

An occasional column, in which Caveman and other troglodytes involved in cell science emerge to share their views on various aspects of life-science research. Messages for Caveman and other contributors can be left at caveman@biologists.com. Any correspondence may be published in forthcoming issues.



On the role of editors (some smells aren't as bad as others - or who delivers them didn't necessarily produce them)

I was in the process of writing on my cave wall a piece about the role of editors, when the following verbatim correspondence regarding a recent Sticky Wicket, 'The (f)art of criticism', was left at my cave entrance. The present piece is, in part, a response to my neighbor.

Dear Caveman,

Thank you for drawing attention to the source of the smell. I thought we were experiencing yet another thaw of ancient excrement through glacial withdrawal. Inspection of the cave network established that it was in fact the e-mail server. Particularly odorous were the following originals: 'While we believe your findings are intriguing, and we do not doubt that they will be of interest to others in the field I am afraid without further insight into how...' It is interesting

how the intriguing results suddenly get taken for granted (unpublished) and demands are made to solve the whole story. Likewise: 'These experts were anxious to say that they did not have any doubts about the data presented, but they wanted more information.' 'Although interesting, the story is too incomplete at this point to recommend publication in...' And what about this for a smell: 'I am afraid I must say that these reviewers, whom we have used often to assess manuscripts in the field...' What I find most odorous is the attitude that we should all be doing the same old assays and experiments, showing what binds to this and that, what affects this and that, rather than valuing new approaches. I guess we have to introduce smells into our manuscripts to attract more attention.

I am sorry to have to send this by e-mail, but the carrier owl got tinged in the cave fire. Currently, it's damn cold, and we are having to burn all past issues of the above journals to keep warm.

Sincerely,

Alpine Cave Dweller (Vic Small)

Dear Alpine Cave Dweller,

It is always good to hear again from a friend, especially during these cold dark winter nights. It is good to hear that your sense of smell is still keen - I wonder if it is enhanced by the cold, perhaps for more acrid smells than fetid ones? It is funny that one can 'hear that your sense of smell is still keen' or 'see that your sense of smell is still keen'. Mixing sensations! But, I digress. As you can see (?) the snow is piled high at the cave entrance, the walls are closing in on me, and I'm not getting out enough!

I understand from your correspondence that you are concerned with the comments in the so-called 'decision letter' written by Head Cavepersons of Journals, otherwise known in this business as Editors or Monitoring Editors, rather than the specifics (or non-specifics) of the reviewer's critiques (the latter was the topic of 'The (f)art of criticism'). Actually, the unstated recipient of the smelly FAX in 'The (f)art of criticism' was an imaginary Head Caveperson of a Journal. I feel sorry for them. All of us, from time to time, are asked to critique a colleague's work. We (should) read the manuscript carefully, write a critique based on our opinion, send it off and forget about it, and go back to butchering the mammoth. As a reviewer, you are safe within the cloak of anonymity - no signature at the bottom of the critique, no need to communicate directly with the author, no need to worry that another reviewer might disagree with your opinion, that the language in your critique was inflammatory or that you missed several key experiments and controls. You will not be the target of lawsuits for libel, deformation of character, or conflict of interest, or receive queries about your parentage. No, it is the Head Caveperson of the Journal who has to reconcile the critiques from several reviewers, the one who must make the decision and then sign the letter - as I wrote many Sticky Wickets ago, the 'Hangin' Judge' interpreting the opinion of the 'Jury of Your Peers'.

The point of the Sticky Wicket on 'The (f)art of criticism' was that reviewers, in

my opinion, have the primary OBLIGATION to write a scholarly review that sets out in clear, concise language the strengths and weaknesses of the work under consideration. Using vague statements such as, 'little new in the way of insights into the mechanisms involved in the biological processes described...' '...of insufficient general interest...', and '...low priority for publication...' is not useful either to editors or, more importantly, to the authors. My point was that reviewers should stick to a scholarly critique of the science, as they would expect from the review of their own work.

So what is the role of the Head Caveperson of the Journal? Clearly, the role is to communicate to the authors a decision, which, it should be noted in 80% or more of the time for some journals, is more likely be a rejection. Their signature at the bottom of the decision letter and the 'discussion' of the reviewer's critiques labels the Head Caveperson of the Journal as the person making the final decision, the one with the black hat. But, did this Head Caveperson of the Journal read the manuscript (carefully)? A good question. If not, they are basing their decision solely on the contents of the reviewers' critiques, with absolutely no knowledge that the reviewers got it right or wrong - there is clearly room for error here, but hopefully one of the reviewers got it right, but which one? I think that this is when phrases that Alpine Cave Dweller recited are used ('Although interesting, the story is too incomplete at this point to recommend publication in...' and 'I am afraid I must say that these reviewers, whom we have used often to assess manuscripts in the field...'). The Head Caveperson of the Journal is trying to deflect criticism of his/her 'decision' by summoning up the ghosts of the reviewers to rattle in front of the authors. It is hard to rebut the critique of 'friends' of the Head Caveperson of the Journal ('I am afraid I must say that these reviewers, whom we have used often to assess manuscripts in the field') or 'experts' in the field ('These experts were anxious to say that they did not have any doubts about the data presented, but they wanted

more information') - who am I, the miserable author, to dare suggest that your 'friends' and 'experts' were wrong?

How can these problems be avoided? As I noted previously, the Head Caveperson of the Journal should be the arbiter between the reviewers and the authors. To do this, the Head Caveperson of the Journal making the decision should have an opinion about the work in the manuscript - i.e. he/she must have read it! Doesn't it make the final decision, whether positive or negative, at least informed? But I am sure that the Head Cavepersons of this Journal, and others, will attest to the fact that they are busy people and have many papers to handle, all of which impedes reading every manuscript. The only solutions are to accept fewer manuscripts to handle and pick reviewers carefully. If the reviewers are scholarly in their critique and the Head Caveperson of the Journal has an opinion of the work, then the latter should, in my opinion, make the final informed decision. I think that authors should always have the opportunity - no, the right - to rebut critiques and that the Head Caveperson of the Journal should - no, is obligated - to ask the reviewers for another opinion. I also think that there should be turnover in the group making these decisions. I think that everyone should have a chance to sit in judgement of colleagues as a Head Caveperson of a Journal. Then they will appreciate the difficulties involved, the frustration of receiving poor critiques from reviewers, the time that it takes away from their own work, and that their signature at the end of the letter informs their colleague, competitor and friend of their opinion of the work.

Caveman

P.S. I am sorry to hear about your carrier owl. I ate mine sometime ago, in part, and you'll find this amusing, because it also was severely singed in my fire but I considered it better to complete the cooking rather than see whether its wing feathers could grow back.

P.P.S. You'd have to be really hungry to appreciate the flavor of carrier owl!