

SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY

Scientists pursued for massive conference fees

Speakers at online COVID-19 debates battle claims they owe as much as €80,000

By Michele Catanzaro

When Björn Johansson received an email in July 2020 inviting him to speak at an online debate on COVID-19 modeling, he didn't think twice. "I was interested in the topic and I agreed to participate," says Johansson, a medical doctor and researcher at the Karolinska Institute. "I thought it was going to be an ordinary academic seminar. It was an easy decision for me."

Three years later, Johansson has come to regret that decision. The Polish company behind the conference, Villa Europa, claims he still owes them fees for taking part, and is seeking payment through a Swedish court. After adding legal costs and interest to the bill, the company is demanding a whopping €80,000.

Johansson isn't alone. Dozens of researchers participated in the same series of online conferences on COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021 and many have received demands for payment from Villa Europa. At least five are being pursued through courts in their own countries for fees of tens of thousands of euros, although several researchers are fighting back.

But the case is peppered with puzzling circumstances. In court filings and interviews, the researchers say the demands are illegitimate and based on deceptive license agreements. Little is known about the individuals who organized the conferences. And many of the demands hinge on the ruling of a Polish arbitration court whose very existence has been questioned by experts in the country.

Science has talked with 10 of the speakers, all of whom tell similar stories. In early 2020, somebody calling himself Matteo Ferensby, whose email signature mentioned the University of Warsaw, invited them to speak at online webinars on the mathematical and computational modeling of COVID-19.

The University of Warsaw has no employee by that name, according to the institution's press office. And there is no track record of scientific publications from a Matteo Ferensby.

But many scholars were convinced to join when they saw online that Ferensby had previously organized webinars on theoretical physics, computer science, and theoretic

cal geography. Serious scientists had joined those events, among them the 1999 Nobel laureate in physics, Gerard 't Hooft. And at this early stage of the pandemic, scientists "were sitting in shock in their homes and welcomed the possibility of ... improving the situation with their research," says Marco Baiesi, a physicist at the University of Padova who spoke at one event.

At least 11 COVID-19 webinars took place between April 2020 and June 2021, according to a list compiled by one of the speakers, Axel Brandenburg, a physicist at the Nordic Institute for Theoretical Physics. The speakers themselves—about 10 people in each session—were the only audience, but participants were told the recordings would be published open access afterward. (*Science* has



Axel Brandenburg (left) and Björn Johansson are fighting claims they owe conference organizers thousands of euros.

not been able to locate videos of the events that are publicly available online.)

All the scientists interviewed by *Science* say Ferensby's initial messages never mentioned conference fees. When one speaker, Francesco Piazza, a physicist now at the University of Florence, directly asked Ferensby whether the organizers would request a fee, Ferensby replied, "No, we are talking about science and COVID-19."

But after the events, the speakers were approached by a conference secretary, who asked them to sign and return a license agreement that would give Villa Europa—named in the document as the conference organizer—permission to publish the webinar recordings. Most of the contracts *Science* has seen state that the researcher must pay the company €790 "for webinar debate fees and open access publication required for the debate proceedings" plus €2785 "to cover editorial work." These fees are mentioned in a long

clause in the last page of the contract, and are written out in words rather than numbers, without any highlighting.

Many of the speakers, already busy studying COVID-19 and under pressure from the transition to remote teaching, did not notice these clauses. The pandemic "meant working 11 to 12 hours per day," says another speaker, Johannes Müller, a mathematician at the Technical University of Munich. "The contract was unreadable [but] I eventually sent it."

Some researchers allege in court filings and interviews that they were sent back altered copies of their signed contracts containing an additional page where the fees are made explicit, and modified clauses, one of them stating that disputes can be settled by a Polish arbitration court.

Then, several months after the events, some of the speakers received long letters signed by a person called Krzysztof Sienicki, CEO of Villa Europa, some in Polish. The letters sometimes demanded payments and late fees.

At least 32 scholars in six countries have received these letters, according to Brandenburg. One researcher agreed to pay about €7200 to Villa Europa at the end of 2022, but many ignored the letters. Although some heard nothing, others—Brandenburg, Johansson, and other scientists in Sweden, Germany, and Spain—are facing new pressure.

Each has received a letter from a local court informing them that Villa Europa has asked for the enforcement of a Polish arbitration decision that found in favor of the company. Villa Europa is claiming about €13,000 to €25,000 from each researcher in fees, fines associated with payment delay, and court costs. (What boosted Johansson's fee to €80,000 is a demand for payment for code that Villa Europa used to edit an animation displayed in his talk.)

But the legitimacy of the Polish arbitration court, Pan-Europejski Sąd Arbitrażowy (PESA), has been questioned. Agnieszka Durlik, director general of the Court of Arbitration of the Polish Chamber of Commerce, says she has never heard of it. Moreover, until recently the online tool who.is indicated that PESA's website was set up by Villa Europa itself in September 2021. Durlik lists several other procedural anomalies. "In my opinion this is fraud," she says. It would not

be unprecedented: In 2019, 10 people were reportedly charged in Poland for extorting companies using a nonexistent arbitration court.

Science reached out by email to both Ferensby and Sienicki. Somebody signing as “COVID-19 Team” replied asking for written questions. *Science* sent questions but received no answers.

Villa Europa has fallen under suspicion before. In 2018, the American Chemical Society (ACS) requested arbitration after the company created a website (chemarxiv.org) whose URL resembled that of the preprint repository co-owned by ACS (chemrxiv.org). An arbitration court in the United States ruled that Villa Europa was “attempting to divert Internet users ... for commercial gain” and ordered the company to transfer the domain name to ACS.

Participants in the earlier conferences run by Ferensby also report that the company billed them after the events—though the fees it demanded were only about €300, according to one speaker. “A Polish organization sent a bill [for] a conference that had been replaced by a Zoom meeting. It was ridiculous so I ignored it,” says ‘t Hooft, who participated in an earlier webinar.

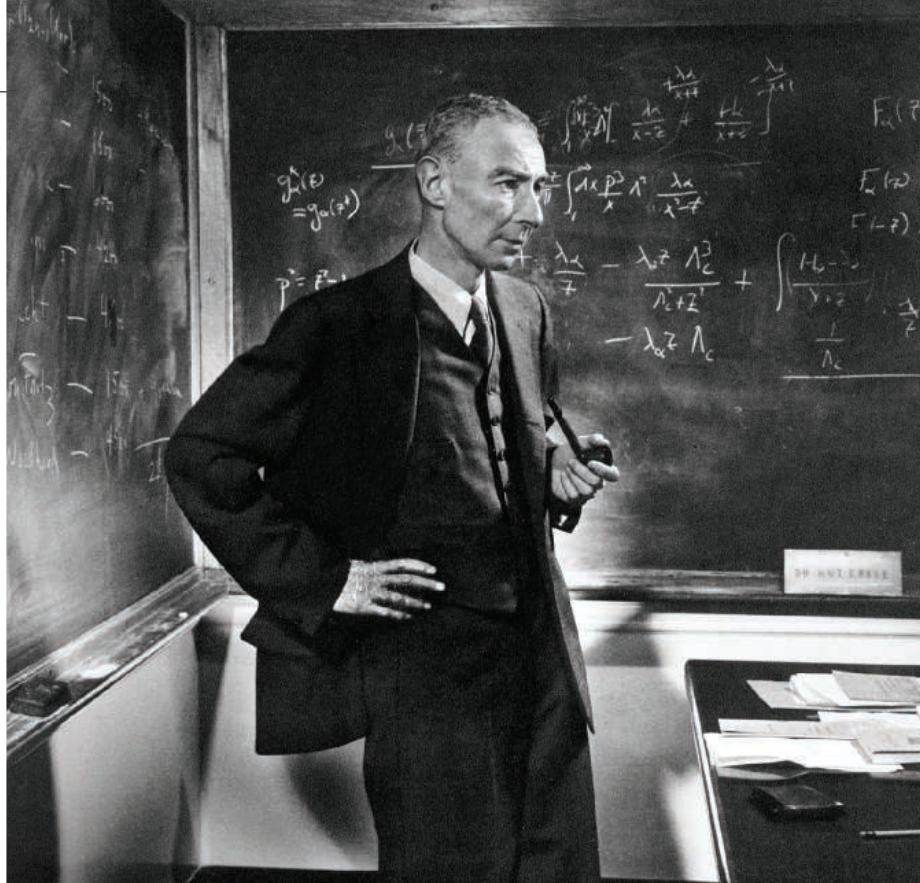
For the researchers now under pressure from the courts, ignoring the demands is not an option. They have all submitted court filings supporting their case. Filings seen by *Science* argue the demands are illegitimate and that they were deceived about what they were signing in the contracts. Brandenburg, for instance, has submitted documents to the Swedish court questioning the legitimacy of PESA and the connection of Ferensby with the University of Warsaw.

Lina Forzelius, the judge in charge of that case, says a decision may be taken in September. If the researchers show the demand is clearly incompatible with Swedish law—for example, if it becomes clear that the arbitration decision is fake—the court may consider not enforcing it, Forzelius says.

Even if the courts rule in the researchers’ favor, many say the experience has shaken them and made them distrustful of other scientific organizations. “I was invited by the Fields Institute for [Research in Mathematical] Sciences to give an online talk about my paper, and so I asked them if they are real,” says Müller, who later realized his reply was “embarrassing.”

And if the courts rule for Villa Europa, more researchers may face the same ordeal, Müller says. “If they win, they can go to others like me.” ■

Michele Catanzaro is a journalist based in Barcelona, Spain. This story was supported by the *Science* Fund for Investigative Reporting and a grant from Freelance Investigative Reporters and Editors.



HISTORY OF SCIENCE

How good a physicist was the architect of the A-bomb?

Oppenheimer “was no Einstein,” says historian David C. Cassidy, but he did Nobel-level work on black holes

By **Adrian Cho**

This week, the much anticipated movie *Oppenheimer* hits theaters, giving famed filmmaker Christopher Nolan’s take on the theoretical physicist who during World War II led the Manhattan Project to develop the first atomic bomb. J. Robert Oppenheimer, who died in 1967, is known as a charismatic leader, eloquent public intellectual, and Red Scare victim who in 1954 lost his security clearance in part because of his earlier associations with Communists. To learn about Oppenheimer the scientist, *Science* spoke with David C. Cassidy, a physicist and historian emeritus at Hofstra University. Cassidy has authored or edited 10 books, including *J. Robert Oppenheimer and the American Century*. The following has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: Oppenheimer’s name appears in the early applications of quantum mechanics and the theory of black holes. How good a physicist was he?

A: Well, he was no Einstein. And he’s not even up to the level of Heisenberg, Pauli, Schrödinger, Dirac, the leaders of the quantum revolution of the 1920s. One of the reasons for this was his birth date. He was born in 1904, so he was 3 years younger than Heisenberg, 4 years younger than

Pauli. Those few years were enough to place him in the second wave of the quantum revolution and behind the main wave of discovery, in what [philosopher of science] Thomas Kuhn called the “mopping-up operation,” applications of the new theory.

Q: He’s known for the Born-Oppenheimer approximation, which helped extend quantum mechanics from atoms to molecules.

A: That was one of his most cited papers.



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