

# The real dirty secret of academic publishing

You can get almost anything into print if you go far enough down the ranks of journals.

Sir—I cannot in all honesty share in the anxiety surrounding publication of a dubious paper on ‘intelligent design’—regarded by most scientists as a version of creationism—in a journal with an impact factor of less than one. Your News story “Peer-reviewed paper defends theory of intelligent design” (*Nature* 431, 114; 2004) suggests that getting an intelligent-design paper into a peer-reviewed journal is a huge achievement for creationism. I am more surprised it took so long to get one in.

The paper in question presents no new arguments and is unremarkable in any way except in that it has been published. It appeared in a journal that, until this particular editorial decision, enjoyed

much-deserved obscurity. Proponents of intelligent design would have us believe that this publication is a testament to the scientific legitimacy of their theory—although the editor has since left and the journal has disowned the paper as “inappropriate” (see *Nature* 431, 237; 2004).

In my opinion it is yet another testament to the rampant proliferation of scientific publications, resulting in a flood of inconsequential papers appearing in those thousands of journals that exist on the fringes of scientific publication.

The editors and reviewers of many low-impact journals cannot provide the quality reviewing process one gets with *Nature*, *Science*, *Cell* and a few (very few indeed)

other established magazines, but any of them can affix the stamp of legitimacy to their outpourings by formally following the ‘peer-review’ protocol.

Let’s admit it—and this is the real dirty secret of academic publishing—one can publish just about anything if one goes far enough down the list of impact factors. There are papers all around us containing problems glaring enough to fail their authors in undergraduate midterm exams. The only reason they are not in the spotlight is because they do not deal with the theory of intelligent design.

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## US restrictions limit anthrax networking

Sir—With reference to Thomas May’s Commentary article “Isolation is not the answer” (*Nature* 429, 603; 2004), we would like to comment on European progress towards the goal of harmonizing international research on high-risk biological agents. Some of the obstacles along the way have been noted by J. van Aken and colleagues in Correspondence (“Biosecurity must be internationally supervised” *Nature* 431, 17; 2004).

Activities that speed the development of viable vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostic tools are a key component to combat the threat of bioterrorism. To this end, the European Commission has mobilized start-up funds to strengthen networking activities among researchers, industry and the public-health sector.

One such network, Anthrax-EuroNet ([www.anthraxeuro.net.org](http://www.anthraxeuro.net.org)), unites leading anthrax researchers in France, the United Kingdom, Germany and Italy to discuss ways to harmonize research practices, to exchange information and materials, and to strengthen networking with countries in and beyond the European Union.

One goal is to develop a handbook of current and recommended protocols to improve comparison and interpretation of research data. Therefore, we circulated a questionnaire to all leading anthrax research labs working on vaccines and therapeutics. Because much research on this topic is done in the United States, the input of US scientists was essential to this survey; the feedback we received from them was supportive. The survey revealed that the possible exchange of information

was restricted by US regulations. In general, US scientists seem unsure how to interpret existing rules and fearful of releasing what could be considered sensitive information.

Follow-up discussions are under way to see what restrictions we are facing and how we can overcome them. Access to scientific information and materials exchanges could be greatly facilitated if there were clear international regulations in place.

Without such regulations and support for international networking, progress in biodefence research, especially the expertise needed to develop new prophylactics and tools for rapid detection and containment of diseases, will be significantly hindered.

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## Today is the time to take environmental action

Sir—Your News story highlighting the different perceptions of climate change between US and German audiences of the environmental-disaster film *The Day After Tomorrow* (*Nature* 431, 4; 2004) raises some interesting issues, and resonates with the findings of our recent survey of UK film-goers. The prime minister, Tony Blair, reaffirmed his commitment in September to the United Kingdom taking the lead in combating climate change. Our findings indicate that there is a clear and urgent need for governments to provide support for individuals who wish to take action.

Our research (see [www.tyndall.ac.uk/research/theme3/summary\\_t3\\_dat.shtml](http://www.tyndall.ac.uk/research/theme3/summary_t3_dat.shtml))

shows that seeing the film did, at least in the short term, change people’s perceptions. Viewers were significantly more concerned not only about climate change, but also about other environmental risks such as biodiversity loss and radioactive waste disposal. However, the portrayal of extreme events in the film also confused people: they believed extreme climate impacts were less likely, and would not be experienced within their lifetime, after seeing the film.

We found that many viewers of the film expressed a strong motivation to act on climate change—more so than before seeing the film. Less than 5% of the 301 people surveyed believed that there was no point in taking action. But despite being strongly motivated, people did not know what action to take. They require specific guidance on what to do to mitigate climate change, with positive images and examples to enable them to make appropriate changes to their everyday lives.

In his speech last month to the Prince of Wales’s Business and the Environment Programme, Blair said: “To make serious headway towards smarter lifestyles, we need to start with clear and consistent policy and messages, championed both by government and by those outside government: telling people what they can do that would make a difference.”

We agree that the time is right to provide incentives to householders, perhaps through domestic transport and energy initiatives, to help translate public support for addressing climate change, as we have seen following *The Day After Tomorrow*, into concrete personal, individual and collective action.

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