

Retraction Watch

Tracking retractions as a window into the scientific process

Chocolate-diet study publisher claims paper was actually rejected, only live “for some hours.” Email, however, says...

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John — aka
“Johannes” —
Bohannon

Following revelations in io9.com this week from John Bohannon about how he [successfully](#) “created” health news by conducting a flawed trial of the health benefits of chocolate and gaming the data to produce statistically significant results, the journal that ultimately published the findings is now claiming the paper wasn’t accepted.

Trouble is, we’ve got [correspondence from Bohannon showing that’s false](#). Here’s a quote from an email from publisher Carlos Vazquez to which Bohannon responded on March 2:

I’m contacting to let you know your manuscript “Chocolate with High Cocoa Content as a Weight-Loss Accelerator” has been pointed by our editors as an outstanding manuscript and could be accepted directly in our premier journal *International Archives of Medicine.*

The Facebook page for the [International Archives of Medicine](#) includes [a statement from Vazquez](#) claiming the paper was published by mistake and was only live for hours:

Disclaimer: Weeks ago a manuscript that was being reviewed in the journal “Chocolate with High Cocoa Content as a Weight-Loss Accelerator” appeared as published by mistake. Indeed that manuscript was finally rejected, although it went online for some hours. We are sorry for the inconvenience. We are taking measures to avoid this kind of mistakes happens again.

Although the journal appears to have [pulled the paper from its website](#), it was there as of this morning (we saw it). Given that the paper was published in April, that’s significantly more time than “some hours.”

Bohannon tells Retraction Watch:

They took our money, they published it online, and it was published for weeks, so enough said.

Asked if they would be requesting a refund, he said:

If they do make the paper disappear, we will ask for the money back, hell yeah.

This isn't Bohannon's first sting operation — in 2013, he found that [fewer than half of publishers of open access journals rejected deeply "flawed" papers](#) which he assembled.

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In "freely available"

[Fallout from Science's publisher sting: Journal closes in Croatia](#)
October 17, 2013
In "croatia"

Written by Alison McCook

May 28th, 2015 at 4:41 pm

Posted in [biomedcentral](#), [International Archives of Medicine](#), [public health/safety](#)

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Comments



- [Dave Burton](#) May 28, 2015 at 5:38 pm

“We are taking measures to avoid this kind of mistakes happens again.”

The *International Archives of Medicine*, where nothing can possibly go wrong.

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- [Dave Burton](#) May 28, 2015 at 6:24 pm

Yahoo's cached copy of the web page about the paper:

http://www.burtonsys.com/Chocolate_with_high_Cocoa_content_as_a_weight-loss_accelerator.html

Google's cache of the paper (pdf converted to html):

http://www.burtonsys.com/Chocolate_with_high_Cocoa_content_as_a_weight-loss_accelerator2.html

A couple of web articles, by authors who took the bait:

<http://www.infinitelabs.com/benefits-of-dark-chocolate/>

<http://suppversity.blogspot.com/2015/03/dark-chocolate-diet-booster-for-low.html>

And Google finds many more:

<https://www.google.com/search?q=%22Chocolate+with+high+Cocoa+content+as+a+weight-loss+accelerator%22>

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• *Paul Brookes* May 28, 2015 at 7:47 pm

You have to hand it to Bohannon. Regardless that his methods are somewhat ethically questionable, he's doing a pretty good job (way better than any of us) right now, of handing science publishing and journalism their collective asses on a plate. I'd like to see more of this type of thing...

Anything that gets the public and scientists to realize what a sham the whole science publishing game is, is a good thing.

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• *Sebastian Kurscheid* May 28, 2015 at 8:05 pm

The article was definitely still available yesterday afternoon (AEST) as I sent out the link via Twitter. This morning the PDF has disappeared.

However, apart from the publisher's behaviour there are also some serious questions about Bohannon's ethics: In his post on io9 he claims that this "operation" was performed in the spirit of "Gonzo" journalism. I am not sure if Hunter S Thompson would have called misleading study participants "Gonzo" journalism, as the investigator hardly put himself in the line of fire. Also, the reason I went to check on the actual paper was the question if it was ethical to publish this in the first place. One glaring omission in the performed work is the apparent lack of consent from the study participants, and/or IRB approval of the study. The questions that have to be asked are:

"Is it ethical to perform research involving human participants without consent"? (No, it is not. It is actually illegal in most countries).

"Is it ethical to involve volunteers in a study which was performed with the sole purpose of producing fake data?" (No, it is not. Ask yourself: would you volunteer for a study which express purpose was to fake data?)

This is not to say, that Bohannon did not have a valid reason for shining the light on the way media handles announcements of health research, in particular when it comes to dieting. However, he

might have just as well made all of the data up, invented his co-authors, including the MD who did the actual surveys and probably would have still been able to find a pay-to-publish OA outlet to get a “peer-reviewed” paper out of it. Hell, I get dozens of invitations a week to publish in obscure journals which promise 48 hour turnaround on peer-review and rapid publication...

I wish RW would consider these points as well, instead of just aiming fire at the evil, lying publisher.

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• [richard katz](#) May 28, 2015 at 9:23 pm

Dieting the whole thing isn't worth discussing, is it?

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• [Arjuna](#) May 28, 2015 at 9:53 pm

To spend time doing this kind of paper is absurd, unless the person has an interest, either promoting himself or ‘down’ promoting others (publisher). Anybody with the right skill would know whether a ‘published’ paper is fake/dubious/etc.

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• [herr doktor bimler](#) May 28, 2015 at 11:05 pm

Arjuna

Anybody with the right skill would know whether a ‘published’ paper is fake/dubious/etc.

Such people are weeded out before they become journalists.

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• [Renee](#) May 29, 2015 at 2:58 am

I'm not saying the journal and it's going ons aren't questionable, but when I receive a letter from an editor saying my paper “could” be published I don't interpret that as “is”. Not yet.

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• *Concerned* May 29, 2015 at 7:08 am

I wonder what would happen, apart from most likely an immediate rejection, if Bohannon would submit a similar “sting” to an Elsevier, Springer, Wiley or Taylor and Francis journal?

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• *Tim Shakespeare* May 29, 2015 at 8:22 am

Any study involving human participants (particularly involving invasive procedures such as blood tests, and deceptive techniques such as concealing the purpose of the study) involves weighing up the risks of the study to the participants, against the wider benefit to society of doing the study. Whether the study is ethical depends on the balance of these risks and benefits. Who should get to decide on this balance, and whether the study should be allowed to happen? It’s not you, me or the person running the study – we have review boards specifically to do this job. In my view bypassing those review boards is unethical.

If it so happens that we as a society disagree with the balance that the review boards decide, then we should lobby to change the criteria that the boards use, not bypass them.

I can’t see any excuse for not getting ethical approval for this study.

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• *Concerned* May 29, 2015 at 8:56 am

Tim, could you suggest exactly from which review board ethical approval should have been obtained, i.e., of which author? I am not sure of the affiliation that Bohannon used, so could someone indicate this please. Also, what are the affiliations of the co-authors, and what are their academic qualifications? Even though Bohannon has a PhD, and even though he has experience with “stings”, does this qualify him to be the lead author of a “medical” “study”?

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• *Fundamentally wrong* May 29, 2015 at 2:24 pm

Paul Brookes: “I’d like to see more of this type of thing...” Among all of the smart things you have ever proclaimed, this was certainly not one of them. It is unacceptable, in any manner or form, to encourage any dishonest behaviour in science publishing. Your encouragement should be strongly rebuked, because in essence what you are saying is increase the number of stings (which include fake or false information, potential breaches of ethics, and possible decept) to achieve a point. You don’t have to cheat journals, and waste precious human time and resources to make a point: you can

just start your own blog, like Beall did. I am of the opinion that Bohannon reverts to incorrect, and possibly unethical, means, to achieve his objectives. No matter what the learning curve turns out to be, the methodology to achieve it, as I see it, must never be praised, approved, or encouraged. If a person wants to show their anger, rage or disappointment, go ahead, but please don't cheat the system, which is already under sufficient strain.

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• *Chris Mebane* May 30, 2015 at 10:42 pm

Here's a study goes to 11!

Similar to Johannes et al, physiologist Brent Ruby, University of Montana, Department of Health and Human Performance was dubious of the rigor of the science behind the claimed benefits of sports supplements. In a report from High Country News, Ruby said the makers of sports supplements tend to exaggerate their effectiveness, touting their clear "natural" superiority to something as obviously odious as a double cheeseburger with an extra serving of fries. reported that "Ruby devised an experiment involving 11 active men who cycled for 90 minutes and were tested before and after consuming either the sports supplement or fast food from McDonald's, which precisely measures its servings and was conveniently located just across the street. The result: Muscle recovery and exercise performance "were not different when comparing products created specifically for sport recovery and traditional fast food." <http://www.hcn.org/issues/47.9/a-prom-request-painted-on-blm-land-a-nevada-brothel-and-more>

So n=11 is as good for supporting McDonald's for athletes as n=16 for supporting chocolate for weight loss!

In contrast to Ruby's puckish study, Johannes was ethically dubious at best to tell people they were part of a TV program about weight loss, take intrusive blood draws, when the real intent was to poke the junk-science diet industry. I cheered Bohannon for his sting of the sketchy vanity/predatory open access journals, despite its whopping flaw (no control submissions to "traditional" journals). To me, in the the present exposé, it's questionable whether the ends justified the means.

By the way, did anyone snag the actual Bohannon PDF before it disappeared? The Google archive converted to HTML seemed incomplete. For instance, the iO9 website said n=16, but I didn't see that in the article. Maybe that was the point, not mention the small size and see if the "reviewers" even bother to ask.

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• *Anonymous* June 1, 2015 at 11:11 am

A perfect critique by Hilda Bastian here:

<http://blogs.plos.org/absolutely-maybe/tricked-the-ethical-slipperiness-of-hoaxes/#comment-12966>

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• *turtle of doom* June 4, 2015 at 8:18 am

Uploaded here: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chocolate_with_high_Cocoa_content_as_a_weight-loss_accelerator.pdf

I totally love it how open-access-journals (especially those with a creative commons license) really CANNOT retract any paper. Everybody can re-publish the papers, and point to the original journal with a certain amount of glee and schadenfreude.

But, of course, that's not an argument against open access.

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