Watch out for AI hallucinations!

By Kit Downes – Assistant Librarian at North London Foundation Trust Library Service
for our October 2025 newsletter

Does the journal article you are looking for really exist? On the current internet, it might not!

The rise of AI tools for searching academic publications is making hallucinations a growing problem, which we are starting to see in article requests at NLFT. AI software works by pattern recognition and prediction. Programs like ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot and Perplexity monitor as you run searches and record which results you peruse and which you ignore. They are capable of creating false results based on what they think you are trying to find.

Look at this citation...

Schnurr, C.A. and Lunney, P.P. 2008. "The role of employment in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder." *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 21(1), pp.68-77

(The article is not in this issue. Only one author is mentioned in the contents page, but as the author of a different article, and their name is given with the second author's first initials. The page numbers in the citation overlap with two other articles)

...and the contents page of the journal issue it lists:

Free Access

The first 20 years

Paula P. Schnurr

Pages: 1-2 | First Published: 26 February 2008

PDF | References | Request permissions

Deployment stressors and posttraumatic stress symptomatology: Comparing active duty and National Guard/Reserve personnel from Gulf War I

Dawne S. Vogt, Rita E. Samper, Daniel W. King, Lynda A. King, James A. Martin

Pages: 66-74 | First Published: 26 February 2008

Abstract | PDF | References | Request permissions

PTSD symptom clusters associated with physical health and health care utilization in rural primary care patients exposed to natural disaster

Melissa A. Polusny, Barry J. Ries, Jessica R. Schultz, Patrick Calhoun, Lisa Clemensen, Ingrid R. Johnsen

Pages: 75-82 | First Published: 26 February 2008

Abstract | PDF | References | Request permissions

This citation has been created by an AI watching a user browsing multiple articles with related keywords and guessing *'Do you mean...?'* complete with the details of who might have written it, and where and when it might have been published. But it has not made it clear to the user that it is a prediction and not a real article, leading to the user requesting a copy of the article from NLFT earlier this year.

Due to the problem of academic researchers padding their reference lists (adding additional references they have not used for a longer, more impressive list), AI hallucinated citations can appear in published research. If they get used as padding by multiple researchers, they can go viral and appear widely across published literature and in metrics tools. Even though they do not exist, be vigilant for them!

<u>Avoiding AI hallucinations:</u>

- **Verify the reference** (As in the example above)
- **Look for inconsistencies, irrelevancies or nonsensical details** (In a famous example, an AI hallucination described website cookies as "chocolate chips")
- **Your searching experience** (If you have been searching for an extended time period and suddenly 'find' a result that fits your search terms very well – which you have not found earlier – there is a chance it is a hallucination)