

Editorial

Predatory journals and the use and abuse of special issues

Many academics will be familiar with the tactics of some of the new ‘predatory journals’ – primarily, unsolicited invitations to publish in the said journal, to sit on the Editorial Board, and increasingly to lead the publication of a special issue, usually because of a topic that the author has previously published on. As editors of *Information Polity* we get at least two or three of these invitations per week, and sometimes more than one a day. As with all spam, these tactics must work, otherwise they would not be deployed. These journals are usually Open Access with the author paying a publishing fee (article processing charge). Their rapid growth suggests that academics are willing to pay these fees, usually in the region of \$1000 per article, in order to get their work published quickly, and sometimes in as little as twenty days. A predatory journal will publish almost anything in return for a fee, and in recent years there has been an explosion in special issues and collections, sometimes with the frequency of such publications outnumbering ‘normal’ or traditional editions. Data on the number of special issues current being published points to an average of at least five per journal in 2020 and rising (Crosetto, 2021). So, what’s the problem, if good quality academic work is being published quickly and is accessible to all? Why do we call them ‘predatory journals’?

One issue with predatory journals is a concern about the quality of published material. The rapid publication period raises doubts about the thoroughness of the peer review process, which in practice can be quite time consuming, as it involves soliciting the participation of reviewers, the completion of reviews, usually the completion of revisions and then subsequent iterations of reviews and revisions. At *Information Polity*, we try to do this at good speed, but we can only proceed at the speed of the reviewers and authors, and a finished publication has never been ready in just twenty days. Accelerating this process significantly suggests shortcuts are being made and that the quality of publications are being compromised.

A further problem is that they can undermine trust in genuine journals. Whilst these practices are not taking place in all journals, the label of ‘special issue’ is getting tarnished, and journals that use these mechanisms are potentially damaged by association. Mainly because the idea of a special issue is being used to falsely attract authors into submitting their papers to the journal. This may make researchers suspicious of special issues rather than seeing them as a great way to bring together a relevant collection of state-of-the-art papers on a topic. Special issues are important, because they collect together similarly themed articles, which in turn increases the readability of ever-expanding literatures. They can facilitate the emergence of collaboration between researchers and research teams, consolidate and build networks, as well as being a space for novel or new topics/methods to be presented. The clue is in the name, they should be *special*, and offer unique value in the academic field or topic area. At *Information Polity*, we have started to use special issues in a more regular way. Not as part of predatory practice to attract academic authors and generate income, but as a means to provide focused content exploring contemporary

issues, and as a means to providing young talented scholars with the opportunity to take leadership in attracting, organising and publishing content in their area of expertise. They offer state-of-the-art in current thinking and also play a role in setting the agenda, for research, policy, and practice.

Information Polity has built a strong reputation and we have successfully managed to attract good quality work, provide strong quality control and organize collaborations with special issue editors who are able to produce highly relevant special issues. This issue, on the broad theme of ‘surveillance’, is a case in point. It is a topic area of utmost importance, and one which is often neglected in eGovernment studies. Surveillance, as a topic, and a practice, is subtle, opaque, and is engrained in the fabric of modern-life – and is a lens through which eGovernment can be understood. We are now all familiar with ‘Surveillance Capitalism’ and the rise and critique of the platform economy (Zuboff, 2019). Others note how surveillance is entrenched in organisational life and is the defining feature of modern management practices (Sewell, 2021) and how the logic of surveillance is irresistible (Ball & Webster, 2020). Most authors agree, that technological mediated surveillance embodies the exercise of power, in a variety of settings and for a variety of purposes, from enhanced security, increased commercial activity and improved public policy and services. Whilst the surveillance capabilities facilitated by modern digital technologies offer possibilities for improved eGovernment, in for example, more cost-effective personalised services and evidenced based policy-making, there are also growing concerns about the human need for privacy, the need to comply with the fundamental human right of personal data protection and an emergent agenda on what constitutes the ethical use of personal data in public service settings. These may not be completely new discourses, but the speed of technological change in data science and the increasing deployment of artificial intelligence and algorithms have made such concerns more pressing.

This special issue, entitled “*Questioning Modern Surveillance Technologies: Ethical and Legal Challenges of Emerging Information and Communication Technologies*”, is intended to address these issues ‘head on’. It seeks to explore the diffusion of surveillance-oriented technologies and to challenge their use, from a range of social, legal and ethical perspectives. This suggests that whilst the logic of surveillance may be irresistible, the extent of its acceptability and their impacts and consequences are not fully understood, and consequently the governance mechanisms surrounding their use are still in their infancy. In many ways, this presents one of the new frontiers of eGovernment studies. We would like to thank the special issue editors, Johann Čas, Paul De Hert, Maria Grazia Porcedda and Charles D. Raab, for bringing the special issue to fruition, and we hope you enjoy reading its contents.

Editors-in-Chief

Professor Albert Meijer

Professor William Webster

References

- Ball, K. & Webster, C. W. R. (2020). Big data and Surveillance: Hype, Commercial Logics and New Intimate Spheres. *Big Data & Society*, 7(1), 1-5.
- Crosetto, P. (2021). *Is MDPI a Predatory Publisher?* 12 April. Retrieved March 20, 2022 from: <https://paolocrosetto.wordpress.com/2021/04/12/is-mdpi-a-predatory-publisher/>.
- Sewell, G. (2021). *Surveillance: A Key Idea for Business and Society*. Routledge: Abingdon.
- Zuboff, S. (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. Profile Books: London.