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Predatory publishing and Islamic economics

Consequences of fake journals making imitative writings original

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Abstract

A group of writers in a paper published in the prestigious science journal *Nature* has voiced grave concern at the explosive proliferation of predatory publishing; the number of journals in the field has shot up to over 10,000 in few years. This number covers natural sciences alone; social studies like economics are also covered. Publications in Islamic economics, finance especially, show marked proclivity to attract the affliction. This note explores the causes of contagion, its consequences and possible remedies to curb the malady.

Key words: Predatory publishing; Econometric modeling; Islamic economics.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term ‘predatory publishing’ originated in the writings of Jeffrey Beall; a researcher and librarian at the Colorado University. It refers to the growth of academic articles of little merit published in the dubious open access journals against payment. These are characterized as predatory journals and have exploded into prominence in recent years.¹ They tend to mushroom in natural sciences but social disciplines like economics are not free of increasing encroachment.²

John Bohannon, writing for the reputed journal *Science*, targeted the open access system for testing in 2013. He is reported sending a faked medical paper to a number of journals. Of them, some 60% accepted the paper, while the remaining 40% declined to publish it. A few other experiments of the sort were made to identify the predators and their modus operandi. Latest in the list, Cabell's International – a company doing scholarly publishing analytics and other scholarly services - announced probable launching of a blacklist of predatory journals soon with access by subscription. The company had started working on its blacklist criteria in early 2016. (Anderson, 2017)

2. CAUSES OF PROLIFERATION

Predatory open access publishing seems on fast ascendancy in the higher education institution of the developing economies. The reason is the imitative legacy of the colonial period structuring of these institutions. The curricula format and course designs followed the colonial tradition. The practice had advantages to start with but needed change after independence. However, continuing with the colonial era approach and methods applicable to research work⁴ was not only inexpensive, it carried premium for promotions and professional growth. Thus, dissertation

¹ In 2015 Rick Anderson, however, questioned the term 'predatory'. He found its meaning unclear and usage deficient as it focused only on one kind of predation: "author-pays OA." He suggests shunning of the term as it generates more heat than light." (Elliot 2012)

² Indeed, Beall started polishing the list of such journals, his first being in 2010. He also lay out and made public his criteria for including a publication in his list. However, he took his list off line in 2007 for unexplained reasons.

writing at the graduate level first appeared on the scene, and a PhD soon became imperative for faculty positions in the universities. Apparently, this was a welcome scheme. However, the emerging socio-political structures in newly independent countries were not always conducive to its implementation. For, troublesome of the requirements was the publication of research done in refereed journals of international repute and recognition

These countries, being late comers to modern education, had few journals filling the bill as recognition had to come from external bodies. Thus, the sole outlets for cognizable publishing for reward were the foreign journals. It was hard to get there for a variety of reasons (cost included) in natural sciences especially, but was not easy in social studies like economics as well. The slogan “publish or perish” echoed in the corridors of higher education unabated. Many sought publication with local avenues but that only exposed their blemishes. The slogan was revised to read: “publish *and* perish”.

Today, competition is fierce to get published in leading journals of economics, the subject we are concerned with here. At less prestigious tiny institutions dotting the firmament in most developing countries, the overworked faculty with little or no funding for research, provide green pastures for predatory publishers to thrive on.³ These are journals that would publish almost anything for fees that can range into hundreds of dollars per paper.⁴ Well meaning academics are at times duped into working with them using dubious ways.

3. THE MODUS OPERANDI

A Wikipedia page on the subject lists the following deceptive practices of the predators which are reproduced here for two reasons. First each is supported with authentic evidence. Second most of these tricks are in my personal experience; their validity cannot be denied.

- Accepting articles quickly with little or no peer review or quality control, including hoax and nonsensical papers.
- Notifying academics of article fees only after papers are accepted
- Aggressively campaigning for academics to submit articles or serve on editorial boards.
- Listing academics as members of editorial boards without their permission, and not allowing academics to resign from editorial boards
- Appointing fake academics to editorial boards.
- Mimicking the name or web site style of more established journals
- Misleading claims about the publishing operation, such as a false location.
- Improper use of ISSNs.
- Fake or non-existent impact factors.

4. QUALITY OF WORK

³ “Call it a case of supply meeting demand. Universities and colleges insist that faculty publish scholarly research and the more papers the better. Academics and the schools they teach at rely on these publications to bolster their reputation and with an oversupply of PhDs vying for jobs, careers hang in the balance (Kolata 2017).

⁴ The system puts premium on collaborative writing. This attracts authors to lighten the payment burden per head through sharing the charge in emerging economies..

The formatting and getup of the predatory journals has been good. But I do not entertain their requests any more. I was not aware of their scandalous activities. Two incidents made me change my mind. First was an e-mail last April from Prof. Hassan, a friend in a university at Makkah, who had read my paper on consumption published in an open access journal. He found it full of errors and thought it fit to inform me making corrections in the copy he enclosed. I was shocked to find the number of typos and missing words afflicting it. On comparison, I found that the errors were even more than the submission contained. The journal editor had not cared to go through what his peer reviewed journal was publishing.

The second was a more serious case. I came across an article co-authored by a senior Professor at INCEIF, in an open access journal. Its language was tight and flawless but the argumentation was flawed because of erroneous mathematical manipulations. I wrote a comment on the article and send it to the journal and also e-mailed it to the author plus other colleagues at INCEIF. I did not receive any reply from the author issue but the journal published it in a subsequent issue. (Hasan March 2017).

I uploaded the comment on RePEc archive as MRPA paper. After some unusual waiting, I received an e-mail message from the archive declining the paper upload, saying that the archive had changed rules not to entertain comments on papers that are not published on their site. This much was good enough. However, intriguing was the additional observation in the message that the comment was non-academic. The reason could possibly be that the journal was listed with the archive. If not, the remark was redundant. For, one comes across scores of harsher comments in books and journals on contemporary writers. [They have of late uploaded the comments.]

5. ISLAMIC ECONOMICS

Accusations of predation heaped on open access journals have kicked up an outcry in their defense. The eye of the storm has been the list of predatory journals Beall had once published. That list has since been withdrawn, but the debate on it continued. We do not want to enter that debate or need bifurcating journals on that criterion. Important for us is the impact of predation on the method, content, and relevance of the research in Islamic economics including finance. Paid-for-publishing is a byproduct of our putting premium on the act in faculty evaluations.

Trading in education as in other goods kept the scales tilted in favor of the developed West for historical reasons. Higher education facilities in terms of infrastructural facilities and teaching staff had been limited in the developing countries during the centuries of colonial rule. Universities and colleges when established followed the curricula patterns, course structures and reading materials prescribed in the ruling countries. Sometimes teachers too were imported. Those from the richer classes of the country went out to obtain foreign degrees that carried high premium in the local employment market. The lingering process created a psyche discounting what was local. Thus, even as lands had become free, intellect remained occupied.

That psyche continued dominating the education policies in the developing world. However, it has created in Muslim countries additional problems with the expanding of education in social sciences, especially economics. For, the freedom movements in most of these countries were led by the clerics who fed the masse aspirations on hopes of erecting an Islamic social order after independence. However, the colonial rulers transferred power at the dawn of independence to the secular elite, not to the movement leaders. For instance, in Pakistan, it was Jinnah & Co. not the Maudidi's legion of Jamaat-e Islami. This had unsavory consequences. The community got divided between the *modern* and the *orthodox* engaged in acrimony that the Western powers fanned to their advantage. In the ensuing instability, orthodoxy could extract some concessions from the ruling elite; especially in the field of education.

The clerics leading the freedom movements had already launched a comprehensive global program for looking at knowledge from the Islamic prism. For brevity of expression, they called it *the Islamization of knowledge program*, albeit a misnomer. Arabs in the middle-east, Jammate-Islami in the Indian sub-continent and Malays in the south-east Asia led the program that received massive popular support for public funding.

Islamic economics soon emerged as the center piece of this program, after the mid-1970s when the subject was launched as a formal academic discipline across the globe. Educational institutions, scholarly journals, research work and funding arrangements emerged fast on the scene across countries. The control and regulation of the developments understandably remained with the movement people who had admirably done the pioneering work. This control had to unwind with the expansion of the discipline. Doors had to be opened for academics and support staff from the mainstream discipline. Not many of them had the needed knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence. Most in the teachers were educated in the Western universities and had a rationalistic, value neutral view of economics; their tools' kit full of mathematical and econometric techniques. This group has gained ascendancy with the advent of finance eclipsing other issues in Islamic economics. This was a disquieting development.

The control of the movements' personnel over Islamic economics started waning with the expansion of its financial segment, reasons being its technical complexities and the pace of change due to monetary allurements. Of course, there were jurists who were well equipped for adapting to the change. Indeed, they found it quite lucrative as the demand for Shari'ah advisement in financial institutions ran far ahead of supply. However, most Islamic economists working in higher education echelons across countries could not take advantage of the change.

5.1 The bifurcation

The ascendancy of Islamic finance paled other vast areas like public economics, distributive justice, and social welfare almost unexplored. This led to some sharp divisions among Islamic economists, the broad bifurcation being between the old guards imbued with tradition and the later entrants from the modern mainstream mainly handling finance. The traditionalists presumably for regaining the lost ground choose attacking the modernists for infesting Islamic

economics with mainstream pollutants.⁵ There is a concerted effort to pull back the subject into its historical formulations. For restoring the edifice, they plead for opening the discussion from the methodology end as it is the use of inappropriate methodology, in their view, that has brought Islamic economics to its present demise. Methodology is a confused and barren subject in mainstream economics itself⁶ and a digression on it is not warranted. However, relevant is to the present context the methodology that has almost exclusively occupied the dissertation writing at the graduate level as a mark of quality in prestigious institutions of higher education in Muslim countries.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Predatory publishing in Islamic economics owes its recent emergence and proliferation to the increasing entrance in higher education institutions of teachers who had studied and worked in foreign universities. Their conditioning in the mainstream thought processes convinced them that the way to raising academic standards to global levels in Islamic economics was to imitate the Western structures and methods in teaching and research. The conviction proved misleading.

The closing decades of the nineteenth century saw an urge in mainstream economics for using mathematics to make ideas more precise and systematic as in natural sciences. Mathematics helps fix ideas; such a fixation, it was argued, could help determine how coherent and logical an economic structuring was in meaning and prescription.

However, it did not take long for the overuse of mathematics in economics to alarm its critics. Some noted economists like J. M. Keynes, Robert Heilbroner, Friedrich Hayek and others also expressed concern over the increasing use of mathematical models for exploring human behavior; arguing that some human choices, especially moral and ethical norms, were irreducible to mathematics. Explicit and abstract models for behavior do not meaningfully submit to mathematical manipulations. Notice that most political problems such as budgetary allocations, fighting over the tax structure, welfare reform, international trade, or concern for the environment have economic aspects. Both the voters and the leaders they elect can fulfill their role more effectively if they have an understanding of basic economics; mathematics will only confuse them. Still, there *are* well-known Islamic economists, who enjoy creating that confusion.

6.1 ECONOMETRIC SYNDROME

An advanced form of mathematical propagation in Islamic economics is the craving for the use of econometric modeling. Illustrative of the emphasis is the compulsive use of such modeling at

⁵ See the writings of Masudul Alam Chudhury, Assad Zaman, and Aslam Haneef as illustrations of the approach. The problem with the puritan approach of the group is that it has not yet been shown operable even on a miniature scale anywhere in the Muslim world while Islamic finance claims an edge over the mainstream for being firmly linked to the economy *on the ground*.

⁶ The rising tendency of formalization in modern economics has paled empiricism adding to methodological confusion in the discipline (Blaugh 1992).

the prestigious Global University of Islamic Finances branded as the INCEIF at Kuala Lumpur.⁷ The syndrome is in my personal experience as a faculty member there for seven years. Typical was the case of a student I worked for as a supervisor for her Master's project paper worth three credit hours on the title: *Sukuk – definition, structures and Malaysian experience*. The rules required evaluation of the work by a high powered *Committee* of the faculty with the supervisor as one of the members. The Committee appreciated the flawless language of the paper and its structuring. However, they expressed reservation to clear it as it was devoid of any empirical modeling. I had to plead for quite some time in defense of the student. I asked the colleagues: what model, if any, could the student have used in the definition or the structure sections of the work? In support of her position on Malaysian experience, she has produced appropriate and adequate supportive data in tabular form; what modeling was missing, I demanded? On my sticking to the argument that the work was good enough for a pass as the rules required no grading, the Committee eventually relented to clear the work.

The insistence of the Committee on econometric modeling being an imperative for acceptable research, save in case of topics dealing with Islamic jurisprudence, is understandable. Most of the faculty is foreign educated and what got sunk in most of them is the econometric culture. Some are indeed adept at using the tools. Their use in doing and supervising research seemingly has sterling advantages. Models of all sorts are readily available for use from the mainstream literature even foreign collaboration is not scant. In Islamic economics and finance one rarely comes across a genuinely original formulation. Research is relatively easy. Feed the information in an appropriate computer program and torture the data until it yields what is required. Bulk of the research, save interpretations, the machine produces.

The research can get an easy linkage with the mainstream network; thanks to the mushrooming predatory publishing journals. They have encouraged collaborative writings as the authors can share the publishing charges to lighten the individual payment burden. Some archives are even sheltering such journals.

7. THE DEVASTATION

Econometric oriented research for payment publishing is a flourishing business. However, it is inflicting incalculable harm on Islamic economics and finance. Students come to reputed global institutions from numerous academic disciplines and very divergent academic backgrounds.

⁷ At the 9th convocation of INCEIF, a record number of 253 students graduated, representing the university's largest since the university welcomed its first batch of 32 graduates in 2009. The top 3 countries of origin for graduates are Malaysia, Bangladesh and Somalia. They are joined by graduates from over 30 countries including from Africa, Central Asia and Europe. Today's graduation takes the number of INCEIF alumni to a total of 1,585. www.inceif.org accessed on 09.10.17

They do not all have the same ability to absorbing even the minimal of econometric shock they receive after admission. It cannot be a case of the same size fitting all feet.

Also, the majority of academics are not at home with empirical methods. Data quality is dubious and availability scanty. Variables chosen mostly lack the needed Islamic import.⁸ Bulk of students and staff remains tense and pressurized. Models employed are invariably picked up from the already published mainstream publications. Results are mostly confirmative. Refutations absent, little is added to the existing stock of knowledge. Improvement in quality is sought by rejecting repeatedly what a student does, positive helpful guidance is rare. Supervisory contribution is minimal, appropriation of credit for sound work maximum. Data mining for the supervisors is commonly a duty of the students. Completion time knows no limit. Cases where students leave without completion or shift to other institutions are not rare.

Stochastic empiricism is currently on discount even in the mainstream economic research, the use of non-parametric methods is on the rise. Econometric models have explanatory value; they are found weak, even misleading, on prediction front. One rarely comes across their conclusions guiding policy in the realm of economic activity in the Muslim world.

Such modes of research keep students occupied with data the values of parametric variables and their significance levels. It leaves little time for creative thinking – thinking out of the box, beyond the limits. It kills initiative. *Imitators cannot be innovators, followers the leaders.*

What useful purpose parametric research is serving for the community?⁹ There is time for a cost-benefit accounting. The reward apparent is the international recognition of *merit* via predatory publications. The test of research merit of articles is how far they promote the Islamic opinion and how many people in the academic world and industry read and benefit from them.

8. CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have explained above how the colonial era hangover has, on the one hand, kept its sway over intellectual pursuits in the Muslim world and how the religious pull back to past glory and present aspirations have, on the other, clashed with that sway in the field of economic research work in higher education. The conflict has resulted in divergent policy approaches for the future progress of the discipline. The opposite views have to be reconciled. The road block is that the foreign educated elite have gained substantive dominance of the system.

⁸ Most of the data used comes from the UN sources. Even the IDB at Jeddah and the statistical setup at Istanbul mostly reproduce data separated from the same UN Tables for the IOC member countries. Data generation in size and quality expressive of Islamic essence is conspicuous by its very absence.

⁹ This issue was discussed thread bare in an earlier paper: See Hasan (2005) and also the illuminating discussant Assad Zaman's comments on the paper in the Conference proceedings.

This dominance has created further, rather more serious, problems for the smooth and purposive progress of Islamic economics and finance. The research objectives are stretched to look Islamic, the increasing use of mathematics and parametric empiricism is overdone for mainstream conformity and publication in the foreign journals the supposed hallmark of scholarship. This has created temptations for predatory publishing. There is often a mismatch between the definitions of data Islamic norms would demand and to what the data available for use corresponds giving results of doubtful validity. The approach enslaves intellect kills initiative and creativity in young minds.

The solution lies in strengthening the existing journals in the Muslim world and launching new ones. Develop a sound refereeing system, assign credits for publishing in these journals and start an international depository for them. The RePEc is vast but is not meeting our requirements because their organizational constraints. In an opinion/suggestion survey the archive conducted this year, I had suggested the creation of a separate field for Islamic economics and finance. I had also recommended listing of the three journals of repute with the archive – one each from Jeddah, Kuala Lumpur, and Karachi - for which requests have been pending for long. Prima facie, the registration requirements have all been met and what is indicated as missing can be met.

Finally, the insistence of the orthodox on classical puritan approach to teaching and research is utopian; a judicious integration of the Islamic and mainstream disciplines is expedient.

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