

Did you receive spam because you published a paper?

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Brendan Thomas has published an interesting paper that looks at author email addresses in the PubMed database of biomedical literature. Email addresses of first authors have been added to PubMed since 1996, and they can be retrieved via the standard web interface or automated software. This makes PubMed an excellent place to find the email address of an academic author, but also shows that PubMed is very vulnerable to email address harvesting.

The problem is not limited to PubMed; this is also an issue with many scholarly journals. Email addresses are used as contact information in scholarly papers, and they are commonly displayed on journal webpages. You can harvest email addresses from NEJM, Science or PLoS webpages, and you don't even need a subscription. JAMA is hiding the email address, and Nature is providing an author contact form. Both journals provide the email address in the PDF.

Most journals provide the postal address of corresponding authors. Journals added email addresses in the 1990s, and this of course has become the preferred method of communication among scientists – when was the last time you received a postcard for a reprint request? Unfortunately we have long learned that it is no longer safe to make email addresses publicly available – more than 90% of email traffic is spam.

Journal publishers have to rethink their policies regarding contact information of their authors. And authors should demand from journals that their email addresses are treated with more respect for privacy. There are better ways to provide contact information for corresponding authors, and I don't mean a link to their Twitter account or LinkedIn profile. Journal publishers should create author profile pages that not only list all publications of a particular author, but also the relevant contact information. There should be contact forms instead of plain email addresses, and authors should be able to control what information is displayed in their author profile. Author profiles of course can be further extended in many ways, from links to publications with other publishers to author-level metrics.

Disclaimer: I sit on the Board of Directors of the Open Researcher & Contributor

ID (ORCID) initiative which aims to help solve this and related problems.

References

Thomas, B. (2011). E-mail Address Harvesting on PubMed—A Call for Responsible Handling of E-mail Addresses. *Mayo Clinic Proceedings Mayo Clinic*, 86(4), 362. <https://doi.org/10.4065/mcp.2010.0817>