

Dear highly-esteemed expert: how to cope with academic spam

Researchers who tested intervention to reduce spam say ‘Get familiar with the delete button.’

Daniel Cressey

14 December 2016



Glasshouse Image/Mary Evans Picture Library

Overflowing inboxes: what spam mail looked like in the 20th century.

Andrew Grey is an eminent professor, held in high esteem. He knows this because — like many academics — he receives scores of messages a month that tell him so. They are spam e-mails, requesting his presence at conferences or his contributions to journals.

A medical doctor and bone researcher at the University of Auckland in New Zealand, Grey has charted his experiences trying to stop spam in an article titled ‘We read spam a lot: prospective cohort study of unsolicited and unwanted academic invitations’, published on 14 December in the *BMJ*’s annual light-hearted Christmas issue¹.

Grey’s research team collected all the academic spam they received between February and April 2014, which averaged 2.1 per day for each team member. In May 2014 they trialled an intervention: unsubscribing from the spam mailing lists. Attempting to unsubscribe reduced spam by 39% after one month. But a year later, spam was only 19% down on 2014 levels, the team say.

Nature corresponded with Grey about his findings. Here is an edited version of that exchange.

If you had to summarize your findings in the style of a spam e-mail, what would you say?

Dear Collegial Honourable Professors,
Greetings for the day!!!!!!

We implore your esteemed science attention to our Academic Spam Study (ASS) that brings shared enlightenment of rather annoying invitation emails to write excellent prestigious research papers or attend utmost international conferences of interdisciplinary excellence. Many relentless invitation emails are received every day by iconic research members who cannot stop them even though they are very esteemed research professors. Most invitation emails are greatly not relevant to research field of receiver researcher. Sometimes, same email invitations are sent many times!!! We detect amusing words often sometimes in email invitations.



Your team received 312 spam invitations per month, which dropped to 253 per month a year after your unsubscribing spree. Was this reduction worth the effort?

No.

Your team also found 83% of spam had 'little or no relevance' to your research interests. Does this mean that 17% of spam was relevant?

Relevant in the sense of having some connection with our academic interests. The proportion of invitations that was useful was 0%.

'Tasty spam' - Selected communications from Grey et al.

"We were impressed by the great enthusiasm of the invitations, featuring up to six exclamation marks! Flattery and inventive turns of phrase were prominent," say the authors.

Friendly and exuberant

"Let your wisdom enkindle others"

Do you have a particular favourite piece of spam you've received?

Invitations to attend the Friends of Israel Urological Symposium

Invitations to publish in Journal of Investigative Medicine High Impact Case Reports

An invitation to a meeting that "paves a way to gather visionaries"

An invitation that implored "let your vision enkindle others"

An invitation to a meeting that is "creating a kind of mind storming forum"

What is your take-home message for scientists plagued by spam? Should they fight it, or just give up?

Get familiar with the delete button. Or threaten the sender with anti-spam legislation. [In 2016 Canadian researchers [reported some success](#) with this approach².]

Conversely, what is your advice to those sending the spam? How can they better serve the scientific community?

Go away. By disappearing. Academia could help itself by removing some of its perverse incentives to publish come what may, and publish in large quantities.

In the absence of spam, how should researchers judge the esteem in which they're held?

Judging one's own esteem is not advisable.

Your paper mentions a possible First Annual International Symposium on Academic Spam. How is planning for 'Spam-2017' going? Can the community expect an e-mail invitation shortly?

Unfortunately, plans are delayed because we can't agree on the wording of the invitation!!!!!!

Nature | doi:10.1038/nature.2016.21158

- References

1. Grey, A. *et al. Br. Med. J.* <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.i5383> (2016).

2. Mazzarello, S. *et al. Curr. Oncol.* **23**, e75–e76 (2016).

Nature ISSN 0028-0836 EISSN 1476-4687

SPRINGER NATURE

© 2019 Macmillan Publishers Limited, part of Springer Nature. All Rights Reserved.
partner of AGORA, HINARI, OARE, INASP, CrossRef and COUNTER