

WHAT'S ALL THIS NONSENSE THEN?



*Contemporary academia could be seen as a hothouse
for functional stupidity.*

Alverson and Spicer, 2012¹

Academia. Stuffy middle-aged men sporting elbow patches. Greying mad scientists, slightly muddle-headed and socially incompetent. Grand buildings with dusty halls and libraries, sinking beneath the weight of arcane books.* Elderly professors skateboarding around campus, cats publishing physics papers in French, and conference presentations consisting entirely of the word ‘chicken’ repeated over and over.

If academia is a world apart, the unusual aspects of it that I am about to show you take place in an altogether different dimension. I drifted into this strange place by accident. The first day I sat down in my PhD office, ready for three years[†] of hard research and writing (not to mention social

* Despite urban legends to this effect circulating amongst students since at least the late 1970s, there is no evidence that this has ever really happened.

† Five years and counting.

isolation and financial instability), I hadn't a clue what I was supposed to be doing. I wasted much of the first week watching cat videos on the internet and playing inane games on my phone.*

I started researching in earnest around week three. Ten or so pages into the search results for 'marine energy'[†] I came across a completely irrelevant (for the purposes of my dissertation) paper entitled 'Energy Saving Through Trail Following in a Marine Snail'.[‡] Naturally, I was intrigued. I proceeded to read the article in its entirety, learning that the marine intertidal snail (*Littorina littorea*) can achieve an energy saving of approximately 75% by following the trail previously laid by a fellow snail. I also learned, albeit indirectly, that academics are researching the most random of subjects.

I created a folder entitled 'Obscure' alongside all the serious stuff and stashed away the snail paper. I frequently added further fodder to the folder.[‡] Not only was it a fun way to procrastinate, but occasionally dipping into the entertaining tit-bits I had collected kept me grounded, reminding me of the (in)significance of my actual research.

It wasn't until much later that this minor folly turned into something approaching an obsession. One evening in Paris, in conversation with my good friend Bart, I remarked that I would eventually write a book about the bizarre side of academia. He told me that nobody would read it, so we made a wager. The fact that you are reading this attests to the failure of his hypothesis (thank you).

Before that fateful conversation, social media had always brought out my inner Luddite, but I swallowed my pride and created a blog and accompanying Twitter account. *Academia Obscura* was born (and a significant portion of my free time was lost forever).

Academics were evidently in need of comic relief because the project proved popular in a way that I hadn't expected. This probably shouldn't

* I wish that were a joke.

† My PhD research looks at the legal and regulatory aspects of wave and tidal energy technologies, sometimes collectively referred to as 'marine energy'.

‡ Always avoid alliteration, alternatives are available.

have come as a surprise. Academic work can at times be unexciting and isolating – we need a collective outlet for our frustrations, and humour has often played this role. As James McConnell (founder of the *Worm Runner's Digest*, one of the first academic parody publications) put it:³

Humour in a scientist, a sort of controlled lunacy, serves as a safety valve that ensures that he remain intellectually open.[‡]

The relationship between humour and academia is nonetheless fraught. There are, broadly, two camps: those who think that jokes and humour have no place in science and academic inquiry; and those who think that we should all just lighten up a bit.⁴ I am predictably (and staunchly) in the latter category. One academic, of the former disposition, responded to one of my crowdfunding emails: ‘Dear Glen, Strangely enough, I’m not keen to fund a book that rubbishes my job in such a one-sided way.’^{*}

It is true that misguided attempts at humour occasionally backfire. The French scientists deliberately naming various genetics processes so as to spell out ‘*Ta mère en string panthère*’[†] come off as humourless at best (and as middle-aged white guys making cringeworthy and immature sexist jokes at worst).^{‡5} This book is about the stuff that’s not just puerile, but actually amusing.

Academic humour assumes many forms: hoaxes, spoofs, satirical journals, silly science experiments, etc.[‡] I’ve also found, and will share with you, sham ‘scientific’ journals that are so outlandish they seem

* I felt bad, so I replied to apologise for the uninvited intrusion into his inbox and politely explain that I did not want to rubbish academia. He wrote back: ‘I apologise for condemning without reading it first. Always a mistake! All the best’. (But he still didn’t pledge for the book.)

† Loosely translated as ‘F**k your mother in a leopard-skin G-string’.

‡ ‘Etc’ is the abbreviation academics use when they can’t think of further examples but want to give the impression that they have plenty left up their sleeve.

satirical, inadvertently amusing errors and faux pas, plain bad manners, and excessive eccentricity from those who should know better.

The Ig Nobel Prizes, the awards that celebrate creative research that ‘first makes you laugh, then makes you think’, are undoubtedly one of the most recognisable outlets for academic humour. The Igs, organised by Marc Abrahams under the umbrella of the *Annals of Improbable Research*, are almost as popular as the real Nobels – around 9,000 nominations are sent in each year. The *Annals* itself follows in a long line of parody publications, dating back to the late 1950s when a number of such periodicals first began poking fun at the peculiarities of the academy (including *The Journal of Irreproducible Results* and the *Worm Runner’s Digest*).

There are also more muted attempts to inject humour into the academic enterprise, like the jokes and jibes that academics slip into their otherwise serious peer-reviewed papers when they think nobody’s looking. Authors citing porn stars and football teams as sources of inspiration, listing Muammar Gaddafi as their co-author, or including this illustration of a rat in pants:*

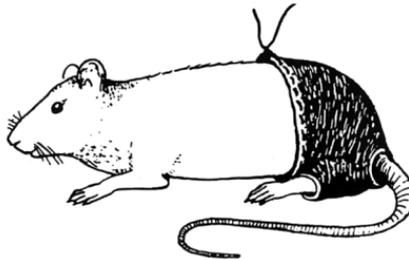


Fig. 1. The underpant worn by the rat.

Figure 1: The underpant worn by the rat

* See page 200 for more details.

Most of the examples in this book are unique and absurd one-offs that are unlikely to be repeated. But I have been driven to wonder how many isolated instances one needs to observe before concluding that a significant portion of the academic community is, in fact, slightly unhinged.

The internet has allowed these oddities to garner a greater share of eyeballs than previously possible, precipitating a bold new era of academic humour. Jokes once buried deep in papers only to be uncovered by a handful of curious researchers are now liable to be spotted and spread rapidly, while school scandals and dodgy dealings are exposed in a heartbeat. At the same time, ticked-off professors and PhD students can now find a global community with whom they can vent their frustrations and share stories. Social media accounts like *Shit Academics Say* reach an audience numbering in the hundreds of thousands, spreading their unique brands of scholarly sarcasm and snark far and wide.

Like all good academic works, I shall start out with the caveat that the scope of this book is limited. The flow of academic antics is constant, and the seam of strange runs surprisingly deep. It is simply not possible to cover every quirky bit of nonsense. I am constrained by space and time (space-time?) to present only the finest selection of academic obscurities.

I probably should be writing something 'useful' or finishing my PhD, but I have had such fun with *Academia Obscura* that I feel it would be a shame not to share it.

My ulterior motive is that I will never again struggle to respond to the question, 'What do you actually do?', or even worse, 'Have you nearly finished your thesis?' Instead, I will just present the questioner with a copy of this book and hope that they are sufficiently baffled to never bother me again.

If you are yourself an academic, I hope that you will do the same and that this book inspires you to take academia a little less seriously. If you are not an academic, I don't pretend that this book will even begin to explain what academics do, but I hope it will make the mass of impenetrable papers and lofty conferences seem more accessible, bring a smile to your face, and inspire you to take us a little less seriously too.