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EDITORIAL

The Mailbag

Donald Kennedy*



The editor's desk at *Science* receives a substantial flow of communications. Some of the arriving material consists of letters "sponsoring" important manuscripts or inquiring about the suitability of an attached manuscript for publication. These take time, but we are glad to spend it because we get some gems this way. Others are complaints: about the quality of already published papers (we advise the authors of these to contribute a Technical Comment); about the size of our fonts (these are mostly from people my age, so of course they're treated with exquisite sympathy); or from authors pointing out that our editors, the blind fools, have failed to see the scientific merit of their study.

There is a quite different category, which might belong under a heading called "author's remorse." These come in two subclasses: "Add me to the author list" or "Take me off." Wannabe authors of the first kind have a strong sense of having been left off the list unfairly; they cite the extent of their participation in the experiments and often hint darkly of personal animus on the part of the lead author. There is little we can do about these except to consult the listed authors and then, if necessary, turn the case over to the institution to sort out. As for getting off the list, just because there's bad news about the already-published paper, forget it. As they say in the pottery shop: "You broke it, you bought it."

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I've had two experiences during the past 6 years that are quite different, in that I found myself urged by distinguished senior scientists *not* to publish a paper from another group that we were evaluating. This is a surprising departure from the prevailing idea in the scientific community that resolution through journal-mediated debate is preferred to censorship. The recent event involved a study by Donato *et al.* (*Science Express*, 4 January 2006) showing that salvage logging in a burned forest inhibited regeneration. The lead author is a graduate student in Forest Science at Oregon State University (OSU), and his coauthors include faculty colleagues in that department. We received a letter on 17 January 2006 signed by several senior OSU faculty members, mostly from the Department of Forest Engineering. It asked that we not publish the paper (apparently not appreciating the fact that its online posting amounted to publication). The letter contained arguments against the methods used in the Donato study.

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This raised serious questions inside OSU. Should senior scientists attempt censorship of a paper from colleagues at the same institution? Faculty members in other departments and at other universities who were aware of the situation expressed deep concern about whether academic freedom was under threat at OSU. We told the letter-writers that we don't believe in censorship at *Science*, that it was too late to do what they asked even if we had been willing to, and that they could put their scientific objections in a Technical Comment.

But the issue didn't just disappear. The U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the source of funds for the study, quickly told OSU that it was withdrawing support for work by the Donato group. Fortunately, that lasted about 24 hours, after which the OSU administration took a firm stand on the matter. BLM promptly rescinded the action and restored funding. In other good news, the provost and the chair of the OSU Faculty Senate issued a strong statement in defense of academic freedom. The authors of the letter to *Science* may get some counseling about collegial behavior, which they surely need.

This brouhaha evoked some déjà vu. In 2002, we were considering a paper from investigators at Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL) that provided evidence for nuclear fusion occurring in rapidly collapsing bubbles in deuterated acetone. ORNL management wanted some additional assurances from the investigators, and we delayed publication for a short time. But in came letters from two very senior physicists—one of them the leader of a large-scale fusion experiment—decrying the very notion of tabletop fusion and advising against publication. We went ahead

anyhow. A confirming experiment with an improved design by some of the same authors has now appeared in *Physical Review Letters*. Of course, confirmation from an independent group is still welcome. But at least this question is up for resolution in the open literature, right where it belongs.

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Donald Kennedy is Editor-in-Chief of *Science*.

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