EDITORIAL

Visible Language

Volume 59 Yearbook

# Recent Trends in Academic Publishing: Open Access, Predatory Publishers, Plagiarism, Citation Format, and Service to the Discipline

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This editorial introduces *Visible Language's* Volume 59 Yearbook. What is a "yearbook" for an academic journal? Instead of stopping at a straightforward explanation of how we decided to print a compilation of the three issues instead of printing them individually, I can do something more valuable. It turns out that the full answer touches upon trends in academic publishing that are helpful to reflect upon.

## 1. Open Access and Predatory Publishers

When then sole editor of *Visible Language* Mike Zender began contacting colleagues in 2023 to discuss the possibility of expanding the editorship into a multiple-institution consortium (Figure 1), he was interested in sustainability for the journal, but also in extending its availability to readers. The latter ultimately led to the diamond open access model we operate under now, in which neither readers nor authors incur costs. Open access has a historical relationship with predatory publishing — though it is a short history. It is crucial that design scholars are aware of predatory publishing practices to protect themselves.

In short, predatory publishers take advantage of scholars' incentives to publish. These publishers leverage those incentives to profit financially, with little to no concern for the quality of research and scholarship (Beall, 2012a,b, 2015; Burton, n.d.; Krawczyk &

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**Visible Language Consortium:**
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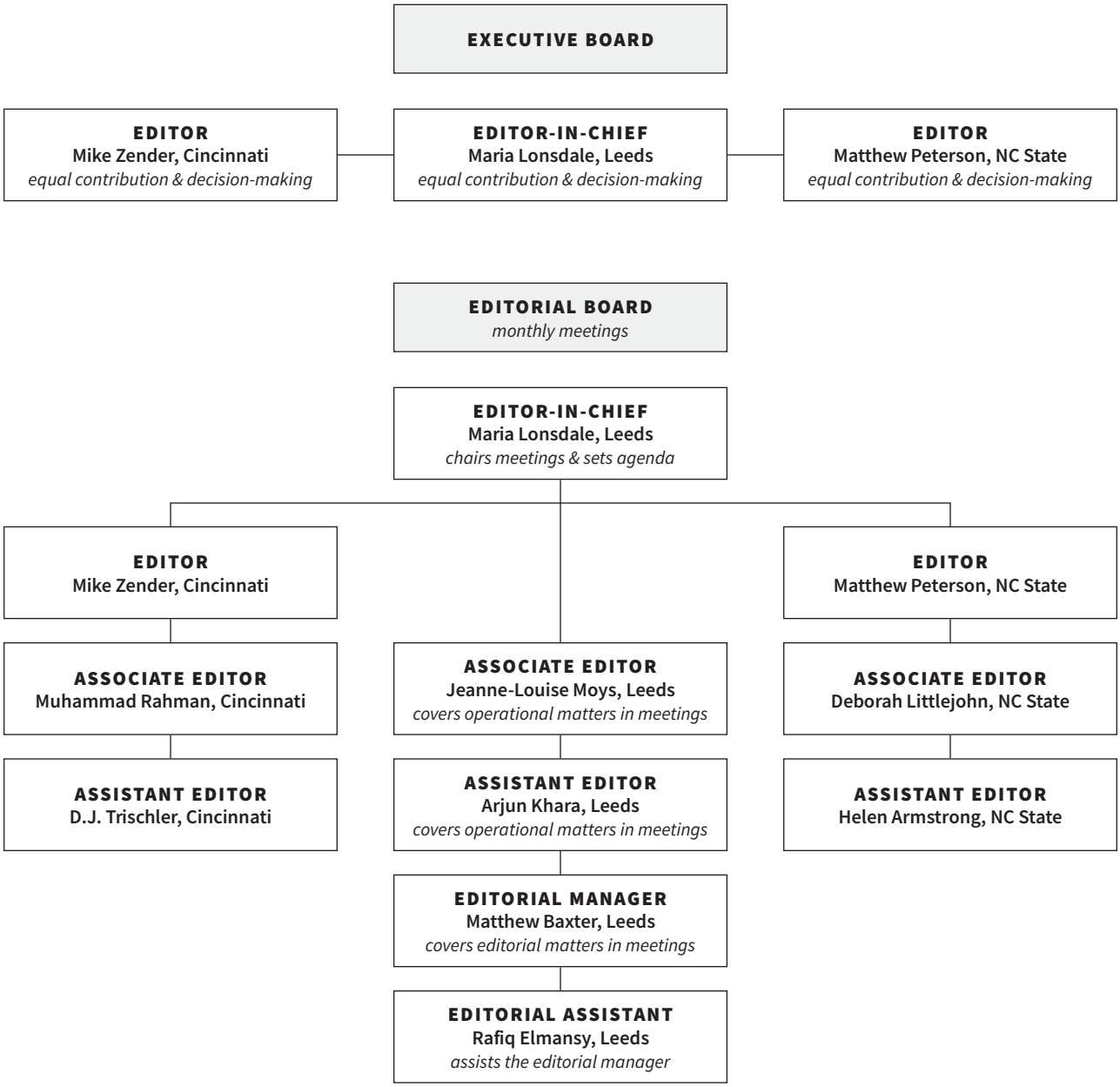


**Figure 1.** *Visible Language* governance and structure as of December 2025. The editorial consortium consists of three institutions: the 2025 "host" institution, University of Leeds, UK ("Leeds"); the University of Cincinnati, USA ("Cincinnati"); and North Carolina State University, USA ("NC State").

Kulczycki, 2021; Think. Check. Submit., n.d.). Here I address how predatory publishing is defined before I explain how the internet led to this situation, how money is inextricable within the environment in which predatory publishing becomes viable, and how this has led to the degradation of quality in academic publishing. All of this is related to open access.

**The definition of predatory publishing.** Academic librarian Jeffrey Beall is famous for discussing predatory publishing and providing a growing list of predatory publishers on his since-abandoned blog (Beall, 2012a). And in *Nature,* he described the "corruption of a great idea" in open access: after "early experiments with open-access publishing [...] came predatory publishers, which publish counterfeit journals to exploit the open-access model in which the author pays" (Beall, 2012b). Krawczyk and Kulczycki (2021) provide an extensive account of how predatory publishing is typically discussed, and note that it is unfortunate that open access and predatory publishing have been conflated. Open access, after all, is a good thing.

Criteria are available for identifying predatory publishers (e.g., Beall, 2015), but it should be noted that any criteria aim at a moving target. These publishers are continually working to counteract efforts to interfere with their profitable enterprise. And plenty of publishers manage to skirt the full label of *predatory* by not checking too many boxes (see Friedman, 2017, for a design-specific discussion of the margins of predatory publishing).

**The influence of the internet.** I see predatory publishing as having emerged directly from the internet, though my argument is not necessarily Beall's. Before the World Wide Web was broadly adopted, academic journals had no means of production beyond printing, an arduous and expensive process. And what we now call snail mail was necessary for peer review and editorial procedures. As of 1968, our journal's instructions for authors included: "Three copies of the manuscript are required: an original on good bond paper plus two other copies, either carbons or mimeographed or Xeroxed copies" (Wrolstad, 1968, p. 79). This is just a hint of the labors we now take for granted with access and automation. Once the internet was fully popularized and readers increasingly accessed scholarship through digital means, it became possible to offer an academic journal with no printing associated costs whatsoever.

**The underlying money factor.** When producing a journal had to involve printing, it had to be more exclusive. And this tended to ensure a baseline of quality — more on that in a moment. The cost of academic publishing has traditionally been covered through expensive subscriptions, which individual scholars (as readers) can pay but that are usually shouldered by universities to give their pool of scholars access. When printing became optional, open access was readily achievable. But this created an avenue for profit. For scholars to benefit from their research results becoming more accessible

than ever before, publishers began asking them to cover production costs — and there are significant production costs to academic journals even beyond printing. This is a common model for open access (of the non-diamond variety): the financial burden shifts from the reader to the author. I imagine many students begin with an assumption that we scholars are paid for our writing. It must be a shock to learn that it can be the reverse.

Once academic publishing was fully transformed by the internet, even legitimate publishing had the potential for high profitability, and this potential led to the emergence of illegitimate and predatory publishers. Acceptance of a manuscript in a predatory journal is followed by a bill in the form of an article processing charge (APC) to the author for the equivalent of thousands of US dollars. Often, this is not clearly outlined on the journal's website, and furthermore the journal may pressure the author — if only *seemingly* legally — by rapidly publishing the article, thus making payment appear necessary for services already rendered. (An aside: author fees do not alone implicate predation, and there is nothing wrong with legitimate journals offering optional open access fees for authors eager to remove the reader's pay wall in front of their writing.)

**The degradation of quality.** Unlike printing costs, the effort costs of academic publishing are often elective — predatory publishers can simply skip steps to reduce their effort. Skipping steps makes it possible to publish a significantly higher count of articles. There are many, many scholars globally who have been incentivized to produce *quantities* of publications. Quantity is easier to evaluate than quality in performance reviews of scholars, after all.

In practice, predatory publishers will publish nearly anything, and will often utilize a perfunctory form of peer review, where even when reviewers recommend rejection, a manuscript is accepted. Predatory publishers are typified by unnaturally quick turnaround on peer review, acceptance, and publication. This has created a new, unrealistic standard for the publication cycle. They also do little of the editorial work normally required of high-quality publication.

Inexperienced academics may actually ask why the quality of a journal really matters. Is it not the article's quality that matters? I do not understand this position. Respected journals do hard work to vet manuscripts and ensure that published scholarship is of high quality and makes a contribution to knowledge. As any good peer reviewer knows, conducting a rigorous peer review on a manuscript is far more effortful and time-consuming than reading a published article in a trusted journal. Peer review is so important in scholarship and in the assessment and refinement of scholarly production. We should be hesitant to bypass it, and even to cite scholarship that has not been properly reviewed and revised — be it in a predatory journal and thus not rigorously reviewed, or on a pre-print server and thus not yet reviewed.

Sadly, a natural outcome of the prevalence of predatory publishing — as well as borderline or illegitimate but not quite predatory publishing — is a flood of low-quality scholarship that is poisoning academic discourse. It is effectively more challenging now to source actual disciplinary knowledge. I am not certain if this is worse for emerging scholars who are coming up in this environment from the start, because some of the first scholarship they engage with is poor but superficially appears legitimate; or if it is worse for established scholars who developed their scholarly engagement patterns when it was not necessary to take as skeptical a position as they should now.

**The opening question.** So, what is a yearbook for an academic journal? For *Visible Language,* this yearbook is an alternative printed format to access its published scholarship, and it rests on an ethical publication model. We have decided, at least for now, to continue providing interested subscribers — notably including university libraries — with printed copies of *Visible Language* for continuity of their physical collections. (One special thing about *Visible Language* that has surely attracted authors is its willingness and eagerness to publish so much rich imagery. Figure 2 compiles the figures from the four non-column articles in Number 2 of this volume, pages 109–217, to make this tangible. And once you have a richness of figures, a printed copy in a library collection permits more careful consideration of them.)

There is a cost related to production, but we are not profiting from it. Because articles are available in digital format for free, we consider that format to be primary. As such, the articles compiled in this Volume 59 Yearbook, from Numbers 1–3, are unchanged from their original release, with headers reflecting their respective issues (e.g., Vol. 59, No. 1), not the yearbook (displayed as Vol. 59, No. 0 for this editorial).

We have managed to make *Visible Language,* outside of the printed yearbook itself, diamond open access through material support from our three institutions. This is the opposite of a profitable enterprise. There are, after all, irreducible costs. We hope that more journals are able to accomplish this, to make the scholarship they feature available to anyone with an internet connection, at no additional cost to them.

## 2. A Deviation: Plagiarism and Citation Format

This yearbook, as it includes the volume's three issues, is a locus of editorial consortium discussions. As editors who are also typographers, there has been plenty of discussion of small details that could be considered mundane. Other discussions are more impactful, like how quickly generative AI, and especially LLM technology, is changing views of writing before we can even collect our thoughts on it.

In such cases, it is important to reflect on otherwise unstated reasons that underlie rote practices. What does it mean to cite a publication? At one point in time, this would


**Figure 2.** All pages with figures from the four peer-reviewed articles in *Visible Language* 59.2, pages 109–217 in this volume, with only the figures retained. All figure captions and thus attributions can be found on pages 109–217. The receptivity of *Visible Language* to imagery was suggested as a benefit by Jeanne-Louise Moys when she reviewed a draft of this editorial.

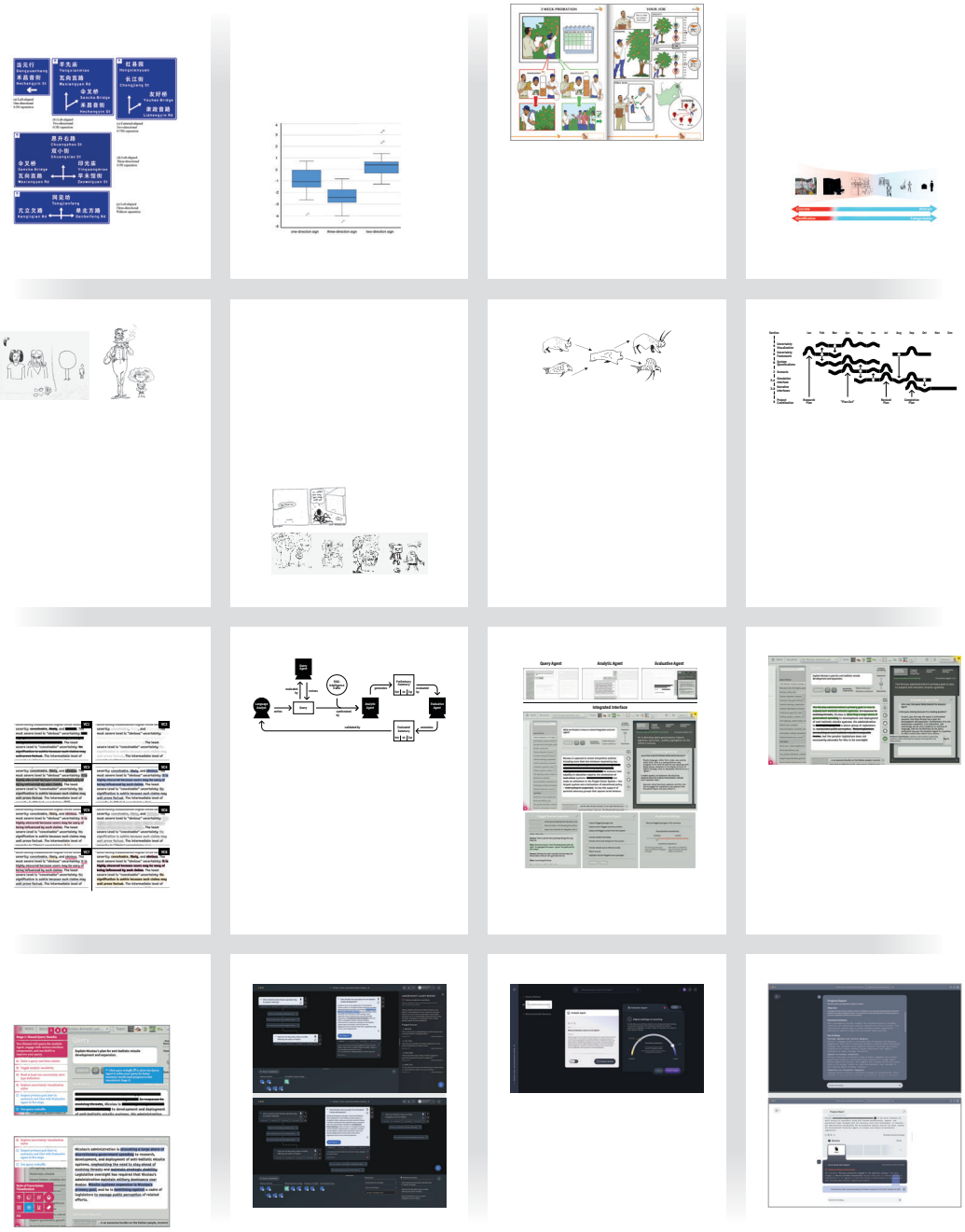

**Figure 2 (continued)**

involve going to the library, tracking down a volume, and reading a publication in person — if you were lucky enough to find it in the library. In a transitional period it became possible to use a search function to find information in a paper without reading much of it. This can create problems because a citation needs to accurately represent its source, and you are more likely to misrepresent a source you have not completely read. But instead of stopping there, let us acknowledge the period we are in now, when a chatbot can provide you information on a source along with a citation. The problem is, of course, that the source may not exist, and even if it does, the characterization is not likely to be accurate. So if an author trusts what a chatbot reports about a source instead of consulting that source — which, again, may not exist — and incorporates it into their writing, what is that in terms of scholarship? You cannot blame a chatbot that has no consciousness. It has to indicate a human author's act of plagiarism.

I find existing definitions of *plagiarism* to be unsatisfactory. The American Psychological Association (APA) declares in its code of conduct that "Psychologists do not present portions of another's work or data as their own, even if the other work or data source is cited occasionally" (APA, 2017, 8.11 Plagiarism). It defines plagiarism as "the act of presenting the words, ideas, or images of another as your own; it denies authors or creators of content the credit they are due. Whether deliberate or unintentional, plagiarism violates ethical standards in scholarship" (APA, n.d.). The emphasis on others' ownership of work, from a novice point of view, can make it seem silly at first that you can plagiarize yourself. In which case you need a separate definition for *self-plagiarism.* I think there is a more fundamental way to define *plagiarism* that makes this unnecessary.

Plagiarism: the misrepresentation of sourcing in formal writing.

This definition is more fundamental because it immediately addresses standards of scholarship, and ownership can certainly follow but it is a distinct matter. Misrepresentation of sourcing can involve claiming someone else's work, yes, but it first suggests a breach of contract between author and reader. This can readily be applied to the self — an author may fail to cite their earlier work, and in doing so they communicate to the reader that the current work is something more novel than it actually is. And it extends to overtrust of AI and citing hallucinated sources. If an author cites a source that does not exist and never has, there is nobody they are stealing from. However, they are communicating to the reader that such a source exists and that it makes whatever claims they are implying. That is unethical.

Speaking of the APA, for Volume 59 and thus by extension for this yearbook, we have adopted APA style for citations and references. Like all style guides, APA has its quirks. But it accomplishes two important things for *Visible Language.* First, it foregrounds original authors and dates at the point of characterization and citation. Other style

guides push this information into footnotes and behind arbitrary index numbers. Second, APA is less work for authors than other styles. For instance, some citation format implementations suggest references at the end of an article and in duplicate in footnotes, but with subtle differences in formatting between the two that authors must manage. Furthermore, in such cases initial-mentions and subsequent-mentions may need to be notated differently in the footnotes, meaning that removing a first citation requires going to the previously second citation and adjusting it. Part of our reason for favoring APA was to reduce the burden on authors submitting their work to *Visible Language.*

Clearly the conduct of an academic journal is not terribly sexy.

## 3. A Return: Service to the Discipline

But the conduct of an academic journal is terribly important. While I wrote in my introductory editorial for the August issue that I have little clarity about our design field's identity and that "it gets worse if we consider what our *discipline* is, or what scholarship is and is not for us" (Peterson, 2025, pp. iv, vi), I was not expressing dismay. I was rather acknowledging the service to the discipline that *Visible Language* — and I say this positively — can and should provide. And that extends to the members of the editorial consortium, and to our peer reviewers. I do think our field or at least our subfield of design is still in the process of maturing as a research discipline, and we are all facilitating that.

Actually, the day I wrote most of this editorial (I am presently making edits the following day), the inaugural issue of *Designing* was published, including an article by Cash et al. (2025). The authors state that "many still seem to regard and approach [design research] as an under-developed or emerging discipline," and they ask: "is this *emerging mindset* still productive for design research?" (p. 12). But *Designing* is not focused specifically on communication design like *Visible Language* is, and thus there are nuances of field and history that might differentiate the state of the discipline. It turns out that my colleague in the editorial consortium, Deborah Littlejohn, is better prepared to speak to this. So I asked her about the disciplinary status not of design generally, but of the area of design we specifically cover in *Visible Language,* and following my editorial is an opinion piece in which she reflects on that (Littlejohn, 2025).

*Designing* as an academic journal is an interesting story because it is effectively a revival or reconsideration of *Design Studies* as it was known before a "quality-destroying directive" in 2023 by its major publisher led to "an exodus of editorial staff and editorial board members" (Lloyd, 2025, p. 4, partially citing Upton, 2023a,b). There are real connections to the "trends of academic publishing" I am addressing here, especially

because the directive *Designing* Editor-in-Chief Peter Lloyd mentions was to increase published articles tenfold, which was surely profit-motivated. The global importance of the Design Research Society, which backed *Design Studies* before the exodus and now backs *Designing,* is considerable. It is good news that *Designing* is now in position to continue what *Design Studies* had been doing for decades. It is providing a service to the discipline of design. As is *Visible Language,* its editors, and our peer reviewers.

Recently, some scholars — outside of design, in my experience — are prone to complain that peer reviews are uncompensated labor, probably because some large academic publishers are making huge profits. Now, in terms of *Visible Language,* we are independent and nobody is making money through editorship or ownership. But more generally, many of us who are academics at major universities or smaller colleges are in fact being compensated for peer reviews as part of our service requirement. It is indirect, to be sure, but it is at least listed as part of my job. And furthermore, every manuscript I have submitted to a journal was reviewed by two or three peers, so I am indebted with each new submission. And many of those manuscripts were rejected multiple times, so my debt increases!

But peer review is a crucial mechanism of engagement in the discipline. And many of our peer reviewers are in fact not at universities or colleges. Many of these scholars are design practitioners who are animated by knowledge of design and of the world. So whether there is some form of compensation to track down or not, those who join *Visible Language* in its mission as peer reviewers are giving something irreplaceable to the field they chose to dedicate their professional lives to. Again, a good peer review is hard work, and as an editor of this journal let me say to our peer reviewers, *thank you.*

What, again, is a yearbook for an academic journal? Let us call it a tangible emblem of service to the discipline in our field of design.

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