The UGC-CARE initiative: Indian academia's quest for research and publishing integrity
by Bhushan Patwardhan and Shubhada Nagarkar

Abstract
This paper discusses the reasons for emergence of predatory publications in India, engendered by mandates of higher educational institutions: that require stipulated number of research publications for employment and promotions. Predatory journals have eclipsed the merits of open access publishing, compromised ethical practices, and left the research community groping for benchmarks of research integrity and publication ethics. To fight back the menace of predatory publications, University Grants Commission, India has established “Consortium for Academic Research and Ethics” (UGC-CARE) in 2018 to promote and benchmark research integrity and publication ethics among the Indian academia. The present paper discusses the UGC-CARE initiative, its structure, objectives and specifically, “UGC-CARE Reference List of Quality Journals” (UGC-CARE list) and finally, the challenges it faces.

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Introduction
Scholarly academic journals are vehicles of sincere and genuine research outcomes. There has been a tradition, dating back a number of centuries to publish such journals in print, maintained through subscriptions by individuals and institutions. These journals were highly respected because of standard publishing practices, and notably, their critical peer review system (Weiner, 2001). However, the last two decades have witnessed unrelenting pressure on researchers to publish; some publishers have seized on this situation as an opportunity to maximize profits through an escalation of unethical practices. This phenomenon has been labeled as “predatory publishing” by Beall, in which publishers follow the “pay and
publish” model with total disregard for the quality of content, research integrity and peer reviews (Beall, 2012; van Vlokhoven, 2019). Though the original open access movement was started with good intentions, it was critically exploited by predatory publishers. The complete circumvention of the peer review process by predatory publishers led to a multiplicity of problems, resulting in millions of worthless articles that have corrupted disciplines, through plagiarism, image and data manipulation, duplicate submissions, salami slicing and authorship problems (Beall, 2013). It simultaneously precipitated a crisis of integrity, creating a challenge for researchers to differentiate between credible and predatory journals. In addition, there lurked the very real danger of inadvertently citing references from predatory journals especially in their review of literature. Therefore predatory journals have fostered a contamination of citations in total contradiction of the original aims of open access movement (https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2017/10/05/turning-critical-eye-reference-lists/).

Indian scenario

The major reason for the increased number of predatory publishers in India is the mandatory research publications for appointments and promotions of faculty members in Indian higher education institutions by the University Grants Commission (UGC) under the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), India (https://mhrd.gov.in/overview). The UGC is a statutory organization established by an Act of Parliament of India in 1956 for the coordination, determination and maintenance of standards of higher education and is a major funding agency (http://ugc.ac.in). It functions from New Delhi and has six regional offices in India at Bangalore, Bhopal, Guwahati, Hyderabad, Kolkata and Pune (https://www.ugc.ac.in/page/Mandate.aspx). At present, India has 1,043 universities that include 48 central, 386 state, 80 “deemed to be universities”, 327 private universities. Accreditation for higher learning is overseen by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (http://www.naacc.gov.in/) along with other discipline-specific professional councils (https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/statistics-new/aishe_eng.pdf).

In 2010, the University Grants Commission (UGC), India, set up an Academic Performance Indicator (API), which required documentation of research activity in order to benefit from the Career Advancement Scheme (CAS). Subsequently, publications became compulsory, with specific points assigned for each publication; thus 15 points were earmarked for publication in refereed journals, and additional points could be accrued from the journal Impact Factor (IF). The API has been criticized by many researchers across disciplines and institutions (https://thewire.in/education/strides-ahead-in-sizing-up-academic-performance-skip-faculty-performance, Lakhotia, 2017). The turning point is often attributed to publications being also mandated for doctoral researchers in 2013. Consequently, the “pay and publish” model of research publications was widely accepted by both authors and funding agencies. This, according to commentators, resulted in the mushrooming of predatory/dubious/sub-standard journals in alarming proportions in India (Priyadarshini, 2017).

To help researchers select credible journals the UGC came up with an idea of having an approved list of journals in 2017. Each individual university was requested to suggest journals from local regions and languages based on certain criteria recommended by UGC. This unfortunately resulted in inclusion of predatory journals into the UGC approved list of journals. New and inexperienced researchers often fall prey to such publishers; subsequently, they are forced to defend their predatory publishers who have published their papers, often manuscripts rejected by the rigorous peer review of reputed publishers. The impact factor (IF) of journals and indexing databases are also used as metrics for career advancement (Lakhotia, 2017; Frandsen, 2017). Predatory publishers have exploited even this avenue with variety of fake IFs (Universal IF, COSMOS IF, etc.). In addition, several questionable indexing agencies like Index Copernicus, Open Academic Journal Index, Scientific indexing services ROOT Indexing, Academic Resource Index and others have been accused of providing false indicators for individual publications (http://esocialsciences.org/Articles/show_Article.aspx?acat=&aid=13154). Thus, predatory publishers
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Attracted researchers to publish in their journals by variety gimmicks, such as imitating titles or Web sites of standard journals; providing false IFs; indexing databases; fabricated names of editors and place of publication; repeated invitations for manuscripts through e-mail messages; and, promised publications after a short editorial process in so called high impact factor journals. This has resulted in an explosion of dubious and questionable journals, publishing substandard research. Consequently, Indian research publications were condemned all over the world for their poor quality (Moher, et al., 2017; Patwardhan, et al., 2018).

The battle against predatory publishing

To fight the menace of predatory publications, under the quality mandate, UGC decided to take strong action and established “Consortium of Academic and Research Ethics” (CARE) (http://ugccare.unipune.ac.in) by issuing a public notice on 28 November 2018, with the main objective of promoting research integrity and publication ethics in Indian universities. The Overall objectives of the UGC-CARE are:

- To promote research integrity and publication ethics in Indian universities.
- To create and maintain a “UGC-CARE Reference List of Quality Journals” (UGC-CARE list) for all academic purposes.
- To initiate a two-credit course on “Research Integrity and Publication Ethics” for Ph.D. students (https://www.ugc.ac.in/pdfnews/9836633_Research-and-Publication-Ethics.pdf).
- To conduct workshops and training programmes on “Research Integrity Awareness”.

To fulfil these objectives, UGC constituted following two committees:

- UGC-CARE Empowered Committee (EC) of 14 members (https://ugccare.unipune.ac.in/Apps1/User/Web/CareECMember);
- UGC-CARE Members committee having 25 members from various Indian councils (UGC-CARE Council members) and four regional universities (UGC-CARE Universities) (https://ugccare.unipune.ac.in/Apps1/User/Web/CareMember).

UGC-CARE developed its “UGC-CARE Reference List of Quality Journals” (UGC-CARE list) as a first step towards fulfilling its objectives. For creating and maintaining this list, the UGC established the “UGC-Cell for Journal Analysis” affiliated with the Centre for Publication Ethics (CPE) at the Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune, Maharashtra, India (Patwardhan, 2019).

This center collects journal titles recommended by UGC-CARE members and UGC-CARE universities through an online portal and analyses them with stringent criteria designed by UGC-CARE members. The evaluation criteria are divided into three protocols:

- UGC-CARE Protocol Part I: Basic information
- UGC-CARE Protocol Part II: Primary criteria
- UGC-CARE Protocol Part III: Secondary criteria

Protocol I is designed to obtain necessary basic information of the journal like journal name, ISSN, publisher details, and editorial details. Protocols II and III are designed for internal analysis and assessment purposes, which are based on verification of journal information including its history, consistency, peer recognition, market reputation, academic credentials of the editors, peer review process, indexing, citations, charges/fees, and related financial matters. This information is examined directly from public domain sources (Web site, flyers, advertisements, hard copies of the journal in libraries). There is a provision that any journal can be disqualified at a later stage if it is found to issue false, misleading, incorrect, or
insufficient information as well as unsubstantiated claims (http://ugccare.unipune.ac.in).

The most important feature of the UGC-CARE list is its dynamic nature. It is updated quarterly. Every qualified journal is rechecked in each quarter and, if found not to follow standard publishing practices, will be removed from the list immediately with the consent of members of the Empower Committee.

Initially, the UGC-CARE list was divided into four non-hierarchical groups for the convenience of its users, but to simplify the search process, the UGC-CARE list currently has only two groups.

- UGC-CARE List Group I: Journals found qualified through UGC-CARE protocols
- UGC-CARE List Group II: Journals indexed in globally recognised databases

There are several credible journals in India in regional languages, published over the last several decades which do not as yet have a place in international indexing databases. Therefore, special efforts have been taken for collecting Indian journals especially those published in the humanities, arts, social sciences and Indian knowledge systems. These journals are evaluated critically relative to the protocols.

To select credible journals for the inclusion in the UGC-CARE list, a standard submission process has been established for colleges, universities, individuals, and publishers. Journals are considered for evaluation and for inclusion only after recommendations by teaching faculty of any university or affiliated colleges. Each faculty member need to sign a declaration form assuring the quality of the journal along with the recommendation (Figure 1).
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This process routinely weeds out predatory journals at various levels.

**Figure 1:** Process of journal selection for UGC-CARE list.

**Current status**

A total of 6,803 journals under Group I have been scrutinized with the UGC-CARE protocols, from which 1,002 (15 percent) qualified (**Figure 2**).
Discipline-wise distribution of the qualified journals indicates that 66 percent represent the arts, humanities, and social sciences (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Number of journals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arts and humanities</td>
<td>362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multidisciplinary</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social science</td>
<td>301</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,002</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The objective of the UGC-CARE to include journals from disciplines other than science is reflected in Group I.

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Journals in regional languages
UGC-CARE strives to add credible Indian journals published in regional languages to the UGC-CARE list (Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Languages</th>
<th>Number of journals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Assamese</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Bengali</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Gujarati</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Hindi</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Kannada</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Maithili</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Malayalam</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Marathi</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Odia</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Pali</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Prakrit</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Punjabi</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Rajasthani</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Sanskrit</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Sindhi</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Tamil</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Telugu</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Urdu</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>290</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

UGC-CARE Web site

The Web site of UGC-CARE is available at [http://ugccare.unipune.ac.in](http://ugccare.unipune.ac.in). Apart from the searchable UGC-CARE lists, the site provides information about the UGC-CARE initiative, latest notifications, standard procedure for submitting journals, information for inclusion in the UGC-CARE list, FAQs, Feedback, and grievances. The site also provides links to useful resources in research and publication ethics. Users need to register with the site to search the UGC-CARE list.
Feedback portal at UGC-CARE Web site

The UGC-CARE Web site has made a separate Feedback portal where anyone can send suggestions about data, such as changes in ISSN numbers, addresses of publishers, and journal titles. It also provides the means to submit grievances, if any, about any given publisher and journal.

Impact of the UGC-CARE list

The launch of the UGC-CARE list in June 2019 has made a huge impact on Indian academia and in publishing industry. The global community has appreciated this effort:

- The UGC Care list has diminished the role of predatory publishing.
- A message is being sent: India does not support predatory publishing and unethical practices.
- Faculty and researchers are being made aware of ethical practices in research and publishing.
- The credibility of good Indian journals is now emerging clearly for everyone to understand and recognize globally.
- By focusing on Indian language journals, UGC-CARE expects to provide the necessary visibility, legitimacy and value to Indian knowledge production.
- Many Indian regional language journals have been published by reputed academies, councils, universities, and learned societies in print format for many years. Publishers of these journals are now approaching UGC-CARE for inclusion of these journals into the UGC-CARE list.
- The UGC-Cell at SPPU has received more than 50 grievances by individual researchers about publishers following unethical practices.

Challenges

The UGC-CARE list is still in its early stages. It will grow beyond its current nascent phase with active participation of all the stakeholders. The primary challenge of the CARE list is its continuous updating and monitoring of publishers, specifically regarding the inclusion and removal of the journals. Moreover, UGC-CARE members are facing several challenges:

- Lack of awareness of standard submission procedures for journals among researchers.
- Procedural delays in securing complete and correct journal recommendation forms.
- Lack of information about peer review and related ethical policies of journals.
- Credentials of editorial boards and contact details not easily available.
- Several governmental publishers tied to commercial publishing companies add false information on certain Web site of some journals.
- Several credible journals that have a long publishing history are available only in print form.
- Web versions of print journals are not updated regularly.
- Predatory publishers are creating Web clones of print journals with similar titles and ISSNs, leading researchers to fall prey to these deceptive practices.

Recommendations
To make the UGC-CARE list robust and error free, thorough searches of credible print and online journals in the social sciences, arts and humanities, and Indian knowledge systems are necessary. Moreover, UGC-CARE, through its Web interface to credible Indian print journals, can increase awareness on a global scale of Indian research.

Indian funding agencies are paying huge amounts for subscriptions to journals as well as APCs to publishers ([https://thewire.in/the-sciences/plan-s-open-access-scientific-publishing-article-processing-charge-insa-k-vijayraghavan](https://thewire.in/the-sciences/plan-s-open-access-scientific-publishing-article-processing-charge-insa-k-vijayraghavan)). To reduce these costs, UGC-CARE can encourage Indian universities and learned societies to publish high quality Indian journals in the near future. To achieve this UGC-CARE can come up with specialized training programs on standard publishing practices.

The library and information science (LIS) community can certainly contribute to fulfill the objectives of UGC-CARE as librarians are well versed and familiar with bibliographic databases and bibliometric analyses (citation analysis, impact factors, H-index, and other metrics) and can extend their skills in identifying predatory publications.

**A Two-credit course on “Research and Publication Ethics”**

To achieve the quality mandate, UGC mandated a two-credit course to Ph.D. students to be completed in the first year of the registration. This course was designed by CPE, Savitribai Phule Pune University. CPE has successfully completed two batches of this course.

**Workshops on “Research Integrity Awareness”**

UGC conducted five awareness workshops at UGC-CARE universities in 2019 for various higher authorities of the universities and colleges from respective regions.

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**Conclusion**

The image of Indian research that has been compromised by predatory publishing. The UGC-CARE initiative is a first step to curb this problem and to promote research integrity and publication ethics in the Indian academia. This dynamic list is expected to evolve to become a valuable resource and reference for the quality scientific publishing. The two-credit course on “Research and Publication Ethics” is being conducted by several universities across India. The research integrity campaign in India is also about increased academic accountability. Thus, the UGC-CARE initiative has started the battle against the unethical practices in research and publication.

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