The Fox and the Crow: Predatory Open Access Journals in Otolaryngology

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Introduction to “The Fox and the Crow”
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In the following paper, we present the authors’ experience with the community of predatory open access journals in otolaryngology. Building on the observations in Aesop’s classic fable, “The Fox and the Crow,” Mudry and Ruben present how many of these journals responded when they submitted an obviously fabricated and nonsensical procedural paper for consideration of publication. Clearly their experience is astounding.

While the journal would not routinely support nor condone the submission of papers that were not genuine, we felt that the message that Mudry and Ruben present and the clear implications of their observations would be instructive for our community, and that there was no viable alternative that would provide the same information as the authors’ methods. We further felt that the ethical issues raised by predatory journals, their editorial processes, and their publications would be illustrative.1,2

We hope that our readers will find the authors’ experiences helpful for them as they traverse the current climate in journal publications, and will carefully consider how they interface with journals and publishers in this climate.

Keywords
otolaryngology, open access, journal, predatory, fox and crow

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E-mailed invitations from open access otolaryngology–head and neck surgery journals (OHNSJs) to submit a paper, be a member of the editorial board, or even become the journal’s editor-in-chief were collected from 62 different OHNSJs from January 2017 to August 2018. These invitations were often personally flattering (eg, “in view of your expertise and past publications”).

An editorial entitled “Open Access: Is There a Predator at the Door?” was authored by editors of and published in a major American OHNSJ,1 articulating the dangers of predatory practices among specific open access otolaryngology journals.

References

Abstract
Otolaryngologists regularly receive invitations from open access otolaryngology–head and neck surgery journals to submit papers or to join the editorial board. Some of these journals are considered “predatory.” There has been no published attempt to see if bogus otolaryngological articles would be accepted by such journals. We sent a fake article describing a supposed otosclerotic lesion localized in the fallopian tube and surgically treated by phacoemulsification of the stapes to 41 such journals. Eight journals accepted the paper, 7 requested structural revision, 2 requested revision even though the reviewer recommended rejection, 4 rejected the paper only because they found it had already been published by another open access journal (without the authors’ knowledge), and 2 rejected the paper. Eighteen journals had not responded after 6 weeks. A contemporary retelling of the poem “The Fox and the Crow” concludes our article, which illustrates predatory practices among specific open access otolaryngology journals.

E-mailed invitations from open access otolaryngology–head and neck surgery journals (OHNSJs) to submit a paper, be a member of the editorial board, or even become the journal’s editor-in-chief were collected from 62 different OHNSJs from January 2017 to August 2018. These invitations were often personally flattering (eg, “in view of your expertise and past publications”). The invitations also frequently included self-serving statements about the open access journal, such as “potentially serving your remarkable expertise for the advancement of the scientific community.”

An editorial entitled “Open Access: Is There a Predator at the Door?” was authored by editors of and published in a major American OHNSJ,1 articulating the dangers of predatory practices among specific open access otolaryngology journals.
predatory journals and offering guidance for readers on how to best differentiate predatory from legitimate OHNSJs. The existence of predatory journals has been reported, as evidenced by legal action noted in Science in 2016. There has not been, as far as we can determine, however, any attempt to see if bogus otolaryngological articles would be accepted by any open access OHNSJ.

On August 25, 2018, we sent a fake, fabricated article of around 1000 words and purportedly written by 3 fictitious authors entitled “Fallopian Otosclerosis: A New Surgical Approach. Preliminary Results” to 41 of these 62 journals, using a newly created e-mail address. Twenty-one of the 62 were eliminated because of the absence of an accessible website, the absence of a link to send the paper, undelivered e-mail, a requirement to create an online account for submission, and/or the presence of other OHNSJs by the same editor. The fictitious authors were affiliated with an imaginary institution: Otolaryngologic Department of Medical Frauds, Recognized Quack Clinic, Trickery Avenue 69. The paper was purely fictional, describing a supposed otosclerotic lesion localized in the fallopian tube and surgically treated by stapedophacotomy—in other words, by phacoemulsification of the stapes. Plagiarism was used for 60% of the text. Two erroneous images were added with 10 references, 2 being completely invented and 8 modified to become fallacious. The text contained numerous nonsensical terms, such as otoendometriosis, otosalpingectomy, otophacoemulsion, otomalachitis, and others. As of October 10, 2018, 8 journals accepted the paper, with comments such as “an excellent article, well written and recommended for publication.” Seven journals requested revisions, essentially requesting more methodological precision, and 2 requested revisions even though the reviewer proposed rejection of the paper. Four journals rejected the paper only because they discovered it had already been published by another open access journal. (Effective September 4, 2018, the paper was published online without the permission of the authors. Another journal published the paper online on October 1, 2018.) Only 2 of the submissions were rejected for quality and content suitability for the journal. From the remaining 18 journals, no response was received as of October 10, 2018. During the last few weeks, a new email invitation was received from an OHNSJ: “We have gone through your research profile. We have gone through your recent Research Article on Fallopian Otosclerosis . . . which was impressive. As our Editorial board suggested us to invite you . . .”

In conclusion, authors must be cautious when a flattering invitation to publish from an unknown person or publication appears in their inbox and refrain from responding if the author believes that the invitation is predatory. What follows is a contemporary retelling of the classic poem “The Fox and the Crow” of Aesop’s Fables (124 in the Perry Index). An author must consider how to avoid being the crow.

**Author Contributions**

Albert Mudry, created and conducted the research, presented it and wrote it; Robert J. Ruben, discussed, presented and improved the text.

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**References**