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Predatory Publishing and the Imperative of International Productivity: Feeding Off and Feeding Up the Dominant

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“Be international!” This imperative can hardly be overlooked in current European research policy and research evaluation.¹ The imports of “internationalization” manifest prominently in how particular value is attached to “international visibility,” “international impact,” or the international character of publication venues. The international is used as a trope on a number of levels: in EU funding schemes, in project goals that guide national assessment exercises, in output measurements, in the formulation of institutional research missions, and in tenure-track criteria. Especially in smaller countries, such as the Netherlands and the Czech Republic, the international is often taken as an unquestioned proxy for quality, proving recognition of value and impact beyond the “academic pods.” Consequently, the international, the national, and the local constitute a clear normative hierarchy. For example, it is taken for granted that international excellence encompasses national excellence and (as such) is supposedly more valuable.

Inspired by Lin and Law’s discussion of “modes of international” (2013, 2014), we argue in this chapter that gaming metrics, predatory publishing, and exploiting the model of gold open access (Beall, 2012) can be partly understood as a logical response to the imperative of internationalization going wild. It enacts a different, yet dubious, alternative mode of internationalization for those researchers and institutions who fail—for better or worse—within the established mode of international, with its epistemic and economic centers in the global, Anglophone North/West. In this chapter, we zoom in on a recent misconduct case in the Czech Republic to show how the imperative of internationalization and productivity inscribed in the country’s research assessment framework impinges on institutional and individual publication strategies and produces a market for gaming in the academy.

Taking the Imperatives to the Extreme

In 2015, a major debate on publishing and research evaluation was opened up in the Czech academy. It was provoked by controversy over a highly productive junior researcher at the Faculty of Social Sciences of Charles University. At first sight, he might look like a paradigmatic case of a successful scholar with a long list of international publications, collaborations, and co-authorships—exactly what the current research policy in the Czech Republic holds as a normative ideal. However, on second sight and when some of his colleagues from the department started to closely scrutinize his production, the case turned out to be something significantly different: a sophisticated attempt to game the current research assessment system on various levels—or rather, to take the imperative of the system to the extreme by some perfectly legitimate and some less legitimate ways. To understand what happened, let us first briefly describe the genesis and current state of research assessment in the country.

The post-1989 changes in the Czech Republic concerned not only political and economic institutions, but also academic ones. One of the most fundamental changes was the establishment of the Czech Grant Agency in 1993 and the introduction, in various forms, of competitive funding of academic research. In 2001, and largely from the initiative of a few natural scientists who came back to the Czech Republic in 1990 after spending several years in the West, the first version of a new methodology for the quantitative assessment of institutional-level research performance was introduced. Its impact on research funding of academic institutions and the “value” imputed to individual scholars has since then gradually increased. The central building blocks of the evaluation methodology are so-called RIV-points (RIV standing for “Information Register of R&D results”²), assigned to predefined types of outputs (including journal articles, monographs, patents, and prototypes) and meant to reflect their academic and user value (Office of the Government of the Czech Republic, 2013).³ One of the key claimed rationales of the evaluation methodology was to create an objective “machine” that would increase the transparency of the research system and depoliticize its governance. However, during the last fifteen years, the methodology developed into a convoluted metrics-based amalgamation with many unclear algorithms and weights that are far from transparent, not only for “ordinary” researchers, but even for research policy managers at the national level (Miholová and Majer, 2016). At present, the evaluation

methodology's criteria for "quality recognition" soak through the entire system. They have a significant—even if, at times, indirect—impact on academic hiring and promotion procedures, individual research grant endowment, and the funding allocation of public research institutions.

A key trope of the research policy reforms since the 1990s has been internationalization, and this trope is also inscribed into the current evaluation methodology. This is understandable in a small country where many disciplines tended to operate in closed circles consisting of local scholars. However, it is more problematic that the international oftentimes stands as a value in itself—unquestioned and undisputed, for example, there is currently nearly no peer-review evaluation of journal articles within the national evaluation framework (a peer-review evaluation of a limited number of outputs submitted by research organizations as "excellent" was introduced in 2015) and the journal impact metrics provided by Web of Science (WoS) and SCOPUS are taken for granted as proxies for international recognition and quality. This is the context in which junior academics start to build their publication record and careers.

We now return to the controversy. Having gained his PhD in 2007, the academic in question has claimed to have co-authored or co-edited seventeen "scientific monographs" between 2011 and 2013 and more than eighty journal articles between 2006 and 2015.⁴ Apart from the extreme productivity, four aspects of his CV are noteworthy. Firstly, the author also acts as an editor in chief, editorial board member, and even publisher of some of the "European" or "international" journals listed on his CV.⁵ All these journals are English language, target an international audience, and have an international review board and international pool of authors. Secondly, even if in SCOPUS, some of the journals on his publication list were also listed in Jeffrey Beall's database of predatory journals.⁶ Thirdly, some of the co-authors on these articles in predatory journals were colleagues from the faculty—including the current head of the department.⁷ And, finally, as the author later confirmed, one of his co-authors was discovered to be a fictional character supposedly affiliated with prestigious Western European universities (first the University of Strasbourg and later the University of Cambridge).⁸

While some of the academic's actions were rather extreme, or even "crafty" (e.g., the invented co-author; see also Marie-Andrée Jacob's chapter on template, dexterity, and publication ethics), we have to acknowledge they have definitely been in line with the current imperative of internationalization. The researcher tried to gain "Western"

recognition and certification (listing on the WoS and SCOPUS databases) for his publishing activities as an author, editor, editorial board member, and publisher based in the East. Interestingly, he not only strove to gain a position in the existing international playing field (which is what the research policy framework in fact tries to encourage), but also, as a skillful academic entrepreneur, to rework and reorder the field at one go by creating new journals and forging new East–West alliances (even if at times with fictitious co-authors). He also specifically offered his teaching and publication “services” to researchers from Russia and Eastern Europe in relation to whom he positioned his activities as international. Apparently, he aimed at the enactment of a different international than the one of current global science, in which the international in fact equals the West. While in general we might have some sympathy for attempts at destabilizing the global asymmetry (Stöckelová, 2012), his means and ways of doing so are rather problematic.

As a result of a major controversy at the faculty level, during which “whistle-blowing” colleagues from the department filed a complaint to the Ethical Commission of Charles University (the complaint was deferred⁹), and following the publication of a number of articles in national public media, the author’s contract was terminated in September 2015. In response to the increasing media and academic community pressure, the faculty openly distanced itself from unethical publishing practices connected with the case. It issued “publication rules” that warned against predatory journals and vanity press publishers, such as the well-known vanity press Lambert Academic Publishing, in which over twenty “international” monographs of the faculty members had been published since 2010.¹⁰ Some other faculties and universities in the country followed suit.

Interestingly, the “international” standards for quality assessment did not seem to count equally for all involved. Though playing the game led to several promotions for the researcher who was later accused of misconduct, when push came to shove, the same rules did not apply to the key whistle-blower, though he and his research group were doing quite well by these standards.¹¹ Debatably, a few weeks later, after the termination of the perpetrator’s contract, the contract of the main whistle-blower was not renewed either—in spite of wide support for his actions from the social science community.¹² The faculty chiefly adhered to a “bad apple” approach, a relatively common strategy in misconduct cases in the sense that measures are often taken mainly at the level of individuals.

Cui Bono?

Calls for more transparent, trustworthy quality control mechanisms and more open infrastructures for communicating and publishing research are currently widely heard in European science policy. The European Commission has introduced several framework programs that focus in particular on responsible research and innovation, and on “open science.” In 2020, all scientific and scholarly output should be freely available by way of open access. Another important aim for 2020 is a fundamentally novel approach to data (re)use, based on open data models. But change will not come easily, with vested interests of established academic elites and large commercial actors with their entrenched infrastructures for publishing and evaluating research. Paradoxically, part of the answer seems to lie in the hands of exactly these commercial parties. At present, they appear to be the ultimate gatekeepers of the “international.” The critique of predatory journals inadvertently makes a very strong case for the value added by corporate, indexed outlets and black-boxed, commercially endorsed algorithms. Predatory journals seem to play right in the hands of corporate publishers as a confirmation of the dangers of uncontrolled open access.

At the same time, the predatory publishing industry managed to develop a business model that taps into both the “open science” *and* the “commercial” publishing models and normative frameworks. Evidently, some of the appeal of predatory journals and vanity publishers lies in their offering cheap, accessible vehicles for the “international”—certainly when compared to the costlier “gold” open-access publications, with quality control and more or less US- and Eurocentric gatekeepers. Also, the predatory publishing business model closely mimics and reproduces the standards and incentive structures of the “global,” dominant publishing industry. This is an industry in which the journal and the journal article are the most valuable means of communication for international recognition and visibility, within a “market world of justification” (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006) that is enacted, among other things, through indicators such as the Journal Impact Factor (Rushforth and de Rijcke, 2015; de Rijcke and Müller, 2017). Finn Brunton (this volume, chapter 18) touches upon a similar logic, where he describes how spam and spam journals work off the same socio-technical infrastructures, institutional mechanisms, and rhetoric as “reputable” or “accepted” publishing industries, and hence also fuel the development of these same “legitimate” forms of publishing. The point we make is that publication practices of predatory publishers are being linked to the most important and profitable value

systems of the dominant publishing industry and the indicator production market. As such, predatory publishing and its concomitant practices are not outside of the research system but emerge at the heart of them and are embedded within them. These practices in effect drive the existing evaluation logic to the extreme. A crucial question then becomes, *cui bono* (Star, 1995), who actually benefits from this industry?

Generally speaking, there is of course no level playing field in the globalizing system for academic publishing. Arguably, attempts to arrive at such a global, “horizontal” system can in themselves be regarded as a form of vertical domination. On the system level, the publishing industry fortifies boundaries between an “international” West or North on the one hand and a “parochial” East or South on the other. And the case discussed in this chapter shows how predatory publishing can be a vehicle for a particular mode of international, enacted at specific locations in the system. In the Czech Republic and further east, the predatory journals and vanity presses played a role in further empowering skillful local researchers who used the new industry to boost their publication records, international visibility, and the financial status of their institutions (for instance by gaining RIV points for books published by international “vanity” presses¹³). The, at first sight, useful term “predatory publishing” or “predatory journals” may be largely misleading, because it obscures much the agency of individual actors in using these outlets to their advantage. In the case at hand, scholars were hardly “prey,” as they found clever ways of gaming the assessment system.

The Czech case makes clear how the predatory publishing industry thrives mainly by being successfully parasitic on existing forms of conduct and material infrastructures for publishing and evaluating research—without fully incorporating its quality control mechanisms (including absence of “proper” peer review and fake editorial boards). But this lack of explicit quality control procedures should not be overemphasized. Some of them apparently have some quality control, and rather than belonging on a blacklist, they operate in a gray zone—into which some established quality journals may now be falling as well with the increased global pressures on production and auditable performance, which deprives the publication system of available competent reviewers and editors. We think the *excessive parasitism* of the “predatory” journals is much more crucial. Many of them deliberately operate on the edges of dominant publication and citation infrastructures, hosted by big commercial publishers. A lot of these journals originate from the “East,” and these journals permeate the “global” publishing industry when they are indexed in the WoS

and—particularly—SCOPUS.¹⁴ The latter’s reputation is based on being the “largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature,” providing a “comprehensive overview of the world’s research output.”¹⁵ This is obviously a rather problematic statement when the company cannot in practice control this international certification, and is nonetheless taken as proxy for quality in many evaluation systems.

Although the critique of predatory publishing does indeed lead to some sanitization efforts (codes of conduct, blacklists, and whitelists), thus far it has not triggered any serious kind of more radical reform of the publishing and evaluation infrastructure. This may partly be because it is too soon. It could also be due to the fact that purification and policing efforts are often based on the ideal of a unified science system, with internationally shared views “from nowhere” about what constitutes “bad” and “proper” scientific conduct. Such an ideal is doomed to fail when we see how different actors within science systems create and re-enforce distinctive normative hierarchies between the international, the national, and the local: journals, databases, evaluators, consultants, publishers, and also researchers. Some assessment systems are in fact beginning to recognize the need for contextual evaluation (in terms of disciplines and fields) and the complex relation between the international, national, and local. But there still is a long way to go before the research policy and wider academic communities acknowledge that the more, the faster, and the more international need not always be the better.

Notes

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2. For details, see the website of the Government Office for Science, Research, and Innovations: <http://www.vyzkum.cz/FrontClanek.aspx?idsekce=1028>.
3. For example, for papers in WoS journals, the value would be counted on the basis of the position of the journal in disciplinary ranking in WoS but it would include other parameters set up in the evaluation methodology. For patents, the value would depend on whether it is a EU, US, or Japanese patent (one hundred points), a Czech or other national patent (fifty points), or other patent (twenty-five points) (Office of the Government of the Czech Republic, 2013). For a detailed discussion of the evaluation system and its evolution, see Linková and Stöckelová (2012), Stöckelová (2012), Good et al. (2015), and Miholová and Majer (2016).

4. See the archived version of his personal web page: <http://web.archive.org/web/20150514044622/http://www.striekowski.com/publications> (accessed March 30, 2017).
5. An example is the *International Economics Letters*, where he serves as an editor in chief: <http://www.ielonline.eu/journal-archive/volume-2-issue-4-2013/> and <http://www.ielonline.eu/editorial-board> (accessed May 12, 2016). Another example is the SCOPUS indexed journal *Economics and Sociology*, where he is listed as a board member with the title of “associate professor”—<http://www.economics-sociology.eu/?eneditorial-board,3> (accessed May 12, 2016)—a title that incidentally does not match with the information he provides on his own website, according to which he became an associated professor only in 2017 (at the Moscow Power Engineering Institute, Russia) (<http://www.striekowski.com/bio> [accessed May 12, 2016]). The researcher also publishes a journal *European Review of Social Sciences* himself through his limited liability company Univerzitiní Servis—<http://rejstrik.penize.cz/29000335-univerzitiní-servis-s-r-o> (accessed May 13, 2016), a journal of which he is also an editor: <http://erss2.webnode.cz/editors> (accessed May 13, 2016).
6. The famous “Beall’s list” of predatory publishers and stand-alone predatory journals was created and maintained in the period of 2012 to 2016 by the University of Colorado, Denver, librarian Jeffrey Beall at <https://scholarlyoa.com>. The list was unexpectedly shut down in January 2017 (Silver, 2017). Refusing at first to comment on the reasons, Beall later stated: “In January 2017, facing intense pressure from my employer, the University of Colorado, Denver, and fearing for my job, I shut down the blog and removed all its content from the blog platform” (Beall, 2017).
7. A summary of the case in English from the whistle-blowers is available at <https://zaetickepublikace.wordpress.com/2015/11/17/facts-about-the-critique-of-questionable-publishing-practices-at-the-institute-of-communication-studies-and-journalism-faculty-of-social-sciences-at-charles-university-prague> (accessed May 12, 2016).
8. It is noteworthy that his operation looks similar to various hoaxes testing the system, which are described in the fourth section of this volume. However, it was not revealed by the author but his department colleagues. Only then did he call it an “academic joke,” adding that “many academics enjoy playing similar jokes” (see <http://zaetickepublikace.webnode.cz/questionable-publishing-practices-or-questionable-academics-a-story-from-the-faculty-of-social-sciences-charles-university-in-prague> [accessed June 14, 2017]). His newest joke than may be his letter sent to and published in *Nature* in April 2017 in which he praises the Beall’s list of predatory publishers and calls for ethics committees to “draw up guidelines for distinguishing reputable from disreputable journals” (<https://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v544/n7651/full/544416b.html> [accessed June 14, 2017]).
9. <http://www.cuni.cz/UK-5554.html> (accessed May 12, 2016).
10. <http://antipredator.vedazije.cz/index.php?action=switchvalidrecords&show=institution&name=8029> (accessed May 12, 2016).

11. In the Czech Republic, that is. He did find a job at the University of Loughborough in the United Kingdom, and so did the perpetrator, who later became, for some time, a research associate at Cambridge University's Energy Policy Research Group (<http://www.strielkowski.com/bio> [accessed June 4, 2017]).
12. A petition in support of the whistle-blower was signed by more than one hundred academics—see <https://zaetickepublikace.wordpress.com/2015/12/02/prohlaseni-za-publikacni-etiku-a-svobodu-kritiky-v-socialnich-vedach> (accessed May 12, 2016). Only his limited individual research grant funding from an external agency would continue, but not the institutional funding he received up to this point.
13. <http://antipredator.vedazije.cz/index.php?show=institution&name=8029> (accessed May 14, 2016).
14. See the study by Macháček and Srholec (2017) documenting the sharp rise in recent years of the number of predatory journals identified according to Beall's list in Scopus, with authors of the paper primarily based in the middle-income countries of Asia and North Africa.
15. <https://www.elsevier.com/solutions/scopus> (accessed May 15, 2016).

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