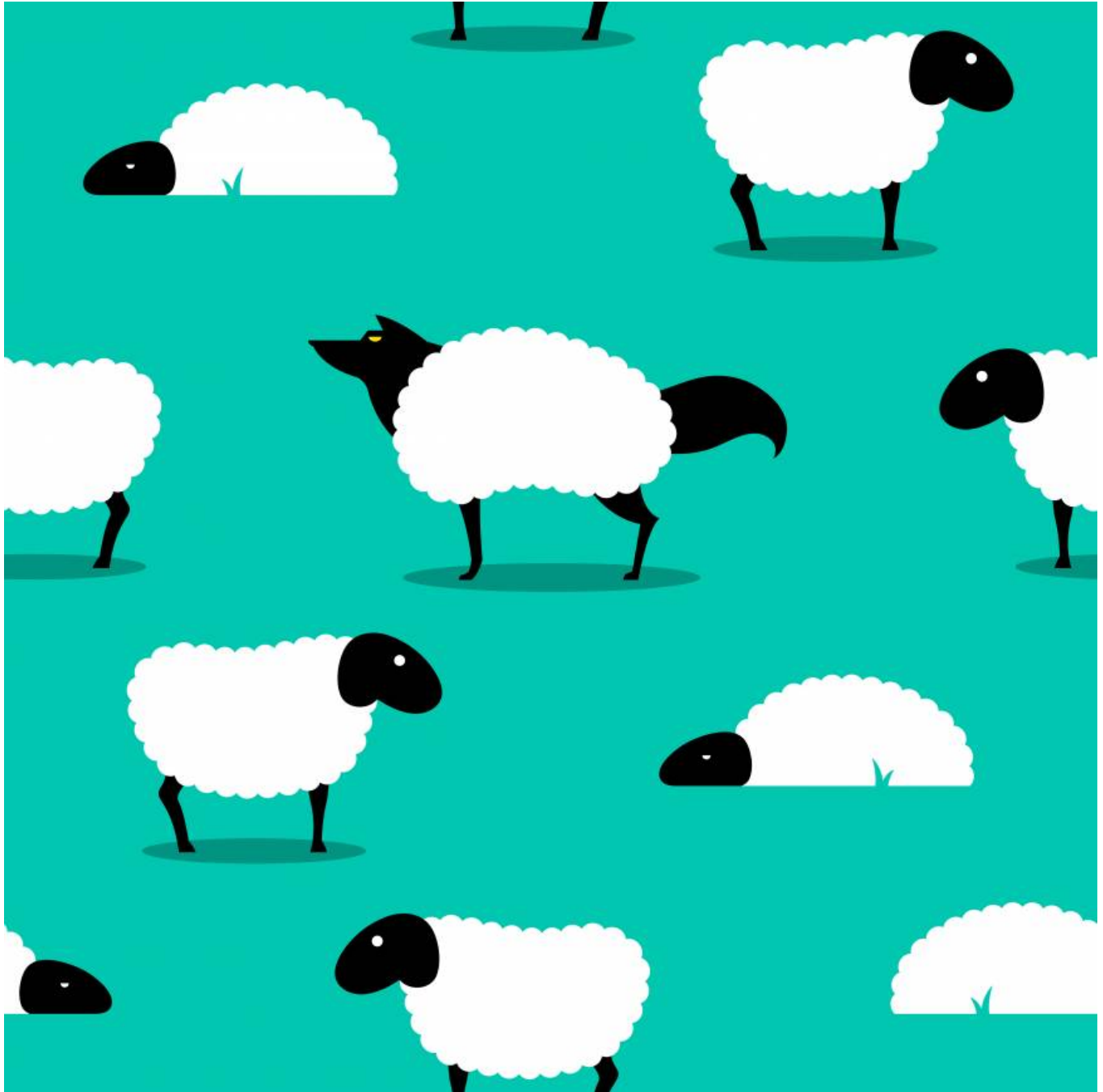


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## 'Predatory conferences' stalk Japan's groves of academia

BY JAMES MCCROSTIE

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“Predatory conference” organizers now stalk Japan’s groves of academe, preying on unsuspecting researchers. These conferences are inferior events that contribute little to the field of academic knowledge but generate plenty of revenue for organizers’ bank accounts. Academics, some simply naive but others willingly participating, risk hurting their wallets and reputations by presenting at such conferences and helping to organize them.

Attendees paying with university research budgets often don’t mind the cost. One university instructor, who didn’t want to be named, said he attended an expensive for-profit conference because his university had paid, but that he would have balked at paying the high fee out of his own pocket. In the case of public universities, these research budgets are covered by taxpayer money. Tom Spears reported in [a 2014 Ottawa Citizen article](http://ottawacitizen.com/technology/science/science-and-the-death-of-peer-review) (<http://ottawacitizen.com/technology/science/science-and-the-death-of-peer-review>) that one Canadian university had canceled the travel plans of faculty planning to attend such conferences.

Predatory conferences are for-profit, low-quality academic meetings that exploit researchers’ need to share and publish their research. According to Jeffrey Beall, a librarian at the University of Colorado Denver, they’re similar to the established problem of predatory publishing. Predatory publishers will, for a fee, publish any article by posting it to an online journal. Beall maintains a blacklist of publishers to avoid on his Scholarly Open Access blog.

As Beall explains by email, “The problem is that predatory conference organizers are removing merit, selectivity and peer review from the system of academic evaluation and replacing it with a product that pretty much anyone can purchase: speaking slots at ‘scholarly’ conferences.”

## The sting

Conferences held by respected academic societies use a peer review system to weed out weak submissions. Typically, experts rate submissions, allowing organizers to select the best. Predatory conferences, on the other hand, accept nearly every proposal to maximize revenues.

To test conference standards, I submitted some fake proposals created with the online tool SCIgen, which generates nonsensical but grammatically correct papers. Graduate students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology designed it to produce papers that “maximize amusement, rather than coherence,” which can then be used to test conferences suspected of low standards.

SCIgen titled my first paper “Visualizing Cache Coherence Using Extensible Models.” The first two sentences read: “Thin clients must work. After years of important research into kernels, we confirm the theoretical unification of systems and consistent hashing, which embodies the confusing principles of networking.” The remainder of the paper is equally incoherent.

Using the pseudonym Sandor Edelstein, Ph.D., and listing him as a professor at the nonexistent Fukuoka Educational College of Knowledge (FECK), I submitted the paper to six suspected predatory conferences. All six accepted it.

Using various pseudonyms, I submitted similar fake SciGEN papers to a total of 12 conferences from six organizations. Ten were accepted, by the American Society for Research (ASR), Global Academic Network (GAN), Higher Education Forum (HEF), International Academy Institute (IAI), and Universal Academic Cluster (UAC). All these organizations regularly hold conferences in Japan.

Sophie Tsang, director of ASR's Conference Department, expressed regret in an email that its reviewer didn't "take the appropriate responsibility." She added, "We will strengthen our coming review process by enhancing the sense of responsibility of the reviewers as well as the qualification of them."

GAN and HEF failed to reply with any explanation of how the papers passed their peer review process. An unsigned email from IAI's conference secretariat didn't explain their peer review system, but argued that conference participants "would not do such a pitiful, deceiving and filthy action" as to try to submit a nonsense paper. "We believe in our participants," the email concluded.

UAC's conference chair, Banyat Sroysang, claimed one reviewer accepted the nonsense paper while another had recommended rejection. By email, Sroysang explained that he accepted it after a Google search failed to uncover any "bad history" behind "Sandor Edelstein."

A second ASR conference rejected a fake proposal, as did Japan-based International Academic Forum (IAFOR).

Only four hours after submission, Nagoya-based Pacific Rim Education for Sustainable Development Alliance (which has since relocated to Gifu and been renamed the International Education for Sustainable Development Alliance) accepted another nonsense proposal titled "Developing International Communicative Competence Through Autonomous Extensive Speaking and Critical Thinking Tasks." It contained all the unrelated teaching buzzwords I could squeeze into the 123-word abstract. A PRESDA/INTESDA conference organizer said that two reviewers had approved the proposal within the four-hour period.

IAFOR accepted the same nonsense proposal within a month and another, plagiarized from the most-cited article in the field of cognitive psychology, only a day after I submitted it. IAFOR then requested both "authors" review other proposals.

"No abstract system is perfect, and in the end a lot does come down to trust," IAFOR President Joseph Haldane said when asked about the acceptance process. He also admitted that he and IAFOR's research and policy manager perform peer review to help overcome bottlenecks.

## The scams

It's impossible to say how many predatory conferences take place in Japan. Organizers often group small and disparate conferences together into one event but maintain separate websites for each. For example, IAI, a subsidiary of the Taiwan-based International Business Academics Consortium (iBAC), held four conferences between July 22 and 24, 2015, in four Waseda University classrooms.

Predatory conferences typically take place in Japanese universities, hotels and conference centers every month. Websites for 10 known and suspected predatory conference organizers had 128 questionable events scheduled in Japan between January 2015 and March 2016.

Some advertised events may never occur. One organization, not included in the above group of 10, is the World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology (WASET). It had 111 conferences scheduled for Oct. 8-9, 2015, at the Hyatt Regency Osaka hotel. Citing a need to preserve confidentiality, a hotel spokesperson declined to confirm if WASET had booked any events. However, the University of Toronto issued a scam advisory after WASET falsely advertised a conference as taking place in June 2015.

Attending predatory conferences isn't cheap. Presenters typically pay \$300 to \$500. Optional dinners and travel tours can push the cost to \$800. These prices can be negotiable. Claiming university budget cuts, I haggled \$100 off GAN's \$400 fee and \$90 off Thailand-based UAC's \$290 charge.

Conferences organized by scholarly associations typically cost less. The Japan Society of Civil Engineers charges nonmembers a ¥20,000 (\$184) conference fee. The Japanese Economic Association charges only ¥3,000 (\$28), but researchers must also pay the ¥12,000 (\$110) annual membership. The Japanese Association for Language Teaching charges nonmembers ¥25,000 (\$230) for its three-day conference.

Holding conferences with as wide a scope as possible increases organizer revenues. About 300 people attended IAI's four conferences at Waseda University. Assuming everyone paid the \$400 early registration fee, the event generated about \$120,000.

Costs seem to have been minimal. The conference's local chair, Waseda University professor Hajime Tozaki, says the school provided classrooms for free. He denies receiving payment for delivering the keynote speech or serving on the iBAC Advisory Board. Presenters received boxed lunches, but attendees I spoke to complained that they looked terrible and tasted worse.

iBAC refused to reveal how many conferences it and its subsidiary IAI hold annually. An Internet search showed at least 28 conferences at 10 events organized by iBAC and its subsidiaries and partners for 2015. More than half were located in Japan with the rest around Asia. iBAC Chair Wenchang Fang, a professor at National Taipei University, and iBAC staff failed to respond to repeated emails asking what happened to conference profits.

## The damage

Predatory conferences hurt serious academics in several ways. Presenting at or helping organize predatory conferences can hurt reputations. In 2013, a Nagoya-based university instructor, who didn't want his name published, had a presentation proposal accepted by an HEF conference in Japan. He then got invited to deliver a conference keynote speech. By 2015, HEF had plastered his photo all over their website, listing him as an "Honorable Chair" or "International Liaison" for 10 conferences.

In a Skype interview, the instructor said that he wasn't aware that his picture and name had been used so extensively. He added that he nearly lost his job when Beall's Scholarly Open Access blog criticized his relationship with HEF and his dean blamed him for the bad publicity. At the instructor's request, HEF removed his name and picture from upcoming conference websites. They've been replaced with the names and pictures of other young Japan-based university instructors.

Reputations can also be hurt after publishing research presented at a predatory conference. The iBAC funnels conference papers to a sponsor called Science Publications. It charges authors \$350-\$525 and is on Beall's blacklist of publishers to avoid. HEF directs papers to at least six suspected predatory publishers blacklisted by Beall that charge authors between \$200 and \$300. When asked about these publishers, an unnamed spokesperson replied by email, "It might be our oversight that some of our cooperated parties are not qualified," adding that HEF would be reviewing its cooperation.

Reached by email, Beall said that publishing in journals on his blacklist could be "potentially damaging to the attendees, whose reputations could be hurt by publishing their work in low-quality, predatory journals."

Predatory conference organizers also hurt reputations by stealing researcher identities. For example, three university professors listed on iBAC's Tokyo conference website as members of the "International Committee" said by email that they weren't aware of the conference and hadn't given permission for their names to be used. Demands by a Canadian university that employs one of the wrongly listed instructors that its instructor and school's name be removed immediately went ignored.

Institutions hosting predatory conferences also find themselves preyed upon. In 2014 and 2015, Temple University Japan (TUJ) rented out space to GAN for their Tokyo conference. GAN's website used TUJ's logo and listed them as a "Global Partner." According to a TUJ spokesperson, the use of their name and logo was unauthorized. "We will be reviewing our relationship with them," the representative said. GAN's website removed TUJ's logo and the Italian Culture Institute in Chiyoda Ward will host GAN's 2016 Tokyo conference.

Unscrupulous researchers can exploit predatory conferences and publishers to get more of the publications required to aid hiring and promotion. While SCIdgen's creators designed the software to amuse themselves, people around the world have been using it to "write" and publish conference speeches. Cyril Labbe from France's Joseph Fourier University discovered 120 SCIdgen computer-generated papers published in 30 conference proceedings between

2008 and 2013. Honest academics submitting to conferences with stricter peer-review risk seeing their careers wither as less-principled researchers pay to publish and rack up citations and conference appearances.

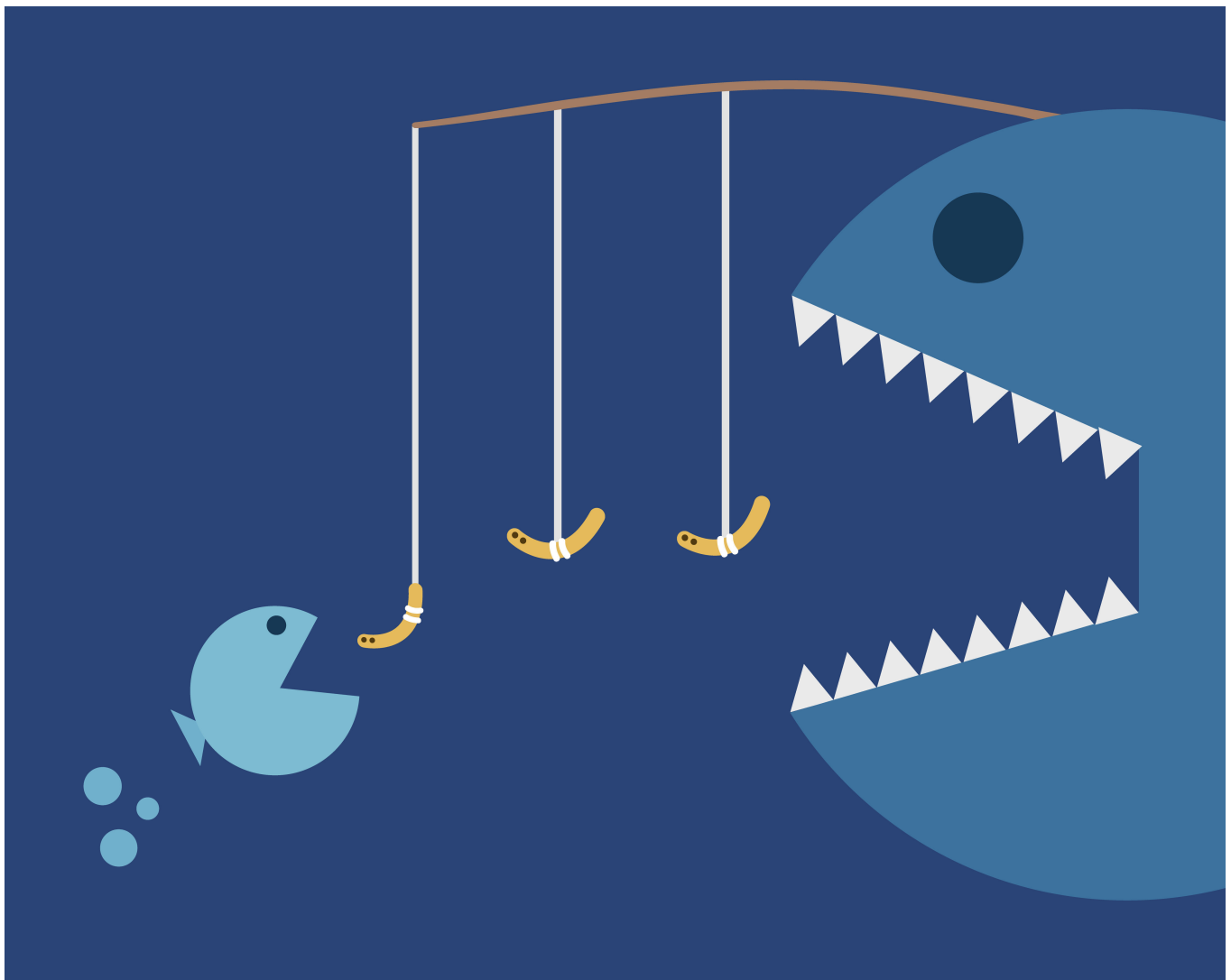
Authors with controversial views use predatory conferences and journals to legitimize their theories. For example, Beall's blog criticizes iBAC's sponsor, Science Publications, for publishing "pseudoscience" related to a miracle cure called GcMAF. Supporters claim the treatment is a cure for cancer, autism, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease and AIDS.

Beall's blog also documents the use of predatory conferences and journals to argue that space dust causes global warming, deny the dangers of asbestos, declare the discovery of extraterrestrial life and warn that Fukushima nuclear fallout is causing thyroid problems in Californian newborns.

Beall warned in a 2012 article in Nature magazine that the work of legitimate researchers runs the risk of becoming "tainted by association" if it appears next to unsound research.

Douglas Sipp, a research specialist at the RIKEN Center for Developmental Biology in Kobe, says he noticed five years ago an increasing number of conferences "which have little actual substance."

"It should concern everyone," he says, "as in many cases the costs of travel and registration are paid for using taxpayer money."



(<http://d1udmfvw0p7cd2.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/p8-predcons-b-20160512.jpg>)

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## So where do all the profits go?

Following the fees paid by researchers to take part in predatory events can be difficult because organizers don't always receive the money.

Taiwan-based Higher Education Forum sometimes has attendees transfer fees to the Hong Kong bank account of Asia-Pacific Educational Research Association Ltd., another conference organizer using the same address as HEF. A spokesperson for the group who failed to sign their emails ignored questions about who owns the company. HEF's website doesn't list anyone's names and their acceptance letters contain only an illegible signature.

Locating predatory conference organizers' offices can also prove challenging. Google Street View reveals the American Society for Research's California address to be a suburban home. When asked why, conference secretary Jenny Chow explained by email: "That's our bosses (sic) place. Our organization is set up in USA, but now our operation is in China." Requests for the name of the boss were ignored. Business name registration statements filed with Los Angeles County list the conference organizing companies ASR, International Academy of Computer Technology, Science and Engineering Institute, and South Asia Institute of Science and Engineering, as well as IA Publishing, as all using the same California address.

Twelve days before the Sept. 3 opening of Global Academic Network's conference at Miami's St. Thomas University, I received an email announcing its cancellation. "Unfortunately, the university we have cooperated with for so many years, decided not to prolong the contract," organizer Gloria Wilkinson explained by email. St. Thomas University's provost and chief academic officer, Irma Becerra, says, "No one at St. Thomas has heard of the Global Academic Network."

By way of compensation for the Miami cancellation, Wilkinson told me that I could present at another GAN event. I was told to transfer the fee for their October conference in Seoul by Western Union to a Polish university instructor named Piotr Romanowski. Romanowski and his company English Services are listed as the registrant for GAN's website. Wilkinson denied Romanowski owned the company but refused to reveal the owner's name or reply to follow-up emails. Romanowski also failed to reply to emails.

Other companies obscure their for-profit status. For example, Japan-based International Academic Forum (IAFOR) claims on its website to be a "nonprofit organization" established in 2009. However, records show it wasn't established as an *ippan shadan hōjin*, which is normally translated into English as general incorporated association (GIA) — similar to an NPO — until June 2010.

IAFOR President and CEO Joseph Haldane and his brother Thomas, a nonexecutive director, established the for-profit IAFOR Limited Liability Co. (LLC) in 2009. While conferences are advertised on the IAFOR GIA home page, participants attending one of IAFOR's approximately 40 conferences in Japan and overseas pay fees to the for-profit IAFOR LLC. The IAFOR GIA web page makes no mention of its for-profit twin.

Joseph Haldane explains the need for the for-profit IAFOR by email: "Maintaining and planning a year ahead requires finance that would be inappropriate for a not-for-profit to hold. Separating the business activities from the organization is a normal structure, and protects the organization from losses and/or bankruptcy."

Legal and accounting experts I contacted don't agree with Haldane's assessment. For example, Hiroyuki Inagaki of the Nanohana Law Office in Osaka says there is no limit to the amount of money a GIA can hold in the bank.

From 2010 to 2015, the IAFOR (GIA) website also claimed to have a Hong Kong office. However, company registration documents show it's a virtual office for the Hong Kong company IAFOR Ltd. owned by the Haldane brothers. They also registered IAFOR Ltd. in the U.K.

Asked if the IAFOR (GIA) Advisory Board was aware of the three for-profit IAFOR firms, Joseph Haldane writes, "There is no attempt to conceal this." Yet none of the members of the IAFOR's Executive Council of the International Advisory Board that I contacted admitted to knowing about the companies. The six "members" who replied to emails said that the board never meets and they knew nothing at all about IAFOR.

## Spotting predatory events in the wild

So how can you know if a conference is predatory? Here are a few questions worth asking:

**1) Is a single group organizing conferences in completely different fields? Similarly, is the scope of a conference too wide or are a variety of conferences held together in the same hotel on the same weekend?** For example, an “International Conference on Arts and the Humanities” would be little use to most serious academics but great for maximizing revenues.

**2) Are submissions accepted too soon?** Getting accepted to legitimately peer-reviewed conferences takes time. If a proposal gets accepted in a matter of days, or before the call for papers has closed, it’s worth investigating further before paying the registration fee.

**3) Is the conference marketed like a holiday in the sun?** Predatory conferences are often held in tourist destinations, advertised through spam and websites resembling travel brochures, and offer tours.

**4) Does the conference fee seem high? Do presenters have to pay more than attendees?** Forcing presenters to pay extra to make a speech should be a red flag.

**5) Who and where are the organizers?** Predatory conferences might not list names of all the people involved, or falsely claim the involvement of legitimate scholars. They may also list phone numbers and addresses that are either nonexistent, private homes or virtual offices. The name of the organization might imply they are based in a Western country when in fact they operate out of a developing country. Or their website fails to mention any address at all.

**6) Do conference websites try too hard to give themselves a veneer of legitimacy?** Look for websites plastered with a plethora of partner organizations and their logos, especially Google Scholar. Long lists of directors, international members, liaisons, advisory board members and so on should also be examined particularly carefully.

**7) Has the organization or conference already been identified as suspicious?** Online searches may reveal complaints or suspicions.

**8) Are fees sent to a separate private company or an individual rather than the organizer itself?** Unfortunately many predatory conference organizers use PayPal, which makes it harder to see where the money is really going.

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