

The OA Interviews: OMICS Publishing Group's Srinu Babu Gedela

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In [an article](#) published in [The Charleston Advisor](#) in July 2010, [Jeffrey Beall](#), a librarian at the University of Colorado, Denver, described OMICS as a predatory Open Access publisher. "Having a large number of titles, as does the OMICS Publishing Group, is typical of predatory Open-Access publishers," he wrote. "Also typical is each journal's broad coverage. By offering 68 titles each with a broad coverage, this publisher is tacitly saying it will publish anything."

Is Beall's characterisation of OMICS fair? Founder and managing director of OMICS [Dr Srinu Babu Gedela](#) insists it is not. "We believe the peer review process is very important ... I am confident about the quality of the review process used in OMICS' journals."

Nevertheless, OMICS has published at least one article that even OMICS itself accepts should never have appeared in a peer-reviewed journal.

There have also been complaints that OMICS clones the names of other publishers' journals, and on one occasion copied text verbatim from a competitor's web site. This too Gedela denies. These incidents, he insists, were simply mistakes, and OMICS corrected the situation as soon as the problem was drawn to its attention.

A further complaint is that the publisher has been bombarding researchers with email invitations to join editorial boards, submit papers to its journals (of which there are now 200), and attend conferences. OMICS does not deny that it uses bulk email services. Nor does it plan to stop doing so. Indeed, Gedela implies, these activities are likely to increase in line with the growth of its business. "As we plan to organise 50 conferences in 2012, we will be mailing invitations to researchers frequently."

OMICS is just one of a growing number of controversial OA publishers: Beall's [list](#) of "predatory" publishers has now reached 28, and continues to grow. But while many researchers are quick to complain about the activities of these publishers, should not the research community accept some responsibility for the current excesses of the [OA Gold Rush](#)? After all, OMICS says that it has now recruited 20,000 researchers to its editorial boards, and we can assume the other OA publishers are proving equally successful. This suggests that for every researcher decrying the activities of these publishers others are facilitating them. Are the latter not concerned that they are conspiring in the email bombardment of their colleagues? Do they not care that some of the journals on whose editorial boards they sit appear to be publishing papers that have had inadequate or no peer review? Are they not worried that some of these publishers may be engaging in dubious business practices?

Normally when I publish an interview I write an introduction, and place it before the interview. On the grounds that my introduction for this interview is longer than the interview itself, Srinu Babu Gedela asked me if I would publish the introduction after the interview rather than before it. As a compromise solution, I have produced two versions of the text, one with the introduction at the end, and one with the introduction at the beginning. Readers can consequently choose which version to read. This version has the introduction after the interview. Those preferring the version with the introduction before the interview can access it [here](#).



Srinu Babu Gedela

The interview begins ...

RP: Can you start by giving me some background on yourself, and your career to date?

SG: I completed my Ph.D at the age of 25 years from [Andhra University](#). This was followed by postdoctoral studies at [Stanford University School of Medicine](#). Presently I am the managing director of [OMICS Publishing Group](#).

I have published more than 50 papers in reputable journals and serve as an editorial board member of repute. My Research interests include the identification of biomarkers for cancer & diabetes and the application of systems biology tools to the life sciences.

RP: Can you say when OMICS was founded?

SG: OMICS was founded at the end of 2007 (when I was 25). As a young Ph.D scientist at Andhra University, I experienced a lot of problems getting access to relevant literature from different sources. On 9th Oct 2007, I received a Young Scientist Award from HUPO [[The Human Proteome Organisation](#)], where I explained the problems young scientists face in getting relevant literature, especially scientists based in developing countries.

At [the 6th World HUPO, held in South Korea](#), some of the scientists provided me with support to enable me to start a new Open Access journal in the field of proteomics. In fact, I had started the first Open Access journal in early 2008 — this was [The Journal of Proteomics & Bioinformatics](#).

Later in 2009, I started another 10 Open Access journals with the support from Stanford Alumni during my post-doctoral studies at Stanford. I invested most of my scholarship money in starting and managing the journals during my Ph.D. and postdoc period.

RP: Why did you choose the name OMICS, and what are the aims and objectives of the company?

SG: The name OMICS was chosen because [the term OMICS](#) formally refers to a broad discipline of science and engineering that analyses the interactions of biological information objects.

OMICS Publishing Group uses an Open Access (OA) publication model that facilitates the wide dissemination of research articles to the global community. That is, all articles published under OA can be accessed by anyone.

RP: Can you give me some data about OMICS Publishing Group: The number of journals, number of papers published to date/per annum, the names of the services in which OMICS' papers are indexed etc.

SG: Today we have around 200 scientific journals, some of which are monthly and others bimonthly. Most of the journals are new, having been started in 2010 or 2011, and right now we are publishing 500-600 articles per month.

All our published articles are assigned a Digital Object Identifier ([DOI](#)) from [CrossRef](#) and are deposited in [DOAJ](#), [EBSCO](#), [Index Copernicus](#), [Scientific Commons](#), [Google Scholar](#), [Chemical Abstracts](#) and [Scopus](#), and a few are indexed in [PubMed](#) and [SCI](#).

RP: *How important is it that OMICS' journals are OA?*

SG: Open Access refers to unrestricted access via the internet to articles published in scholarly journals. The benefits include lower costs, greater accessibility, and better prospects for the long-term preservation of scholarly works. There is no doubt that the idea of an open, free and interconnected flow of information is appealing.

RP: *Where is OMICS registered, where is the company headquartered, and what regional offices (if any) does it have?*

SG: OMICS was registered at Stanford, USA and Hyderabad, India (which is the main office) and we have offices in Los Angeles, Nevada and Hyderabad.

RP: *You say it ***was*** registered at Stanford and Hyderabad. Is it still registered as a company in both the US and India?*

SG: Yes, it is still registered in the US and India.

RP: *Would I be right in thinking that the addresses of your three corporate offices are these: a) 5716 Corsa Ave, Suite 110, Westlake, Los Angeles, CA 91362-7354; b) 2360 Corporate Circle ; and Suite 400 Henderson, NV 89074-7722; c) 1-90/1, Plot No.20, Kavuri Hills, Madhapur - HITEC City, Hyderabad, A P, INDIA - 500 081?*

SG: Yes, you are right.

RP: *There is also an Australian address on your [contact page](#) (26 Joseph Drive, Hillside Victoria 3037, Australia). Is that a mailing address, or an office?*

SG: No, it is just for communication.

RP: *Before I managed to make contact with you, I tried to communicate via the OMICS contact page, and via an email address I was given by an OMICS' editorial board member. I did eventually get a couple of emails from someone who signed his emails Pavan A. I was not very successful in having my questions answered, but Pavan A did tell me that OMICS is headquartered in the US. He used the Los Angeles address at the bottom of his email. Can you say who Pavan A is, and what role he plays at OMICS?*

SG: Pavan A is one of our employees; Los Angeles is the default address for most of our communications.

RP: *I did a web search on the two US addresses above. The Los Angeles address seems to be associated with a company called [MYLCC](#), and the Nevada address points to a company called [INCORP](#). These both appear to be corporate formation companies, and in fact I think they are the same company. Are your US addresses also merely used for communication? If so, why would Pavan A say that OMICS is headquartered in the US?*

SG: I do not have any in-depth knowledge on this matter, or understand what you are getting at. Most of our addresses are for communication purposes.

Peer review

RP: Most if not all of your journals appear not to have an editor-in-chief. Is that correct? If so, who has overall responsibility for each journal?

SG: We have a few old journals that have an editor-in-chief, but as I said, most of our journals are new. We are appointing editors-in-chief to our journals right now. I expect this task to be completed by the end of next year.

RP: How does peer review operate with OMICS' journals?

SG: We believe the peer review process is very important. We are the Only Open Access publisher (with the exception of *PLoS ONE*) that uses the Editorial Manager [\[EM\]](#) tracking system to allow for the rapid and quality processing of articles. EM is a costly software platform provided by Aries Systems Corporation. We are doing our best to create quality Open Access journals for the scholarly community.

RP: Can you say how many people are asked to review an OMICS paper before it is published, whether the author sees the reviewers' reports and (if reviewers advise it) whether they are asked to amend their paper before it is published? Also, are the reports anonymous, and are they published on the Web alongside the paper for others to read? (If so, can you point me to some examples)?

SG: We use a minimum of two or three reviewers, but in rare cases one reviewer's comments are enough to send the initial submission for revision to the corresponding author.

OMICS follows this criterion for all submissions except a few editorials and high profile communications. Reviewers/editors can check the status of papers assigned to them whenever they want to by logging in.

Currently we do not publish reviewer/editor comments on the Web, but we may do so in the future.

RP: If many of your journals currently do not have an editor-in-chief, who takes responsibility for seeing a paper through the peer review process, and is their name attached to the paper?

SG: In general, the respective executive editors will take responsibility for a paper; but in some cases, one of the experts from the editorial board will take responsibility.

RP: I believe you yourself have published in OMICS' journals, and you have been on the editorial board of several OMICS' journals. How is the peer review process handled in such circumstances? What special conditions apply?

SG: So far, I have published four or five articles in OMICS journals, mostly editorials.

Author-pays

RP: I believe OMICS operates an author-pays business model. What do authors pay to publish their papers, and do OMICS' journals offer any waivers? If they do, what percentage of the papers have the charges waived?

SG: Yes, OMICS operates an author-pays business model and authors are invoiced in relation to the funding available to them. In practice, this means that we provide complete waivers, or discounts of up to 90%, for some articles – depending on the request/research, and the effort the author has put into the respective article.

Right now out of every ten articles, two will get a waiver, and another four will get a discount.

RP: How much is the standard APC for publishing in an OMICS journal?

SG: The APC depends on the journal, and the author. Authors are invoiced depending on where they are based, with the amount calculated using the [World Bank's country classification](#) system. The fees for researchers from high-income countries range from \$900-\$1800, although one or two journals charge up to \$3,600. There is a 30% reduction for researchers in middle-income countries, and a 60% reduction for those in low-income countries.

RP: *OMICS has also introduced a unique [fellow and associate membership system](#). Can you say something about this: how it works, why you introduced it, and how many researchers have taken it up?*

SG: We only recently introduced these memberships. Right now, I do not have any meaningful statistics to share with you.

RP: *OMICS also runs conferences. How do they fit with the journal portfolio?*

SG: Yes, OMICS Group also runs conferences at an international level. We currently run 25 conferences a year.

There are many reasons to run conferences: International conferences allow us to coordinate meetings with our editorial board members, for instance, and with other experts in the field the conference is focused on.

Additionally, the scientific program allows us to gather together visionaries from around the world. By means of talks and presentations, they are able to put forward many thought-provoking strategies in the related fields of the conference.

OMICS also believes conferences are the best platform to advertise our journals, and they aid in the dissemination of science all around the world. In addition, OMICS provides a publishing opportunity for the participants, speakers and other attendees of the conference. The readers, reviewers, editors and authors of our journals form the basis of our conferences. For that reason they fit very well with our journal portfolio.

Predatory?

RP: *As you are probably aware, researchers have been complaining about the way in which OMICS recruits people to its editorial boards, and the way in which it seeks submissions to its journals (e.g. [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). The main complaint seems to be that OMICS is randomly spamming researchers with invitations, and that these invitations are often inappropriate and badly targeted. OMICS has also been described as a “predatory publisher” by Jeffrey Beall ([here](#)). Are these criticisms justified? If not, what is it that researchers are misunderstanding?*

SG: I am sorry, I was not aware of the article published by Dr. Jeffrey Beall. However, I note he published it a year ago. We have achieved a lot more than he expected in that time. As we discussed, we also successfully organise 25 conferences a year, and we have recruited more than 20,000 editorial board members to support and run our open-access journals.

As to the comments you point to me, I respect the personal opinions of scientists, but I do not want to comment on them. I leave the matter to their discrimination.

RP: *Just to clarify: Beall's [definition of a predatory publisher](#) is a publisher whose mission “is not to promote, preserve, and make available scholarship; instead, their mission is to exploit the author-pays, Open-Access model for their own profit. They work by spamming scholarly e-mail lists, with calls for papers and invitations to serve on nominal editorial boards ... Also, these publishers typically provide little or no peer-review. In fact, in most cases, their peer review process is a façade. None of these publishers mentions digital preservation. Indeed, any of these publishers could disappear at a moment's notice, resulting in the loss of its content.” In describing OMICS as a predatory publisher I assume that Beall believes the above*

to be an accurate description of OMICS. In your view, are any or all of the above claims true about OMICS, if not today then in the past?

SG: I definitely disagree with Beall's claims; OMICS has had its own corporate logo from the very start, and will do in the future.

RP: Would you agree that OMICS does spam researchers with invitations to join its editorial boards, and to submit papers?

SG: For any start-up in the scientific community, it is necessary to contact researchers. We are doing our best to avoid spam.

RP: Are you confident that your bulk email activities are now targeted more accurately than they evidently have been in the past, and can you confirm whether or not they are conformant with the regulations concerning unsolicited bulk emailing now in force in many of the countries in which the researchers you email are based?

SG: We are now advertising 50 more conferences which we are planning to organise in 2012. That could be the reason for multi-disciplinary scientists getting more emails.

RP: I would be most grateful if you could answer my question. Are you confident that your bulk email activities are now targeted more accurately than they evidently have been in the past, and can you confirm whether or not they are conformant with the regulations concerning unsolicited bulk emailing now in force in many of the countries in which the researchers you email are based?

SG: We do use bulk mail, but only to send invitations to our valuable clients who are pioneers in the field. As we plan to organise 50 conferences in 2012, we will be mailing invitations to researchers frequently.

RP: Most of the invitation letters, both with regard to OMICS' journals and to its conferences, appear to be signed by someone called Richard Akul. He gives the Los Angeles address as his contact point. Who is Richard Akul, and what are his qualifications?

SG: Previously Mr. Richard Akul was one of the OMICS communications representative in the US. Unfortunately, his name was set to the automatic mailing system at the time and confusion arose between him and [Richard Smith](#), the editor-in-chief of [The Journal of Proteomics & Bioinformatics](#) (our first journal).

At that time, we had few employees and I was busy doing my research. Several months ago, I realised what was happening and changed the names to the respective individual journals and the respective editors.

RP: Again, just to clarify, who is Richard Akul, what are his qualifications, and where is he now? Can you put me in touch with him?

SG: OMICS has more than 500 employees. We have a number of members with the name Richard on our editorial boards and teams. It is somewhat difficult for me to know who replies to editorial members. I can track it down if you give me the names of the journals concerned.

RP: Earlier this month I was told by an OMICS editorial board member that he always communicates with Richard Akul about the journal. If Akul left the company several months back should not editorial board members have been told about his departure, and given a current contact name? When I emailed the address I was given for Akul it was answered by Pavan A. Has Pavan A taken on Akul's job?

SG: Yes, maybe the work was diversified and distributed by Mr. Pavan, who has taken over these responsibilities.

False claim

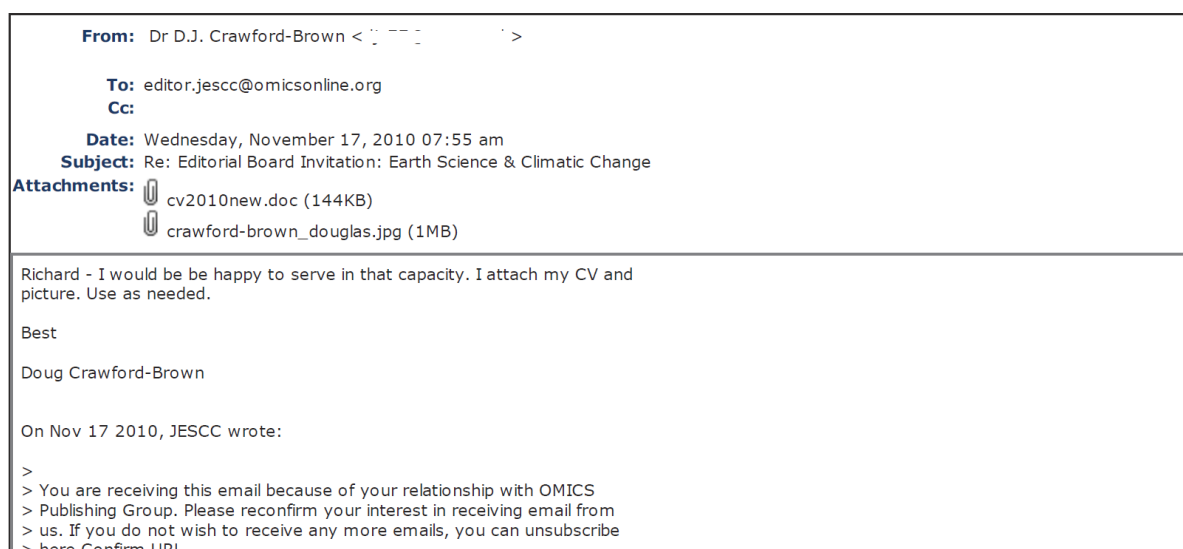
RP: *There have also been claims that some researchers are being put on OMICS' editorial boards without their knowledge? Has this happened at all? If so, how do you hope to avoid it in future?*

SG: No, to my knowledge, this has never happened; it is a false claim.

RP: *In the link to the Chronicle of Higher Education forum I pointed you to earlier exactly that claim was made: “I was asked by this company to serve as an editorial board member. I declined, as my research area expertise has shifted dramatically from the subject matter of the journal. This group then took my name and affiliation, and then listed me as a member of their board without my permission!”*

In addition, earlier this month the Executive Director of the Cambridge Centre for Climate Change Mitigation Research Dr Douglas Crawford-Brown told me he was unaware that his name had been placed on the editorial board of the OMICS Journal of Earth Science & Climatic Change. Were you aware of these incidents? Can you assure researchers that such mistakes will not recur in the future?

SG: Dr. Douglas Crawford-Brown agreed to serve as an editorial board member. Please refer to the attached e-mail confirmation that we received from him.



Dr Crawford Brown agrees to join editorial board

RP: *Recently someone brought to my attention a paper published in the above journal. They suggested that the paper should never have been published in a peer-reviewed journal. Amongst other things, the paper discussed Stonehenge, cell biology, the Icelandic volcano Eyjafjallajökull, crop circles, the White Cliffs of Dover, and it hypothesised that the earth has an immune system.*

The author of the paper concluded, “This text was generated by the origin and coded mystery of ancient sites located on the European Continent. The Stonehenge Site, Crop Circles and The White Cliffs Of Dover are all located on the European Island of the UK. Compiled information in this text points in the direction of cellular death and cellular mutations caused by a high probability of an active ancient infection on the European Continent.”

The paper indicates that the text was received on February 1st 2011, accepted three days later on February 4th and published a week after being submitted on February 7th. When I

contacted the author he said he was not aware of the paper having been reviewed. Can you confirm whether or not the paper was reviewed?

SG: According to the information I have received from the corresponding managing editor, the article was sent for review.

***RP:** The author of this paper also told me that, while he did email the paper to OMICS, he did not give OMICS permission to publish it, and indeed had been trying to get OMICS to take it down for some time. Are you able to give me any more background as to how and why the paper was published by OMICS, and say whether you agree with critics that it should not have been published?*

SG: Following the recommendation of an editorial board member of the journal, the article was removed from the publications list.

***RP:** Yes, it was removed after I contacted several members of the editorial board and Mr Pavan. But can you tell me how the paper was published, who was responsible for reviewing it and publishing it, and why was it only taken down after I contacted members of the editorial board? In addition, can you assure the research community that such errors will not occur again?*

SG: At the time the article was removed a parallel communication was taking place between OMICS and the journal's editorial board members, and OMICS and you. You therefore assumed that we removed the article only after your communication with the editors. I can assure the research community that this type of confusion will not arise again in the future.

***RP:** Can you please provide details of who the corresponding managing editor for the paper was, and why the author did not receive any of the reviewers' reports?*

SG: The corresponding managing editor was Pavan A, and he sent the reviewer comments to the author.

***RP:** Can you say what qualifications Pavan A has?*

SG: Most of our employees are postgraduates and a few are doctorates. Mr. Pavan is a postgraduate in Bio-informatics.

***RP:** Can you send me the reviewer reports for the Stonehenge paper?*

SG: Please contact Mr Pavan for clarification.¹

***RP:** Dr Douglas Crawford-Brown told me he was a little concerned about some of the other papers published in The Journal of Earth Science & Climatic Change. Are you confident that the quality control mechanisms used by OMICS journals are satisfactory currently? If not, what still needs to be done?*

SG: Yes, I am confident about the quality of the review process used in OMICS' journals, including *The Journal of Earth Science & Climatic Change*.

***RP:** I was recently contacted by a US-based publisher called [Mary Ann Liebert, Inc.](#), which claims that OMICS copied the name and some text from the site of one of its journals. As executive vice president & managing editor at Mary Ann Liebert, Vicki Cohn, put it to me, "The OMICS Group started a journal with the exact same title as our journal, [Journal of Women's Health](#), and copied descriptive copy from our website, including the name of a*

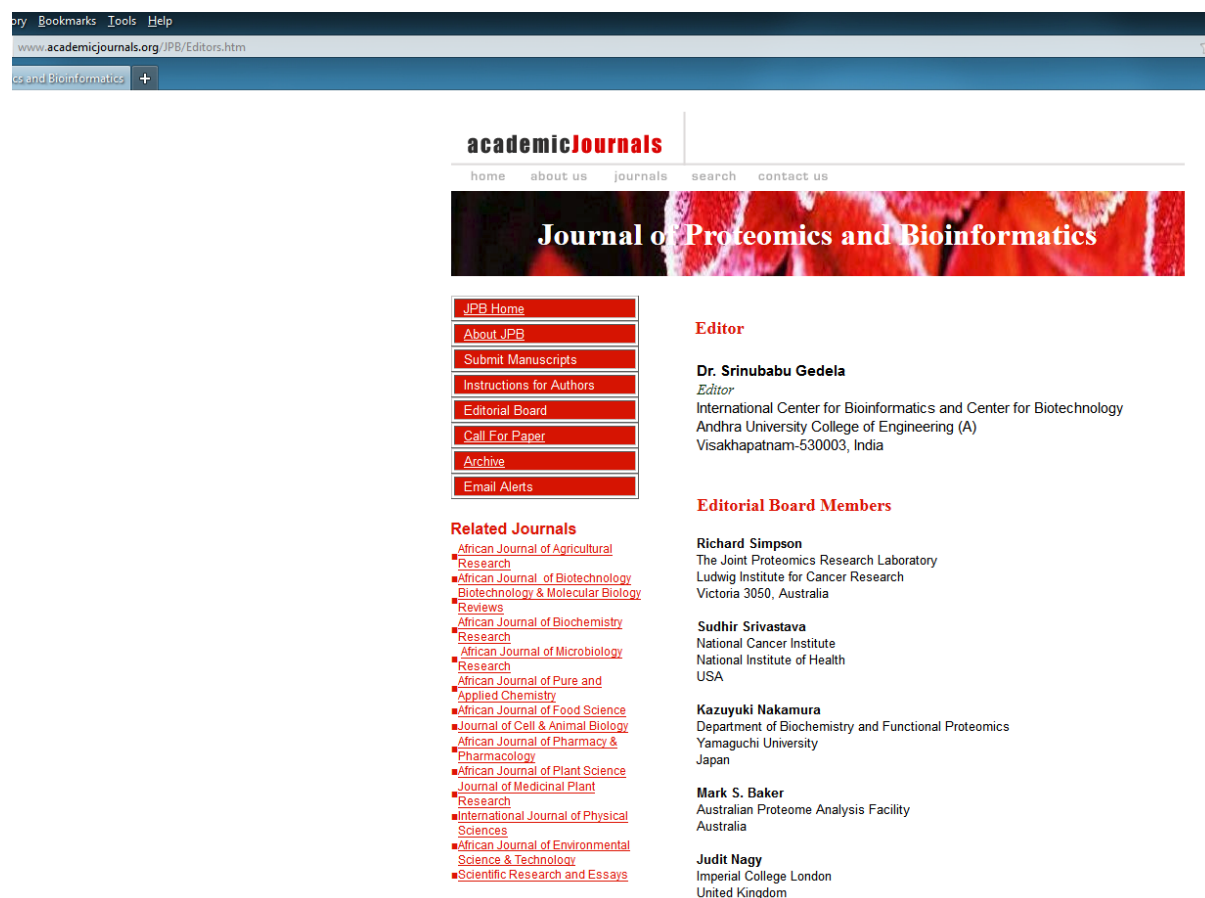
¹ When I emailed Pavan A to ask him to confirm his qualifications, and to let me have sight of the reviewers' reports for the Stonehenge paper, as Gedela suggested I do, I received another message from Gedela saying, "I am sorry, his supervisor informed that he is on year end leave."

society we used to be affiliated with. They subsequently changed the title of the journal to [Journal of Women's Health Care](#), after extreme pressure from Mary Ann [President & CEO of Liebert].” I am conscious also that one of your other journals – [Biomolecules](#) – has the same name as an OA journal published by [MDPI](#). I would be grateful if you could respond to Vicki Cohn’s claim (as I understand it) that OMICS is prepared to copy other publishers’ journals, and on at least one occasion has taken copyrighted text from another publisher’s web site. Is this true?

SG: Yes, a duplicate title was initially created, but the claim made by Mary Ann Liebert, Inc. is not valid. When we created our journal we were not aware that a similar title existed, and when they queried the title it was changed immediately. We do our best to avoid these kinds of mistakes when creating new titles. As I say, the mistake was rectified, and our journal is no longer called *The Journal of Women's Health*.

RP: In addition Cohn told me, “The OMICS Group sent the author of a paper published in a Liebert journal new proofs of a paper and asked her to pay an open access fee to republish it in their journal. When we objected to their trying to re-publish the article, their explanation was that someone on Facebook gave them permission to do so.” The email correspondence that Liebert had with OMICS over this was with someone called Phaneendra M, who described himself as a managing editor and gave OMICS’ Los Angeles address as his location. Can you confirm whether or not what Cohn says here is accurate?

SG: We do promote our services through social networking sites, and on this occasion we received an article from a Facebook group. We processed the article only after we received approval from the author, and the author responded only when we asked for publication charges. We withdrew the article immediately the issue came to our attention, so there exists no fault on our side.



The screenshot shows the homepage of the Academic Journals website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'home', 'about us', 'journals', 'search', and 'contact us'. Below this is a large banner for the 'Journal of Proteomics and Bioinformatics'. To the left of the banner is a sidebar with a list of links: 'JPB Home', 'About JPB', 'Submit Manuscripts', 'Instructions for Authors', 'Editorial Board', 'Call For Paper', 'Archive', and 'Email Alerts'. To the right of the banner, there is a section for the 'Editor', Dr. Srinubabu Gedela, with his title and affiliation. Below this is a section for 'Editorial Board Members', listing Richard Simpson, Sudhir Srivastava, Kazuyuki Nakamura, Mark S. Baker, and Judit Nagy with their respective institutions.

RP: I also note that [Academic Journals](#) publishes a journal called [The Journal of Proteomics and Bioinformatics](#) (which you indicated is the title of the first OMICS journal), and you are

listed as the editor of the journal. Can you explain the background to this? Have you copied them? Have they copied you, or is there some other explanation?

SG: I contacted them initially in 2007 but both the parties later cancelled the deal. They were supposed to remove those web pages and I was not aware that the web pages still existed. I will ask them to remove them.

RP: Why was the arrangement later cancelled?

SG: Academic Journals were not prepared to raise invoices in line with the World Bank country classification system. That may be one reason they cancelled the arrangement.

Finances and USP

RP: You described yourself as one of the partners of OMICS. Does this mean that you are a part owner? Who are the other partners/owners?

SG: Right now, I am the main owner of OMICS Group. However, the ownership may change in a couple of months.

RP: Can you expand on that: Are you planning to sell the company, are you seeking new investors, or what?

SG: As of now, I do not have any plans to sell the company, but I am looking for some new investors.

RP: At a [conference](#) held in China in 2009, you are described as “Director, GSB Life Sciences, USA”. Can you say something about [GSB Life Sciences](#), what products and/or services it offers, what relationship (if any) it has to OMICS Publishing Group, and whether it is indeed headquartered in the US as the above suggests?

SG: GSB Life Sciences uses the initials of my name, Gedela Srinu Babu. The company is registered in India but not the USA.

The plan is to do some database development work in GSB. To date we have developed E-BABE, the Encyclopaedia of Bio-availability and Bio-equivalence. Currently we are working on developing some more products, including Bio-safety, clinicalpedia, omicspedia, all in order to support Open Access.

RP: Where do the bulk of OMICS’ revenues come from?

SG: The Company’s revenues are derived partly from authors paying an Open Access Publishing fee and partly through the scientific events that we organise across the globe.

RP: So do the bulk of OMICS revenue come from the journals or the conferences?

SG: 40% of our revenues come from the Open Access fee, 5% from reprints, and the remaining 55% comes from scientific events registrations and sponsorships.

RP: Much has been made of the financial sustainability of OA publishers: Is OMICS self-funding, or you still having to inject capital into it?

SG: OMICS Publishing Group is a self-funding organisation and its revenues come from our rotational income strategy. The revenue goes hand in hand with scientific dissemination.

RP: Is OMICS profitable. What growth rates are you currently experiencing?

SG: As of now we are not experiencing good profits, but we expect to do so from next year onwards. Currently we generate sufficient income to run the journals and events, and to fund the future development of OMICS.

RP: *Whom do you consider to be OMICS' primary competitors?*

SG: Being an Open Access publishing group, OMICS has many competitors internationally. Among them, I would mention BioMed Central, SAGE Publications, PLoS, Hindawi, SpringerLink, Willey InterScience, and all the other Open access publishers.

RP: *How does OMICS differentiate itself from its competitors? What is its USP?*

SG: To the best of my knowledge, we are the leading scientific event organiser in the world. Using that as a platform, we will surely be able to take a lead position in open-access publishing.

We also provide audio versions of our published papers, and we provide digital articles for anyone to share and explore.

In addition, we offer a user-friendly website-translation service for every paper we publish in the world's leading languages; and in future we plan to provide published content in different languages (in separate PDFs) so as to ensure that language is no longer a barrier to research.

Finally, we are the only publisher that provides discounts in line with the World Bank countries classification.

I am confident that these features, and the scientific support we are getting, will see us become a leading player in making science Open Access.

Introduction

On 15th November 2011, [Valdosta State University](#) posted a [press release](#) on the Web announcing that one of its faculty had been appointed to the board of a journal called [Biomolecules](#). “*Biomolecules* is a new publication with OMICS Publishing Group, an open access database of articles that focus on various sciences,” it read. “The journal publishes peer-reviewed manuscripts that pertain to biogenic substances and their biological functions, structures, interactions with molecules and their microenvironment as well as biological systems.”

The press release added that *Biomolecules* was the second OMICS journal to which the faculty member had been appointed. Earlier this year, it explained, he had joined the board of *The Journal of Clinical and Cellular Immunology* ([JCCI](#)).

Press releases like this are two a penny today. The aim of producing them, one assumes, is to convey the message that the wider research community has acknowledged the contribution that the appointee is making to global research efforts in his or her field – and, by association, the contribution that the researcher's institution is making.

But such a message would surely only be justified if the journal in question belonged to a publisher known for the quality of its journals, the rigour of its peer review process, and the knowledge and expertise of its editor-in-chief. If that were not so, why would a research institution go to the effort of producing such a press release – unless its motive was pure self-aggrandisement and a desire to generate spin?

Science spammer of the month

So who and what is OMICS? How rigorous is its peer review process? How prestigious are its editors-in-chief? How valuable is the research it publishes?

When I looked at OMICS' web site I could find no information about ownership. There are four contact addresses (which at one time were not available), but little more. Two of these addresses are in the US, one is in Australia, and the fourth is in Hyderabad, India. And while I found some [general information](#) about peer review on the site, this appeared to consist of little more than worthy, but non-specific, statements like, "Credible peer review is the foundation of scholarly publishing." Moreover, since hardly any of OMICS' 200 journals appear to have an editor-in-chief, it not clear who is responsible for overseeing the review process.

On the assumption that no research institution would write a press release endorsing (in effect) a publisher unless it knew the answers to the above questions, I emailed Valdosta State's communications department and put my queries to the author of the press release. I was also curious to find out if the university was aware that *Biomolecules* is also the name of [an OA journal](#) published by [MDPI](#).

Alas, Valdosta State was not able to enlighten me. "It appears that MDPI also has a journal with the same name, but [our faculty member] is not affiliated with that one," the reply came back. "I'm not sure if the JCCI has an editor-in-chief, but you can contact its editorial board at omics@omicsonline.org. You may also find additional information about OMICS on the company's website."²

When I pushed my interlocutor on her knowledge of OMICS, she said, "I am in no way affiliated with OMICS. I cannot provide you with any answers (formal or informal) to any questions pertaining to OMICS, which is why I have advised you to contact the company directly."

This response was doubtless fair enough. But if Valdosta State did not itself know the answers to my questions (as opposed to just not wanting to speak for OMICS), should it not have found out before publishing a press release endorsing the publisher? As it happens, suggesting that I contact OMICS directly was also not that helpful. I had already done that and, at the time, had had little success obtaining answers to my questions by doing so.

However, while there may be a scarcity of factual data about OMICS in the public domain, there is no shortage of opinion and rumour. There are also many examples available online of the email invitations that OMICS continuously pumps out in order to recruit researchers to its editorial boards. These are posted all over the Web – on blogs, on mailing lists and in online forums; and invariably they are accompanied by acerbic remarks about OMICS and its *modus operandi*.

For it appears that OMICS's recruitment strategy consists of bombarding researchers with what many recipients angrily denounce as intrusive spam. Finding himself a target of one such virtual bombardment in July 2010, OA advocate [Jonathan Eisen nominated OMICS](#) for what he called "Science Spammer of the Month".

What do these invitations look like? Here is an example [posted](#) to the [Edmonton Reptiles Forum](#) in March 2011 by Kelley Jensen. "OMICS Publishing Group successfully publishing quality open access journals with the support from scientists like you," the invitation began. "We are aware of your reputation for quality of research and trustworthiness in the field of 'Herpetology' and that is why you have been chosen as an Editorial Board Member of our *Entomology, Ornithology, Herpetology: Current Research*" ([EOHCR](#)).

The email concluded, "If you are interested, you are requested to send a recent passport size photo (to display at our website) and your C.V, Biography (150 words), Research Interests for our records. We look forward to a close and lasting scientific relationship for the benefit of scientific community."

When I looked at the web site of EOHCR it appeared that while the journal has successfully recruited an [editorial board](#), it has yet to publish [any papers](#).

² While *Biomolecules* has recruited an editorial board, it has [yet to publish any papers](#).

Opt-in or opt-out?

It seems plausible that the researcher at Valdosta State had been recruited to two OMICS' journals after receiving invitations like the one above. If so, was the news really worth a press release? (Again although *Biomolecules* has recruited an editorial board, at the time of writing it had yet to publish [any papers](#)).

After reading a few of these invitations – and the accompanying complaints – I began to wonder if perhaps invitees may be assumed to have agreed to serve on the relevant editorial board unless they actively reply declining the invitation; in other words, more of an opt-out system than an opt-in one.

Certainly, some researchers have claimed that their names were added to OMICS' editorial boards without their agreement. Many also complain that they are being invited to join journals outside their area of expertise.

In the forum of the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#) last year, for instance, someone posting as *adb75_im* wrote, “I was asked by this company to serve as an editorial board member. I declined, as my research area expertise has shifted dramatically from the subject matter of the journal. This group then took my name and affiliation, and then listed me as a member of their board **without my permission!** Incredibly unprofessional behaviour, in my opinion. Indeed, I am quite upset by this – it's an abuse, really. Calls to their office have gone unanswered. I've submitted a request to have my name removed immediately. But I fear I might have to get my school's legal office involved.”

Another member of *The Chronicle* forum, using the name [kstjohn](#), posted a similar [complaint](#). “I just got a notification that I had been added to the [Journal of Tissue Science and Engineering](#) editorial board because of my ‘quality of research and trustworthiness in the field of’ Tissue Science & Engineering’. I do not do tissue engineering, although I am a member of an academic department that conducts such research and have a colleague who does so. I did publish in the early 1990's on animal studies of a new bone graft material but my suspicion is that this is a new journal and that online searching is being used to identify board members. I tried to bring up the board for this journal and it is blank (i.e. under construction) and the first issue of the journal has not yet been published. I have been unable to find any more information about this publisher, who they are, or where they are.”

Whatever its policy on adding researchers to its editorial boards, I was driven to the conclusion that OMICS adopts a [blunderbuss](#) approach in marketing its services. As a result, many recipients of its invitations complain that they have received inappropriate invitations. This, for instance, was the complaint [made](#) in February by [Steve Caplan](#), a professor of biochemistry and molecular biology at the University of Nebraska Medical Center when he posted an invitation he had received from OMICS.

The email Caplan received began, “It is because of good wishes and blessings of scientists, editorial board members and well wishers like you, the [Journal of Chemical Engineering & Process Technology](#) has now got International reputation.”

The message added, “As an editorial board member, you are requested to submit at least one article and one editorial for this year on your expertise. For more details on how to write an editorial please go through the attached document.”

That he was a member of the editorial board of a journal covering chemical engineering was evidently a big surprise to Caplan; and a somewhat shocking one too. “For those of you who don't know me, I am a cell biologist/biochemist who works on [endocytic transport](#),” he [wrote](#). “I know absolutely NOTHING about chemical engineering. Peer review would be in pretty bad shape if I were really an editor of a chemical engineering journal!”

OMICS' calls for papers appear to take a similar blunderbuss approach. [Here](#), for instance, is an email received in October by OA advocate [Stevan Harnad](#) inviting him to submit to the [Journal of](#)

[Proteomics & Bioinformatics](#). It reads: “We are glad to announce the success of *Journal of Proteomics & Bioinformatics* (JPB) an Open Access platform for proteomics, bioinformatics research and updates. To provide a rapid turn-around time regarding reviewing, publishing and to disseminate the articles freely for research, teaching and reference purposes we are releasing following special issues ...”

At the top of the message OMICS had written, “You are receiving this email because of your relationship with OMICS Group.”

Harnad, however, appeared unaware of this relationship. Nor, he added, was the journal at all relevant to his research. “Not only do I not work on anything faintly resembling ‘proteomics/bioinformatics’ but I have no ‘relationship with OMICS Group’ (except possibly prior complaints about spam)! These spam disclaimers are a lark. They seem to be using professional spam services that try to appear respectable.”

Curious to see what kind of papers *The Journal of Proteomics & Bioinformatics* publishes I tried to access the site, but the page simply filled up with gibberish and gave me an error message (See below). This error remained throughout the several weeks I was researching OMICS, and was still there the last time I tried to access the journal.



Front page of *The Journal of Proteomics & Bioinformatics*

Richard Akul

Perhaps unsurprisingly, some researchers tend to assume that OMICS’ email invitations are a scam of some sort. In May 2010, for instance, a researcher called [Anna Olsson](#), based at the Institute for Molecular and Cell Biology in Portugal, posted [some comments](#) about OMICS on her blog after a colleague received an invitation to join the editorial board of [The Journal of Glycomics & Lipidomics](#). ([Here](#) is Olsson’s post in Google English).

Olsson had two main concerns. First, she said, the invitation had not been signed by the editor of the journal. Second, the journal appeared to have no editorial board members, and had published no articles.

Given this, she wondered whether the journal really existed. As she put it (Google translation), “[T]here’s potentially money to be made in inviting researchers to publish a false sense of open access journals – because you pay to post there. And the first step is obviously to create virtual editorial teams that give credibility to the initiative.”

Olsson concluded, “But who is this? Trying to lure a professional group whose specialty is critical thinking, is it really worth it?”

Since OMICS claims to have recruited 20,000 researchers to its editorial boards, however, some may be more inclined to conclude the opposite: that there is no profession less critical in responding to such invitations – perhaps because acceptance costs nothing but brings the benefits of allowing the recipient to bulk up his or her CV with what will seem like additional honours.

As it happens, Olsson’s suspicion that her colleague had been asked to join a non-existent journal would appear to have been unfounded: since she posted her criticism, *The Journal of Glycomics & Lipidomics* has not only assembled an [editorial board](#), but published a few [papers](#) too.

But who is it that writes and distributes these invitations? Most of those I found on the Web were signed by someone called Richard Akul. [Here](#), for example, is Akul inviting researchers in Taiwan to join the editorial board of [The Journal of Business & Financial Affairs](#).³

Another example of Akul’s appetite for spamming is evidenced by an email he sent to researchers in March 2011 inviting them to join the board of EOHRC. This one was posted by someone to the [Arizona Herpetological Association forum](#).

A [similar letter](#) recruiting researchers to [The Journal of Diabetes & Metabolism](#) was posted on a Chinese forum in May 2010.

And in November 2010 an email addressed to “Dr Subscriber” was sent out by Akul [inviting](#) researchers to join the editorial board of [The Journal of Bioremediation & Biodegradation](#).

Akul’s emails, we should note, consist not only of invitations to contribute to journals, or join editorial boards, but also to attend conferences⁴. OMICS, it turns out, also runs conferences.

In July 2010, for instance, Akul was [inviting](#) Russian researchers to an International Conference on Biomarkers & Clinical Research.

And in August 2011 was to be [spotted](#) telling delegates where to take their slides for an International Conference on Cancer Science & Therapy. (What the programme was is [not clear](#)).

Who exactly is Richard Akul? Let us put that question on hold for the moment.

Stonehenge

All in all, it would seem fair to conclude that OMICS is an importunate and somewhat indiscriminating wooer of researchers, with accurate targeting low on its list of priorities.

But what about the quality of the services it is marketing? How good, for instance, is its peer review process?

As indicated earlier, there is not a great deal of information on the publisher’s web site about its peer review process.⁵ We also need to acknowledge that judging the quality of peer review can be

³ When I accessed the journal’s web site I found an [editorial board](#), but no papers [as yet](#).

⁴ See [here](#) for a list of upcoming OMICS conferences.

⁵ OMICS does, however, make great play of the fact that it uses the professional software service [Editorial Manager](#), developed by Aries Systems specifically to enable scholarly publishers to manage peer review effectively.

a little subjective, particularly when the process is non-transparent, with reviewing done anonymously and reports kept secret – as appears to be the case with OMICS⁶

It surely does not help that most of OMICS' journals appear not to have an editor-in-chief, and when papers are published there is no indication given as to who was responsible for overseeing the review.⁷

What we can say with some confidence, however, is that at least one of the papers published by OMICS has no place in a scientific peer-reviewed journal, a truth even OMICS subsequently acknowledged to me.

Entitled “Stonehenge” the paper in question was published in [The Journal of Earth Science and Climatic Change](#). According to the dates published in the paper, the text was received by OMICS on February 1st 2011, accepted three days later on February 4th, and published a week after submission on February 7th.⁸

This paper is striking for a number of reasons, not least the way in which it sets out to link the topic of the British ancient monument [Stonehenge](#) with cell biology, the Icelandic volcano [Eyjafjallajökull](#), crop circles, the [White Cliffs of Dover](#), and global warming. And it does so in order to advance the hypothesis that the earth has an immune system akin to a living creature, and that global warming is the consequence of an “infection” on the European continent. This infection is held to be linked in some way with Stonehenge, perhaps caused by it.

As the author puts it, “This text has attempted to build a solid foundation, showing that the Earth is a living organism, featuring eukaryotic cell structures, symptoms of an ancient eukaryotic infection and the appearance of an elaborate Immune Defense Response Network. That appears at the current time, physically preparing a defense immune response via the Iceland Volcanic System.”

The paper adds, “This text was generated by the origin and coded mystery of ancient sites located on the European Continent. The Stonehenge Site, Crop Circles and The White Cliffs Of Dover are all located on the European Island of the UK. Compiled information in this text points in the direction of cellular death and cellular mutations caused by a high probability of an active ancient infection on the European Continent. A Cross Over Concept, featuring Cellular Biology, Immune Defense Biology, Eukaryotic Biology, European History, Geographical Science and Global Warming. Has shown distinct trends indicating the possibility of a large scale active ancient infection located on the European Continent.”

And it concludes, “The Stonehenge is a viral codes law violation. It appears that until a response from the Immune Defense Response Network recurs, high temperatures will effect the consistent weather patterns of the Earth. Temperatures will continue to rise as the immune defense network attempts to eliminate the ancient infection. The Immune Defense Network of Earth ‘will delete the ancient infection, the question is when’. This is Book # 2.”

Some form of vanity publisher?

Curious as to why the paper had been published by OMICS, and whether and how it had been peer reviewed, on 7th November I emailed both OMICS (of which more later), and the first ten members on the [list of editorial board members](#) of *The Journal of Earth Science and Climatic Change*.

Half of the board members I contacted replied. However, both [William Reisen](#), a professor in the Department of Pathology, Microbiology and Immunology, at the University of California's School of Veterinary Medicine, and [Timothy Randhir](#), an associate professor at the University of Massachusetts, declined to comment.

⁶ Alas, non-transparency remains the norm in scholarly publishing today.

⁷ Compare, for instance, *PLoS ONE*'s practice of [listing the responsible academic editor](#) for each paper it publishes.

⁸ Those at least are the dates published in the paper itself.

[Xiaodong Zhang](#), an associate professor in the Department of Earth System Science and Policy at the University of North Dakota, did comment: “‘Stonehenge’ is not my research area and therefore I cannot comment on the merit of paper,” he said. “However, this should not be interpreted as that I’m questioning the merit of the paper. The journal is a comprehensive journal ... and I don’t even pretend to know or understand every article published. And that is exact reason why there is a group of editors.”

Paul Ruscher, an associate professor in the Department of Earth, Ocean and Atmospheric Science at The Florida State University, responded more directly, “Frankly I’m quite ashamed that my name has been associated with this journal if this is the type of paper being published,” he emailed me. “I looked at the issue and saw a rather well thought out essay on sustainability by another editor, and you might contact him. However, this paper eluded my view and I certainly played no part in its publication.”

[Dr Douglas Crawford-Brown](#), Executive Director of the [Cambridge Centre for Climate Change Mitigation Research](#) also responded. At first, he said he was not aware that he was on the board of the journal, and that he had certainly not agreed to be. Later, however, he emailed me to say, “I suspect someone asked me once whether I would consider being on the editorial board, and I probably replied that I would consider it once the journal was launched. Then I lost track of the issue. Therefore, it may have been an honest assumption on the part of the journal that I was still willing to serve.”⁹

But however he had become a member of the editorial board, Crawford-Brown was clear about one thing: The Stonehenge paper should never have been published in a peer-reviewed journal, certainly not one devoted to climate change. Consequently, he told me, he had emailed OMICS to demand that his name be removed from the journal’s web site.

“I don’t see any reason for it to be in a peer-reviewed journal,” he emailed me. “In fact, I am not sure what the peer review process was in this case. I should have thought any solid process would have caught that this particular article was neither particularly good nor in the topical area of the journal.”

He added that he was also concerned about a number of other papers in the journal. When I later asked him to highlight which ones, however, he replied, “I’d rather not. I don’t want to get into the middle of a battle with other authors, especially now that my name is off the editorial board.”¹⁰

Crawford-Brown concluded, “It’s very odd indeed. The journal appears to be some form of vanity publisher rather than an actual scientific journal. A shame, really, because the last thing we need in the climate science world is dodgy journals that publish questionable results without proper peer review.”

By now I was finding it hard not to agree with Jeffrey Beall’s description of OMICS as a [predatory publisher](#). The objective of predatory publishers, Beall explained in a 2010 [article](#) in [The Charleston Advisor](#), “is not to promote, preserve, and make available scholarship; instead, their mission is to exploit the author-pays, Open-Access model for their own profit. They work by spamming scholarly e-mail lists, with calls for papers and invitations to serve on nominal editorial boards. If you subscribe to any professional e-mail lists, you likely have received some of these solicitations. Also, these publishers typically provide little or no peer-review. In fact, in most cases, their peer review process is a façade.”

As we shall see, however, OMICS denies that it is predatory.

⁹ As we shall see, it would seem that Crawford-Brown had in fact agreed to be on the editorial board, but presumably forgotten.

¹⁰ At the time of writing Crawford-Brown was still listed as a member of the board here: <http://www.omicsonline.org/2157-7617/2157-7617-2-105.digital/2157-7617-2-105.html>.

Otis D Williams

Curious as to the identity of the author of the Stonehenge paper, I sent a message to the email address published in the article. It had occurred to me, for instance, that the paper might be a hoax similar to the one Phil Davis [perpetrated on Bentham Open](#) in 2009 – when he submitted a computer-generated paper to one of Bentham’s journals in order to test the quality of the publisher’s peer-review process.¹¹



Otis D Williams

But Otis D Williams does appear to be a real person; more specifically, a 55-year-old former central control room operator for Detroit’s remote train service the [People Mover](#).

“I am the researcher, writer and editor [of the paper],” he replied to my enquiry. “The name is real and so is the story. I am an independent citizen researcher [and] I’ve been self-taught in biology, planetary science, earth science, quantum mechanics and the Holy Bible. The Bible came first, it made the other subjects more easy.”¹²

Williams explained that he had retired from his job in 2003 after a back injury, at which point, he said, he became an autodidact. Over the past nine years, he added, he has written a series of eighteen papers, which “range from planetary science, disease deletions and space science. They all tell a mankind story.” The Stonehenge paper, he added, is number two in the series.

“Understand, this text has been in the hands of the [Global Warming Committee](#) on global warming in Lisbon, Portugal,” he continued. “They rejected it without any review; I am yet to hear back from the EPA [[US Environmental Protection Agency](#)]. The facts are observable, access the photos online and compare them for yourself. I have researched, cross-referenced over and over again. I still came up with the same results for the region. I am trying to alert mankind about the inevitable possibilities.”

Curiously, Williams added that he himself objected to the publication of his paper in the OMICS’ journal, and had been trying to get the publisher to take it down for some time. “The web site that you read the paper on did not get my permission to post Stonehenge,” he told me. “It was e-mailed to them for a review, no permissions were given to the site to post it. I have emailed and telephoned OMICS asking them to remove my paper. So far, it is still there. I will legally deal with OMICS at a later time.”

When I asked Williams whether his paper had been peer reviewed, he replied, “I am not aware if OMICS peer reviewed it or not.” As we shall see, OMICS insists that it was peer reviewed. When I asked to see the reviewers’ reports, however, I was told to contact the “corresponding managing

¹¹ Bentham Open, we should note, is also on Beall’s [list](#) of predatory publishers.

¹² Williams later told me that he is an advocate of [intelligent design](#).

editor”. But on emailing the name I was given I was told, “I am sorry, his supervisor informed that he is on year end leave.”¹³

I also asked Williams whether he had known when he submitted the paper that OMICS’ journals were pay-to-publish. He replied, “The package did mention a variety of payments for posting. The charge was \$1,800. I laughed at them. In fact, they offered to give me a bargain price of \$800 to sign off on the posting.”

A further oddity is that when Williams forwarded to me the email he had received from Richard Akul acknowledging receipt of his paper, I noted that the message was dated April 7th – some two months later than the date of publication recorded in the paper itself.

Following my contacting the editorial board the paper was removed from the journal’s index. On 14th November, I received an email from Ruscher. “The paper has been pulled from the journal in response to my own query and my desire to withdraw from their editorial board.”

He added, “I await their next response. But at least this appears to be a move in the right direction.”¹⁴

The same day OMICS emailed Williams to say, “This is to inform you that we had removed article online and please go through the issue URL: <http://omicsonline.org/ArchiveJESCC/CurrentissueJESCC.php> and get confirmed regarding the same.”

One final oddity is that OMICS appears to have made no formal retraction of the paper, which is the norm when peer-reviewed papers are pulled. Should we therefore be concerned that in an OA publishing environment research papers can melt like snow overnight, as if they had never existed?

Or might we find that they persist in ways not expected? What OMICS apparently failed to tell either Williams or Ruscher is that the Stonehenge paper had not been removed from the Web, but simply de-listed from the journal index. At the time of writing (over a month after the publisher said that it had been removed), the paper is still online, and freely, available [here](#).

Mary Ann Liebert

The controversy surrounding OMICS does not end here. While I was doing my research, I was contacted by US-based publisher [Mary Ann Liebert, Inc.](#) Liebert had a different complaint: As executive vice president & managing editor at Liebert Vicki Cohn explained, “The OMICS Group started a journal with the exact same title as our journal, [Journal of Women’s Health](#), and copied descriptive copy from our website, including the name of a society we used to be affiliated with. They subsequently changed the title of the journal to [Journal of Women’s Health Care](#), after extreme pressure from Mary Ann [President and CEO of Liebert].”

One consequence of this name confusion was that a number of doctors accepted invitations to join the editorial board of the new OMICS journal under the mistaken impression that they were joining the board of the prestigious Liebert journal. After being contacted by the publisher’s president, Mary Ann Liebert, however, most of these doctors subsequently asked to be removed from the

¹³ It seems odd that a publisher using Aries’ Editorial Manager is unable to locate copies of reviewer reports when a member of staff is on leave. As OMICS says on its web site, “editorial manager / tracking system is an online submission and review system. Authors may submit manuscripts and track their progress through the system, hopefully to publication. Reviewers can download manuscripts and submit their opinions to the editor. Editors can manage the whole submission/review/revise/publish process. Publishers can see the manuscripts that are in pipeline awaiting publication. Automatic mailing system to the appropriate parties when significant events occur.”

¹⁴ When I subsequently emailed Ruscher to enquire whether his request to be removed from the editorial board had been actioned he replied, “They have asked me to stay on — I’m reconsidering based on their actions.”

OMICS' board. Explaining why she had joined in the first place, one of them told me, "We physicians don't always pay attention to who the publisher is, if we recognise the name."



Mary Ann Liebert

Another doctor who joined the board of the OMICS' journal initially told me that he had not done so, and did not understand why he was listed on the journal's web site. Later, however, he emailed me to clarify what had happened. "I asked my secretary to re-review all old emails and she found one from 8/11 that I forwarded to her saying I would be possibly interested in this editorial board which came to me by email and she forwarded to them my CV. I did not remember earlier as to my knowledge there was no further correspondence, but now I do. To my knowledge I never heard from them again, certainly have not reviewed any journal articles to be published in their journal and have no idea what is going on."

OMICS maintains that it copied the name of the Liebert journal by accident, and insists that it rectified the situation as soon the matter was brought to its attention. Mary Ann Liebert disputes this. "The response was hardly swift," she told me.¹⁵

When she contacted me Cohn also made a more serious allegation. "The OMICS Group sent the author of a paper published in a Liebert journal new proofs of a paper and asked her to pay an open access fee to republish it in their journal," she told me. "When we objected to their trying to republish the article, their explanation was that someone on Facebook gave them permission to do so."

The journal in question was [The Journal of Cell Science & Therapy](#), and OMICS' response to Liebert came from [Mylavarabatl Phaneendra](#), who described himself as managing editor.¹⁶

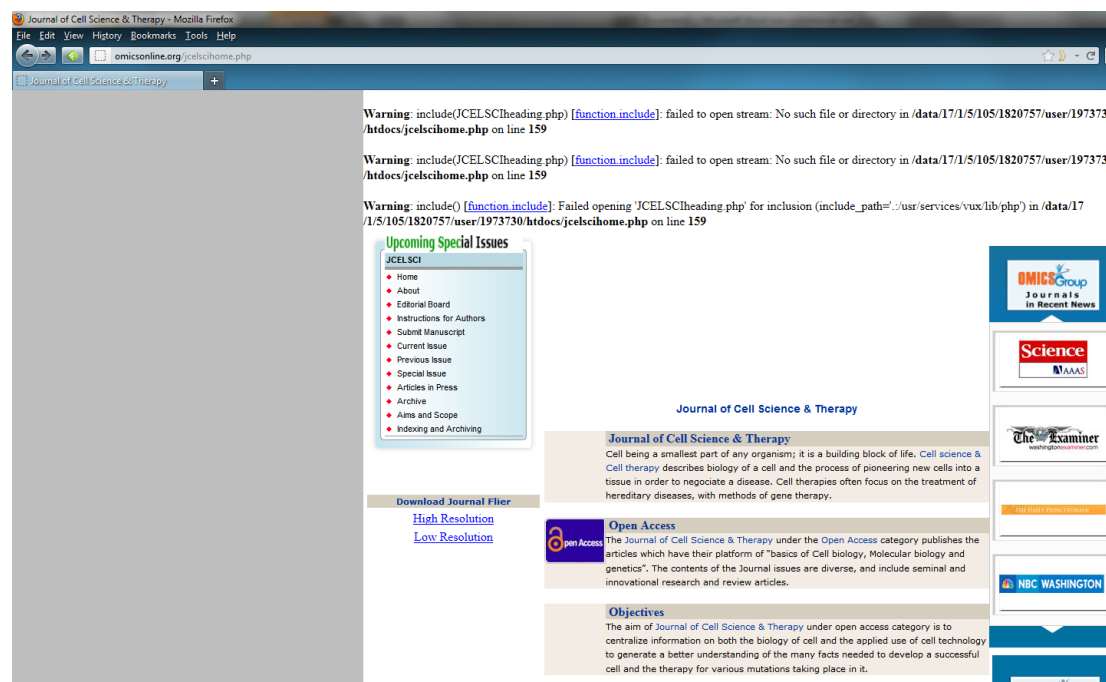
Again, OMICS insists that it rectified the situation as soon as it became aware there was a problem, and withdrew the paper. But Mary Ann Liebert is unconvinced by OMICS' explanation. What publisher, she asks, "would think an unnamed person on Facebook could grant permission to publish anything?"

When I tried to access *The Journal of Cell Science & Therapy* there appeared to be a problem with the site. Specifically, the title banner was missing. In place of the journal's name an error message

¹⁵ As with many OMICS' journals, when I looked at the web site of *The Journal of Women's Health Care* it was evident that while a small editorial board had been recruited, [no papers had yet been published](#).

¹⁶ In a [paper](#) co-authored by Phaneendra, and published in April in OMICS' *Journal of Bioanalysis and Biomedicine*, Phaneendra gives as his affiliation the Department of Biotechnology at [GITAM University](#). When I tried to access HTML version of the paper from the journal's [index](#) I got an error message. I also got an error message when I hit the link to the [DOI number](#).

was displayed. (See below). I subsequently discovered the same problem on all the journal's pages – a problem that remained throughout the period of my research.



Front page of *The Journal of Cell Science & Therapy*

Intriguingly, I also discovered that one of OMICS' journals appeared to have been cloned: Nigeria-based OA publisher [Academic Journals](#)¹⁷ also has a [Journal of Proteomics and Bioinformatics](#) on its web site. OMICS later explained to me, however, that there had an arrangement between OMICS and Academic Journals to replicate the journal in this way, but Academic Journals later withdrew from the deal. The Academic Journals site, I was told, should have been taken down.

Srinu Babu Gedela

All the time I was doing the above research, I was also trying to make contact with OMICS. I wanted to check my impression that few of its journals have editors-in-chief, I wanted to ask how its peer-review process works, and I wanted to know how and why the Stonehenge paper was published. I also wanted to ask if researchers are indeed sometimes listed on OMICS' editorial boards without their agreement. And I wanted to know who Richard Akul is, who owns OMICS, and where the company is headquartered. And after being contacted by Liebert, I wanted to discuss the allegations about OMICS business practices.

On 7th November, I made an enquiry via the OMICS [contact form](#). This generated an automated acknowledgment, but not a reply. I also sent an email to editor.jescc@omicsonline.org, which Reisen had told me was Richard Akul's email address.

On 11th November, I received a reply to the latter message signed by someone called Pavan A. It read, "We are sorry to inform you that contact details of the journal editors are confidential, Please drop your queries to the following address: editor.jescc@omicsonline.org,¹⁸ we will forward them to our Journal editors and solve your query at the earliest. We feel sorry for the inconvenience."

I replied with a list of questions, and asked why OMICS editors' names were confidential.

¹⁷ Academic Journals is also included in Beall's list of predatory publishers.

¹⁸ This was the email address to which I had sent my original enquiry, and it is the address given to me as being Akul's email.

On 14th November – the date the Stonehenge paper was de-listed – I received the following brief reply from Pavan A:

- 1) Editor names are not confidential but the e-mail are confidential to avoid spam mails to our editorial board members.
- 2) We removed that [Stonehenge] article from issue page as the article is not up to the standards.
- 3) We will be having editor-in-chief for this journal after having some more issues.
- 4) We usually do not have editorial board members without the acceptance. We do have communication with editors regularly.
- 5) OMICS believes in peer review process and we do publish reviewed articles only.
- 6) OMICS is having its head quarter in USA.

I replied asking Pavan A who he was, and who owned OMICS.

This last message went unanswered, so I did a web search on the four addresses listed on the publisher's [contact page](#), in the hope that it might help me to establish where the publisher was headquartered, and who owned it. I started with the address Pavan A had used in his email signature – 5716 Corsa Ave., Suite 110, Westlake, Los Angeles, CA 91362-7354. My search appeared to point not to OMICS, but to a company called [MYLCC](#), which provides company formation and registered agent services.

OMICS' other US address – 2360 Corporate Circle. Suite 400 Henderson, NV 89074-7722 – pointed to a company called [INCORP](#), which appears to be the same company as MYLCC, and also provides company formation and registered agent services. Perhaps these companies provide Post Office Box services too, I thought to myself.

Apart from the Hyderabad address, there was also an address in Australia: 26 Joseph Drive, Hillside Victoria 3037. [A search on Google Maps](#) indicates that this is probably a residential bungalow.

None of this helped me to establish who owned OMICS, so I continued searching the Web. Eventually I found a Dr Srinubabu Gedela listed in the programme of the [BIT Life Sciences' 7th Annual Congress of International Drug Discovery Science and Technology](#) (IDDST), which was held in Shanghai, China, in October 2009. The programme described Gedela as a director of OMICS Publishing Group, "a premier quality open access publisher for the advancement of science and technology". Gedela's research affiliation was given as Stanford University School of Medicine.

I also found Gedela described as an OMICS' director in an [article](#) he published in OMICS' *Journal of Proteomics & Bioinformatics* in July 2009. And I found him listed as the contact in the OMICS [domain name](#) record.

Interestingly, at a second Chinese event ([BIT's 3rd World Conference of Gene](#)) held two months after the Shanghai conference, Gedela was listed as Director, GSB Life Sciences, USA. On its [web site](#), GSB is described as "a premier BIOSOFT service organisation", and its main product appears to be the ENCYCLOPEDIA OF BIOEQUIVALENCE AND BIOAVAILABILITY ([E-BABE](#)).¹⁹

What, I wondered, is the relationship between OMICS and GSB Life Sciences? I noticed that the GSB site links to [a number of OMICS journals](#) under the heading "Leading Scientific Journals", and Gedela is also listed as the contact for GSB in the [domain name](#) record. Finally, I noted that GSB uses the same address as OMICS in California, and its [contact email address](#) is contact.omics@omicsonline.org.²⁰

Contact information for Gedela himself was more difficult to find. I did find his [Facebook page](#) (where his employer is named as OMICS), but was unable to make contact with him that way. Then

¹⁹ GSB Life Sciences is listed as one of the sponsors of [this OMICS' conference](#). A person I assume to be Gedela can be seen congratulating OMICS Publishing Group for organising the conference.

²⁰ It did also occur to me that GSB could be Gedela's initials which, it turned out, was correct. Despite appearances, however, GSB Life Sciences is not registered in the US.

I noticed that Gedela was the corresponding author in another 2009 article published in OMICS' *Journal of Proteomics & Bioinformatics* ([here](#)). He was also the corresponding author in a third article [[pdf](#)], published the same year in *The Journal of Computer Science & Systems Biology* (with Siva Prasad Akula *et al.*). Both the latter articles included an email address for Gedela.

In the process of reviewing these papers I noted a few more affiliations for Gedela, including the Institute of Glycoproteomics and Systems Biology, the Center for Biotechnology at the International Center for Bioinformatics Andhra University College of Engineering, and the Department of Computer Sciences and Systems Engineering at Andhra University.

One of Gedela's co-authors, Siva Prasad Akula, also gives as his affiliation the Institute of Glycoproteomics & Systems Biology, along with the Department of Computer Science and Engineering, [Acharya Nagarjuna University](#). It appears that Akula has published elsewhere with Gedela too (e.g. [here](#)).

Now armed with his email address I tried again to contact Gedela. A few days later he replied and agreed to do an email interview with me, which I am publishing with this text.

But who is Richard Akul? When I asked Gedela he replied, "Mr. Richard Akul was one of the OMICS communications representatives in the US. Unfortunately, his name was set to the automatic mailing system at the time and confusion arose between him and [Richard Smith](#), the Editor-in-Chief of *The Journal of Proteomics & Bioinformatics* (our first journal)."

When I asked for Akul's contact details, Gedela said, "OMICS has more than 500 employees. We have a number of members with the name Richard on our editorial boards and teams. It is somewhat difficult for me to know who replies to editorial members. I can track it down if you give me the names of the journals concerned." But I decided to leave it at that.

Public interest issue

What do we learn from all this? I think we learn that while there can be no doubt that universal Open Access is a highly desirable goal, and OA publishing a good idea in principle, the current explosion in the number of OA publishers poses some real dangers.

Most of these new companies, for instance, appear to have little or no experience of publishing, scant regard for quality and, in some cases, an apparent willingness to bend the rules. Since many of them are publishing medical research that might be used in patient treatment decisions there is a serious public health issue.

In addition, much of the money that OA publishers can expect to earn from their trade will come from the public purse (i.e. taxpayer's money). Experience shows that taxpayer's money is rarely spent wisely if there is not constant public scrutiny. This raises a further public interest issue. For this reason, OA publishers need to be much more transparent about what they do, and how they do it than they are currently. And the research community needs to take more responsibility for monitoring what these publishers do, not simply facilitate them unthinkingly.

It may be that most if not all of these publishers – including OMICS – are owned and managed by honest and well-intentioned people. Indeed, since many are based in the developing world, they may represent a genuine attempt to address the problem that Gedela says inspired him to found OMICS in the first place: the extreme difficulty that researchers in the developing world face when trying to access research that has been locked behind a subscription paywall.

Gedela is also proud of the fact that OMICS offers "a user-friendly website-translation service for every paper we publish in the world's leading languages"²¹, and plans later to provide "published content in different languages (in separate PDFs) so as to ensure that language is no longer a barrier to research." Meanwhile, he says, OMICS offers special discounts, or even full waivers, for researchers based in the developing world who want to publish their research with OMICS.

²¹ It is not clear to me how this works.

These are important issues: researchers in the developing world face real barriers *vis-à-vis* research information. They face an access barrier when trying to read research that has been published in a subscription journal, and they face an entry barrier if they want to publish their own work in an OA journal, but cannot afford the publication fee. Finally, since the language of science is English today, if English is not their first language they may face an additional access barrier when trying to read others scientists' research. For this reason, it could be unfair to categorise OMICS as a predatory publisher.

On the other hand, if in order to provide a more level playing field OMICS means to carry on bombarding researchers with intrusive emails, ignore the rules of peer review, and engage in dubious publishing practices, then the cost of overcoming the above barriers is far too high, and it is right to censure the publisher.

Certainly, it is hard not to conclude that OMICS' current operations are a shambles. If nothing else, this means that the public is unlikely to get value for money where taxpayer's money is used to pay for the publisher's services.

What do we mean when we say shambles? Judging by the quality of the Stonehenge paper, for instance, there must be serious doubt that all OMICS' papers are properly vetted before publication. Since few of OMICS' journals currently have an editor-in-in-chief this is hardly surprising.²²

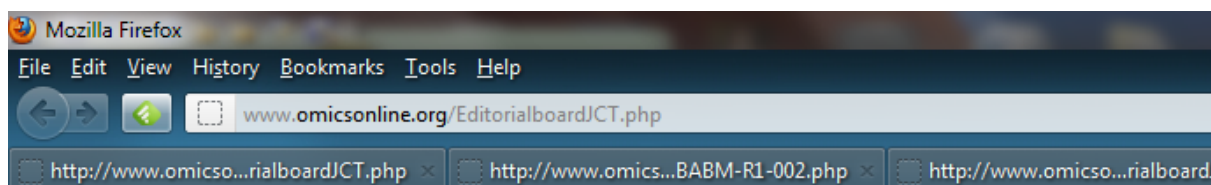
Meanwhile, OMICS continues to anger researchers with its badly targeted spam campaigns. And yet it appears not only to be unapologetic about this, but seems committed to increasing the intensity of its mailing activities.

In addition, as we have seen, it is alleged that OMICS has been deliberately copying the titles of other publishers' journals, and has even cut and paste text from a competitor's web site. OMICS denies that this was intentional, but at the very least it is most regrettable that its actions led physicians to sign up to an editorial board under false pretences.

More seriously, it is alleged that OMICS has sought to persuade researchers to re-publish (for money) papers that they had published in other journals. Again, OMICS denies that this was intentional, but its explanation fails to address the central issue. At the very least, the incident suggests that the publisher's business procedures are inadequate.

Finally, OMICS' web site is full of errors and dead links. We noted earlier the problems at *The Journal of Proteomics and Bioinformatics* and *The Journal of Cell Science & Therapy*. Below is another example from [The Journal of Clinical Toxicology](#). Here the page that loaded when I tried to link to the editorial board from one of the journal's [papers](#) came up with the following error message.

²² Gedela says he expects to have editors-in-chief in place by the end of next year. In the meantime, he says, executive editors oversee the processing of papers. But as noted earlier, their names are not published in the papers and, judging by the Stonehenge paper, the process is not transparent even to other members of the editorial board.



404: Page not found

This error is generated when there was no web page with the name you specified at the web site.

Troubleshooting suggestions:

Ensure the page you are linking to exists in the correct folder.

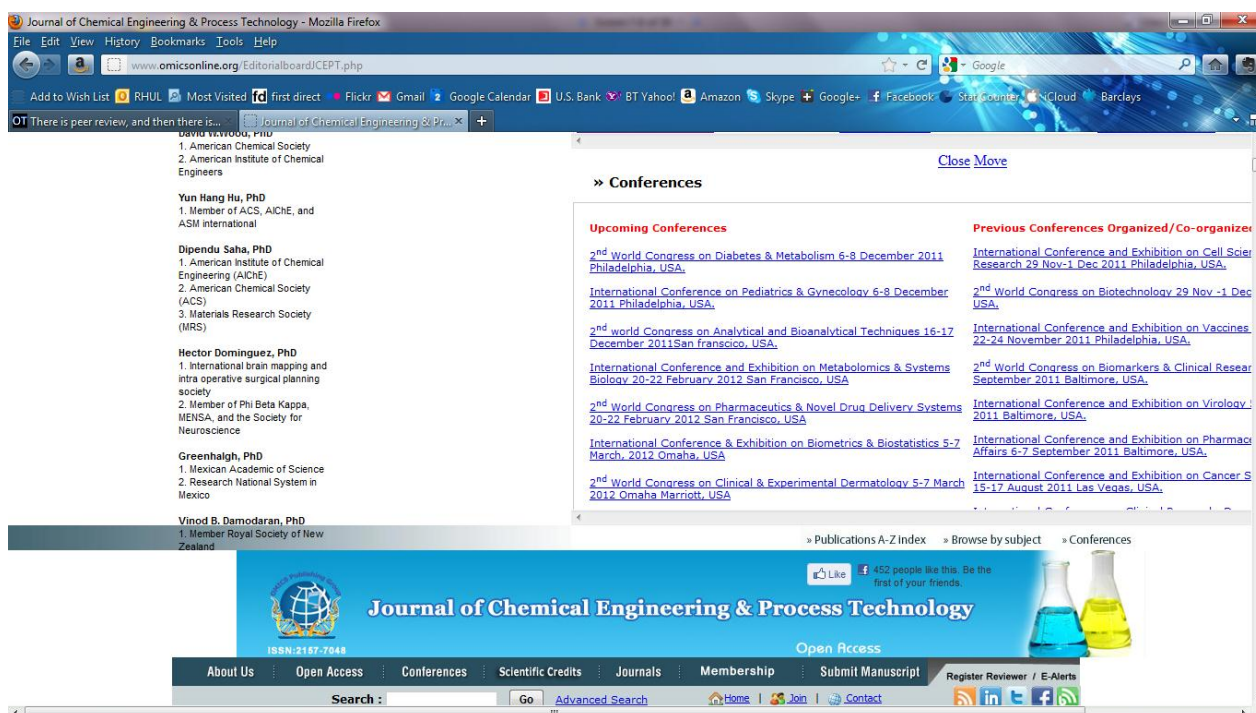
Check your file name for case sensitivity . Index.htm is not the same as index.htm!

Temporarily disable any rewrite rules by renaming your .htaccess file if it exists.

Editorial board of *The Journal of Clinical Toxicology*

Similarly, in accessing a number of other OMICS' journals I found the text sometimes loaded up and was then overwritten with new text, such that the hyperlinks ceased to function.

Finally, below is an example of another problem: when I accessed the editorial board of [The Journal of Chemical Engineering & Process Technology](#), it loaded into the browser with the title banner in the wrong place, causing the page to distort into a melange of chaotic information.



Editorial Board of *The Journal of Chemical Engineering & Process Technology*

It may just be that OMICS is on a steep learning curve, and its services will improve over time. It may be that no start-up publisher can possibly hope to launch and manage 200 journals in a short space of time without experiencing considerable chaos.

However, even if these explanations are accurate, we should not forget that OMICS is just one of a growing number of start-up OA publishers entering the scholarly publishing market, the majority of which appear to share similar characteristics, and are experiencing similar problems.

So what is to be done?

Should know better

Unlike tyro OA publishers, the research community ought to know better. It knows the rules of scholarly publishing, and it understands the vital importance of ensuring that if a paper is stamped as peer reviewed then it must have been properly assessed, not simply posted on the Web as is – particularly in areas like medical research.

So why is the research community not doing anything to address the problems that have become so evident? Presumably because the long-standing affordability problem associated with subscription publishing – the so-called [serials crisis](#) – has turned OA into a mantra that is now mouthed repeatedly (and thoughtlessly) without any attempt at critical assessment. “There’s none so blind as those who will not see”.

As a result, the only factor OA enthusiasts appear interested in today is whether research papers are made freely available on the Web, not whether they have been adequately checked for quality, or whether they even contain anything resembling useful research information.

In light of this, it would be unfair to criticise OA start-ups like OMICS without also commenting on the role that the wider research community appears to be playing in the gradual decline in the quality of published research triggered by the OA fad. After all, no business would survive if there were no customers willing to pay for its services.

Some of the most vociferous advocates for Open Access are librarians. For this reason, Mary Ann Liebert believes it is incumbent on them to respond to the situation. “The troubling questions, she says, are, “Do the libraries know? Do they care? [about what is happening]. And if so, what are the academic library groups going to do, other than give a light rap on the knuckles and continue to look the other way?”

Liebert adds, “The ramifications are profound. Research papers play an important role in furthering scientific endeavour. In the practice of medicine and surgery, published papers influence therapeutic decisions.”

Research institutions clearly also have some responsibility. Pumping out press releases trumpeting the appointment of faculty members to journal editorial boards when very little is known about the publisher, the journal in question, the editor-in-chief, or indeed whether peer review even takes place, can surely only exacerbate the problem. Would a university be quite so quick to endorse a publisher if it knew that it was passing off as peer-reviewed research articles that hypothesised that Stonehenge is an “active ancient infection” and a “a viral codes law violation”.

In the end, however, the buck must surely stop with researchers. They need to be more discerning – more discerning about how and where they publish, more discerning about which publishers they associate themselves with, and more discerning about the quality of the review process used by the journals on whose boards they sit.

Right now hundreds of thousands of researchers are joining the editorial boards of a host of start-up OA publishers who have no track record, scant or no peer review, and who spend most of their time organising mass spamming campaigns.

Crawford-Brown’s experience is perhaps instructive here. When I first contacted him he was convinced that he had not agreed to serve on the editorial board of *The Journal of Earth Science & Climatic Change*. Later, he conceded that OMICS might have made an honest mistake. However, when I raised the issue with Gedela he forwarded me a copy of the email that Crawford-Brown had

sent to Richard Akul accepting the position. It would appear therefore that Crawford-Brown agreed to sit on the editorial board, but then forgot that he had done so.

Perhaps for this reason, Crawford-Brown has come to the conclusion that researchers need to be more cautious about signing up to journal editorial boards and/or submitting papers to publishers that they do not know. They need to know with whom they are dealing. “It is essential,” he told me. “This is not only because there is an issue of credentials, but because there seems to be a blurred line ... between academic and commercial operations.”

He adds, “I do think it is important for researchers to see an issue or two of a journal before committing to being on the board. Journals can take quite unexpected turns, especially when they are new and hence subject to receiving quite a diverse group of submissions before clear standards have been established.”

It should be stressed that, for a number of reasons, this problem is to a great extent specific to OA publishing. The minimal start-up costs associated with setting up as an OA publisher means that it is very easy to create a large portfolio of virtual OA journals, rapidly recruit a virtual editorial board, and then embark on an aggressive email campaign inviting researchers to pay to publish their papers. Moreover, this can all be done electronically, from any part of the world, and with a high degree of anonymity on the part of the publisher.

Importantly, the model that most of these publishers opt for – in which authors pay to publish – means that a publisher can face a very real conflict of interest. The more papers it publishes, the greater its revenues; and we are discovering that this can seriously impact on the quality of published research, and, in some cases, can lead to suspect business practices.

In addition, from the point of view of a publisher OA has become a more appealing business model. The serials crisis, and librarians’ consequent distaste for the traditional journal model, means that selling subscriptions to a smallish population of sceptical gatekeepers (librarians) has become very hard. By contrast, selling publishing services to hundreds of thousands of naïve researchers keen to bulk out their CVs appears to be a doddle.

Finally, since the current OA gold rush is in serious danger of bringing OA into disrepute, organisations like the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association ([OASPA](#)), the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition ([SPARC](#)) and the Compact for Open Access Publishing ([COPE](#)) really need to become proactive on this issue. They should be drawing attention to and deprecating those OA publishers who engage in mass spamming campaigns, who operate obviously poor quality peer review, and/or bend the rules of scholarly publishing.

As noted above, it took me quite an effort to establish who and what OMICS is, and to track down Srinu Babu Gedela. It should surely not have been that difficult? Moreover, interviewing Gedela was a little like [drawing teeth](#): on a number of occasions, I had to repeat my question before it was answered; and even then, the answer was frequently more gnomish than illuminating, and often less than direct. Indeed, I had eventually to give up any hope of obtaining a clear answer to some of my questions.²³ On the other hand, Gedela did agree to be interviewed. This is noteworthy because not every controversial OA publisher I have contacted has been willing to do that.

²³ For instance, when I asked Gedela if special rules applied when he himself (as owner and director of OMICS, and sometime editor of several of its journals) published in OMICS’ journals, he replied indirectly, “So far, I have published four or five articles in OMICS journals, mostly editorials.” I have mentioned above at least two Gedela papers that were published in OMICS’ journals that were not editorials, and I remain unclear as to whether any special procedures were used when these papers were reviewed. Likewise, when I asked Gedela to respond to the allegation that OMICS had sent the author of a paper published in a Liebert journal new proofs and asked her to pay an open access fee to republish it in an OMICS’ journal, I do not think he addressed the question directly. Finally, when I asked Gedela whether he agreed that OMICS was predatory, he replied, “OMICS has had its own corporate logo from the very start, and will do in the future.” I was not clear how that answered my question. But perhaps he misunderstood it.



Richard Poynder 2011

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