

The Science Beyond The Horizon

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Christoph: [00:00:00] I'm not sure how many invitations to submit to conferences and journals you receive per day. But I receive more than a caterpillar has legs. There are the occasional invitations to high-profile conferences, but the vast majority is to conference I never heard of. At times the invitations can be highly confusing.

There are, for example, two conferences called international conference on social robotics. One is organized by the world academy of science, engineering, and technology. And the other publishes its proceedings with Springer, but does not seem to have a direct owner. Which one is the real one? I also received an invitation to the international conference on electrical computer communications and mechatronics engineering that will take place in Mauritius in October, 2021.

The conference committee largely comes from Mauritius, Turkey Lithuania, Iran, Uganda and Nigeria. One scientific committee member works for the Christ, deemed to be university in India. This conference set off my alarm bells and I checked if the reputable, I triple E really sanctioned this conference as the website claimed. They did. This conference seems legitimate. Although its reputation and impact might have plenty of room for improvement.

In early April, I received an invitation to the robotics and artificial intelligence conference to take place in Rome in March, 2022. They offered a special track on human robot interaction. A quick look at their website, did again, set off all my alarm bells. But instead of hitting the delete button, as I do so many times a day, I decided to have a closer look. Who is organizing all these conferences? How do they work? And what academics are contributing to them? Why do they participate in a conference that might be nothing more than a scam? Would it not be great to actually talk to the organizers?

I'm pretty nervous. Let's try to make this work.

Yeah.

Devasai: [00:02:45] Hello,

Christoph: [00:02:45] Hello, this is Christoph Bartneck calling. Um, I'm looking for Deva.

Devasai: [00:02:52] Yeah. Yeah.

Christoph: [00:02:53] It took a long time before I managed to talk to the organizers. So let's start at the beginning. We need to understand what is the difference between a good conference and a bad conference.

Great Anton It is wonderful to have you back in the podcast. Could you maybe enlighten us as to what are predatory conferences?

Anton: [00:03:17] Sure, thank you for that. And thanks for having me on, I really appreciate being back. These are great topics that you're going through. Predatory conferences. Well, that's a really good question. I kind of take the same approach to this as I do for inverted commerce, air quotes, kind of predatory journals in that there are these, and this is what we're going to be talking about, I think is the low end, low value, questionable conferences, people setting up conference events, getting registrations and not actually providing much in the way of value for the people who go to these things that may happen.

Yeah. At least with questionable journal something actually ends up on the web. I'm not so sure about these. My name's Anton Angelo. I work at the university of Canterbury as a digital librarian where I've been looking at, um, shall we say, questionable publications and scholarly communications in general.

Christoph: [00:04:14] David. Kaye is a distinguished professor emeritus of law at the Penn state university. David, what is the flaky conference or journal?

David: [00:04:25] Well, I use the phrase flaky to refer to or anything that is kind of questionable unreliable. Not necessarily what people call a predatory journal. It's a little broader category. Sometimes I actually have a discussion of that through comments or emails I get from journals or conferences that I mentioned, they will sometimes write, we're not predatory.

And I'll say, well, you know, I didn't say you were.

Christoph: [00:04:57] Where do you see the difference between a flaky conference and a predatory conference?

David: [00:05:03] Well, the former, I think is a super set of the latter. In other words, the ones that are kind of colloquially called predatory are ones that are really have no academic merit at all, or, or the, to the extent they do. It's incidental to an effort to really deceive people into thinking it's something they are not, there are other journals or conferences that are just questionable.

And I don't always know which is which I'm a lawyer, by the way. I'm pretty careful to not say things that I can't back up and to make it clear what's opinion and what's fact. Predatory is, as I say, a term that, uh, is used particularly pejoratively. And I'll mention when a journal or a conference has been called predatory by other people.

Christoph: [00:06:01] And by your website flaky conferences. If you were just calling them flaky, you stand on safer ground because you do not get accused them of, uh, of some form of misconduct. Is that it means a self protection mechanism.

David: [00:06:17] Uh, partly. Yeah. What, what leads me to put something on the website or on the blog is the fact that typically that I personally get an email that smells bad and that leads me to spend a little time looking into it. Sometimes it turns out. That, uh, what I discuss is a conference that's organized by bona fide academics, but it's really not well done.

And I know it's not something I would really recommend or consider people going to. So I'll leave my discussion of it up there, why I thought what I thought, but I'll try to point out that it does appear that the people behind it have identified themselves and do have credentials and are maybe being, huh?

I'm not going to make a judgment about whether they're out there just to make a profit, whether they are trying to establish themselves in their field, perhaps prematurely. And not having adequate quality, but because there were questions, questions about the emails or the information that they put out there, I'll leave up what I found in the journal of the, excuse me, on my blog and try to indicate, um, what I think the facts are.

Christoph: [00:07:40] And what are criteria that you look out for to make your judgment?

David: [00:07:46] So the kinds. Activities that all flag are having an address. Often a statement of all of our international offices that turn out to be a, for an office mail drop that can be obtained for a monthly fee at a fancy address. In London, in New York, in San Francisco where a so-called virtual office, there's nothing illegal about that, but it, you know, gives the impression that the journalist somehow being edited in those places or that the conference organizers have real business sites.

In those places. And the more I look into it, the more it seems like, uh, well, they're, they're different places, but a lot of them are a lot of it turns out to be in India in a, perhaps another part of the United States or in China. So that's one factor. Is there a valid address that's being used?

Anton: [00:08:52] I like to look at the office of the place that has developed this by going into Google street map, I have on times, if you see that it's a two up two down on north circular in London, or whether it's a nice little office, suite, someone in Basel, it's a very different thing. Can you tell me what you, you hit some issues with looking this up? Didn't you?

Christoph: [00:09:13] Well, it turned out that the. They had the conference organizer, which is in India and it turns out there is no Google street view for India. And therefore I could only look at satellite imagery from above and it did not look like a particularly office type of environment. Um, however, The address does match exactly with the company registration.

So India also has a conference company, registration office and. A company under the same name exists under the same address. It is not a fake address. So in that sense, it is probably the right address, but it is not, let's say like a typical professional organization that has to head quarters with proper office space. That would be quite unlikely.

David: [00:10:08] And now on this page, it becomes clear that science conference horizons comes out of a flat in Hyderabad India. Seems to be a hotbed of activity for conferences in Europe.

Anton: [00:10:28] It is another trick to this one as well. And I've got caught up with it. Which is when a company or an organization doing this kind of work uses a post restante or a PO box or some kind of mail holding service. So they might have a very flash, uh, Manhattan

fifth avenue address. That's a classic one, actually. Uh, I think there was one in Rockefeller Plaza. Sounds great. Sounds really good. And it just turns out to be a place where people hold mail or forward it from even there. So it's a useful thing to look to, um, to actually have a look down at the physical infrastructure of what this might look like.

David: [00:11:06] The European society of medicine or something as it causes. Is a, is one that has a very, uh, sounds very plausible emails you get. And I simply put it up on the blog and said, has anybody had any experience with this? Well, I got back things like I live in Geneva where the address is I went to look at the building. There is no such place.

Christoph: [00:11:28] And how are predatory conferences different from a straight out scam.

Anton: [00:11:35] But are they? And, and I just think this is just a, it's a nice grift. It really is. What you're doing is you dividing and conquering. So. I'm going to use a rather risque analogy, which is, these are like trying to sell penis pills on the internet. In your email. I get a feeling, this is all about volume. You put enough things out there, and enough people will fall for it for a business to occur, to, to be sustainable.

Christoph: [00:12:06] So the conference in question is the science horizon conference series. And, and particularly we have got a conference in the area of robotics, which was the reason that I got interested in it because I received an invitation. Yeah. To submit an abstract to the international conference and expo on robotics and artificial intelligence.

Robotics and artificial intelligence. It's both of them just to be sure. Fantastic.

To find out more about the conference organizers. I first checked their as usual, they do not give any names of the conference organizers, or owners just plenty of names and pictures of academics contributing to the conference as committee members or keynote speakers. Still, the website gives an address and phone number in Hyderabad. India. Next stop is a, who is lookup to find out who owns the domain name of the website. As usual problematic conferences hide their identity in the domain name, registration, through a proxy. The only usable piece of information I could find through this lookup was that the domain name was first registered on January 9th, 2021.

This website is brand new. I was a bit disheartened at this point in time, since I'm not a professional cyberstalker, but I did not give up and went down the rabbit hole. I checked the Indian company registration database. Luckily, a company with the exact name was first registered on 13th of November 2020.

The company address was identical to the one on the conference website. Bingo. The Indian ministry of corporate affairs lists two directors of the company, Shaik Riyaz and Devasai Udarapu. The later maintains a LinkedIn profile, but he does not yet mentioned his new directorship at science horizon conferences. You can only get that far with cyber-stalking.

At some point you need to engage directly to find out more. So I wrote the requested abstract and submitted it on April 15th. The website allowed me to select my type of submission and full of confidence I selected keynote speech for my contribution. Did I

mention that my abstract did not make any sense whatsoever. And that I tried to maximize the number of buzz words. I received a confirmation of my submission right away, and I was informed that my paper would be submitted to their review committee. I would be notified within one or two business days for academic standards. This is light. No proper peer review process can be conducted in such a short period of time.

On April 19th I received my letter of acceptance. So far so good. Clearly this conference has no academic standards whatsoever since it accepted my nonsense submission. This confirmed my suspicion that this is a predatory conference. While working on this podcast episode, I noticed that the early bird registration deadline was pushed back in regular intervals.

When I submitted my paper, the deadline was April 30th, 2021. Now it is June 16th. But why stop here when you can learn so much more. Over the following weeks, I called the number on the website and Devasai actually picked up the phone. My university cannot pay directly through PayPal. And hence I requested their bank details, which Devasai supplied.

Eventually I asked Devasai if he would allow me to interview him for the HRI podcast and after a couple more phone calls and emails, he agreed.

So I'm a bit nervous. Um, see if I can make this work. Okay. Deva, I switched on the audio recording. Are you okay with that?

Devasai: [00:16:49] Yeah.

Christoph: [00:16:50] I thought maybe we start with something easy. Maybe we can just talk a little bit about you. Maybe you can give the audience your name and what your current job role is.

Devasai: [00:17:03] Yeah, I am. Devasai was a, I hope I'm prepared my secondary school in the alumni and the and her recently her get a graduate degree in 2019. unprepared the graduation. yeah, I have started the biomedical engineering.

Christoph: [00:17:26] Um, I had a look at your LinkedIn profile and I also noticed that you worked for a couple of companies. So what kind of work experience do you have?

Devasai: [00:17:37] Yeah. I have worked for the Ababil healthcare for less than a week. I don't want to visit the hospital to hospital. Why? Because the job is manufacturing device devices in an example, like CD MRI. ECG EMG like that. I have to calibrate that missions, we have to do the service, but I can't always get a visit to a hospital to hospital. I have moved to the digital marketing executive in scientific Erevna a company

Christoph: [00:18:17] Yeah, so scientific, uh, I'm not sure how to pronounce that scientific erevna

Devasai: [00:18:22] A erevnana now. Yeah. Yeah.

Christoph: [00:18:24] What kind of company is that?

Devasai: [00:18:26] It is a digital marketing company that is publishing the content creation and SEO, email marketing and social media.

Christoph: [00:18:36] Well, there was no information about this company online. So I was just, yeah, there was just no information. I was a bit curious.

Devasai: [00:18:45] No, no. Uh, I have things. So science erevna under maintenance, I think.

Christoph: [00:18:51] Scientific erevna is not on the maintenance. It is a marketing publishing and event organizing company, but it has no website. How can you possibly operate as a publisher and event organizer without a website, the company did not respond to any of my emails, time to dig a bit deeper. The only traces I could find were a domain name, registration, job postings, and a Facebook page. The domain name and the company was first registered on March 2019

their domain name has been registered by the coalesce research group, which David had already flagged as a flaky organizer. It. Their list of directors are Sindooru Jalagam and Anuja Korukonda. Both have been previously associated to the infamous omics group.

Now, it seems like you are owning your own company. Is that correct?

Devasai: [00:19:57] Yeah,

Christoph: [00:19:58] And what kind of company is that?

Devasai: [00:20:01] it is a conference I'm organizing a con the conference, uh,

Christoph: [00:20:05] What is the name of this conference? So not of the conference, but if the company,

Devasai: [00:20:09] science horizon conferences.

Christoph: [00:20:11] we had a bit of communication before, and it seems like you have at least a partner, his name is

Shaik

Devasai: [00:20:20] Yes. Riyaz

Christoph: [00:20:21] Riyaz is that correct?

Devasai: [00:20:23] yeah. Is it correct.

Christoph: [00:20:25] The two of you are owning and running this company.

Devasai: [00:20:29] yes.

Christoph: [00:20:30] Wow. That's a, that's a big responsibility. So how did you, two of you meet, uh, how, how did that happen?

Devasai: [00:20:44] Okay, one second,

Christoph: [00:20:48] At this point in the interview, I realized that something is not normal. Devasai paused for long times. It seems like he muted his microphone and maybe consulted with another person in the room. I have no other explanation.

Devasai: [00:21:05] one second. You can ask the question.

Christoph: [00:21:07] Yeah.

Oh, I, I was curious about, um, you. and Shaik How did you meet and how did you become business partners?

Devasai: [00:21:15] Yeah. Uh, Hmm. Me and Shaik Riyaz was studying in BTech from first year onwards. We are traveling to each other and they're also working in the same company for both. And later we have got idea to organize the conference conferences, science, arts, and content. We are providing one platform. It is a unique platform for researchers to share the ideas and extend this, this, uh, research later to other researchers.

David: [00:21:46] Let's put it this way. Bill gates ought to the foundation. Some philanthropists ought to give a bunch of money to the enterprise. of really devoting some effort to separate the wheat from the chaff here, not just what are the best top five journals, the top 10, but what are the ones that really are ones that people should effectively boycott the ones I'm talking about now that have no true editorial board?

Um, or that have people who should not be editors on the editorial board. And I, when I look into who the editors are, for example, I find people who are, um, who've yet to publish more than one article themselves.

Christoph: [00:22:39] Great. And how many conferences are you currently organizing?

Devasai: [00:22:45] Yeah, we are organizing 10 conferences it isn't. No, it is in 2022.

Christoph: [00:22:52] Oh, that's a big number. It must be a lot of work.

Devasai: [00:22:55] Yeah.

Christoph: [00:22:57] And where do these conferences take place?

Devasai: [00:23:00] The conference really takes place in Rome and Berlin and in Spain.

Christoph: [00:23:06] Anton. Did you had a chance to look at the website? And what are your thoughts on that?

Anton: [00:23:10] I did briefly. I actually think that it's certainly in terms of what used to be produced for these kinds of things it's doing. quite well. Got a nice template. They've hired someone to come in and do some programming, which was better than we'd seen previously, but it has the same issues that you can. If you look carefully, it spelling mistakes. For example, um, I see that you submitted an abstarct. So things like that, also very templatized. If we looked at the other conferences, all exactly the same to keep costs low on producing each one.

Wow. Those are all very nice, very nice places.

David: [00:23:48] Uh, I know their characteristic of the conferences are. Where they are held. So this one is Rome, Italy, nothing wrong with having a conference in Rome, Italy, but one does find a lot of companies in China or India, for example, that are somehow organizing and holding their conferences in Europe or the United States.

Christoph: [00:24:14] Maybe let's talk about the specific conference. The international conference and expo on robotics and artificial intelligence. We already talked about this before. Uh, we had a bit of communication on this and, and one of the questions that I had was about the location of the conference. And you mentioned that you had not yet, uh, secured a conference location. Have you been able to make any progress on that? Have you secured the conference venue?

Devasai: [00:24:47] Yeah, we are in process. We are in process.

Christoph: [00:24:51] Okay. Still in process.

Devasai: [00:24:53] Yes. In process we can complete within one or two months.

Christoph: [00:24:57] one or two months. Okay.

A true challenge for predatory conferences is the conference venue. Normally you have to make a substantial down payment to book a venue. This down payment can even be non-refundable. Hence many predatory conferences refrain from mentioning an exact conference venue. The robotics and artificial intelligence, 2022 conference only mentioned Rome as its venue and shows tourist hotspot.

No conference center, no hotel, no address. The registration. page however offers me to book a hotel room. When I asked Devasai about the venue during other phone conversations, he only mentioned that the conference will take place in a hotel close to the airport.

This particular conference is pitched to take place in Rome. Lovely. Let's go to Rome. I thought so too. I could not work out where exactly. And I asked the organizer who never revealed it to me, but I am able to book a hotel room already for this conference and pay via PayPal for this room. Do you via PayPal via PayPal!

Anton: [00:26:21] Yes. That's always interesting. PayPal is a fantastic service. It's incredibly useful. And it's also very useful to obfuscate things. Yeah, no, that's an interesting fact in a time you're going to have to book ahead in March in Rome. Yeah. It's not the loveliest, the nicest, but it's spring and it's a, it's a nice place, but it's not September. All of these things play a part to make me think, uh, I'm concerned.

David: [00:26:46] You know, then they do get people to come to the hotel in Rome and they do have a sort of conference. Someone wrote me about that, that she went, it turned out that there were. A whole bunch of conferences in the hotel organized by the same group on different topics. They, they seem to be all of terribly uneven quality. Shall we say? In other words, enough, people signed up to take their vacation there and some of them to give a

paper, others to get their tax deduction, but it was not anything she would have wanted to have paid money for. It could take place if they get enough people to. And if they don't, then it, uh, you could find, you know, sorry, we have to cancel the conference and they're not going to get their money back.

Christoph: [00:27:41] Okay, cool. I also had to look at the website again, and I noticed that I think his name was professor. Hui Yu. He was previously mentioned as a speaker and I was kind of really looking forward to meet him, but he's no longer listed. So I'll just wonder what happened.

Devasai: [00:28:04] he has some work to attend the conference. It has in some other work,

Christoph: [00:28:10] oh, some other work He was just got busy. Oh, it's a pity I would have, I would have liked to meet him. So I was looking forward to that.

I wasn't completely honest here. I had contacted professor, Hui Yu before and told him how my meaningless paper had been accepted at the conference. I asked him about his involvement in the conference. He had replied that:

I had received several emails from the conference organizers asking me to give a keynote. And I did not reply until I was contacted several times. The communication looked fine to me at that time. I did not think it would be a good conference, but did not think it would be a fraudulent event at all either. I became cautious when they send me an email asking me to register and pay I just wrote an email to them and rejected their invitation completely.

The other two researchers I contacted with my concerns about the conference did not reply to me. But who is submitting to this conferences and why?

Anton: [00:29:25] Okay. So there are good reasons to do it. And the reasons are if you need to get some evidence of impact for your work. Quickly and easily and cheaply. And the same goes for, um, questionable journals as well. If I am under a lot of pressure to have a number of research outputs and conference material, as part of it, something like this could be really effective.

There's also potentially students or early career researchers who need to bulk the numbers up. There also might be people who have questionable results. They've worked on them hard and they've come up with something and they, and if you apply for something that doesn't have great peer review, then is anyone really going to notice, but you are able to pop that into your resume.

David: [00:30:19] Okay. I've had Correspondence with decent good scientists who have been taken in. And who've asked me, I've suddenly re I realized, I just looked at your, your website, your blog. I realized I submitted this to a, you know, to a place I shouldn't have they accepted it and they've made it worse in their editing. They actually did change some words.

Um, what can I do? This person ultimately was able to withdraw the article before it got published, but only, uh, he worked at a company, not in a university and he had the legal

department, or he had his lawyer, right. In order to threaten them, they were, they had taken the paper under false pretenses and so on.

Other people aren't as lucky I've. And this is a sad situation, but someone wrote me and said, you know, can you remove my name from your blog as one of the editors of this journal. I've come up for promotion. And this has come up that this is a predatory journal and I didn't want to be identified with it. And I mean, I said, no, I'm sorry, but you're on the board of editors. Whether I take the name off or not, it's kinda too late.

Christoph: [00:31:47] So our academics, so gullible.

Anton: [00:31:50] We're all gullible. This is one of the things I've learned over time. Is that in effect the smarter we think we are. In one particular thing, we know that it doesn't translate to the rest of our lives. Some of us do. Some of us who got some sense of acceptance around that. Being pulled into these things, I can imagine being relatively simple..

David: [00:32:14] There's an old saying, I forget who said it, PT, Barnum. Uh, this is may, may, may too much of an American reference. Um, but anyway, that there's a sucker born every minute. And as long as people are paying, present themselves as open access journals. Or conferences and so on, they will be out there advertising

Christoph: [00:32:36] Maybe you can walk us through if a researcher wants to participate in your conference, what does, what do you have to do to participate What is the process?

Devasai: [00:32:51] Yeah, one second, please. Again, repeat the question.

Christoph: [00:32:56] I was wondering if you can walk us through the process of when people want to participate in your conference, what, what do you need to do? What is the process?

Devasai: [00:33:08] Yeah, we are contacting the researcher. By seeing that profile and, and research where we are contacting them. Well, contacting, we are having a conversation with them and we can proceed.

Christoph: [00:33:24] Okay. So you invite people to participate and you do that to me. I received an email from you where you invited me and. Does that mean that only people who receive an invitation can participate or could people also submit their own work?

Devasai: [00:33:42] Yeah, they have to submit their abstracts. where is the research work they are doing?

Christoph: [00:33:51] Okay. So people submit an abstract and what happens next?

Here we have another awkward pause with a request to repeat the question .To whom was Devasai communicating in the background?

Yeah.

Devasai: [00:34:09] Yeah again, can you repeat the question?

Christoph: [00:34:10] The question is once people submit an abstract, what are the next steps? What happens next?

Devasai: [00:34:16] After receiving the abstract we can forward it to the review committee. And once the acceptance is approved, then we can move forward.

Christoph: [00:34:30] The review committee is that the, uh, conference committee that is listed on the webpage or who is that?

Devasai: [00:34:36] No we are inviting three members

Christoph: [00:34:40] Sorry, what kind of members?

Devasai: [00:34:41] We can't reveal that.

Christoph: [00:34:44] Oh, so you contact, uh, you, you contact reviewers and ask them to review the abstract. And if they say, okay, this is a good abstract, then you invite the person to give a presentation. Is that the idea?

Devasai: [00:34:58] Hmm.

Christoph: [00:34:59] Actually, a question that I had, I submitted an abstract. Do you expect me to also write a full paper?

Devasai: [00:35:08] Yeah, I understood just to be out, uh, organizing the conference. For that we are addressing the abstract and, um, we had, um, one second.

Christoph: [00:35:21] Clearly he's talking to somebody else. What made me curious is that most of the people that I could identify as being the directors of these companies are all rather young. Recent graduates from universities. I'm left wondering if there might be more senior members in the background.

Devasai: [00:35:43] Yeah, you can go ahead. And ask another question

Christoph: [00:35:47] No. I was just wondering for myself, like sometimes you have conferences where you submit an abstract and then closer to the conference, you have to submit a full paper.

Devasai: [00:35:59] okay. You can submit a full paper that we had in process with in person via contact with a general publication compound company company. When contacting them, you had paper will be published in the journals.

Christoph: [00:36:16] Okay. That was actually my

Devasai: [00:36:18] It is, it is, it is entirely different. from conference. It is a journal and it is contract conference where your research paper, four or five papers that is concerned at the manuscript that manuscript can be, can be a editorial board, can be review that one. And then once it is accepted, then you can contact that to the general publishing com companies. And you can publish that journal.

Christoph: [00:36:46] And what kind of journal companies are those.

Devasai: [00:36:51] No, we are not in step in general publishing and just we are conducting and organizing the conferences. Just, we have entered in this platform. Conferences. Spectrum may have our main aim is to. All researchers are to be stay in one platform and to elaborate this ideas, ideas, research works and main theme is it is a one network. It's a platform researchers can connect, we can exchange it already.

Christoph: [00:37:25] The conference website says nothing about full papers or about a possible publication of them in a journal. My guess is that they're are making this up on the spot or that there intend to use scientific review to push out these papers. In a flaky journal.

Now let's say if a person would write a really, really bad abstract and it would be submitted to your reviewers, what would happen then?

Yeah. So as you mentioned, I took it upon myself to write an abstract. Do you think this abstract has any kind of scientific merit

Anton: [00:38:05] no, not at all. I think it's got sociological merit. I think I could write a paper on this abstract in that the way that you have put in virtually every decent buzzword from about, I'd say 1995 to present is really impressive. And you've done it in a way that actually imparts no meaning at all, which, um, it really, really, um, I like that a lot, so yes, I could write a paper on this, but this paper itself. No.

David: [00:38:33] Anybody who knows anything about the field is going to say, this is a joke, right? It's jargony, big data disruptions, synergistic, alignments, and so on. But I got to say I've seen funnier ones. That are even more leap out at you even more. So I submitted one to a conference. Uh, I think it was the world Congress on genetics and in it, I offered to give a paper on a new form of DNA that had been discovered called K DNA that was discovered using the techniques of alchemy.

And they said, you know, of course, please come. You are being more subtle. I've been on the editorial part of journals and there's no way a paper with your abstract would be accepted. It's dense with, with not just jargon in the field, but, but really empty words. People have done such outrageous things. I mean, they've composed material using the auto-complete feature of their phone.

Christoph: [00:39:37] Oh, that was me.

David: [00:39:39] Oh yeah. Did you do that? Okay.

Christoph: [00:39:41] I did that one. Yes.

David: [00:39:44] Well, you're not the only one. Or where there was a group who used random note, random word generators. Um,

Christoph: [00:39:51] There are automatic paper generators for math and computer science where you just given a couple of parameters and it automatically generates a paper for you

that does exist. And they look on the face of it again, convincing, but of course, completely empty.

Devasai: [00:40:05] Yeah, funnel that we have.

just because we have recently, we have started this company.

Christoph: [00:40:17] Right now, every abstract that gets submitted is accepted for the conference. Is that the idea right now?

Devasai: [00:40:26] Yeah.

Christoph: [00:40:27] Did you hear that. Every abstract submitted gets accepted!

David: [00:40:32] To claim that it's for example, a rigorously peer reviewed when it's not, you know, that's a deceptive practice. That's a scam in my book because you are misrepresenting what you are doing. It's also partly predatory.

Christoph: [00:40:49] How do these conference sustain themselves?

Anton: [00:40:52] It's a volume game. I mean, how did you find out about this conference in the first place?

Christoph: [00:40:57] I received an email invitation.

Anton: [00:40:59] Exactly. So out of the blue, you receive an email invitation. It is towards your discipline. So they have obviously done a little bit of work in getting email addresses. When I think about it, that's not too hard, a little bit of a script on Scopus or something like that.

I'd be able to get email list or I might just buy one, you know, we can do this. The business model is about getting people to submit abstracts, getting them accepted so that people will register. And it seems that they've left the bar for submitting abstracts very low, which means more people are going to register.

David: [00:41:34] One answer is that they fill a market. Academics who are very unsophisticated or unduly ambitious.

Christoph: [00:41:46] Okay, so you don't filter like or you select papers or you might even reject papers if they're not good enough, nothing. nothing like this?

Devasai: [00:41:56] Yes. If the abstract is good and it is valid abstract. There is no plagiarism in there, then it did get accepted. If the abstract is having a lot of plagiarism content and they did some other research sector work, um, and they're publishing this, some other conference ups stood up to this conference, upstairs then abstract can be rejected.

Christoph: [00:42:20] Plagiarism checks can be done almost automatically these days. And they do not require a scientific editors. While Devasai might have checked submissions for plagiarism. It alone does not qualify for or substitute peer review.

That's very wise. I do that all the time with my students as well to check plagiarism is indeed a big problem, but there's also another problem. And that is, and this is probably where I have to make a confession. The abstract that I wrote. is actually complete nonsense. It doesn't actually make any sense. And I was wondering why you invited me to give a keynote speech.

Okay. He just disconnected. Wow. That's a pity. So I just try to ask him to re connect because yeah, he hung up and now he's asking me to make a phone call. So I guess I'll try that again. Hello. Hello Deva it's Christopher again.

Devasai: [00:43:41] Yeah. You can speak with me.

Christoph: [00:43:43] I'm. Sorry. Is it possible to go back to clean feed since the quantity is so much better

Devasai: [00:43:49] and you can go through phone,

Christoph: [00:43:51] could we not just use clean feed? It was working so nicely and then your voice was very clear. Nice. That was all very good.

you don't want this to be in the broadcast okay.

Devasai: [00:44:03] Yeah, yeah, yeah. Please.

Christoph: [00:44:05] Could I still ask you a couple of questions?

Devasai: [00:44:08] No, I have answered all of your question?

Christoph: [00:44:11] Devasai no longer want to talk to me using the clean feed software that runs in a web browser. He only wanted to talk to me on the phone. Probably because he thought that it would not be possible to record a normal phone conversation. Well, it is possible, but I have to respect his direct request, not to broadcast the conversation that followed

Devasai apologized for accepting my paper. And he begged me not to broadcast the interview. He claimed that they are only trying to provide a platform for scientists to exchange ideas and that they did nothing illegal. David did keep researchers accountable for their participation in predatory conferences and journals, Shaik Riyaz and Devasai Udarapu need to be held accountable for the science horizon conference. And it is important to warn researchers about this probable scam.

Do you think this event will actually ever take place? Will people travel to Rome and attend an event?

Anton: [00:45:29] I sincerely doubt it. And the main reason I doubt it is the information that you gave me about the abstract that they accepted. And that, to me, it feels like it was a good test to see whether, um, they were taking this seriously. It's a really interesting question, whether it will actually happen because of course we don't know it, it could, there

could be enough people who actually sign up for it, that it becomes a worthwhile thing to do.

It could be a new company that is. You have to start these things somehow. And a conference organization, working out of India. Sounds like a good way of doing it with potentially lower costs than employing organizers that are perhaps in Northern Europe. I get it. So there's nothing against the idea of that.

David: [00:46:17] The business model is just to put out your schematics for a conference. People will come to it because they want to go to a nice city like Rome. And some of them will, they don't really care. They want a tax write off in the U S at any rate. Uh, you go on a business trip and you deducted from your taxes. So you take a nice vacation.

Christoph: [00:46:43] What I found quite interesting is when I was selecting the submission type,

Anton: [00:46:47] Hmm.

Christoph: [00:46:48] I could select a keynote presentation. So I essentially became a keynote speaker because I could.

Anton: [00:46:56] It's lovely. It's I must get a few of those.

Christoph: [00:46:58] It's slightly better than one. Usually having to build up an academic reputation and being asked, or invited to become a keynote speaker. I just selected so that I found that quite interesting.

Anton: [00:47:10] I've been monitored on the keynote gravy train for a while. So.

David: [00:47:15] At a genetics conference, I noticed that a Nobel Laureate was described in the program and the T the description was written in a, what is colloquially called Chinglish. It was hard for me to believe that the individual who was being listed as a plenary speaker had had conceivably, you know, he, that he might not even be aware of this.

So I wrote him because I had had previous contact with him and to my surprise, I mean, what he wrote back was thank you very much. And he contacted them to correct the biography a bit, but he was in fact a speaker there. And that was perhaps a more was in a more sophisticated operation. I don't know, but I think they were paying for a few speakers in order to entice others. And they did have a Nobel Laureate on their panel, even though I would have no hesitation to call them predatory.

Christoph: [00:48:19] Another thing that occurred is that within three days or three or four days, I got a row acceptance letter with almost like a certificate of acceptance that had never happened to me. Normally you get like an email saying you got accepted with peer review comments, but you never get a certificate of acceptance.

Not no, but a PDF. Oh no, with a stamp on and everything. So that was struck me a bit odd. Why do you think these type of conferences, uh, put such a high emphasis on certificates? Things that have looked like some sort of achievement, I suppose.

Anton: [00:48:58] I suspect they're looking for chain registration. So you will say, oh, look at this one, I've been accepted for this fantastic conference. And then you'll encourage your colleagues and your contacts to follow along and, and come along and spend a lovely time in Rome with you and get up, get one of one yourself. The other thing is that it could well be as as concern.

There's always a concern about how we measure impact and productivity within universities. This looks like evidence. Rather than just forwarding an email that says, um, you've had a conference abstract, uh, accepted you've got this slightly more tangible thing, but once again, as you said, uh, I've never had a certificate of award for actually just having an abstract accepted.

Christoph: [00:49:49] Now here's the question when abstracts like mine get published. And enter the body of scientific knowledge. What effect does this have on our society?

Anton: [00:50:05] That's a really interesting question. And I think what we'll find is that it probably won't have that much effect at all. The reason being is in libraries, we have a perception, both of being, uh, of accuracy and precision so these are the librarian terms about making sure you get the right information and that you get all of the right information.

We also have another one which is called curation, which is about disregarding low quality. So, this is one of the things about open access that's happened. Actually, what we've found is a study came out many years ago and has been recently reviewed, which is that work that comes out as open access and free to access is cited more if it's good quality. So more than pay for access. If it's poor quality, it gets cited less than toal access journals. So making things open and making things easily achievable and accessible things currate themselves. So what will this do? Well, I think what it'll do is it will present researchers of culture and of knowledge in the future.

Essentially this generation's version of snake oil people will be entertained by it.

David: [00:51:31] What I find in other situations, uh, as I, as I say, are people without an appropriate academic background, trying to induce academics to publish in their journals. And that does the world know.

Christoph: [00:51:49] Shaik Riyaz and Devasai Udarapu graduated from the same university in the same year. They were friends and also work together probably for scientific erevna they have never worked in science. Have no postgraduate degree and have never organized a conference or journal before. They have also never worked as an editor.

Still, Devasai claims to have been the digital marketing executive at scientific erevna on his LinkedIn profile.

But here we're having two people in the room who are familiar with scientific literature and the process of how it's worked. We are able to read an article and form an opinion about its quality. But there are a lot of people out there who have not this high level of training is true. And we've seen now in all sorts of instances where the oh look, I found a scientific

study that supports whatever kind of conspiracy theory I have is supported by this piece of work. This can actually have a quite negative impact. So it's surprising that the non librarian here is more concerned.

Anton: [00:53:06] I'm probably an optimist.

David: [00:53:08] But meanwhile, you get this whole literature going out there, clogging everything up. Bad currency drives out good is Gresham's law or economics. Here it becomes an issue in the field I work in, which is, uh, the use of science in the courtroom. Because now people can say, oh, there's a literature that, uh, you know, this is not just my opinion, uh, there are sources for it.

Christoph: [00:53:34] David's argument is of utmost importance. Scientific papers of little or no quality at all can and are being used in the courtroom. For years the tobacco industry could stall legal actions against them. By claiming that there is contradicting scientific evidence. There would be no consent on the relationship between smoking and lung. Just a few bad papers, can delay important reforms. It is important to call out predatory conferences and journals, even at the risk of being sued.

Well, this speaks actually an interesting question. So you're running these blogs, flaky conferences, flaky journals. Are you ever worried that you'll be sued at some point?

David: [00:54:29] The libel laws, at least in the United States. which is where I do everything are first such that, um, I mean, these are matters of public interest, that there's reasonable protection for making these statements that I make. So, nah I'm not too worried.

Christoph: [00:54:47] It takes very little effort to set up a series of websites to advertise scientific conferences. The science horizon conference is only one of far too many predatory conferences. For every conference we take down two will start up. Shaik Riyaz and Devasai Udarapu are only the symptom of a flawed system.

Anton: [00:55:13] It's not a difficult gift. It's not a complicated one. If you want it to do it. And the more I think about it I wonder why I go to my day job, it wouldn't be difficult to manage something like this. Come to beautiful Christchurch, New Zealand come to a conference.

David: [00:55:28] Yeah. What surprised me was that the blogs of mine that we'd been talking get a heck of a lot more reads, than my serious academic blog on forensic science, statistics and law. Now, of course that's an narrower subject and that's the reason, but still I'm finding that some people are genuinely hurt by them. Others are just ignorant but I get a lot of, sort of thank you notes that, um, you know, I got this email, it sounded good. I started to look into it. I came across what you said and oh my gosh. But I got to admit, I'm not sure how much longer I can keep this up. I don't have classes to meet, but I do do some pro bono legal work that, you know, might be better than just keeping track of emails.

But then again, I never ceased to be amazed at what I find.

Christoph: [00:56:26] The true change must come from us. We must stop submitting papers to flaky conferences and journals and stop participating in their organization.