
Articles

Fake paper causes open access storm

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This article was posted on *The Scientist's* website (<http://www.the-scientist.com>) on 10 June 2009 as "OA publisher accepts fake paper" and followed on 11 June 2009 as "Editors quit after fake paper flap"

An open access journal has agreed to publish a nonsensical article written by a computer program, claiming that the manuscript was peer reviewed and requesting that the "authors" pay \$800 in "open access fees".

Philip Davis, a PhD student in scientific communications at Cornell University, and Kent Anderson, executive director of international business and product development at the *New England Journal of Medicine*, submitted the fake manuscript to *The Open Information Science Journal (TOISCIJ)* at the end of January.

Davis generated the paper,¹ which was titled "Deconstructing Access Points," using a computer program called SCIGen that had been created at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He and Anderson signed the work using pseudonyms (David Phillips and Andrew Kent). The two listed the "Center for Research in Applied Phrenology" (CRAP) as their home institution on the paper, which featured fictitious tables, figures, and references.

"I wanted to really see whether this article would be peer reviewed," said Davis. "[Our paper] has the look of an article, but it makes no sense."

A "little experiment"

Davis told *The Scientist* that he got the idea for this "little experiment" after receiving scores of spam emails soliciting article submissions and invitations to serve on editorial boards of open access journals from Bentham Science Publishers, *TOISCIJ's* publisher. According to its website (www.bentham.org), Bentham publishes "200 plus open access journals" that cover disciplines from bioinformatics and pharmacology to engineering and neuroscience. "One of the things that made Bentham catch our eye," Anderson said, "was that they were so aggressively soliciting manuscripts."

The two wrote about the incident on the Scholarly Kitchen, the Society for Scholarly Publishing blog that they run (<http://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2009/06/10/nonsense-for-dollars>). Davis said that the journal had notified him that it had accepted the manuscript, which contained absolutely meaningless statements typified by the first few lines of its introduction: "Compact symmetries and compilers have garnered tremendous interest from both futurists and biologists in the last several years. The flaw of this type of solution, however, is that DHTs can be made empathic, large-scale, and extensible. Along these same lines, the drawback of this type of approach, however, is that

active networks and SMPs can agree to fix this riddle."

He received an email from Ms Sana Mokarram, assistant manager of publication at Bentham, that the manuscript "has been accepted for publication after peer-reviewing process in *TOISCIJ*." But Davis said that he received no reviewer comments in reference to the sham manuscript.

"The publisher said that it went through peer review," Davis said. "That looks very suspect. [Bentham says] that they're a scientific publication that does peer review, but at least in one case they did not do peer review, and they said that they did."

Richard Morrissy, who's listed as the US contact for Bentham Science Publishers on the company's website, declined to answer my questions and instead directed me to his supervisor, Matthew Honan, who works in Bentham's France office. Honan does not have a phone number, according to Morrissy, and he did not reply to an email (which was CC'ed to Bentham's marketing team in Pakistan) by the time this article (<http://www.the-scientist.com/blog/browse/blogger/31/>) was posted.

Davis had submitted another fake SCIGen-generated manuscript to a Bentham journal, *The Open Software Engineering Journal*, and it was rejected after what appeared to be an actual peer review process.

Publication charges

Mokarram's acceptance email for the *TOISCIJ* article had a fee form attached, asking Davis to submit an \$800 payment to a post office box in the SAIF Zone, a tax-free complex in the United Arab Emirates. Davis wrote back and retracted the manuscript. "We have discovered several errors in the manuscript which question both the validity of the study and the results," he wrote in an email to Mokarram.

Davis said that he considered scraping together the \$800 to see if Bentham would actually publish the fake paper, but considered that taking the hoax further would be unethical. "I think that the point has been made," he said. "And, I mean, it's \$800, and I'm a graduate student."

Davis and Andrews say the episode points out potentially serious flaws in the open-access, author-pay model that is being adopted by an increasing number of publishers. "What happens to be going on is that some publishers see this as a lucrative opportunity," Davis said. "This open access environment may set up the condition under which publishers could use the good will of academics and their institutions for profit motives."

Open access journals generally charge authors fees to publish research papers. For example, BioMed Central journals charge up to \$2265 in “article processing fees,” and publishing in the PloS family of journals costs authors \$1300–\$2850. Institutional libraries, including Cornell’s, and granting institutions, such as the Wellcome Trust and the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, are offering to pay open access publication fees for faculty authors and grantees, so the potential for abuse may be increasing. “It’s almost an inevitability that you might have several publishers tempted to take advantage of this relatively easy money,” said Anderson.

But open access advocate Peter Suber from Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana, said that the problem is not the open access business model, per se: “If it were intrinsically suspect, we would have to level that criticism at a much wider swath of subscription journals,” many of which also charge page fees when manuscripts are accepted for publication.

As for Bentham, Suber noted that “many questions about their business” have been circulating for more than a year. “There’s a whole range of quality in open access journals,” Suber said, “in the same way that there is a whole range of quality in subscription journals.”

Resignations

After learning that *The Open Information Science Journal (TOISCIJ)* accepted a fake, computer-generated article for publication, its editor-in-chief stepped down from his post. Bambang Parmanto, a University of Pittsburgh information scientist, said that he had never seen the phony manuscript that was accepted by *TOISCIJ*. “I didn’t like what happened. If this is true, I don’t have full control of the content that is accepted to this journal. I want to lessen my exposure to the risk of being taken advantage of.”

Parmanto, who became editor-in-chief of *TOISCIJ* when Bentham launched the journal last year, said that he had reviewed manuscripts for inclusion in the journal previously, but that he made up his mind to resign from his volunteer position “because of the potential for abuse” of the kind uncovered by the hoax.

He added that the perpetrators of the hoax were also guilty of some degree of unethical behaviour. “This is a process based on trust,” he said. “An author should submit something legitimate, and the process on the review side should decide if a paper is worth publishing or not. In this

case, the process was broken on both sides.”

Parmanto wasn’t the only one to react to the news of Bentham’s ignominy by terminating his association with the publisher. Marc Williams, an immunologist and stem cell researcher at the University of Rochester School of Medicine & Dentistry who served on the editorial advisory board of *The Open Stem Cell Journal (OSCIJ)*, another Bentham publication, resigned as well. After reading the story of Davis and Kent’s “little experiment”, Williams “immediately requested my name to be removed from the journal’s editorial board.”

“What upset me was the fact that this happened at all, in any of [Bentham’s] journals,” Williams said. “It really informs us that it may be a company policy that this is permitted in general.”

Williams, who had served on the *OSCIJ* editorial advisory board since the journal’s inception last year, said that in his 15 or 16 months on the job he has not reviewed a single manuscript submitted for publication, though the journal has only published one volume containing five articles since its inception.

Looking at open access

Both Parmanto and Williams said that they support the idea of open access journals. “The open access system is definitely the way forward,” said Williams. “At face value, it is an extremely valuable way of making scientific data widely available.” But Parmanto, though he said that he “believes in the open access system,” noted that the business model of charging authors fees to publish in OA journals might become problematic. “I see that [Bentham would] have the incentive to maintain the credibility of the journal, but I also see the potential for abuse.”

Parmanto said that upon reading the story about Davis and Andrew’s hoax on *The Scientist’s* website yesterday, he contacted the publisher of *TOISCIJ* to ask what was going on. Parmanto said that he was told that “someone on the editorial board reviewed” the fake paper. I contacted Parmanto in reporting the original story, but he said that he wanted to hear from *TOISCIJ’s* publisher before getting back to me.

References

- 1 <https://confluence.cornell.edu/download/attachments/2523490/Access+Points.pdf>

Editor’s note

So, who are we to trust? It seems that neither authors nor publishers are immune to the temptation of one more citable paper or the lure of extra income. Although this is not an “Original Article” in the true sense, we thought that our readers (especially those of you who do not regularly browse the world wide web) might be interested in seeing this. It certainly highlights that we should all be vigilant when editing manuscripts – presumably, had this

manuscript completed its journey through the publication process, then as some point it would have passed across the desk of a scientific editor, who one hopes would have suspected the quality of the science and had the moral fibre to raise the alert.

You can follow the various discussions on this debacle, and access other science news items, on *The Scientist’s* website (<http://www.the-scientist.com>).