

A COMMENT ON THE COMMENTS¹

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Commenting on the work of other authors is justified when there are serious concerns related to the scientific content, and the authors do not respond with valid arguments to address such concerns. It should not be used to advertise one's own work.

Keywords: comments; scientific publishing; publishing ethics; scientific bias

КОМЕНТАР ЗА КОМЕНТАРИТЕ

Јавно критикување на научните резултати од други автори во форма на коментар е оправдано кога постојат сериозни сомнежи во врска со содржината на научна публикација, а авторите не одговараат со валидни аргументи коишто би ги земале предвид таквите коментари. Коментарите не треба да се користат за промоција на сопствените резултати или гледишта, дури иако тие не се во согласност со тие на други автори.

Клучни зборови: коментари; научно публикување; етика на публикување; научна пристрасност

An open debate and freedom to criticize published work are some of the underlying principles of the scientific method. Reasonable arguments, brought to the attention of the public in a follow-up communication by experts who are knowledgeable in the field, could provide reassessment of data, interpretation, and conclusions. For a peer-reviewed publication, this is a process that requires a strong and well-rounded justification, supported by relevant literature and/or additional experiments as a means to demonstrate the (lack of) validity of a concept or conclusion that has been filed and exists as public knowledge in the scientific literature. Comments on primary publications are justified when they are made public with the intention to correct the scientific literature

for the sake of promoting the scientific truth on a certain subject.

Comments do not make sense when they are published for the purpose of promoting one's own work by discrediting another person's work. Such attempts, which can be spotted when authors frequently write comments, might indicate other factors that drive publishing of the comments, such as the feeling of lack of attention to one's work or even frustrations of not being appreciated by their peers. This short comment (which is the only comment I have written in my career thus far) is intended to highlight such a case, or rather a series of cases. In a series of six comments on articles from various authors coming from various institutions, Marek Szafranski and Andrzej Katrusiak,

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researchers from the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland, have commented on six articles between 2013 and 2022.¹⁻⁶ Our own article on the dynamic properties of guanidinium nitrate, a compound that was studied by Szafranski and Katrusiak three decades ago (between 1992 and 1996), and again in 2004 and 2011, that was recently published in the journal *Nature Communications*,⁷ is the most recent case that these authors have decided to focus on in a public comment.⁸ And while each of the authors of our original article⁷ appreciates the attention of the careful reading and inspection of its scientific content, the communication with the two authors indicates their dissatisfaction with the insufficient citation of their published articles related to the subject of interest in our article, and that it was not done within the context that they would like to see. Our subsequent communication with the other authors of articles on which they had commented (kept in confidence), however, have indicated that other comments by one or both of these authors were published as a punitive measure for the lack of (sufficient) acknowledgment their earlier work, which in some cases (similar to the work on guanidinium nitrate) had been published quite a long time ago.

It is an established maxim in the scientific publication practice that the relevant literature, regardless of where and when it was published, should be included in the reference list. That assumes two points: (1) the authors are aware of the related references, and (2) they consider that the published literature is relevant to their work. While the former condition is subject to the authors' time, knowledge, and diligence in reading the related literature, the latter one is a more subjective category that depends on the authors' assessment of the relevance of the previously published work and its relation to their own work. When an author is not aware of the entirety of the related literature, it is expected that the authors whose work has not been cited, in a common collegial spirit of academic communication, could bring that fact to the author's attention. This has indeed been the case with our article where we have cited only one reference, and that was insufficient in the view of Szafranski and Katrusiak, who felt that more of their work should be included. Even though our article had gone over the limit in the number of references (80) allowed by the journal,⁷ our offer to publish an addendum that would be reviewed and approved by these two authors was not acceptable to them. This would have rectified the issue with the "missing" references, however that did not suffice in deterring the authors from their intention to pub-

lish a comment, much in line with their practice with the other six cases in the past. We stand by our argument that the citation of the literature – both in content and position in the article – is at the discretion of the authors of that article and cannot be forced upon the authors if they have not done so, according to one or both reasons above.

The second factor of concern in these six cases¹⁻⁶ is the scientific content. While each case has individual content-related specifics, the tendency of Szafranski and Katrusiak to criticize the content of the published work in favor of their own older published work and their results is consistent across these comments. It is indeed sometimes very difficult to appreciate the fact that the power of instrumentation grows at an unprecedented rate, and that brings technological capabilities that are superior to the ones that were used in the past. Should the older results be neglected and overlooked? Certainly not. Should the older data prevent us from using new methods to explore the same or similar related phenomena? Most definitely not. A significant part of scientific progress is rooted in the sophistication of the instrumentation used to investigate the phenomena of interest. Addition of new information, occasionally unavailable with the equipment that was available decades ago, can only be of benefit to advancing scientific knowledge. The intention to prevent that progress demonstrated by this series of comments by Szafranski and Katrusiak, is a retrograde way of thinking that perhaps reflects a closed academic environment where these individuals work. It is this author's firm belief that whenever disputes on scientific content or format arise, an attempt should be made to resolve conflicting opinions in an amicable manner and in direct communication with the authors, who are also respectful members, each in their own field. Commenting on every article that the authors feel does not acknowledge their past contributions does not attract the right kind of attention in the wider academic community.

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