

I am getting testy at this point, so I back into my earlier search and find another possible hit in an article called “Titles,” written by somebody named Brenner and published in *Current Biology* in 1998. Because it sounds interesting, I decide to follow up on the tempting little offer that appears for me to see the whole article by logging onto BioMedNet. I have had some bad experiences on the Internet and tend to be a bit cautious about signing in to anything new, so I log in using one of my many pseudonyms, “Teddy.” I am told that the user name has already been taken, so I add “bear.” Somebody else has already logged onto BioMedNet using “teddybear,” so in the end I have to go with “teddybearfur.” I click to tell them I am from Antarctica, because that is one of the choices they give me, and advance.

BioMedNet asks me about my interests. I’m okay with that, as it seems like a sincere overture. I picture the gang at BioMedNet saying, “Hey, I wonder what Teddybearfur from Antarctica really cares about?” They don’t give me a chance to say I like long walks or chocolate, but I do check off “neuroscience.” It’s then that I notice the little box at the bottom that you have to check that says “I do not wish to receive information from carefully selected, reputable companies which may be of interest to me.” Those statements always bother me. It’s the use of the negative. I think what it is supposed to mean is that, if you check the box, they won’t

let any companies contact you. My concern is that they don’t say anything about unselected or disreputable companies. If I check the box, am I actually saying that I don’t want them to make sure that the companies are reputable or maybe that they should let people send me stuff that will bore me? I worry for a while, but check it anyway.

I’m almost there, ready to read Brenner’s work, when I get held up by the need to agree to the “terms and conditions.” They sound appropriate in general, but I get hung up on the following: “BioMedNet may modify any part of the Terms and Conditions, and may discontinue or revise any or all aspects of BioMedNet at its sole discretion and without prior notice.” In other words, I have to agree to terms and conditions that may change at any time without so much as a call to see how I feel about it. I can’t see how that’s fair. I decide I don’t want the article that much anyway, don’t sign, and back my way out.

By this time I have wasted an hour. I am no closer to finishing the article I am supposed to be working on. I decide to turn PubMed off and go have a coffee. Maybe if my inner child has a little caffeine it will get to work and write something for me.

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## IgNobel (2): Is that ostrich ogling me?

If you thought getting “goosed” was bad, consider what happens when an ostrich starts thinking of you as a potential sexual partner. That’s what’s happening as British farmers begin raising ostriches. Researchers think the birds imprint on their owners and stop seeing their own kind as mates.

A study of ostrich courtship behaviour in the presence and absence of humans, published in the journal *British Poultry Science*, has won the 2002 IgNobel Prize for Biology (see [www.improbable.com](http://www.improbable.com)). Researcher Charlie Deeming of Lincoln, England, says: “The paper had a sound scientific basis and a very practical outcome for ostrich farmers because it highlighted how humans could interfere with the normal behaviours of ostriches.”

Observers watching the ostriches discovered that the presence of humans stimulated courtship behaviour. The males “displayed,” for example (although this can also be a territorial behaviour). Many farmed ostriches mate in front of people: the female is stimulated by the presence of a person, and the male takes advantage of the situation.

Deeming points out that farmers who don’t understand that the ostriches are acting “frisky” only when people are around will wonder why they’re avoiding each other the rest of the time. This is important if you’re trying to breed ostriches.

Deeming is happy about his IgNobel Prize, which highlights “the



point that the research did have a serious [rationale], even if it sounds odd to the outside observer. I’m just pleased that somebody read the paper, or at least the title!” — *Carolyn Brown, Ottawa, Ont.*