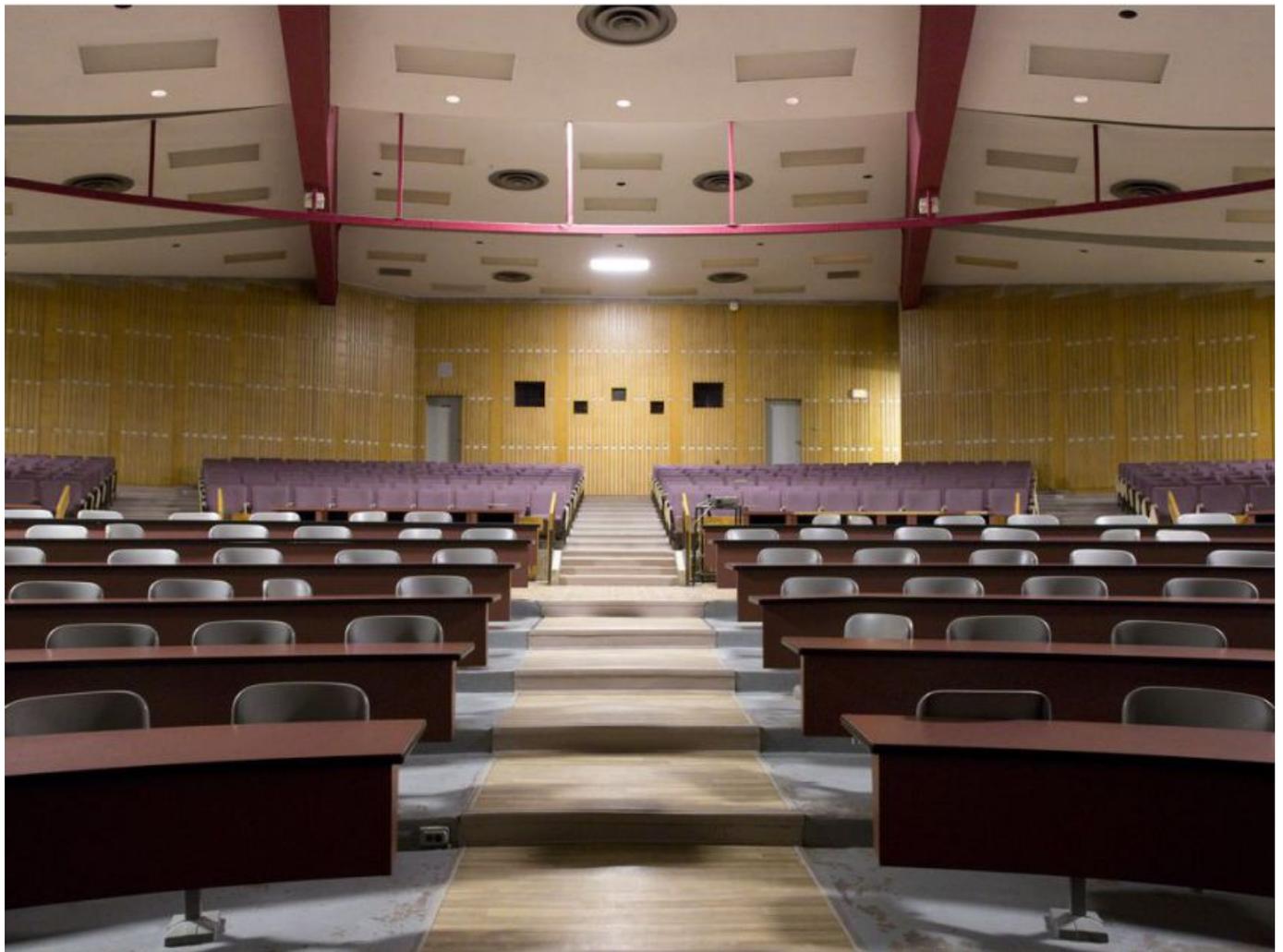


Are universities complicit in predatory publishing?

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A university lecture hall. What's happening in all those academic journals? CRAIG GLOVER / CRAIG GLOVER/THE LONDON FREE PRESS
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As recent articles in the Ottawa Citizen make clear, a growing scourge in universities has been the growth of predatory journals. These journals claim to be peer reviewed but in reality allow authors to buy publication and thereby inflate their publication records. Authors can then use their publication records to apply for research awards, promotions and other benefits.

Some universities have policies against them. The Sydney Morning Herald reports that several Australian universities do not allow them to be used for promotion and even ask academics to identify them in publications reported on their annual reviews. Many higher quality universities may not even need formal policies: their researchers have good reputations that they do not want to damage with publications in predatory journals.

Despite this, publications in predatory journals have been growing. Cenyu Shen and Bo-Christer Bjork, researchers at the Hanken School of Economics, estimate that in 2014, a staggering 420,000 papers were published in predatory journals and all indications are that the number is still growing. This implies the existence of some universities where predatory publications are relatively common. Common enough, that one suspects that universities are aware that their faculty are publishing in predatory journals but are turning a blind eye to it.

In a study published in the current issue of the Journal of Scholarly Publishing, I find that the majority of research faculty in the business school at one Canadian university have publications in predatory journals. Well before the study was published, I made the dean, provost and others aware of this result. It did create friction with the dean, who did not appreciate my emails and other communications about the problem. However, the truly surprising reaction was that there was absolutely no attempt to discuss my findings, verify the problem or otherwise address the issue. Indeed, the business school is currently preparing a performance metric that will count publications in predatory and legitimate journals equally.

Why might administrators at some universities turn a blind eye to the problem of predatory journals? Might they think that the university actually benefits from predatory publications? In any particular case, it is impossible to determine the motivations of university administrators in turning a blind eye to predatory publications. However, there are reasons why they might feel that they benefit from predatory publications.

Increased competition among predatory publishers has driven down submission and other publication fees until they are sometimes lower than those of legitimate journals. Universities usually reimburse faculty for publication costs. Research destined for legitimate journals may also require significant research support in terms of research assistants, access to expensive data sets and other costs. Publications in legitimate journals also require a significant investment in time (often years) both for the original work and subsequent rounds in the refereeing process that in the end may not result in publication. This investment is lower in predatory journals that have even published computer-generated nonsense papers. The time freed up can be used on other activities valued by the university, such as service and teaching.

The most important resource freed up may be salaries. The hiring of quality researchers is competitive. If a university does not have the resources to be competitive, it may decide that

predatory publications are a suitable substitute. Potential students, community members and others lacking the expertise to judge publications will still see them listed in online faculty profiles. Governments, which may also lack expertise, also see publications being produced and perceive value for their funding. Add a few high-profile legitimate publications and research grants to the mix and it may cement the impression that the university is very active in research.

The word “predatory” implies that authors and universities are somehow the victims of predatory publishers. However, a basic tenet of economics is that both people and institutions respond to incentives. This does not mean that they never make mistakes or get duped. However, when hundreds of thousands of publications appear in predatory journals, it stretches credulity to believe all the authors and universities they work for are victims.

Derek Pyne is an associate professor of economics at Thompson Rivers University. His current research activities include the study of the market for predatory publications.