

Guidelines to Recognise Fake Scientific Events

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Why now?

The emergence and spread of fake scientific events make worry the academic community over the world. Such events induce negative consequences and currently exceed the number of quality-driven scientific events (Grove, 2017b).

Recently, the international academic community has been shocked by a US court ruling related to the allegedly scientific acting of the company OMICS, a subsidiary of iMedPub LLC. This company has been found to be performing in bad faith, i.e. it got a 50 million US \$ fine. This is the approximate amount that this company earned from researchers for publishing their publications in their journals from 2011 until 2017 (Casella, 2019; Timmer, 2019). The manner of this and other similar publishing companies is known to the entire academic community – the manuscript submitted for publication is not peer-reviewed, but promptly published once the fee is paid. Such publishing houses are often described as “predatory”.

In 2016 Christoph Bartneck, professor at the University of Canterbury, received a call for a potentially fake scientific event hosted by OMICS. He submitted an abstract automated by iOS software in nuclear physics which would be meaningless even to a non-researcher but was successfully accepted within hours for a presentation at that scientific event (Bartneck, 2016). There have been other similar cases. For example, a non-medical journalist was accepted to a medical scientific event to read a report simply after a short talk with the organisers; evidently, the fee and status of student were enough regardless of the lack of competence in the field (Carey, 2016).

Lithuanian case

The Research Council of Lithuania carries out the evaluation of the activities of higher education institutions, develops and implements measures for financing travelling to research dissemination events, evaluates and allocates funding for research proposals and otherwise contributes to the evaluation and assurance of research quality. Meanwhile, higher education institutions accomplish assessments and calls for various academic positions, evaluate the researcher’s or candidate’s publications and presentations at scientific events. Hence, for researchers, who are seeking scientific recognition and academic career, publications become an important asset. More importantly, conference presentations are taken equally into

account. Therefore, it is crucial to carefully choose scientific events as participation in fake scientific events can undermine a researcher's reputation and career, as publishing in 'predatory' publishing journals do so. Members of the academic community take a negative view towards such scientific events and identify them as a kind of threat to the quality of science, impeding further research and development (Beall, 2015).

Given the importance of the issue described and responding to the growing concern of the international academic community regarding the uncertainty of scientific events and their compliance with quality standards, the Office of the Ombudsperson for Academic Ethics and Procedures (Office) in Lithuania has developed guidelines for Lithuanian academia (Guidelines) to help them to identify fake scientific events.

Methodological approach

The aim of these Guidelines was to raise awareness of malpractices related to fake scientific events. In order to develop Guidelines, the fake scientific events were analysed in terms of how they are organised, by who, how prevalent they are, what types of events emerge and what kind of participants attend such an event. This was achieved by reviewing the literature which varied from scientists' blogs to scientific and press articles. The next step was analysing and systemising the information gathered.

In order to make the friendly-user Guidelines, the Office consulted national stakeholders, such as the Lithuanian Research Council, the Lithuanian Young Scientists' Union, the Conference of Rectors of Lithuanian Universities as well as the Conference of Directors of Lithuanian Universities of Applied Sciences. All these stakeholders were invited to suggest improvements, so to contribute to the refinement of Guidelines.

Types of fake scientific events and types of participants

First, diverse terms related to fake scientific events were identified. The typology and synonymy of scientific events, that have emerged alongside "predatory" publishers over the past few years (Beall, 2015; Laskowski, 2017; Stoye, 2018), are as following: 1) junk conference; 2) predatory conference; 3) fake conference; 4) vanity conference; 5) questionable conference; and 6) bogus conference.

All these terms describe scientific events that operate similarly as 'predatory' publishing houses – a fee opens doors to everyone to an alleged scientific event. Nevertheless, few differences might be distinguished. First, junk, predatory, fake, vanity and questionable events are those which take place but do not meet the standards required for scientific events. Second, bogus conference relates to the behaviour of organisers, such as to send out invitations, to collect the registration fee, but the event itself does not take place, i.e. without any explanation the event is cancelled or even not organised at all (Cowan, 2016). The

general term used throughout the Guidelines to describe all events of this type is ‘fake scientific events’.

Then, the profile of participants was assessed. Sarah Elain Eaton, professor at the University of Calgary, identifies three types of participants in fake scientific events: 1) cognisant, 2) pseudoscientists, and 3) naive, the most vulnerable group of potential participants. The latter are described as inexperienced and / or young researchers seeking to be recognised within the academia, or whose abstracts have been repeatedly rejected, and are tempted to present their research and present it at a scientific event without realising it as a fake scientific event (Eaton, 2018). Furthermore, with a reference to the qualities inherent to a cognisant researchers, these researchers might be treated as the riskiest to the reputation of research credibility because these researchers are aware of such an event and perceive their involvement in fake scientific events (and/or publishing in ‘predatory’ publishing houses), but they don’t care due to indifference to the quality, but they are rather quantity-oriented.

Distinctive hints

The main features related to fake scientific events are thematic area of the scientific event, organisers of the scientific event and communication of the scientific event. These features serve as a structure for Guidelines.

Features related to thematic area consists of an event scope (e.g. many different, not necessarily interrelated disciplines); mismatch of disciplines (e.g. the research area of the invited researcher does not fully or partially correspond to the thematic area of the scientific event); unheard-of event (e.g. colleagues have never heard of such a scientific event nor attended it) and so on.

Furthermore, organisers of the scientific event are usually a profit-making organisation which hides the nature of its business, gives the priority rather to the location of event (e.g. an attractive resort), but not to academic value; contact information is unclear and so on.

Then, communication of the scientific event is inherent in inconsistent language (e.g. many grammatical errors); website and email letters are formatted very primitively; information about the scientific event is distributed via spam emails and so on.

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