

Flattering emails will get you everywhere, except when they're from junk journals

Written by Simon Chapman, Emeritus Professor in Public Health, University of Sydney

I wrote [last year](#) about junk research journals and conferences when I explored the intriguing case of a Philip Morris employee speaking at one of these conferences in Brisbane.

Every researcher I know receives dozens of gushing emails every week from the organisers of these conferences and editors of the journals.

There is barely any sub-specialist field in science, business, engineering or you-name-it that hasn't reached out to me with these breathless invitations to write articles, attend conferences as a delegate, keynote speaker or panellist, or become a member of the editorial board.

Not only do you get the initial invitation, but also imploring, obsequious follow-ups, with ever-increasing saccharine coatings. Everyone I know instantly deletes these. But I go a step further and mark each email with "block sender". When they often continue to come, this suggests the senders use multiple email addresses to avoid going immediately into spam.

Colleagues derive great amusement from sharing the more bizarre ones and I had such an experience recently, giving me insights into how these outfits operate.

We'd be honoured if you'd write for us

On January 23, I received an email from a [John Behannon](#), managing editor of the Journal of Bioequivalence & Bioavailability. You'll understand as I am a social scientist, this is naturally not a journal perpetually at my bedside, yet I read on.

John wrote:

I wonder if you can write a short review or commentary on the topic "Biosynthesis of Taxadiene in *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* : Selection of Geranylgeranyl Diphosphate Synthase Directed by a Computer-Aided Docking Strategy". If it is not possible to submit by February 15th, 2017

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kindly let us know your feasibility regarding the submission of the article. Anticipating positive response!

This request seemed to be in the very top tier of junk mail, so I thought I'd have some fun with it. I wrote immediately to Mr Behannon:

I know less than absolutely nothing about this subject, but imagine this probably doesn't matter to you. Can you confirm you would still like me to write something?

Overnight he replied:

Thank you for the prompt response! The Journal was seeking for an article having similar study as I have mentioned earlier. Your name was mentioned in that article and hence thought of contacting you with the hope of receiving a quality work piece. Kindly, let me know if I can get such an article for the next upcoming issue!

So I tell him I know less than absolutely nothing about the subject and he still holds the door wide open.

I donned my sleuthing outfit and pasted the "topic" of his invitation into Google. There I found a paper with the exact title by Chinese authors [published](#) in the accredited (indexed) and peer-reviewed journal PLoS One in 2014.

The original paper had received a modest number of readers and only nine citations since publication, so why would another journal be in the least bit interested in publishing a commentary on it?

PLoS One welcomes commentaries from readers, which is the normal route scientific

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responses take. So the rank odour of [predatory publishing](#) began to increase.

I then searched the PLoS article for my name. And sure enough there was “Chapman” in a reference to a 1991 book, the Dictionary of [Terpenoids](#), published by ... are you ready for this ... Chapman & Hall, London.

So I got back to John:

I'm sorry, I have looked at the paper you say my name was “mentioned in” [here I linked to the PLoS One article]. Quite obviously, as I do not work in any area remotely associated with that paper, my name is NOT mentioned in the paper. Can you clarify why you have asked me to write on this subject please?

He then replied:

I apologize for the inconvenience brought to you, as there might be some technical error! It was an automated mail. Have a nice day!

The plain “technical error” was a webcrawling [bot](#) scooped up my surname from the PLoS One article and had no way of understanding I was not the same Chapman whose name is behind the English book publisher Chapman and Hall. This match then would have populated an automated invitation email (to, in this instance, probably all researchers in the world named Chapman, regardless of research field).

A business model based on spam

Behannon's journal is published by OMICS International. The publisher's business model probably involves sometimes many thousands of people in my situation getting such totally irrelevant spam. All other authors referenced in each bot-mined article would also get invitations. I also get many similar emails from junk journals to write about areas where I do

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have a track record.

Only a tiny fraction of those invited to write for such journals end up doing so, albeit after paying a fee to publish. The huge majority, like me in this example, find the invitations bizarre, immediately recognise them as the commercial fishing trips for desperate authors that they are, or both.

Those who respond are sadly often wildly naïve and inexperienced in research publishing, which is why their targeting has been dubbed “predatory”. All experienced researchers understand that at the very bottom of the food chain in journal selection are those that tick many of the predatory publishing criteria.

Publishing company OMICS is subject to [a court action](#) by the United States Federal Trade Commission. The defendants are accused of having been “deceiving academics and researchers about the nature of its publications and hiding publication fees ranging from hundreds to thousands of dollars”.

Keeping up with predatory publishers

OMICS has [been described](#) as a predatory publisher, [which the company denies](#) .

US university librarian Geoffrey Beall has spotlighted predatory publishers in the much-lauded Beall’s List, which included over 1,000 such publishers. In January Beall took down his list from the web and has [not explained why](#) . One rumour is another publisher is planning to take over and continue the list, which would be very welcome in the global research community. In the meantime, recent editions are available on the wonderful [Wayback Machine](#)

Am I part of an experiment?

I Googled “John Behannon”, the OMICS journal managing editor. The search also returned [John Bohannon](#) , who coincidentally or not is an investigative journalist at the Berkeley Institute for Data Science and has published work on the problem of

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[fake peer review](#)

and

[fake science journalism](#)

I'm now wondering whether I have been picked as a subject in an experiment to see how researchers respond to bot-generated overtures from publishers.

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