

# New SciComm Services for Researchers: Knowledge Translation, Public Relations, or “Predatory” Publishing?



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- I am presenting this session today from Saskatoon, SK, Canada, on Treaty 6 Territory and the Homeland of the Métis.
- **Abstract:** Like many science librarians I regularly receive concerned emails from faculty asking whether certain publishers or journals are “predatory.” In recent years however a growing number of these inquiries have been regarding what seems to be a new form of publisher seeking to promote the work of scientists... for a fee. They offer the science communication (SciComm) services of professional writers to create high-quality, magazine-style articles on the scientist’s research in accessible language for a general audience. Additional services may include glossy brochures with graphic designing, website production, social media marketing and promotion, and even podcast episodes discussing the research.

Faculty encountering these publishers are understandably wary. There has been extensive concern and discussion in academia about so-called “predatory” publishers for the last decade, so much so that any unfamiliar publishing model is treated as suspect - especially those sending unsolicited emails and asking for publishing fees. However, the entities I have investigated appear to be offering a legitimate service with transparent costs. But what needs the service is fulfilling, and what the motivations of their clients are, is debatable. Is it for knowledge translation or mobilization purposes (increasingly required by funding agencies)? Is it for increasing the reach or

impact of a researcher's work? Or is it driven by vanity or ego?

In this session I will introduce several examples of these publishers, discuss their business models and the services they offer to clients...and what the potential motivations of their clients may be. My goal is to raise awareness among STEM librarians about this new kind of publishing service so that they are prepared to respond should they receive similar concerned emails from their science faculty!

This presentation is available in Google Slides.

Link: <https://bit.ly/3B8efcH>

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Except where otherwise indicated.

## Presentation Outline:

1. Background
2. Two Examples
3. Assessment (to avoid sketchy SciComm)
4. Possible Motivations
5. Other (free) Options

# Background

# The “Predatory” Publisher Connection

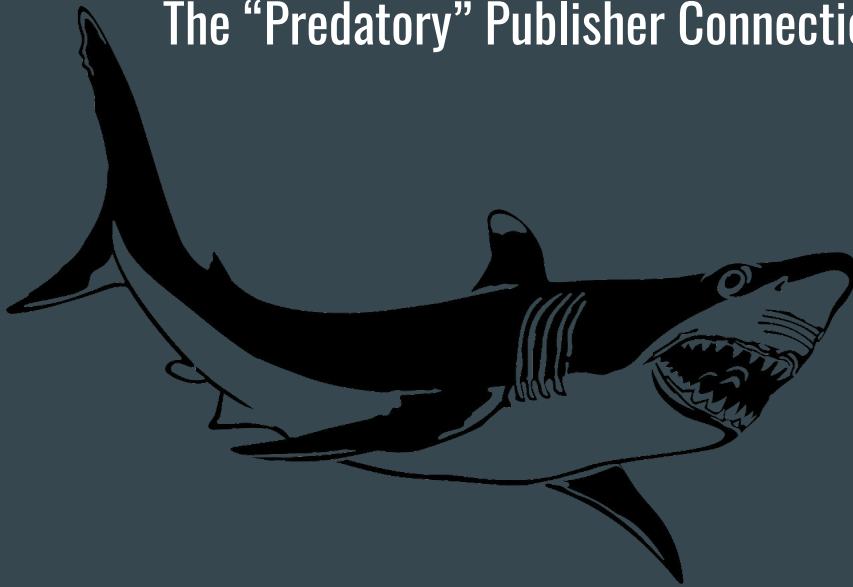


Image by [OpenClipart-Vectors](#) via Pixabay ([license](#))

- In the last decade there has been considerable discussion and concern about so-called “predatory” publishers/journals.
- This topic has been extensively covered elsewhere so I will not go into great detail here.
- Suffice to say that there are scam journals/publishers that will, for a fee, publish anything submitted. They’ll promise the usual journal services of peer review and editorial work but actually do little or none of it.
- Many of these entities are well known for sending spam emails to researchers with invitations to publish.
- So, it is no surprise that researchers are now incredibly wary of unsolicited emails with offers to publish their work for a fee, and especially if the entity uses a novel or unfamiliar business model.
- As a science librarian with an interest in scholarly communication topics I often talk to researchers about these issues and they will in turn seek my advice or opinion when receiving such emails from unknown entities with suspect offers.

# Not “Predatory” ... they are SciComm!



Image by [Free-Photos](#) via Pixabay ([license](#))

- Several years ago I began to receive questions about what seemed to be a new kind of publishing service... or at least new to me (and some of the researchers I support)!
- The entity would reach out to the researcher, sometimes praising a recent publication or research program, and offering to publish a promotional article about the researcher and their work... for a fee of course.
- Because this kind of unsolicited and complimentary email outreach is a similar tactic used by “predatory” publishers this raised red flags for the researchers. And many people jump to the conclusion that they must be “predatory”.
  - Aside: One of the reasons I dislike the whole “predatory” conversation is that it often lacks nuance: anything of low or amateurish quality, or of an unfamiliar model, gets painted unfairly with the same brush.
- Over the years there have been a number of different entities like this that I have investigated for researchers at my institution, and *like any business or publishing model* they seemed to exist along a spectrum of “quality”... some more professional and legitimate seeming than others; and some may be scams too.
- The legitimate ones seemed to be offering a PR-style of service for the researcher, but this business model is unfamiliar to many scientists who were often confused about why any of their colleagues would pay for such a service. So, they were naturally suspicious.
- I speculated that these services may be understood to be promoting the “reputation” of the researcher so I began to refer to them (in my own head anyways!) as “reputation builders”, but I’ve come to realize that these are

- perhaps much better understood as science communication (SciComm) services.
- Beyond the faculty at my own institution asking about these entities, I've also seen the same questions come up occasionally on librarian email lists and Slack channels I belong to.
- So, this seems to be an unfamiliar service or business model to many researchers and librarians.
- The purpose of this presentation is to raise awareness among more science librarians about these SciComm services for researchers so that they will recognize them and be better prepared to support faculty at their institutions who may ask about them.



## Two Examples...

- So, now I'd like to briefly introduce you to two of the legitimate SciComm services I have come across...

# 1. Research Outreach (<https://researchoutreach.org/>) - overview



- A “communication agency specializing in research”
- They “operate in a unique space between traditional media outlets and peer-reviewed publications”
- Professional writers distil the research into clear, general language using examples and images
- Based in England
- Products are open access with CC licences; DOIs
- They accept no advertising
- Quarterly publication, both print & online
- Also produces podcasts (<https://researchpod.org/>) & video abstracts
- Promotes content through social media, creates impact reports

Issue 123: <https://researchoutreach.org/publication/#123> (website license: [CC BY NC ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/))

## Research Outreach - services

<p>Digital Outreach Article</p> <p>£870</p> <p>*VAT applies for all UK clients at 20%</p>	<p>Research Outreach Publication</p> <p>£1780</p> <p>*VAT applies for all UK clients at 20%</p>
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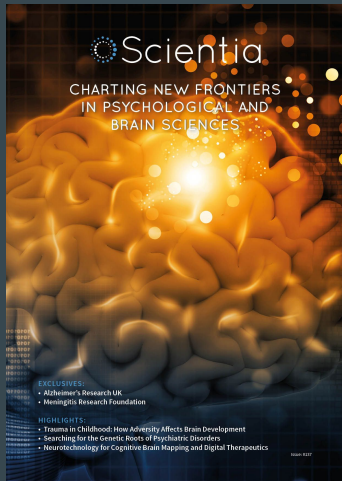
~\$1200 USD

~\$2400 USD

Our Services: <https://researchoutreach.org/our-services/> (website license: [CC BY NC ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/))

- Two main service choices: Digital only article or inclusion in the Research Outreach publication (digital and print).
- If you go to this page you will see a very clear and lengthy list of what each package includes.
- This transparency and clarity in pricing and services is a strong indication of legitimacy. Whereas, opaqueness of these kinds of details is a hallmark of “predatory” entities.

## 2. Scientia (<https://www.scientia.global/>) - overview



- “Scientia helps researchers communicate their findings beyond their specialty and into the wider world”
- Also known as Science Diffusion
- Very similar model and services as Research Outreach, they are likely competitors; also based in England
- Professional science writers and graphic designers create the content
- Bi-monthly publication, Scientia, in both print and digital
- Open access, CC licences, DOIs
- Podcasts (<https://www.scipod.global/>) & videos, brochures, webpages
- Marketing and social media promotion

Issue 137: <https://www.scientia.global/scientia-issue-137/> (Website © Scientia, screenshot used under Fair Dealing exception in the Canadian Copyright Act)

## Scientia - packages and costs

	Option 1 - Text	Option 2 - Text and audio	Option 3 - Text and video	Option 4 - Text, audio, and video
Choose your dissemination requirements	<b>£1600</b> approximately \$1950 USD / €1900	<b>£2050</b> approximately \$2550 USD / €2350	<b>£2950</b> approximately \$3700 USD / €3500	<b>£3300</b> approximately \$4150 USD / €3900

Editorial packages and associated costs: <https://www.scientia.global/publishing-cost/> (Website © Scientia, screenshot used under Fair Dealing exception in the Canadian Copyright Act)

- As with the costs page at Research Outreach, there is incredible transparency and clarity in details of services provided in each package.

## Assessment (to avoid sketchy SciComm):

- TRANSPARENCY is key!
  - Pricing and details on what services are included
  - Copyright
  - Who they are (qualifications), what their purpose is
- Testimonials from past clients
  - Follow-up with them if unsure of authenticity
- Read/listen/watch some of the products!
  - “Quality” (or not) will be obvious

# *Why would a researcher pay for this service?*

## Possible Motivations...

- So, these sorts of services are not something that academics have traditionally sought out and paid for.
- I believe this is why I began getting questions from researchers about them: it is an unfamiliar service and business model, some of the researchers didn't understand why they pay for such a service (at least the ones who contacted me!). I'm assuming all the others who didn't contact me and certainly those who have used the services have motivations.
- So, these are my speculations on what their motivations might be... (have I missed any?)

## Possible Motivations

### 1. Knowledge Translation/Mobilization/Transfer purposes

- Increasingly required by granting agencies
- Communicate results in non-traditional outlets to non-academic audiences
- Increase real-world impact of research
- Could help with commercializing research
- e.g. plain language summaries of the research

- Each of these terms (knowledge translation, knowledge mobilization, knowledge transfer) has similar meanings/definitions: basically it is about taking the research out of the lab or scientific journal, making it understandable and applicable for non-academic audiences and purposes, or for interdisciplinary collaboration purposes.
- Increasingly, granting agencies are requiring this of their fundees and (for example) ask for a “knowledge mobilization plan” with their grant application.
- There could be many different strategies, but one obvious one would be to develop a plain language summary for a general audience of the research findings and importance or application.
- Indeed, many of the testimonials from clients posted on the Scientia website indicate that their main motivation in using the service was to communicate their research clearly with a general audience, one client specifically mentioned hoping to reach a business-minded audience that could help commercialize his research.
- It is likely that many scientists do not feel they have the expertise to write in this style, and/or would value a service to provide them with a professional quality piece.



## Possible Motivations

### 2. Public Relations or Outreach purposes

- Explainers handy for media or administrators
- Could also be useful for connecting with potential students or collaborators (especially interdisciplinary)

- Similar to the previous motivation, the researcher could have any number of reasons they might want to communicate to others outside of their disciplinary colleagues.
- So, they may not be required to by a granting agency but they still feel it valuable to have a plain language explainer or brochure about their research program or a particular study ready should an administrator or member of the media request it.
- This could also be handy to have available, maybe posted on the researcher's departmental profile page, for potential graduate students, or other collaborators - especially if they are from other disciplines.

## Possible Motivations

3. Increasing interest, reach, and “impact” of research (among colleagues)

- Draw more attention to the work... perhaps increasing citations (??)
- Building the reputation of the researcher
- May result in greater success in career goals (e.g. P&T) and grant applications

- And again, drawing on the previous motivations, a researcher might simply want to draw more attention to their work among their own disciplinary colleagues in order to increase the impact metrics (i.e. citations and therefore h-index etc), and build their own reputation (back to my original idea of “reputation builders”).
- Increasing impact metrics and reputation could potentially increase job prospects, success in tenure/promotion/merit and grant applications.
- I really don't know how successful this method would be though, this is not the sort of publication that colleagues would seek out, they would need to stumble upon it then be interested enough to seek out the original peer-reviewed publications and cite them.

## Other Possible Motivations...

4. Vanity, ego?
5. A misunderstanding of how to comply with granting agencies' Open Access Policies?

- There are other potential motivations that we can speculate on as well...
- I left this idea of vanity or ego till the end because it seems a bit uncharitable or negative... but who wouldn't like a nice glossy article or brochure discussing their research? I doubt this is a primary motivation of many clients, but it could be an underlying driver.
- The last bullet here is based on an anecdotal comment I heard: some researchers are concerned that they do not have enough funding to pay open access (OA) article processing charges (APCs) for each peer-reviewed article they publish on a particular grant, so if they figure if they pay this one charge for an OA scicomm article that discusses several of the peer-reviewed articles at once then they are hoping that meets the OA Policy requirements of their funder. Unfortunately, this would not in fact comply with any granting agency OA Policy that I am aware of. These policies generally require the actual peer-reviewed articles themselves to be made OA (either through gold or green route, and within a certain timeframe).
  - Both Scientia and Research Outreach heavily promote that their content is all open access, which may feed this confusion among researchers

## Other (free) Options:

**THE CONVERSATION**

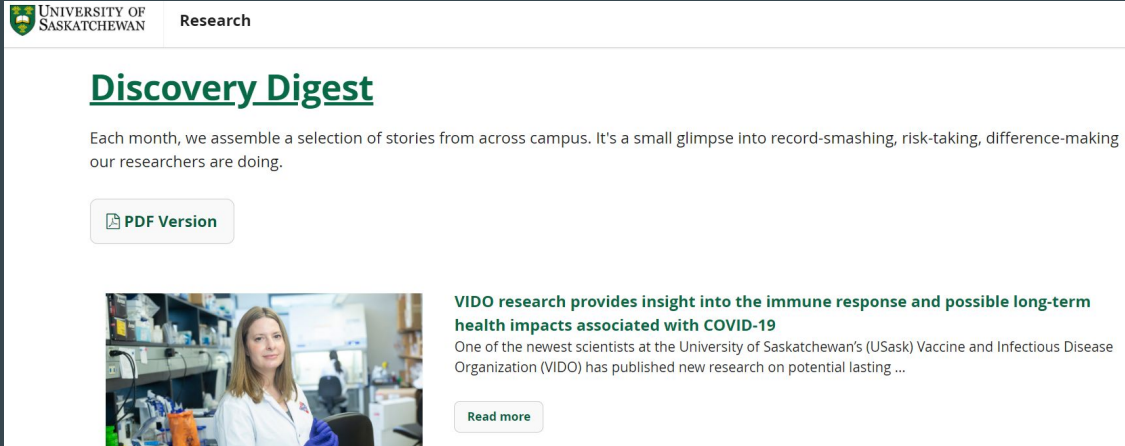
Academic rigour, journalistic flair

<https://theconversation.com/ca>  
(Canadian version)

- Free option! But researcher needs to write content themselves, professional editors available to help finesse it
- Must be a researcher currently employed by a university (or PhD student) with proven expertise in area they are writing about
- Open access, CC licenses
- Non-profit, funded by universities and granting agencies (etc.)

# Other (free) Options:

- Your institution's Office of Research likely has some communication specialists who could write SciComm-style articles too!




The screenshot shows the 'Research' section of the University of Saskatchewan website. It features a 'Discovery Digest' header, a brief description of the digest, a 'PDF Version' button, and a featured article titled 'VIDO research provides insight into the immune response and possible long-term health impacts associated with COVID-19'. The article includes a photo of a scientist and a 'Read more' button.

UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN Research

## Discovery Digest

Each month, we assemble a selection of stories from across campus. It's a small glimpse into record-smashing, risk-taking, difference-making our researchers are doing.

[PDF Version](#)

 **VIDO research provides insight into the immune response and possible long-term health impacts associated with COVID-19**  
One of the newest scientists at the University of Saskatchewan's (USask) Vaccine and Infectious Disease Organization (VIDO) has published new research on potential lasting ...

[Read more](#)

<https://research.usask.ca/our-impact/highlights-of-our-research.php> (Website © University of Saskatchewan, screenshot used under Fair Dealing exception in the Canadian Copyright Act)

# Questions or Comments?

If you think of something after this session please get in touch:

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