

# *The Editor Got a Letter From 'Dr. B.S.' So Did a Lot of Other Editors.*

The rise of artificial intelligence has produced serial writers to science and medical journals, most likely using chatbots to boost the number of citations they've published.



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By Gina Kolata

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Letters to the editor from writers using chatbots are flooding the world's scientific journals, according to new research and journal editors.

The practice is putting at risk a part of scientific publishing that editors say is needed to sharpen research findings and create new directions for inquiry.

A new study on the problem started with a tropical disease specialist who had a weird experience with a chatbot-written letter. He decided to figure out just what was going on and who was submitting all those letters.

The scientist, Dr. Carlos Chaccour, at the Institute for Culture and Society at the University of Navarra in Spain, said his probing began just after he had released a paper in The New England Journal of Medicine, one of the world's most prestigious journals. The paper, published in July, was on controlling malaria infections with ivermectin, and it appeared with a laudatory editorial.

Then, 48 hours later, the journal received a strongly worded letter. The editors considered publishing it and, as is customary, sent it to Dr. Chaccour for his reply.

“We want to raise robust objections,” the letter began, going on to say that Dr. Chaccour and his colleagues had not referred to a seminal paper published in 2017 showing that mosquitoes become resistant to ivermectin.

Dr. Chaccour was in fact well aware of the “seminal paper.” He and a colleague had written it, and it did not say that mosquitoes become resistant.

The letter then went on to say that an economic model showed the malaria control method would not work.

Once again, the reference was to a paper by Dr. Chaccour and colleagues.

“Me again? Really?” Dr. Chaccour thought. That paper did not say the method would not work.

“This has to be A.I.,” Dr. Chaccour decided.



Carlos Chaccour of the Institute for Culture and Society at the University of Navarra in Spain. Manuel Castells/Universidad de Navarra

A large language model must have been used to compose the letter, Dr. Chaccour reasoned. He thinks that, searching for references in a niche field where there aren't many, it popped in two of Dr. Chaccour's own papers.

He told the journal what he had found. It did not publish the letter.

Dr. Eric Rubin, the journal's editor in chief, said he hadn't thought about the possibility that chatbots might be writing letters until he heard about Dr. Chaccour's experience.

There's a reason authors might turn to A.I., Dr. Rubin noted in an interview.

Letters to the editor published in scientific journals are listed in databases that also list journal articles, and Dr. Rubin said that "they count as much as an article."

"For doing a very small amount of work, someone can get an article in The New England Journal of Medicine on their C.V.," he said.

"The incentive to cheat is high," he added.

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Dr. Chaccour had to wonder: Who was this person who sent the letter?

He discovered that the author was a doctor from a Middle Eastern country who had published no letters to editors of scientific journals until 2024.

Suddenly, in 2025, he published 84 letters, on 58 topics.

"He's a Leonardo," Dr. Chaccour said.

Dr. Chaccour thought he would write about his experience. He wanted to use the doctor's initials to identify him but realized that wouldn't work: His initials are B.S. He didn't think he could write about a Dr. B.S., so he called him Author No. 1 in a report that examined the proliferation of letters to the editor after the end of 2022, when A.I. became widely available.

The study involved an analysis of more than 730,000 letters to journal editors published since 2005. It has been posted online ahead of submission to a peer-reviewed journal.

“Something happened in 2023,” Dr. Chaccour said. There was a sudden emergence of authors who had published few or no letters before then but who suddenly had letters appearing on a regular basis — going, Dr. Chaccour said, “from zero to hero.”

One author, from a Southeast Asian country, published 234 letters in 2024 and 243 as of Oct. 31 of this year, after having not published any in 2023.

He also identified 128 authors who had never published a single letter. Then, in their first year as letter writers, they had at least 10 published letters.

As many as 3,000 authors who had never had a published letter before 2023 published at least three, he said.

“If someone comes out of the blue and writes three, five or 10 letters in a single year, that raises eyebrows,” Dr. Chaccour said. “To write a letter, you need expertise — you need to be really up-to-date with the literature.”

Dr. Amy Gelfand, editor in chief of the journal *Headache*, has started receiving suspicious letters. One clue, she said, is letters that arrive a couple of days after a paper has been published. Human authors, she said, usually take a few weeks.

She has begun looking up the authors of questionable letters in PubMed, a database of scientific publications. An author of one recent letter had published six letters to the editor this month in six journals on six topics.

Keith Humphreys, deputy editor in chief of the journal *Addiction*, received what looked like a reasonable letter to the editor. He sent it to the paper’s authors for comments.

It turned out that the authors, based in China, were highly productive. Within six months, they had published letters to the editors of journals in cardiology, emergency medicine, endocrinology, gastroenterology, hepatology, immunology

and intensive care medicine.

“They had mastered every single field,” Dr. Humphreys said.

The number of suspicious letters keeps growing, Dr. Chaccour and his colleagues found. In 2023, the share of letters written by prolific authors — those who had three or more published in a year — was 6 percent. In 2024, it was 12 percent. This year, the investigators report, it is approaching 22 percent.

They’re invading journals “like Omicron,” Dr. Chaccour said, referring to the Covid variant that quickly became dominant.

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The situation “is not good,” Dr. Rubin said. But the answer is not to stop publishing letters.

“Sometimes letters have critical information,” he said. “Good letters ask good questions or raise points the authors don’t raise.”

Without letters, Dr. Gelfand said, “you miss all the value, the new insights and important critiques and discussions of what they mean for science.”

Another idea is to stop indexing the letters, so they do not appear in PubMed.

That too, is not a good solution, Dr. Gelfand said. Links in PubMed from letters are helpful for people doing research.

For now, there is no agreement on what to do.

Dr. Chaccour said that while his experience with Dr. B.S.’s letter was funny, the bigger picture is not.

“It is terrifying,” he said.

**Gina Kolata** reports on diseases and treatments, how treatments are discovered and tested, and how they affect people.

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