Bibliometric analysis of a controversial paper on predatory publishing

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Abstract

Purpose – In 2017, one study (Derek Pyne; Journal of Scholarly Publishing; DOI: 10.3138/jsp.48.3.137; University of Toronto Press) in the "predatory" publishing literature attracted global media attention. Now, over three years, according to adjusted Google Scholar data, with 53 citations (34 in Clarivate Analytics' Web of Science), that paper became that author's most cited paper, accounting for one-third of his Google Scholar citations.

Design/methodology/approach – In this paper, the authors conducted a bibliometric analysis of the authors who cited that paper.

Findings – We found that out of the 39 English peer-reviewed journal papers, 11 papers (28%) critically assessed Pyne's findings, some of which even refuted those findings. The 2019 citations of the Pyne (2017) paper caused a 43% increase in the Journal of Scholarly Publishing 2019 Journal Impact Factor, which was 0.956, and a 7.7% increase in the 2019 CiteScore.

Originality/value – The authors are of the opinion that scholars and numerous media that cited the Pyne (2017) paper were unaware of its flawed findings.

Keywords Bibliometrics, Citations, CiteScore, Journal impact factor, Journal of scholarly publishing, Popularity, Predatory publishing

Paper type Research paper

The Pyne (2017) paper in the journal of scholarly publishing

In 2017, Derek Pyne, an associate professor at Thompson Rivers University (TRU) [1] in Canada published a paper in the *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* (*JSP*) by the University of Toronto Press. That paper, even upon acceptance, attracted immediate global media attention, simply because the author claimed that it was the first ever study to show financial rewards for publishing in Jeffrey Beall-blacklisted open access (OA) journals relative to those that do not have such publications [2]. In general, blacklists, including Beall's lists which exclusively targeted OA journals and publishers, suffer from false positives and may carry a very high false discovery rate (Teixeira da Silva and Tsigaris, 2020). For example, Tsigaris and Teixeira da Silva (2019a) compared the "predatory" publications of the small business school using Beall's lists with that of Walt Crawford's gray open access (grayOA) list, and Cabell's blacklist to find that only a small fraction of the total publications of the research faculty at the small business school may have been published in potentially questionable journals (i.e. 2% of 451 publications). In contrast, the Pyne (2017) study found significantly more publications (15.3%). For more than three years, the vast majority of the media that has covered this case as well as scholars who cited the paper have echoed his claims [3] without questioning their validity nor citing papers which show flaws refuting the findings of the study. Now, more than three years later, at least according to Pyne's Google Scholar profile [4], that paper has accumulated 58 citations [5], accounting for over one-third of the total Google Scholar citations throughout his career. Pyne, labeling his own workplace at TRU as a "small business school," claimed erroneously that the majority of research faculty members in

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that school–individuals who had been masked in the study but who could easily be identified following media exposure and several by name on Pyne's now-defunct ResearchGate social media account (Tsigaris and Teixeira da Silva, 2019b) [6]–were financially compensated for Beall-blacklisted publications relative to those that did not (Tsigaris, 2019), referring to them as "predatory publications," thereby assigning a negative stigma to the "small business school" and his colleagues.

Bibliometric findings

According to Google Scholar, and setting the limit to August 9, 2020, the Pyne (2017) study is the author's most cited paper. The Pyne (2017) paper has now accrued 53 citations (adjusted from 58 shown) (Supplementary Table S1), accounting for approximately 33% of Pyne's total of 162 citations (from 24 papers) throughout his academic career [7]. On Clarivate Analytics' Web of Science (WoS), only 34 papers are listed (Supplementary Table S2), while 36 citations appear on the *JSP* website (Supplementary Table S3) [8]. Oddly, the Pyne (2017) paper is not listed on the author's Research Papers in Economics (RePEc) account, which lists 13 papers [9]. Between March 29 of 2019 and August 9 of 2020, total citations on Google Scholar doubled from 29 to 58.

The Pyne (2017) paper has had a strong impact on the metrics of *JSP* which is unranked in the Australian Business Dean's Council (ABDC) list [10]. Using Web of Science (WoS), from 1994 to 2020 there were 737 papers listed for *JSP*. Figure 1 shows the number of citations over this long time period. As shown in the figure, in terms of total citations, the Pyne (2017) study ranks fourth with 37 citations (Supplementary Table S4A) but ranks first if the 2015–2020 window is observed (Supplementary Table S4B). Figure 2 shows the number of articles published in *JSP* as a function of the number of citations to articles. The frequency distribution is a typical one for any journal in that it is positively skewed with most articles having a few citations while a few articles have many citations one of which is Pyne (2017) falling in the bin citation category of [36, 41]. Figure 2 does not include articles that have not been cited, while Figure 1 includes these. An association map was created in WoS, showing that most articles that cited Pyne fell in the information and library science category followed by computer science interdisciplinary applications (Figure 3). According to Clarivate Analytics' InCites Journal Citation Reports, the 2019 Journal Impact Factor (JIF) for *JSP* is 0.956 [11]. The JIF_{2019} became 0.667 [12] when 13 citations to the Pyne (2017) paper were removed from the numerator of the 2019 JIF, i.e. the 2019 citations of Pyne (2017) paper caused an approximate 43% increase in the 2019 *JSP* JIF. Similarly, the 2019 CiteScore, which is a strong competing metric with the JIF (Teixeira da Silva and Memon, 2017), decreased from 1.9

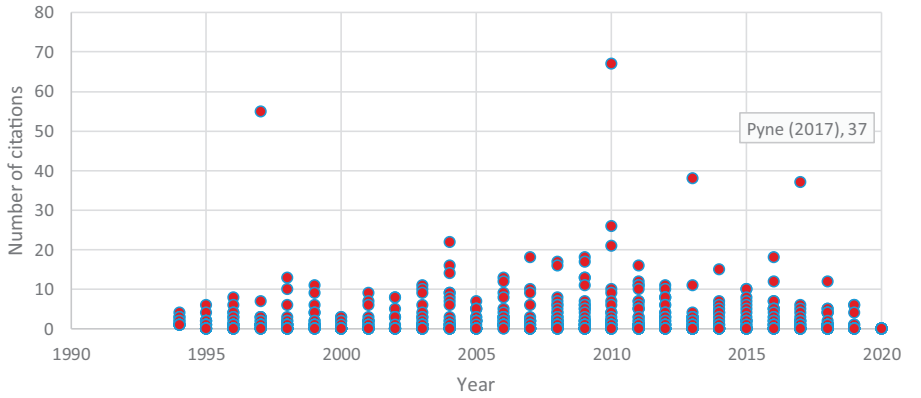
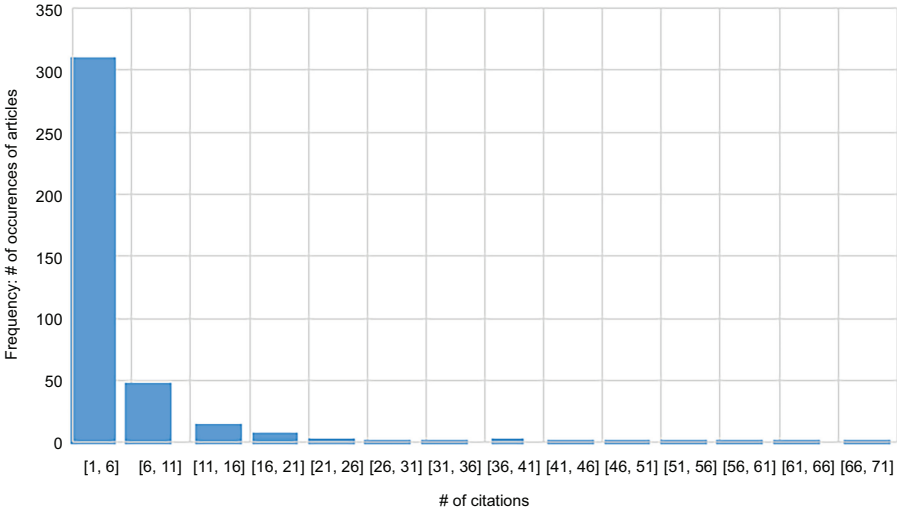


Figure 1.
Citations of articles in the *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* from 1994 to 2020 (data were drawn from the Clarivate Analytics' Web of Science and plotted in Windows Excel)

to 1.76 [13] when the 13 Pyne (2017) 2019 citations were removed, i.e. the 2019 citations of the Pyne (2017) paper caused the metric to increase by approximately 7.7%.

From the 58 citations listed on Google Scholar, we first eliminated any duplicates, irrelevant sources or presentations. There were 45 English papers and eight non-English papers that cited the Pyne paper (Table 1). For the English papers, we added the letter to the *JSP* editors by Tsigaris (Tsigaris (2019), which refuted Pyne's claim of financial compensation [14]. Paradoxically, Google Scholar and peculiarly *JSP*, the same journal in which Pyne published his paper, did not trace, or list, the Tsigaris (2019) letter to the *JSP* editors. Among the 45 English papers, 4, 13, 15 and 13 papers cited the Pyne (2017) paper in 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020, respectively, and for the 53 English plus non-English papers,



Note(s): The Y-axis measures frequency and the X-axis the # of citations in bin intervals. For example, there were 309 articles in JSP that had citations in the interval [1, 6]. The Pyne (2017) paper falls into the [36, 41] range

Figure 2. Frequency of citations in the *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* (*JSP*) (data as in Figure 1, drawn from the Clarivate Analytics' Web of Science and plotted in Windows Excel)

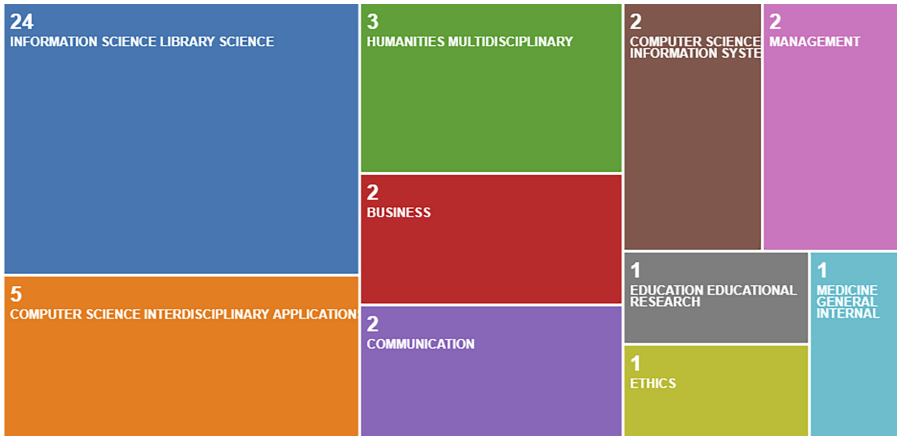


Figure 3. Visualization treemap of the Web of Science field categories from the citations of the articles citing the Pyne (2017) paper in the *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* from 1969 to 2019 (data drawn from the Clarivate Analytics™ Web of Science)

values were 4, 18, 16 and 15, respectively (Table 1). In the first year of publication, there were not too many citations, which would be a typical pattern (Davis and Cochran, 2015), and citations increased by a 4.5 times factor in 2018 relative to 2017 and declined slightly in 2019. Of the 45 English papers that cited Pyne (2017), 11 were from the authors of this paper. Removing these shows the following pattern for English papers 2, 11, 10 and 11 for 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020, respectively. The citation curve for Pyne (2017) has flattened out but there are no signs of a decline yet.[15] A total of 42 papers (all languages) were supportive of the Pyne paper, while 11 were critical of it (Supplementary Table S1).

In the next analysis, to offer a geographic and possibly cultural perspective, for country counts, each author or corresponding author was treated as a separate and independent count, even if they had more than one publication. We identified a total of 72 authors who cited Pyne, excluding our (Teixeira da Silva and Tsigaris) papers. Most of the corresponding authors [16] that cited Pyne (2017), excluding our own papers, originated from the USA, Canada and Turkey (10, 9 and 4, respectively). These numbers were 18, 15 and 8 for the USA, Canada and Denmark, respectively, when the countries of all 72 listed authors were considered (Supplementary Table S5). Most of the corresponding authors of the 53 sources that cited Pyne (2017), including our own papers, originated from Canada, Japan and the USA (19, 11 and 10, respectively). These numbers were 26, 19 and 11 for Canada, USA and Japan, respectively, when the countries of all listed authors were considered (Supplementary Table S5).

Except for one doctoral dissertation, four book chapters and one preprint [17], the remaining 39 papers among the 45 English sources were published in journals. The vast majority of the 39 papers were articles (34), followed by four opinion pieces and a letter to the editors [18]. Most of the 45 English papers were published in journals published by commercial publishers (77.8%) followed by university presses (13.3%), then academic societies or other categories of publishers or publishing models (8.9%) (Supplementary Table S1). Since the findings of the Pyne (2017) study might also be indirectly promoted through citations of papers that cited his paper, we also verified–using Google Scholar statistics–the number of citations of papers that cited Pyne (2017), finding that Demir (2018) was the most cited paper, with 55 citations as of August 10, 2020 (Supplementary Table S1).

Discussion and conclusions

The Pyne (2017) paper is the author's most notable publishing achievement if one considers citations as the benchmark, accruing 58 (adjusted to 53) citations in almost three and a half years (April 2017 to August 2020). Most of the papers that cited the paper paradoxically offer support to the findings of Pyne (2017), despite the Tsigaris (2019) letter to the *JSP* editors, published in January of 2019, and which refutes Pyne's claim that research faculty at the "small business school" were financially rewarded or compensated for Beall-blacklisted publications relative to those that did not have such publications. In addition to that letter to

Table 1. Summary of English and non-English literature citing Pyne (2017) (until August 9, 2020)

Year	Total citations	Total English citations	English journal citations	Total citations excluding our papers	Total English citations excluding our papers	Total English journal citations excluding our papers
2017	4	4	3	2	2	1
2018	18	13	10	16	11	8
2019	16	15	14	11	10	9
2020	15	13	12	13	11	10
Total	53	45	39	42	34	28

the *JSP* editors, which found statistical, methodological, measurement and specification errors with the salary determination regression results, another 10 papers critique or refute Pyne's findings. Of the 11 papers that critiqued and refuted the claims, methodology and findings of the Pyne (2017) paper, two were published in 2017, two in 2018, five in 2019 and two in 2020. We are of the opinion that most, if not all, scholars who cited the Pyne (2017) paper were unaware of its disputed and erroneous findings [19]. This research was conducted hopefully to bring awareness to future scholars that the study linking rewards to predatory publishing at a small business school in Canada has been challenged and that flaws have been detected in it.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no relevant conflicts of interest. The authors have challenged the findings of the Pyne paper on numerous occasions. The first author of this paper (Panagiotis Tsigaris) works at the same institute as Derek Pyne and has an interest in re-examining the controversial findings and conclusions as his institution's reputation are at stake.

Notes

1. http://kamino.tru.ca/experts/home/main/bio.html?id=dpyne
2. From the abstract: "This study is the first to compare the rewards of publishing in predatory journals with the rewards of publishing in traditional journals."
3. A Google search with the keywords "Thomson Reuters University predatory" will reveal such coverage.
4. https://scholar.google.ca/citations?user=75P5jgGgEvQC&hl=en
5. https://scholar.google.ca/scholar?oi=bibs&hl=en&cites=5375323568168537275&as_sdt=5; the number of citations that is indicated is 58. However, after removing duplicates, incorrect entries and presentations, a total of 53 was obtained, including the Tsigaris (2019) letter to *JSP* editors, which does not appear on Google Scholar.
6. Pyne's ResearchGate account (https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Derek_Pyne2) became defunct in mid-2019.
7. Using 58 citations as reported in Google Scholar from 162 total citations yields 35.8%.
8. The supplemental file lists 34 articles from WoS. According to the WoS search, there are 3 additional articles listed in Medline which are not included in this analysis. Of these 37 papers, 31 are articles, 2 editorials, 2 letters and 2 review articles. Four of the papers have been funded by the Canadian Research Chair on the Transformation of Scholarly Communication, The Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research NOW, Social Sciences and Humanities of Canada Insight Grants and University of Ottawa S Ph.D Program in Digital Transformation and Innovation.
9. https://econpapers.repec.org/RAS/ppy19.htm
10. The respected ABDC list was/is used by scholars at the "small business school" to find outlets and to assess the quality of the journal. It is puzzling why the Pyne (2017) was sent to a noneconomic journal which is also not in the ABDC list.
11. The JIF shows the number of times an average article has been cited in a given year. It is the ratio of the number of citations in a given year to the number of articles published in the previous two years.
12. Original $JIF_{2019} = 43/45 = 0.956$; adjusted $JIF_{2019} = 30/45 = 0.667$. The 2019 JIF considers the 2017 + 2018 articles. The WoS database includes 13 citations to Pyne (2017) in 2019.
13. Original CiteScore $_{2019} = 147/76 = 1.9$; adjusted CiteScore $_{2019} = 134/76 = 1.76$. CiteScore considers the articles for four years 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019 articles for the 2019 CiteScore. The Scopus database includes 33 citations to Pyne (2017).

14. In the letter to the *JSP* Editors, Tsigaris debunked Pyne's core findings in Table 5 showing signs of research spin, as well as specification and measurement errors resulting in bias and inconsistent estimated regression parameters for salary determination, thereby throwing the core claims and findings of the Pyne (2017) paper into doubt.

15. These 11 papers are essential since they are the only papers within the entire body of 53 papers that critiqued the Pyne (2017) paper. Moreover, readers might like to see the pattern without these papers.

16. Corresponding authors were observed separately since they are generally considered to be the individuals responsible for submission and accuracy of the published paper, and the contact point for academics and the public: "The corresponding author is the one individual who takes primary responsibility for communication with the journal during the manuscript submission, peer review and publication process. The corresponding author typically ensures that all the journal's administrative requirements, such as providing details of authorship, ethics committee approval, clinical trial registration documentation and disclosures of relationships and activities, are properly completed and reported, although these duties may be delegated to one or more coauthors. The corresponding author should be available throughout the submission and peer-review process to respond to editorial queries in a timely way and should be available after publication to respond to critiques of the work and cooperate with any requests from the journal for data or additional information should questions about the paper arise after publication. Although the corresponding author has primary responsibility for correspondence with the journal, the ICMJE recommends that editors send copies of all correspondence to all listed authors." http://www.icmje.org/recommendations/ (December 2019 version; last accessed August 9, 2020)

17. Note that Siler (2020) had originally been published as a preprint in 2018 that was modified through 11 versions, to result in version 12, which corresponds to the final published version.

18. Several of the papers did not indicate the type or category of manuscript, so we used our subjective analysis to classify the papers, unless the article type was also clearly specified on the article or on the publisher's web-page. In addition, we recognize that even "articles" or "original research" contain a certain amount of opinion, so this classification should not be considered as robust.

19. The exception is Manley (2019), who cited Tsigaris (2019) in note 13 of his paper.

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Appendix

The supplementary file is available online for this article.

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