged, such as the African Books Collective (launched in 1989) and the donor-funded African Journals Online (AJOL) database launched in 1998. African publishers began to explore the potential of print on demand, digital publishing and the internet. Then came more commercially-minded models. The Egyptian publishing house Hindawi launched in Cairo in 1997, making the most of affordable professional labour to undercut existing publishers and transform the economics of publishing. Growing through acquisitions and journal launches, it adopted an Open Access publishing model in response to library funding cuts and the

growing use of "Big Deals" by other publishers (Peters 2007). It has a stable of more than 200 author-pays OA journals, and in January 2021 was acquired by Wiley for $300 million. MedKnow, an India-based medical publisher, now a subsidiary of the major multinational publisher Wolter Kluwers, moved to provide publishing services for many Egyptian and Nigerian medical journals. Meanwhile, an AJOL survey of 330 African scholar-led journals highlighted how one third operated in a "cashless" environment, relying on voluntary labour in an often "grim" financial situation (Murray and Clobridge 2014).

Where Hindawi led the way, other African commercial publishers sought to follow, marketing their OA journals to researchers who felt excluded from the high-impact elite journals of the global North (Beigel 2014; Collyer 2016). We now offer a case study of two such Nigerian-based publishers. The first, Academic Journals grew rapidly through the 2000s, until it was labelled by Beall as predatory in 2011. The second Nigerian publishing house, Zeetarz operates at a much smaller scale, but has struggled to build academic credibility and authenticity.

Academic Journals

Academic Journals was founded in 2002 by a Nigerian biotechnology researcher (Tonukari 2004). It began with one online Open Access journal – the *African Journal of Biotechnology*. The concept of electronic publishing was still novel, and it offered obvious opportunities to African publishers (Smart, Pearce, and Tonukari 2005). In 2003, the journal published 145 articles in 12 issues. By 2005, this had grown to 284 articles. Responding to this growth in submissions, the company launched six further life-science journals in 2006, and has since continued to expand.

The company has a professional and well-designed journal publishing platform. Of the 119 journals that are active as of 2020, around half are in the life sciences, 20 titles have "African" in the title and 23 include "International". Most of the remaining 76 are focused on particular disciplinary areas, such as the *Journal of Plant Breeding and Crop Science*. Like Hindawi, the publisher's "author-pays" business model relies on payment of a "handling fee" (more usually described as an APC) of around $500 once an article is accepted for publication. Full or partial waivers are generally granted to authors from low-income countries. The journals continue to attract submissions from across the world. Of the roughly 4300 submissions received by the *African Journal of Agricultural Research* over 5 years, only 10% were from Nigeria; 25% were from Ethiopia, 25% were from Brazil, and around 20% were from the rest of Africa. In order to understand the publisher's success, we carried out a detailed analysis of two of its serials, and spoke to editors, reviewers and authors, before communicating with the company's founder. He also provided us with detailed country download data, suggesting that almost four million articles were downloaded from the site in 2019.

International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology

Publishing its first issue in 2009, by the end of 2020 *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* (*IJSA*) had published 299 articles. The majority address broad themes in sociology and applied anthropology, but submissions cover topics as diverse as theology, linguistics, education, human rights, socio-legal studies, public health and demography.

Most are reports of empirical research, often including quantitative data, along with a few shorter commentaries or literature reviews. Issues are published monthly, ensuring a fast turn-around between submission and publication. If there are no submissions, there is no publication. During 2011 and 2012, most monthly issues had five or six research articles. Negative publicity led to fewer submissions in 2012 or 2013, but numbers revived in 2014. The journal now usually publishes an issue most months, each with one or two articles. Scholars with Nigerian university affiliations authored 23% of all published articles, whilst 29% held affiliations in other African countries, 27% from Asia (mainly India) and 21% from Europe and America. Whilst most articles have DOIs, the site provides no journal-specific citation or download data.

International Journal of Education Administration and Policy Studies

International Journal of Education Administration and Policy Studies (*IJEAPS*) has published 207 articles to date since its launch in 2009. Most are full-length research papers addressing educational themes, from classroom management to national and global policy, from basic education to professional education. Just over 60% of authors are affiliated to an African university (half of these being from Nigeria), with 17% of authors from Asia. Not all authors have a university affiliation. Some years there is an issue of the journal published every month – usually with one or two articles – but there are also regular gaps in this schedule. Publication frequency dropped in 2013, reflecting the impact of the publisher's inclusion in Beall's list. Time to publication varies from a month to sometimes a year or more. The journal is indexed by the US-based Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), and articles from the journal were downloaded 4800 times during 2019. The Dimensions database shows a small but steady stream of IJEAPS articles being cited.

"A Bogus, Nigeria-based Publisher"

By 2011 the company was publishing 107 journals. In the same year it was described by Jeffrey Beall as a "bogus, Nigeria-based publisher" that had "been around for years". His blog accused it of "seeking legitimacy" and "falsely" associating itself with "authentic organizations and conferences". The listing had a major impact on the company's fortunes, leading to the resignation of editors and a steep decline in submissions. The company was forced to downsize, and claims that over 120 employees lost their jobs.

The company wrote to Beall to appeal their listing as predatory, and offered "clear answers to all of Jeffrey Beall's requirements". According to its founder, Nyerhovwo Tonukari, Beall "did respond positively that we had addressed the issues he had … yet he refused to remove Academic Journals from his damaging list" (personal communication, 2020). Faced with Beall's immovability, the company's website called into question the authenticity and reliability of Beall's list:

> Academic Journals considers Jeffrey Beall unfair and insincere with regard to the inclusion of Academic Journals in his list. Since Academic Journals met all the requirements as stated, it would have been only appropriate and fair for Jeffrey Beall to remove Academic Journals from the list. Academic Journals doubts the sincerity of the Jeffrey Beall's list. We perceive that the list is deliberately biased towards open access journals. In addition, we consider Jeffrey Beall's methods questionable and lacking in rigor in a matter as important as the

> evaluation of academic publishing. We welcome a fair, transparent and rigorous evaluation of all our activities.

The statement ends with a vigorous defence of the publisher's strategy:

> Academic Journals remains resilient and will continue to pursue its purpose. We will continue to bridge this critical gap in the dissemination of researches from Africa to a global audience and create an excellent publishing platform for both African and non-African researchers.

In communication, Tonukari supported the general principle of journal evaluations: "Accredited journal lists are necessary because there should be some regulations and control in academic publishing". He went on to query whether there was a level playing field: "There are about 8,000 journals from the UK indexed by SCOPUS. How many Nigerian journals are in Scopus? Do you think that is fair?". In 2010 Academic Journals had 10 journals indexed in Scopus. All but one were removed from the index in 2012, with the final one delisted in 2017. Only six Nigerian journals are still indexed in Scopus.

Tonukari went on to insist that the scope of these indexes was unfair, arguing that "the rankings are skewed to 'force' researchers from developing regions to publish their articles in 'high ranking journals'". He argued that it was all too common to hear that manuscripts are rejected from many of these "high ranking journals" because the manuscript "does not have sufficient relevance and significance to our primary journal readership". He felt that "until there is a fair and transparent ranking system, the present ranking system will continue to hinder research and researchers especially those from developing nations". He was particularly critical of Scopus, its minimal representation of African-based journals, and the way that more than half of these are published by Hindawi. For Tonukari,

> some of these journals are actually based in Europe, especially the UK and the USA. So, when you see *African Journal of* … , it may not really be an African journal. Additionally, many of the African journals in Scopus are published by the big commercial publishers.

By questioning the coverage and legitimacy of Scopus, the authentic and the fake become a matter of contestation.

This rhetorical challenge to the inequalities of global academic publishing makes no mention of tensions and turbulence within the publisher's journals themselves. Between 2017 and 2020 more than 60% of the editors and editorial board had left the two social science journals that we analysed. One academic listed on the editorial board of *IJEAPS* responded to our request for an interview expressing surprise that his name had appeared on the website. He insisted that he had never been involved with the journal, adding "I am not keen on predatory journals or those that charge a processing fee like this one".

Several former and current editors and editorial board members at the journals we contacted conveyed their misgivings about the commercial nature of the company's publishing model. One source of frustration was the role of the central editorial office in limiting collaboration and discussion between the editors. The editorial office involved them by sending articles for review or revised manuscripts (with accompanying reviewers' comments) for a final decision on publication. The editors' complaint was the frequency with which the editorial office would send articles addressing topics outside of their expertise or even outside of the stated scope of the journal. Both editors we spoke to commented that, while the Academic Journals editorial office never explicitly complained about

decisions to reject submissions, they felt that the office would have preferred them to accept these papers.

In response to the question "why do you think these authors choose to publish in this journal" one Hong Kong- based associate editor of *IJSA* acknowledged that it was easy to get an article accepted:

> The quality is not high enough. You know, usually a high-quality paper they submit to SSCI journal or some journal with high impact factors, so I don't think that it's good, usually they come from Africa, from some developing country.

A former editorial board member of *IJSA* explained that he had got involved to help open up access to publishing for scholars from the global South. He had gradually become "disillusioned" with practices he saw as "unprofessional", such as the broadening scope of the journal, and the increasing inappropriateness of articles he was asked to review. He felt that the lack of inclusion of the editorial board in decision making, rendered the board "notional" and simply "glorified peer reviewers". He went on to say that

> this is one of the unfortunate elements in that the journal and journals like this have identified a gap … there needs to be changes [in the global academic publishing sector] to find new ways to engage with people who have different experiences, different ways of thinking, that don't meet the kind of standard of predominantly global North parameters.

We also spoke to editors and authors with positive views and experiences of working with the two journals, and who appreciated the opportunity to publish their work. One associate editor felt that the publisher had "standards below which there is no compromise" and "valued the privilege of making contributions to the advancement of knowledge … I always enjoy doing the work". An author, who had been granted a 75% fee waiver, felt that the review process had been very thorough, reporting that

> they weren't those that are out to publish anything. They made objective observations and it kept coming. They made sure the corrections were effected and you were highlighting almost line by line what you've done so they were very thorough – I like that.

She had previously withdrawn a submission to a different publisher when the review came back with no comments because that showed "they were out for the money". By contrast, she felt that Academic Journals had won her trust, noting how after "my experience with them I would have loved to go over and over and over again with them … I will recommend them any day".

The case of Academic Journals highlights the value of an "up-close" empirical study of African scholarly publishing practices, going beyond normative judgements and labels. The company's success illustrates the viability of Open Access publishing, and the tensions between a commercial imperative and academic research as a public good, especially in a resource-constrained research system like Nigeria.

Zeetarz Publishing Nigeria

Founded in 2015, Zeetarz Publishing describes itself as "an independent growing academic publisher working hard to encourage Nigerian and developing countries' scholars". Operating at a much smaller scale than Academic Journals, it currently publishes three online Open Access journals (two in Education and one in the Social Sciences). None

are listed in any citation index (or on AJOL). The publisher has launched several other journals, but these are currently inactive, and several only published one or two issues. Zeetarz has organised "capacity-building" conferences in Ghana and Zambia, runs an online "certificate" course in research training, and offers a range of research training and web-design services.

Journal of Education and Entrepreneurship

The most active Zeetarz publication is the *Journal of Education and Entrepreneurship* (*JEE*), set up in 2014 as the *Journal of Education Policy and Entrepreneurial Research*. From 2015 to 2017 it published an issue most months, with up to six articles in each issue. Since 2018 this has decreased, and only one issue was published in 2019 and 2020. Articles cover all aspects of education (and more), but few focus on the connection with entrepreneurship.

The journal's current editor is a US-based Nigerian scholar of management who has a good deal of editorial freedom, and takes the role seriously. He is closely involved in every aspect of manuscript selection, review and preparation. He described initially screening of manuscripts for relevance, his use of a pool of peer reviewers, tight timetables for return of comments, fairly high (50%) rejection rates, and his encouragement of shorter papers. In 2019, the journal began to charge a modest $120 APC to cover costs. Whilst this is waived in certain cases, it impacted submissions. Reviewers are not paid, but are occasionally invited to deliver workshops at *Zeetarz* conferences.

In interview, the editor described his commitment to mentoring Nigerian scholars, his frustration at the lack of "a genuine passion for knowledge", and his vision for building an "African research culture" through "rebranding" African publications. He travels regularly to Nigeria to promote his journal at conferences but is disdainful of hierarchical university cultures where the professor is "treated as king", and senior staff "wait to see if others can prove their ability to do research". He sees his role as empowering new scholars by "taking out the hurdles of those traditional journals without compromising the values of knowledge". *JEE* is seeking inclusion in DOAJ, the main global index of Open Access journals, but this has yet to be achieved. The application process requires evidence of a regular publication cycle, as well as a range of other data, and takes at least six months to be approved. If successful, this will be a key marker of authenticity for the journal, and the publisher itself.

"Publishing Is Not a Do or Die Affair"

The Zeetarz website seeks to offer guidance on publishing to its Nigerian audience through a series of blog-posts. The editor-in-chief of *Africa Education Evaluation*, Professor Zee Madueke, has a post on "preparing your manuscript for publication in academic journals". Another is entitled "What are your difficulties conducting academic research?" and a third promotes mentoring.

The site critiques the major commercial publishers, and seeks to justify its modest APCs. Acknowledging that "80% of Nigerian lecturers do not receive any form of journal grants, either for PhDs or for publications in academic journals", one blog explains that scholars are having to "conduct researches with their money, and pay to publish freely for other researchers to access their works". It draws attention to the cost of

publishing in "developed countries, where academic journals are ranked", highlighting APCs of between $500 and $1350 (usefully also providing the price in Naira). It goes on to acknowledge that scholars are motivated to publish, "simply because they need it for promotions or other reasons best known to them" and to say that "lecturers from developing countries shouldn't worry about the Article Publication Fee, they should worry about meeting the standard for publishing with Zeetarz Publishing Nigeria". Whilst "not against payment of article submission fees in any way" it does "not believe or preach that publishers are 'predatory' simply because they charge publication fees".

Another blog acknowledges that "from experience, over 70% of scholars that have submitted their manuscripts to our journals want their papers published as soon as possible". Warning that this expectation may not be realistic, it recommends, for example, that a scholar should "not publish under any pressure, be it promotion, not to lose your job etc.", and that "Publish or Perish shouldn't be a thing of horror to you; publishing is not a do or die affair". Zeetarz acknowledges that not all their journals are ranked or have been given an impact factor. In reality, none are indexed. They attribute this to the short amount of time that these journals have existed. "The good truth is", they advise, "that if you publish in any of our journals, in a few years to come they'll be ranked by all the genuine journal ranking bodies and will also get impact factor values". The blog finishes: "Remember, no journal got to its currently [*sic*] level in a day. They all started small like we are starting presently".

The site seeks to persuade authors of the value of careful peer review, and the need to give reviewers adequate time. The language of avoiding "victimhood" echoes that of Elsevier:

> if your research is not properly reviewed or vetted, you stand the risk of misleading readers when it is eventually published. Spreading misinformation and disrupting the productive, efficient, and meaningful flow of scholarly communication, regardless of the field or discipline is associated with poor review of manuscripts submitted to academic journals. As a scholar, insist on submitting your manuscript to journal editors that guarantee quality peer review to avoid being a victim.

It also questions the poor quality reviewing practised by other publishers: "they simply ask their reviewers to grade manuscript by ticking/scoring the manuscript". By contrast, screenshots of reviewers' comments provide "evidence" of double-blind peer review, and an insistence on checking the CVs of all reviewers to ensure relevant expertise. Their emphasis on formative (rather than dismissive) feedback is underscored: "we encourage our reviewers to carefully draw author's attentions to details instead of being arrogant to authors, especially when they feel that the authors have not expressed themselves well".

Like other publishers, Zeetarz seeks to demonstrate its commitment to academic quality, and uses the CrossRef logo to signal its use of plagiarism checking software. The *JEE* subsite has a section on "handling plagiarism", which warns that if the similarity index of a submitted paper is above 50%, the manuscript will be rejected without the need for double-blind peer-review. It also has a large section on "publication ethnics (*sic*) & malpractice statement", outlining the responsibilities of the authors, editors, and reviewers.

The comparison of the two publishers is revealing. Zeetarz has sought to build journal capacity and quality, gain DOAJ accreditation and comply with international standards. By

contrast, Academic Journals, with a far larger and more professional publishing platform has rebuffed accusations of predation, and continues to attract submissions to its journals.

The Fragile Authenticity of Open Access: The View from DOAJ

A few months later Ghana's university librarians organised another webinar with an international library association entitled "How to identify credible journals and avoid predatory ones" (eifl 2020). This time the session was delivered by DOAJ, a not-for-profit online directory of the world's Open Access journals. Set up in Sweden in 2003, the database includes meta-data from 12,000 Open Access journals (many of which are not included in Scopus), indexing all journals that apply and meet its inclusion criteria.

The host introduced the session by again calling for "vigilance", much like the Elsevier webinar. Insisting that there were "hundreds of predatory journals out there", they promised that the workshop would help participants "identify their common characteristics". The DOAJ presenter used rather different language. Her focus was on helping people understand "beacons of accreditation" rather than spotting fakes. In a presentation entitled "Identifying and accessing OA journals", she explained DOAJ's approach, its inclusion criteria and expectations. She acknowledged that there were very few West African journals in DOAJ (currently 15 from Nigeria, 6 from Ghana, and 1 from Cameroon), a trend repeated across sub-Saharan Africa (Kenya has 6, and Ethiopia 7). With 109 DOAJ-listed journals, South Africa is the exception. She highlighted another African journal platform (AJOL – African Journals Online) and its Journal Publishing Practices and Standards framework (JPPS) as an alternative "trusted source", awarding stars for compliance with best practice. She drew attention to the "Think, Check, Submit" initiative, and to two other places through which authors could check journal credibility, including membership of Netherlands-based OASPA (Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association) and the UK-based COPE (Committee for Publication Ethics). Membership of these organisations is too expensive for many African journals, as one Ghanaian journal editor pointed out in the text chat. Excluding South Africa, COPE has only 20 sub-Saharan Africa journals as members, out of a total membership of more than 12,000.

The Director of DOAJ presented next. He offered a different definition of predatory publishers to that promoted by Elsevier, describing them as "not living up to reasonable standards in terms of content, services, transparency and business behavior". This led to his "DOAJ definition" of "Low Quality Publishers" who publish "low quality articles due to inadequate peer review and or editors / peer reviewers from one institute only". His distinction of quality from fakery allowed him to criticise the "media picture of predatory publishing as uniquely linked to Open Access journals". One bullet point slide described the "big media attention to biased surveys". The words THE STING were capitalised in bright purple to draw attention to the undercover "targeting" of Open Access journals with spoof articles (Bohannon 2013). Bohannon's work has subsequently been criticised for invoking a racial imaginary of fraud, as he gave the imagined author an affiliation at an Eritrean research centre (Sidaway 2016).

The webinar sought to change perceptions of Open Access publishing, explaining that charging fees is not predatory, that the "real picture" of predatory publishing was "not as high as often reported", and that this did not occur only in Open Access journals. It pointed to the growing number of article retractions from the major commercial journals,

and made the case for "inclusive" lists of good quality journals "that are hard to get on", rather than "not inclusive" lists of predatory journals "that are hard to get off". Finally it highlighted a 2017 LSE blog on the unethical nature of journal "blacklists", and the problematic nature of the term itself (Houghton and Houghton 2018). The question-and-answer session was nuanced and insightful. Webinar participants asked whether authors were culprits as well as victims, whether "predatory journals" could be trained to do the right thing, and whether the quality of the article mattered as much as the journal. A few asked if they should still use lists of predatory journals. Participants were encouraged not to bother with journals that look "fishy", and instead focus on "the things that are good".

DOAJ is in many ways seeking to position itself as an alternative to Scopus. It offers African universities, libraries and researchers an alternative map of OA journal authenticity. However very few African journals are included, making navigation of the African journal landscape even more complex. Meanwhile, many African universities and higher education regulators are creating their own lists of accredited or "predatory" journals, creating confusion, rival sources of authenticity, and risking undermining local journal publishing cultures and "peripheral" science (Guedon 2008).

One solution would be to create an African citation index. This has long been the ambition of African scholars and journal editors (Nwagwu 2007; Nwagwu 2010; Murray 2009). In 2008, only 0.7% of publications in global indexes were from Africa. Ten years later, and amidst global growth in science, this had only increased to 1% (Duermeijer, Amir, and Schoombee 2018). Meanwhile, proposals to set up an African citation index have failed to attract international funding or build a pan-African coalition. Similar challenges will be faced by any future attempts (Obeng-Odoom 2019).

Conclusion

This paper has described the cultivation of a fear of "fake" scientific journals amongst African academics and the struggle for authenticity pursued by the journals themselves. The two Nigerian publishing houses we profiled adopt different approaches to balancing quality, reputation and financial sustainability. Both are working at the periphery of a global science system dominated by large commercial publishing houses and their data infrastructures. We showed how they responded to the discourse of "predation" in different ways, one by explicitly and publicly rebuffing the label, and the other by championing capacity building, training and quality improvement. Zeetarz continues to work towards getting *JEE* listed within DOAJ, whilst the removal of Academic Journals from Scopus meant a sudden loss of legitimacy and authenticity for the company.

Our vignettes of the Scopus and DOAJ webinars highlight the power and influence of journal indexes within this credibility economy. The fragility of academic authenticity requires constant effort by African journal publishers to meet the metricised definitions of legitimacy set by the indexes. Credibility is increasingly defined by the cultures of the major scientific publishing conglomerates. The promotion policies of African universities – such as requiring large numbers of articles published in "reputable" peer reviewed journals – risk undermining fragile local scholarly publishing ecosystems.

What does the future hold? For some the solution is to strengthen African academic publishing capacity to counter global publishing inequalities. Others push for a more

equitable approach to Open Access that prioritises researchers from low-income countries (Powell, Johnson, and Herbert 2020), along with a rethinking of prohibitive APCs (Nabyonga-Orem et al. 2020). A few visionaries call for a radically different academic landscape dominated by community-led Open Access and Open Science platforms (Eve and Gray 2020). Meanwhile the list-making continues, as does anxiety about "predatory publishing".

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