

Academic street smarts: be vigilant of fraudsters

A warning to scientists travelling to conferences about hotel scammers

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“With a gentleman I am always a gentleman and a half, and when I have to deal with a pirate, I try to be a pirate and a half.”
—Otto von Bismarck

My mom and dad raised me to be street smart. They were rough and tough travellers and dragged me to some of the most remote and dodgy places on Earth. From the pick-pocketers of Tangier to the street scams of Mumbai, I learnt from a young age to be a world-weary global citizen. On an overseas trip, my passport is buried so deep within my person that not even the most intimate of travelling companions could find it. And don't even ask about my wallet. In my professional life, too, I try to preserve the kind of alert, battle-ready existence that would make my parents proud. That is why the pickle I found myself in earlier this year was so humiliating and surely had my dear father turning in his grave. Although embarrassed, I will describe my ordeal in the hopes that other academics won't fall prey to the same swindle that ensnared me.

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A phone call after lunch

My predicament began on what was a particularly hectic day at my university, one

where my office felt more like a “war room” than the quaint, cluttered den of a biology professor. All morning I had been dealing with an overwhelming grant, an underwhelming review of a manuscript and a slew of ornery undergraduates. When my office phone rang shortly after lunch, I was of two minds about picking it up or letting it go to voicemail. Unfortunately for me, I proceeded with the former. The woman on the other end was polite: “Good afternoon, Professor Smith. I am calling from Expo Hotel Services to facilitate your accommodations at the upcoming 2020 Society for Molecular Biology and Evolution meeting”. Now, before you start rolling your eyes, note that I am an invited speaker at this meeting, which takes place in Québec City in July, and had recently been in contact with the organizers who told me that they would be reaching out shortly with details about my travel and stay, the costs of which they will be covering.

As I listened to the woman, I thought here comes another task on an already task-ridden day. Just try to get this done as efficiently as possible. Then, I made a disastrous assumption—that the SMBE organizers had hired a travel agency to do the hotel bookings for the invited speakers, which would not have been overly bizarre given that the meeting is quite large. “Sir, I have you scheduled to stay in Québec City for the duration of the meeting. Would you like me to extend the reservation by one night on either end to accommodate your travel dates? Don't worry, you can easily alter the booking at any time”. “That's generous of the organizers”, I said. “Let's do that”. “Alright, Sir. You should have an

email from me in your inbox. Please open the attachment and check that I have filled in your contact information correctly”. Sure enough, there was an email from E-Hotel Services eagerly waiting for me. The attached PDF had my name, email and affiliation correctly listed and showed a reservation for a six-nights' stay at Hôtel Universel Québec. Just one little detail needed my attention.

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“If everything looks fine, sir, please add your credit card information, sign, and email it back to me”. “I thought the organizers were covering the costs”, I said. There was a short silence, and then, she replied: “We need your Visa to hold the booking”. Seeing that my next meeting was in less than 10 minutes, I quickly completed and signed the form. “Thanks, Professor Smith. Document received. You will be getting a confirmation email shortly. Have a wonderful day”. And with this small act, I betrayed my upbringing.

Credit card bill

Two days went by and I quickly forgot about this interaction, that is, until I received an \$1,850 Visa charge from my friends at

E-Hotel Services. Stay calm, I whispered, as I suddenly felt the spirit of my father's hand gently whacking me across the head. I went to my inbox and looked closely at the PDF that I had so hastily signed. In extra small print, the terms and conditions read: "E-Hotel Services is a privately-owned company not affiliated with any event or other organization and will be providing you with hotel accommodation reservation and booking services ... should the reservation be cancelled you agree to pay a cancellation fee in the amount of 25% of the total cost of room accommodation". Because I willingly signed my name to these terms, it would be very hard for me to win a dispute claim with Visa. My only hope was to cancel the booking myself and submit a services not rendered claim.

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After cancelling my credit card, I called Hôtel Universel to see whether there was in fact a booking under my name. "Yes, Dr. Smith. We have your reservation, which we received through Booking.com". I asked the manager whether my stay had been paid in full. "No, sir, with Booking.com the customer must pay at the hotel". In other words, I just spent \$1,850 for someone to reserve me a hotel online—a task that takes all of 5 min. "Well", I said, "please go ahead and cancel my booking." "Sorry, sir, I can't do that. You need to go through Booking.com". Then, he gave me the reference number for the reservation.

And so began my Kafkaesque journey into the bureaucracy and inner workings of Booking.com. I spent hours on the phone slowly making my way up the company's hierarchy, explaining my predicament to one representative after another. But the

message was clear: in order to cancel the reservation, I needed both the reference number *and* the PIN number—the latter was provided online when the booking was made and only E-Hotel Services had it. I begged and I pleaded and finally my sad story landed on a sympathetic soul. "Sir, I could lose my job for doing this, but I feel so bad for you that I'm going to go ahead and delete this booking. I wish you the best of luck in getting your money back". One day later, my Visa was credited the full amount of the initial charge, even though I had not yet filed a transaction dispute. I can only assume that by having terminated the reservation myself, E-Hotel Services realized I would win a claims dispute and thus refunded the money.

Warnings abound

Some of the people reading this are likely well aware of the various accommodation cons targeting academics. Indeed, a Google search of "Expo Hotel Services" not only yields that its office is apparently located in an apartment building in Wuppertal, Germany, but also leads to various official conference sites warning about this company. For example, the site for the European Society of Gastrointestinal and Abdominal Radiology annual meeting states that "Expo Hotel Services has been targeting ESGAR faculty and attendees, claiming to be a part of the ESGAR annual meeting organisation and offering housing and hotel services in Amsterdam ... please be aware of this scam!" And to be fair, SMBE, the meeting for which I was targeted, writes on their website: "be aware that you may be contacted by phone, fax, or email by third-party companies that act as travel agencies, wholesalers or destination management companies to solicit you with aggressive or deceptive tactics for room reservations".

After getting caught up in this ordeal, I went around my department and vented to my fellow colleagues. Not one of them had heard of this sort of swindle, meaning that there probably needs to be more awareness

surrounding fraudulent activity geared towards scientists. A lot has been written about predatory journals and fake or low-quality conferences [1,2], but obviously scams can affect a much broader swath of academic life, and to be taken in by one can have serious final consequences. I never received an invoice or confirmation email from E-Hotel Services breaking down or explaining the \$1,850 charge. Their terms and conditions state that "we require 25% as a deposit at the time of the booking and the full balance due will be charged 20 days prior to the check in date", suggesting that I would have ultimately been charged \$7,400. Had that been the case, I'm confident my father would have forever haunted the sleazy call centres and dingy offices of E-Hotel Services. They should consider themselves lucky to have gotten off so lightly—and so should I.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

References

1. Strielkowski W (2017) Predatory journals: Beall's list is missed. *Nature* 544: 416
2. Cress PE (2017) Are predatory conferences the dark side of the open access movement? *Aesthet Surg J* 37: 734–738