

Tensions between Beall's *List of Predatory Publishers* and the ALA's *The Freedom to Read Statement*

Beall's *List of Predatory Publishers* is a continuously updated list of “[p]otential, possible, or probable predatory scholarly open-access publishers” and journals as well as related lists of “[m]isleading metrics and [h]ijacked journals”. The list is maintained by Denver-based librarian Jeffrey Beall.

The Freedom to Read Statement is an official Intellectual Freedom Statement of the American Library Association (ALA), first adopted in June 25, 1953 as a direct response to McCarthyism. Proposition 5 is “It is not in the public interest to force a reader to accept the prejudgment of a label characterizing any expression or its author as subversive or dangerous.

I examine whether there is a potential tension between the List and the Statement: whether ‘Predatory’ is a ‘subversive or dangerous’ label; whether the List labels expressions or authors and whether these tensions are likely to surface in real-life academic institutions if the List is used.

Predatory does not necessarily connote something ‘subversive or dangerous,’ the OED has four meanings, briefly “involving plunder, pillage, or ruthless exploitation”; “harmful to health”, “relating to predatory animals” and “of business or financial practices: unfairly competitive or exploitative.” Since there is very little on the Beall website about predatory animals and the other three are all subversive or dangerous, it’s hard to argue that ‘Predatory’ as a label does not characterise something as subversive or dangerous.

While the List is a primarily list of publishers or a list of journals, but the evidence considered when deciding whether to add publishers or journals is sometimes related authors of the works presented.

The List could be used for collection development purposes or informing academics’ choice of publication venue, both common activities in academic librarianship in which there is no obvious ‘reader,’ but these activities are commonly performed by or under the scrutiny of academics, who are by definition both readers and writers of the academic output. There are indeed no functions of an academic library which are likely to be safe from the scrutiny of academics and thus no space where scrutinising academics might not see expressions labelled as ‘Predatory.’

Therefore, there is indeed likely to be tension between the List and the Statement when used in academic institutions.

There are a number of potential alternatives to the blacklist-like List, which diffuse the tension with the Statement: citation-counting or alt-metrics techniques could be used to assess journals; commercial transparency and licensing openness could be used to assess journals; alternatively academics could be polled on the relative merits of the journals in their field. In each case, journals might be grouped only into deciles (or maybe ventiles) rather than a complete ranking to avoid the illusion of false precision and discourage interested parties from over-analysing rankings. This might see journals as “between the 95th and 100th percentile of journals when ranked by commercial transparency and licensing openness” rather than “on the list of predatory journals.”