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## Why does Retraction Watch continue to offer support to Jeffrey Beall, and legitimize his post-mortem “predatory” lists?

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**Abstract:** Retraction Watch is a science watchdog that may give the impression of being both an anti-bad science and an anti-science blog. This blog has tried to legitimize its ethical stance by naming its parent organization The Center for Science Integrity Inc. (CSI), and by appointing a former Chair of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), Elizabeth Wager, to the CSI board of directors. Jeffrey Beall, another science watchdog, often appears in public alongside Adam Marcus and Ivan Oransky, the CSI secretary and president, respectively, and participates in events with Wager. Beall became academically redundant on January 15, 2017. This is because his blog, which hosted a faulty, controversial and misleading list (and thus potentially libelous) of “predatory” open access journals and publishers, suddenly went blank. Beall offered no apology or explanation to the public, but was offered intellectual asylum and protection by the University of Colorado, Denver, where he works as a librarian. After a grace period of almost two months, members of the global academic community have now largely lost respect for Beall because of his silence, which may be equated with irresponsibility and/or cowardice. Despite this near extinct academic status, Retraction Watch continues to laud Beall, refer to his now-defunct site and lists as valid, as many as 25 times, and even rely on the Beall blog and lists to support several of their journalistic claims. In the world of science publishing, the legitimization of a “fact” using a defunct or false (i.e., non-factual) source, is equivalent to publishing misconduct, and feeds into the “false facts” and “alternative truths” epidemic in journalism that Retraction Watch is now impregnating into science publishing. Why then is Retraction Watch allowed to operate under an ethically superior platform, while expecting scientists and academics to respect basic rules of citing valid references, but while practicing suspect or unethical citation practices? This attitude undermines the ethical publishing foundation of the CSI, the CSI directors, and Retraction Watch as a reliable “journalistic” source of information, undermining trust and respect in this blog, while emphasizing its biased nature.

**Keywords:** Center for Science Integrity Inc.; COPE; ethical boundaries; “predatory” journals

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Conflict of Interest: The author is not associated with any academic institute, blog or web-site. The author was profiled multiple times, often with issues unrelated to retractions, by Retraction Watch. The author has always recognized that the need for a blog like Beall’s, is necessary to raise awareness, but that Beall’s lists have always been deeply flawed.

Dear *KOME* editors,

Using factually incorrect, outdated, inaccurate or non-existent sources of information is unethical in science and biomedical publishing, because the use of such sources corrupts the literature. The literature is corrupted because the source of information may be unreliable or factually dubious, and because such unreliable sources of information can mislead academics and the public, thus posing a real threat to the integrity of information sharing. A tainted message, or a message that is based on false, inaccurate or invalid citations cannot be relied upon as being fact. Using retracted papers, for example, to support a statement in a scientific paper, is – in addition to being academically invalid (Teixeira da Silva and Bornemann-Cimenti 2017; Teixeira da Silva and Dobránszki, 2017) – a violation of basic ethical publishing principles, because if done knowingly, and willfully, then it indicates that the user of such invalid and corrupt sources may be acting unethically. The counter-argument to this idea is what constitutes a valid, or verified, source of information, and who is in a credible position to verify that a source of information is valid? In science publishing, the responsible selection of a source of information lies in the hands of the authors, while the responsible screening of an author's choice lies in the hands of editors. Thus, a published paper represents a collective act of responsible citation use and selection, under a broad umbrella protected by editorial independence. In science journalism, a similar principle applies: if a source of information no longer exists formally, has been retracted, or removed, then referring to it not only distorts the factual basis of that information, it poses a threat to the integrity of journalism, by misleading society and academia. For example, the decision by the DOAJ to delist about 3300 journals in 2016<sup>1</sup> in essence invalidated their scholarly status.

That is why readers of this letter will be surprised to learn that the infamous lists of “predatory” open access (POA) publishers and journals that was maintained by a University of Colorado, Denver librarian, Jeffrey Beall, continue to be cited and referred to by Retraction Watch, a science watchdog blog, as if they are actual, valid, and legitimate. So, why are these lists invalid and factually false? The reason, as I interpret it, is two-fold. Firstly, many of the entries on the Beall lists were in fact not POA publishers and journals, they were simply new and perhaps academically imperfect publishers that had faults or naïve publishing practices, no doubt, but were not in any way predatory, abusive, or unethical. Those POA lists were also invalid because Beall never indicated clearly the precise criteria for *each* POA publisher and journal, leading them to be listed and profiled by Beall. Beall failed to be open, transparent or accountable for the flawed nature of those lists. The second reason is because, very suddenly and unexpectedly, the Beall blog went blank on January 15, 2017. Without any public explanation, or apology, Beall shut down (or blanked out) his blog, and the POA lists disappeared. So, why should Beall, who ran a private blog, be expected to offer a public explanation, or apology? There are several reasons. Firstly, even though Beall's blog was private, Beall was a highly public individual, therefore his actions are accountable to the public. Secondly, Beall's actions, mainly through his lists, his blog's message and his presence in public meetings around the world, directly affected global academia, both positively – through awareness – and negatively, through the spreading of the potentially libelous and derogatory POA journal/publisher lists. Thirdly, those lists were used formally by journalists, research institutes and academics for formal purposes, either as policies for inclusion / exclusion criteria in journals, citation lists, academic grants, and other purposes that directly affected public funding, so if flawed criteria (Beall's lists) were being used for determining public funding, for research or publishing purposes, for example, then Beall must be held accountable for the public dissemination of those lists. Notwithstanding, the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://doajournals.wordpress.com/2016/05/09/doaj-to-remove-approximately-3300-journals/>

parties that used Beall's lists and blog to validate formal public, or private, academic or educational parameters of any sort, need also now be held accountable, given that the Beall blog, including his lists, are non-existent, and thus permanently invalid.

Even if these lists and blog posts were archived on the internet archive, the moment that Beall unilaterally shut down his blog, he lost considerable respect by the global academic community for this act, which may be interpreted as an act of cowardice. Even if Beall had valid motives, he should have explained these to the public, openly and frankly, even anonymizing the reason, for example, if there were legal threats. However, silence, lack of transparency and failure to offer any explanation are not only acts of cowardice, they are acts of unethical and irresponsible reckless behavior, at least in the eyes of academics, for whom those lists were apparently created. Therefore, Beall is a public figure<sup>2</sup>, and must be held accountable until he offers a formal and detailed explanation for the scholarlyoa.com shutdown (Teixeira da Silva 2017a). Most importantly, his blog and lists must never again be used as a legitimate source of information, because they are not.

Retraction Watch, particularly the secretary and president of its parent company, The Center for Science Integrity Inc. (CSI), Adam Marcus and Ivan Oransky, respectively, share a rich history of friendship and interaction with Beall, primarily at events that focus on science integrity, ethics and other topics of core interest to (biomedical and science) publishing. The first major public amalgamation of common interests, as a powerful display of the power and prowess of the science watchdog movement, took place in the first quarter of 2016, where Oransky, Beall, Brandon Stell, the President of the PubPeer Foundation that runs PubPeer, an academic whistle-blower website, and the former Chair of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), Elizabeth Wager, among others, cuddled together to offer their influence and interpretations on the gaming of metrics, and ethics, within biomedical science and publishing (Teixeira da Silva 2016a). Unknown to most academics, Wager is one of the directors of the CSI<sup>3</sup>, and ethically speaking, this is important because Wager continues to actively support and promote COPE, as an alumnus<sup>4</sup>. So the actions of Retraction Watch are under the directorship of Wager, in her capacity as a director, confidante and advisor, and thus any misconduct or ethically or morally suspect behavior by Retraction Watch also reflects poorly on Wager and COPE, who must share, through their direct association, in the responsibilities of unethical or opaque actions by Retraction Watch, as equally as they draw credit for standing alongside and supporting Retraction Watch and its awareness campaign. This is because, like co-authorship in a manuscript, credit and responsibility have two sides of any ethics coin.

To summarize the above: a powerful "ethical" axis developed between Retraction Watch's Oransky, COPE's Wager, Beall, and others. Beall's lists were invalid even before his blog shut down, but are now a *de facto* unreliable and invalid source of information, not unlike a retracted paper. That is why the academic community is surprised to know that Retraction Watch continues to cite the Beall blog and lists as if they are valid sources of information, to either support the CSI anti-science rhetoric, or to fortify its occasionally journalistically flawed stories.

The author has determined, to the best of his ability, and as accurately as possible, that Retraction Watch has referred to the now-defunct Beall lists, 14 times, while six approved reader comments rely on those factually invalid lists, and five mentions appear in Weekend Reads linking to papers that cite Beall's lists or that rely on those lists as the basis for their analyses. These values do not include reader comments on the initial Retraction Watch blog

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<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeffrey\\_Beall](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeffrey_Beall)

<sup>3</sup> <http://retractionwatch.com/the-center-for-scientific-integrity/board-of-directors/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://publicationethics.org/about/cope-alumni>

post on January 17, 2017<sup>5</sup>, that exposed the news of Beall's blog shut down, because that blog post is a valid information source. It is evident that Retraction Watch should retract such factually invalid statements, and sources of information, including reader comments, because they rely on a source that no longer exists, or add an editorial note that such information should be viewed with caution, but will it? Curiously, a CODESRIA-linked reader on a May 9, 2017 Retraction Watch post was able to pass Retraction Watch moderation to question the premise of "predatory" journals<sup>6</sup> and the basis of the use of Beall's lists in a recent study (Pyne 2017).

In other words, when scientists use invalid citations or sources of information that are factually invalid, they are, on occasion, forced to retract such publications. This is a fundamental ethical principle supported by the Retraction Watch leadership, including CSI directors, so why should Retraction Watch not be held to the same ethical publishing principles, and what makes it so ethically superior to merit an exception to this rule? Part of the problem is that Retraction Watch serves as the author and the editor of its blogs, and there is no independent, external moderation, ethical or otherwise, of its blog publishing activities. In other words, Retraction Watch engages in a form of self-"peer" review. Any one of these five categories (see [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#) and [5](#)) apply (to some degree but in a different context, of course) to the use of factually invalid sources of information, which Retraction Watch uses to profile "ethically" infringing, i.e., supposedly unethical, academics.

Imagine that an author is purposefully using a retracted paper again and again, because it suits their message or rhetoric, or simply because it seems to be the most suited source to support a fact in a paper. Such an action by authors, if submitting to a biomedical journal, would constitute an unethical action, if detected, even more so when done consciously, and deliberately. In such a situation, especially if the author repeats such unethical and non-academic behavior, with blatant repeated disrespect for basic publishing ethics principles, such an author may even be banned from a journal. Imagine now an editor who is on the receiving side of an author's paper that continues to cite invalid and non-existent sources of information, portraying them falsely as being relevant, and actively true at the time of submission. Clearly, such editors, especially of COPE member journals and publishers, would immediately call out such an author, initially very diplomatically to indicate that they should not use such flawed, outdated or invalid sources of information, but eventually with a stronger response if the author continues to repeatedly violate editorial requests. In this case, and analogous to this situation in publishing, Retraction Watch has violated publishing ethics by using invalid and, at the time of publication of their blog posts, non-existent, sources of information, i.e., from Beall lists and a blog that simply do not exist, at least since January 15, 2017 until May 13, 2017.

Why then, is Oransky and his journalistic pool of editors and reporters offered ethical exclusivity and exceptionalism? Why has Wager, of supposed ethical "purity" or purported ethical superiority, not advised the Retraction Watch team to stop citing and using the flawed and now non-existent Beall lists to support its journalism? Why has the Laura and John Arnold Foundation (LJAF)<sup>7</sup>, or The Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust<sup>8</sup>, which dedicate millions of US\$ in grants to "ethics" groups and research integrity projects, including the CSI, not advised the CSI about such questionable citation practices? What does the lack of clear ethical and responsible leadership tell us about the integrity of Retraction Watch and its leaders, allies, and sponsors? There is no formal entity that watches over the

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<sup>5</sup> <http://retractionwatch.com/2017/01/17/bealls-list-potential-predatory-publishers-go-dark/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://retractionwatch.com/2017/05/09/faculty-publish-predatory-journals-school-become-complicit/#comment-1319833>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.arnoldfoundation.org/grants/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://retractionwatch.com/2017/04/06/thank-helmsley-charitable-trust-325000-grant-renewal-will-help-us-build-sustainable-future/>

actions of Retraction Watch, i.e., there is no watchdog that watches over the science watchdogs, in this case Retraction Watch, Beall and Wager (Teixeira da Silva 2016a). Consequently, Retraction Watch and its “ethically” powerful allies establish their own ethical publishing rules, apply them as they see fit, violating them, as in this case, and then expect scientists and academics that they profile from a moral higher ground, to respect publishing ethics, including only the use of valid (i.e., unretracted and editorially validated) literature. This form of ethical exceptionalism, and moral superior arrogance, combined with clear cronyism in an unhealthy and ethically suspect relationship between Oransky, Marcus, Beall, Wager, and others is now beginning to pose a serious threat to the integrity of Retraction Watch and its purported mission. It is, as I see it, dangerous for academics to rely on Retraction Watch as a source of accurate and unbiased science journalistic reporting, and its leadership should not be blindly trusted, especially because there is such a large financial conflict of interest, and lack of transparency about those finances (Teixeira da Silva 2016b). There are already reported / published instances of suspect activities by Retraction Watch, including poor journalistic standards, such as manipulated editing (Teixeira da Silva 2016c), apparent lack of interest in retractions (Teixeira da Silva 2016d), undeclared facts about the professional background of Oransky (Teixeira da Silva 2017b), use of slang and profanity (Teixeira da Silva 2017c), and, as fortified here, double ethical standards.

Retraction Watch must stop using the Beall lists as if they are valid, to support any facts in their blog posts. Moreover, they should stop referring to Beall as an ethically valid entity, when he is clearly not, cowering away from the public in an act of opaque cowardice. Beall’s shut down of his blog, for whatever private reason he may have, has caused as-yet unquantified irreparable damage to an unknown number of academics around the globe, over and above the damage caused when it was still in existence. Beall is a public figure, his blog and lists were used widely by the public to support “facts”, and thus Beall must be held responsible, even for his post-mortem blog. The same principle applies to Retraction Watch, the CSI directors, and CSI sponsors and allies.

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