

A not-so-harmless experiment in predatory open access publishing

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Key points

- Publishing articles in predatory or low quality open-access journals has been proven to be easy.
- In the presented case study, the editor replaced the entire submitted manuscript with plagiarized texts, without explicitly informing the authors.
- When strongly motivated to publish, editors and publishers may fraudulently change articles to make them more publishable.
- Replacing the entire content of an article cannot be interpreted as a misguided attempt to improve article quality.
- Plagiarism should not be solely blamed on authors when editors may be the culprits.

INTRODUCTION

A negative – and unintended – side effect of the *open access* publishing movement (Van Noorden, 2013), where a reader-pays economy has been replaced by an author-pays model, has been the numerous ‘predatory’ open access (pOA) journals that have appeared over the last few years (Beall, 2012, 2013). It has been shown on numerous occasions that publishing in pOA journals is not difficult, and the peer review process, if any, is not rigorous.

The most notorious example is probably a paper entitled ‘Get me off your fucking mailing list’, which consists of that very sentence repeated over and over again throughout the entire length of the 10-page paper, as well as graphs containing the same wording. The manuscript was ‘written’ in 2005 by David Mazières (NYU) and Eddie Kohler (UCLA) as a response to unsolicited e-mails (spam) from conference organizers (Mazières & Kohler, 2005). Earlier in 2014, Peter Vamplew (Federation University Australia) had used the unpublished manuscript for the same purpose and had submitted it to the *International Journal of Advanced Computer Technology*, a pOA journal that was spamming him. The

manuscript was accepted with minor changes after allegedly going through a peer review process. However, Vamplew, who never intended to go through with the actual publication – perhaps to avoid the \$150 publishing fees – chose to stop the process (Beall, 2014). Another well-known example is the case of a graduate student who submitted a nonsensical computer-generated manuscript that was accepted for publication (Gilbert, 2009). Again, the process was immediately stopped, and the accepted article was never published. In both cases, however, the question remains: would the editors have actually published the articles, or would they have simply taken the money and not followed through? (A question that has since been answered in Ray, 2016.)

The case study described in this paper aimed at answering this question by repeating Peter Vamplew’s experiment, but going one step further by attempting to have the article published. The exercise was performed in the context of an ‘Introduction to Research’ graduate class taught at the University of Kentucky by the first author. The manuscript, written by a 7-year old, was submitted and quickly accepted. However, it was ultimately decided not to go forward with the publication. As it

turned out, performing that last step would have transformed a harmless case-study into a case of severe academic offense.

JOURNAL SELECTION, SUBMISSION, AND NOTIFICATION

The manuscript selected for this case study was a minimalistic booklet containing a collection of facts about bats, illustrated with several figures. The booklet was written by a 7-year old student at Rosa Parks Elementary, Lexington, KY. A page of this booklet, as originally drafted, is presented in Fig. 1(A). To prepare the manuscript for submission, the 'booklet' was reformatted using L^AT_EX, and the figures were replaced with similar but copyright-free images. The first page of the submitted manuscript is presented in Fig. 1(B).

In order to select an appropriate journal for this experiment, the scholarly open-access website (Beall, 2016b), maintained by Jeffrey Beall, was consulted. The website publishes up-to-date lists of 'potential, possible, or probable predatory scholarly open-access' journals and publishers. In order to be included in the lists, journals and publishers are evaluated according to specific criteria (Beall, 2015) based on publishing standards established by the Committee on Publication Ethics: *Code of Conduct for Journal* (2011) and *Principles of Transparency and Best Practice in Scholarly* (2013). The journals included in the lists are therefore not necessarily 'predatory' in the proper sense but have been deemed to have questionable publishing, scientific, or business practices.

After consulting the list, a decision was taken to submit the manuscript to the *International Journal of Comprehensive Research in Biological Science*. The manuscript was submitted, and a few weeks later, the editor wrote back stating that it was being considered for publication but that minor changes were needed:

We are happy to inform you that the article entitled 'Assessment of living habits of bats' (Manuscript No: IJCRBS 1402) has been considered for short communication but it has been found that the content in the abstract, introduction and conclusion are one and the same. In this regard we would like the author to revise the article and communicate the same with minimum of 5 references.

As the suggestions appeared to be reasonable, the changes were made, and the manuscript was re-submitted in Microsoft[®] Word format as requested by the editor. The first page of this version of the manuscript is presented in Fig. 1(C). The acceptance e-mail came a few days later:

We are glad to inform you that the article entitled 'Assessment of living habits of bats' (Manuscript No: IJCRBS 1402) is provisionally accepted and will be published in forthcoming issue Vol II, Issue I, Jan 2015 of IJCRBS.

The e-mail was also accompanied with a request for copyright transfer and a \$60 invoice. After contemplating the idea to pay the fee, 'competent authorities' made the case that this might not be such a harmless idea after all. Similarly to Peter Vamplew's experiment, it was argued that the point had been proven, and there was no need to potentially tarnish the reputation of a 7-year old by having him published in a non-reputable journal.

UNEXPECTED AFTERMATH

A few weeks later, the editor sent a new e-mail, insisting once more that the \$60 fees were to be paid. However, this time, the galley proofs of the article were also attached. As can be seen in Fig. 1(D), the text of the manuscript had been completely – and unexpectedly – changed, and only the title, the author, and the figures were kept as originally submitted. Because the text was no longer that of the author, the editor was immediately informed of the intentions of retracting the submitted manuscript, which then prompted the following reply (original spelling preserved):

The Changes included in your manuscript was only a suggestion put forth by the editorial review committee. The gallery proof sent only for consideration and not the final manuscript. After the discussion with review committee members the original article can still be considered for publication under short communication. As the author has been in communication for the past 2 months we can still publish the original version of your article if and only the author wants to proceed further. Thank for your association.

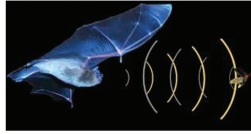
An online search was also able to reveal that the new version of the manuscript had been plagiarized verbatim from two published papers: Agosta (2002) and Schnitzler and Kalko (2001). Following these findings, the experiment was terminated, and no further communications occurred with the editor. As a side note, the journal has since been discontinued, and the website has been shut down (as of August 15, the website is still accessible through the *Wayback Machine* at <http://web.archive.org/web/20150611035413/http://www.ijcrbs.com/>).

DISCUSSION

The true motivations of the editor are unknown, but one can speculate. Considering the chain of events, it is unlikely that the changes made by the editor were the result of ill-judged benevolence. Replacing the entire content of an article, especially after it has been accepted for publication, cannot be interpreted as a misguided attempt at improving the quality of the article. If, for instance, a single paragraph had been replaced with plagiarized content, it might have been possible to blame a lack of understanding of in-text

(A) **What is a bat?**

Bats are really cool animals! They are the only mammals that can fly. They sleep by day and fly by night. They use **Echolocation** to find their way around. This is when they send an **Echo** that does not make any sound and the Echo comes back to the bat and tells them where things are.



(B)

Overview of living habits of bats

Tristan Martin*
Rosa Parks Ele. School, Lexington, Kentucky 40513, USA
(Dated: April 21, 2015)

Bats are really cool animals! They are the only mammals that can fly. They sleep by day and fly by night. They use Echolocation to find their way around. This is when they send an Echo that does not make any sound and the Echo comes back to the bat and tells them where things are.

Keywords: bats, echolocation, Myanmar, bumblebee bats, Giant Golden crowned Fruit Bat.

INTRODUCTION

Bats are really cool animals! They are the only mammals that can fly. They sleep by day and fly by night. They use Echolocation to find their way around. This is when they send an Echo (see Fig. 1) that does not make any sound and the Echo comes back to the bat and tells them where things are.

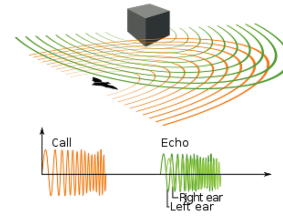


FIG. 1: Illustration of the ultrasound signals emitted by a bat, and the echo generated by an object.[1]

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Bumblebee Bats live in Myanmar and Thailand. They are mostly found in Thailand and have been recently found on Myanmar. They live in Limestone caves that are close to rivers so they can find more bugs at night. There are many different types of bats. The longest type of bat is the Giant Golden crowned Fruit Bat. The smallest type of bat is the Bumblebee bat (see Fig. 2).

CONCLUSION

Bats are really cool animals! They are the only mammals that can fly. They sleep by day and fly by night. They use Echolocation to find their way around. This is when they send an Echo that does not make any sound and the Echo comes back to the bat and tells them where things are.

(C)

Assessment of living habits of bats

Tristan Martin*
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(Dated: January 9, 2015)

This paper presents a short assessment of the living habits of bats. First their daily activity is presented, and then an overview of the Echolocation principles is presented. Finally, a brief review of the various sizes of bat is discussed.

Keywords: bats, echolocation, Myanmar, bumblebee bats, Giant Golden crowned Fruit Bat.

INTRODUCTION

Bats are really cool animals! They are the only mammals that can fly. They sleep by day and fly by night. They use Echolocation to find their way around. This is when they send an Echo (see Fig. 1) that does not make any sound and the Echo comes back to the bat and tells them where things are.

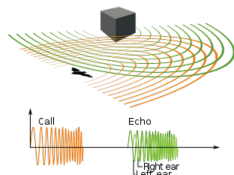


Figure 1: Illustration of the ultrasound signals emitted by a bat, and the echo generated by an object.[1]

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Bumblebee Bats [3] live in Myanmar and Thailand. They are mostly found in Thailand and have been recently found on Myanmar. They live in Limestone caves [4] that are close to rivers so they can find more bugs at night.

There are many different types of bats. The longest type of bat is the Giant Golden crowned Fruit Bat [5]. The smallest type of bat is the Bumblebee bat (see Fig. 2).

CONCLUSION

Bats are the only mammals that can fly. They sleep by day and fly by night and use Echolocation to find their way around. They are truly amazing.

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(D)

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Review Article

ASSESSMENT OF LIVING HABITS OF BATS

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ABSTRACT

Echolocation is one of the adaptations that make bats so successful. Bats use echolocation for orientation in space, that is, for determining their position relative to the echo-producing environment. The bumble-ee bat *Craseonycteris thonglongyai* of the monospecific family Craseonycteridae is categorized as Endangered on the IUCN Red List. These bats roost at the back of small caves or remote caverns. Group size varies from as few as 10 individuals to as many as 500, although most caves contain around 100 bats. The bats spread out across the ceiling of the caves so that they do not come into contact with one another. At dawn and dusk they leave their caves for around 20-30 minutes to forage for food. The bats primarily use echolocation (810 kHz) to hunt small insects on the wing, although they may also glean small spiders and beetles from plant leaves. The normal foraging range appears to be limited to an area of around 1 km from the roost site. Little is known of the reproductive system of these bats.

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INTRODUCTION

Bats are belonging to the order of Chiroptera and ecologically more diverse than any other group of mammals. Numerous morphological, physiological and behavioral adaptations of sensory and motor systems permit bats access to a wide range of habitats and resources at night. The more than 750 species of the suborder Microchiroptera occupy most terrestrial habitats and climatic zones and exploit a great variety of foods, ranging from insects and other arthropods, small vertebrates, and blood to fruit, leaves, nectar, flowers and pollen.

Bat populations are declining worldwide as a result of a growing number of factors, including habitat loss and fragmentation, disturbances to roosts, exposure to toxins, human hunting pressures and introduced predators (McCracken, 1989; Fenton, 1997; Arita & Ortega, 1998; Fenton & Rautenbach, 1998; Marinho-Filo & Sazima, 1998; Pierson, 1998; Racey, 1998; Rainey, 1998; Richards & Hall, 1998; Utzurrum, 1998; O'Donnell, 2000).

This makes it difficult to draw general conclusions about bat conservation, which may require species-specific conservation plans (Fenton, 1997).

Insectivorous bats are major consumers of nocturnal insects, many of which are economically important pests. This presents both ecological and economic rationales for their protection (Grinnell, 1918; Constantine, 1970; Whitaker, 1995; Pierson, 1998). In addition, bat guano is rich in nitrogen and other nutrients. Bats may transfer significant amounts of nutrients in ecosystems as guano accumulates at roosts (e.g. tree hollows; Kunz, 1982; Rainey *et al.*, 1992; Zielinski & Gellman, 1999) and is spread across the landscape while bats forage (Pierson, 1998).

Bats are also important components of cave environments, where the accumulation of guano supports a diverse invertebrate community (Poulson, 1972; Culver *et al.*, 2000). Some bat assemblages may be useful indicators of habitat disturbance and quality (Fenton *et al.*, 1992; Medellin *et al.*,

FIGURE 1 Evolution of the manuscript, from submission to the galley proofs. (A) Second page of the original booklet. (B) First page of the submitted L^AT_EX manuscript. (C) First page of the accepted Microsoft Word manuscript. (D) First page of the publication galley proofs of the article returned by the editors.

citation standards. Here, it is clearly not the case. A more plausible explanation is that the editor recognized the poor quality of the manuscript. Motivated by the desire to publish an article for his newly founded journal, or perhaps to simply collect the publication fee, he chose to replace the content to make the article look serious. Aside from the problem associated with copyright infringements and plagiarism, wholesale changes in a manuscript after it had been accepted creates a whole new set of issues with publishing ethics and proper scholarship.

It is also not possible to know for sure if the editor had made a habit of this practice. A few other papers published by the journal were also examined. All of those analysed were either plagiarized or had already been published by the same authors in other journals. For instance, the entire content of the article by Desoky (2015a) was taken verbatim from a book published in 2006 by the World Health Organization (Curtis, 2006) and was published identically as Desoky (2015b) and Desoky (2015c). In this case, it is more likely that the author himself committed the plagiarism offense. In any cases, these findings do confirm that the journal has questionable publishing practices, and its inclusion on Beall's list is justified.

As for the potential repercussions of having gone through with the publication, they are equally hard to evaluate. As seen in the last communication from the editor, an offer was made to revert the manuscript to its original form. Published in its submitted form, the repercussions would have been minimal, if any. However, if the article had been published in its 'galley proof' form, the author would have had a published paper with the content wholly plagiarized. Retractions of such articles have been known to be very difficult (Beall, 2016a).

What makes the present case study rather unique is the fact that the academic offence had not been perpetrated by the author but by the editor, without directly informing the author. Although this type of editing practice is probably not widespread, it did happen and therefore presented an additional reason not to publish in pOA journals.

CONCLUSION

Publishing in pOA journals has many obvious and well-documented negative consequences, such as tarnishing the reputation of researchers or institutions; disseminating low-quality, often bogus and plagiarized, research; and decreasing the confidence of the public in the peer review process. In the case presented here, the damage could have been even greater as it would have resulted in a severe academic misconduct.

The open access movement is gaining popularity in scientific circles, and there are currently many excellent open access journals. None of these show signs of the publishing and academic malpractice discussed here. However, journals identified as truly predatory need to be treated differently. The case study presented here adds one more reason to expose them and discourage researchers to publish in them.

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