



SRI LANKA ASSOCIATION FOR THE
ADVANCEMENT OF SCIENCE

GHOSTWRITING AND PREDATORY
JOURNALS: MALPRACTICE IN
ACADEMIC PUBLISHING

**Sri Lanka Association for the Advancement
of Science**

**Ghostwriting and Predatory
Journals: Malpractice in
Academic Publishing**

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Preface

The rapid proliferation of universities around the world, especially in developed countries like Sri Lanka, has resulted in an expansion of the academic community. Many young, recently qualified graduates with post-graduate qualifications have joined these universities, and while in most cases their primary duties are pedagogic, research and publication play an essential role in eventual promotions. The pressure to publish has resulted in the proliferation of opportunities and practices of questionable merit and ethics, involvement in which could have negative effects on academic careers.

This publication is the outcome of a workshop conducted by the Ethics Committee and the General Research Committee of the Sri Lanka Association for the Advancement of Science (SLAAS), as part of an ongoing series of workshops intended to build capacity among and upgrade the quality of young academics in the country. It addresses two important ethical issues that have arisen globally in the academic world, and is intended to provide guidance to young academics on how to avoid certain pitfalls.

The SLAAS would like to express its appreciation of the work done by the organisers of the workshop, as well as of the time and effort of the highly experienced resource persons, who willingly shared their knowledge and expertise with the audience. In particular, the editors wish to thank Prof. Devaka Weerakoon, Prof. Priyan Dias, and Dr. Henry Throop, for gathering and providing the information based on which this report was prepared. The aim of this publication is to summarise and place this expertise on record, and make it available to all academics in the country as a source of information and guidance.

Workshop Programme

1. Introduction

Prof. Manuj Weerasinghe
General President, SLAAS

2. Welcome address

Prof. Sumedha Jayanetti
Chair, Ethics Committee, SLAAS

3. Publication Records for Promotion Scheme of Academics

Prof. Veranja Karunaratne
Prof. Emeritus, University of Peradeniya

4. Ghostwriting

Prof. Devaka Weerakoon
Senior Professor, University of Colombo

5. Predatory Journals

Prof. Priyan Dias
Prof. Emeritus, University of Moratuwa

6. American Perspective on Predatory Journals and Ghostwriting

Dr. Henry Throop
Program Scientist, NASA.

I. Introduction

The paradigm shift from the traditional teaching culture to a research culture in many of our universities in recent times has put pressure on academics to publish copiously. The UGC academic promotion scheme in place gives more recognition to publications in science citation indexed journals. As a means of encouraging research output, more recently, many local universities also introduced academic award schemes to recognize and reward ‘good researchers’, thereby, perhaps unwittingly, creating a somewhat challenging situation for their academics. In this backdrop, journal publications have become virtually mandatory! It is inevitable that young academics in particular, striving to rise up the ranks and make a positive impact on researchers of good standing in their field, feel compelled to publish at any cost. The rapid emergence of predatory journals in large numbers has opened the floodgates for publication opportunities, questionable though they are, much to the grave concern of the academic community.

Publishing a scientific article in a well-recognized journal is by no means an easy task, particularly for scientists in this region of the world. More often than not, several revisions would be required before the article is given the green light, resulting in extensive publication delays. A heavy financial burden is also incurred by the authors.

The Journal of the National Science Foundation is the only nationally recognized, science citation indexed journal for scientific publication at present. In the bid to overcome this limitation, authors seek publication opportunities in peer reviewed international journals. Thus, considering the scientific output of our local scientists, clearly, there is an urgent need for more of our own indexed journals.

The situation with predatory journals is markedly different. The editor of the journal personally invites the author, generally using the most ‘flowery’ language, to publish in the journal, with the virtual guarantee of a rapid publication and the promise of significant financial concessions. It is not surprising for an academic just stepping out into his or her career, to fall prey to the ‘tempting carrots’ on offer, not fully realizing the long-term implications of publishing in such journals. Even a senior scientist may think twice about turning his or her back on tempting offers such as these!

Ghostwriting, in which uncredited authors contribute substantially to the writing of an paper, has been a long-known and accepted practice by politicians and leading figures in speeches, autobiographies, etc. But in academia, it is considered misconduct and violates the academic trust, the very essence of the academic and research process, in which authors' reputations are directly based on their own intellectual contributions. Increased pressure to publish has provided a sometimes tempting alternative avenue to get the work done! Some academics are of the view that ghostwriting is an acceptable practice, the justification being the final result of a more meaningful, coherent, and sound article. They seem oblivious to the associated ethical considerations and violations.

This seminar was organized by the Ethics Committee of the Sri Lanka Association for the Advancement of Science in collaboration with its General Research Committee to provide a much needed, timely word of caution to the scientific community on the long-term implications of publishing in predatory journals and resorting to ghostwriting. The seminar also provides a detailed account of predatory journals and ghostwriting with a view to assisting young researchers to move on, and move up, in their chosen field of study within the ethical boundaries.

II. Ghostwriting

Ghostwriting is a well-known practice in which the nominal author of a book, paper, or other document is not the person who actually wrote it. The true author is not named, while someone else takes the credit for the work.

This has long been a practice among politicians and celebrities, who have authored books, including autobiographies, and is generally accepted, even though ghostwriting may influence the outcome of an election or the level of trust in a politician. Unfortunately the practice has now made its way into academia, where papers are written by unnamed third parties for both students and academics. This is generally considered to be academic misconduct.

Ghostwriting in Academia

In academia, a very dangerous form of ghostwriting occurs when the paper is written by representatives of some industry, especially the pharmaceutical industry, and purports to present the outcome of research into a product developed by that corporation, in a very positive way. However, the listed author(s) would be well-reputed and presumably neutral academics, whose reputation would add credibility to the publication, the actual writers often not being listed at all. This has unfortunately become an increasingly common practice in medical publications, where the reputations of academic researchers, whose actual contributions to the work may be nominal at best, is used to promote products and support regulatory requests.

Academic ghostwriting can also take other forms. An entire paper may be written by a third party and the nominal author(s) given credit, whether the work was done by them or not (or done at all). Another form of ghostwriting occurs when "honorary" or "guest" authors are added to the list of authors, even when they have contributed nothing to either the research or the writing. In some cases the subject matter of the article may not even be in the authors' area of expertise. Yet, their lists of publications, prospects for promotion, etc., are enhanced. These practices are considered academic misconduct or even fraud, and should be avoided by academics seeking to develop their careers.

Preventing Ghostwriting

The first step is raising awareness, and the institutions for which the concerned individuals work have a key role to play. Universities and R&D institutions must realise that ghostwriting is a very real problem, which has not received sufficient attention in Sri Lanka. These institutions need to define ghostwriting as academic misconduct, with appropriate sanctions, as part of creating and enforcing a culture of academic integrity. A standing committee to enforce the rules against ghostwriting and similar activities among academics is strongly recommended.

Journals in which ghostwritten articles may be published also have a role to play. Increasingly, journals are requiring declarations by authors describing their contribution to the work.

All academics, and especially senior academics, have a role to play in raising awareness, creating a culture of academic integrity in their departments, being aware of problems that may arise, and being unafraid to take appropriate action where necessary.

Ghostwriting within the student body has been a significant problem for decades, and must also be dealt with by the academic community. Ghostwriting for students has become a significant commercial exercise in universities, ranging from class assignments to dissertations. Services of ghostwriters are brazenly offered via e-mail within the academic community. Ghostwriting is much more difficult to detect than plagiarism, and constitutes a serious violation of academic trust on the part of the student, who may meet academic requirements without achieving the expected skills and knowledge.

Dealing with ghostwriting among students is often more difficult, especially when it comes to creating a culture of academic integrity within a large student body, since there are always members who will cheat if they think they can get away with it. More weightage should be given to invigilated exams rather than written assignments. Where written assignments are part of the evaluation process, ghostwriting can be discouraged by in-class writing, a multi-draft process, personalisation of topics, in-class discussions, and *viva voce* verifications. Submitted work can be assessed for conformity with the student's personal language proficiency in English and writing style.

III. Predatory Journals

Publishing, especially of original research results, is a very important part of academic life. Academics publish their work to disseminate their results, gain peer recognition, and enhance their prospects for promotion. Over the last few decades, and especially with the advent of the internet, opportunities for publication, including online publication, have increased dramatically. Worldwide, the number of universities and other institutions where research is carried out has increased, along with staff engaged in research and under pressure to publish. The number of journals has increased to meet this demand, and while many of these are perfectly legitimate, it is clear that many are not. These journals are referred to as *predatory journals*.

What is a Predatory Journal?

There is no clear definition of predatory journals, nor is there a clear dividing line between them and legitimate mainstream ones. However, predatory journals have a number of characteristics which, taken as a whole, help identify them. These include the following:

1. **Aggressive and indiscriminate solicitation of articles**, often by frequent e-mails.
2. **Low standards**. Nearly anything can get published as long as the publication fees are paid, although the scientific content may be zero. Legitimate journals are selective about the articles they publish, though the actual standard will depend on the journal's reputation. The top journals like *Science*, *Nature*, or *The Lancet* will only publish the most ground-breaking of articles.
3. **Peer review, the hallmark of scientific publication, is superficial or non-existent**. The journal often promises very rapid publication, whereas legitimate journals will subject the paper submitted to strict editorial scrutiny and rigorous peer review, which will take several months. Even a paper containing "good" science may go through one or more cycles of correction before final acceptance.
4. **Short history and no regular readers**. Mainstream journals are well established, at least in their own fields, and have a reputation among scientists, who may constitute a regular readership.

5. **Not indexed in SCOPUS, Web of Science, etc.,** and sometimes not archived. This makes articles published in these journals harder to trace. Such journals may even lie about being indexed or being members of publishing organisations. Academic review panels may give such articles less weight, or not count them at all towards promotion, something that young academics should be concerned about.
6. **Published by for-profit companies with no legitimate interest in science.** Predatory publishers are almost always dependent on publication fees rather than subscription revenue for support. Many legitimate journals have other sources of support, such as subscriptions or professional society support, though many also have page charges.
7. **Editors who have no qualification in the subject,** and editorial boards which are non-existent, inactive, or even fake. High quality journals have strong editorial boards and systems to ensure research integrity and allow for retractions.
8. **No affiliation with legitimate professional bodies.** Again, many mainstream journals are affiliated with or even published by established professional bodies.

It should be noted that these attributes form a continuum between the top-of-the-line established journals and the completely fake ones. While predatory journals usually publish online and are "Open Access," so are many perfectly legitimate journals. Many start-up journals, or ones that charge a fee for publication, may also be likewise legitimate. Nor are predatory journals associated with particular countries. *The most distinguishing characteristic of a predatory journal is the absence of proper peer review.* Science operates through peer review, and peer review is the whole point of publishing. Any journal which promises rapid publication is likely to be abbreviating or circumventing this important step, and should be avoided by researchers who wish to be taken seriously.

Avoiding Predatory Journals

Researchers need to be able to identify predatory journals, or even questionable ones, and avoid submitting articles to them. Universities and research institutions also have a role to play, in discouraging their scientists from publishing in these journals.

The first step is an investigation of the website of the journal in question; the information needed to make a decision will often be there. A low H-index or impact factor is a warning signal, while an absurdly short time for processing and publishing the article is a clear indication of superficial or no peer review. Being indexed in Google Scholar or having a DOI (digital object identifier) do not indicate legitimacy. Researchers also need to be aware that information provided on the journals website may not be accurate.

Young academics are strongly encouraged to "do their homework" and take sensible precautions against publishing in the wrong journals. They should become familiar with the characteristics of such journals and obtain all possible information about unknown or suspicious publications, cross-checking to ensure that information provided by the journal's website is accurate and up-to-date. The Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) lists journals that have been vetted by them, and these are less likely to be predatory. Similarly, journals which are members of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) generally follow COPE's guidelines. In addition to these, indexes such as Scopus and Web of Science are reliable sources of information about genuine indexed journals.

There are many online sources which identify suspicious journals. One of them is ThinkCheckSubmit.org, which includes advice and a checklist of questions to ask, before submitting a paper. Other web-based sources include the following:

- www.authoraid.info/en/resources/details/1417/
- noaa.cabells.com/about-predatory
- www.ohri.ca/journalology/predatory-journals
- osc.cam.ac.uk/about-scholarly-communication/author-tools/considerations-when-choosing-journal/predatory-publishers
- www.inasp.info/publications/journal-publishing-practices-and-standards-framework

Institutions can play their part in this by refusing to pay publishing charges on behalf of their employees for publishing in predatory journals, and by not counting such publications for purposes of promotion and career advancement. Universities should conduct awareness programmes for faculty and students, and promote a culture of good practices in professional development and

research integrity, where involvement with predatory journals would be considered a violation.

Predatory Conferences

Similar to predatory journals are predatory conferences, which operate along similar lines. These events are organised for profit and are often breath-taking in their scope; one can present a paper on just about any topic at one and the same conference! But, like predatory journals, they can be checked out, preferably before the researcher or his/her institution pays large sums of money for participation. Questions to ask include

- Who are the organisers?
- Has this conference been held before? Have the researcher's colleagues attended?
- Who are presenting papers, keynote addresses, etc.?

As in the case of predatory journals, there are online sources which will assist the canny researcher to decide, including ThinkCheckAttend.org. Both academics and their institutions should exercise the same precautions with respect to predatory conferences as with predatory journals.

