

Evolution of a Journal. Editorial Policy 2.0

Editorial published in *Bioscience Hypotheses* Volume 2(2): (2009) 57 - 58

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ABSTRACT

Papers submitted to *Bioscience Hypotheses* should be innovative, clear, compatible with at least most of the facts, and testable. Not all good, new, challenging ideas manage these exacting standards. Editorial policy has been altered to include both an increased role for peer advice and an occasional role for editorial advice to authors to bring out the ideas in a form that I think most likely to attract interest from our readership.

TEXT

It is now a year since *Bioscience Hypotheses* started publication. Up to the end of January 2009 we had received over 400 submissions, and published 90 of them. It is too early to know what impact this will have on research. We will not have any data on citations for years, and not really know whether a *Bioscience Hypotheses* paper has become an important part of the scientific endeavour for a decade or more. So we, and specifically your editor, has to adapt the Journal's policies and processes without useful feedback from real success. We are like Columbus seeking the Indies. We know that success is out there somewhere, but the successful path will only be known when we arrive. In that spirit, I am making a mid-course correction to the Journal, small but I hope significant and useful.

The original policy was to run the journal by editorial review. Following *Medical Hypotheses'* successful example, the editor would read papers and decide whether to publish them or not. Referees would rarely be involved. The editor would select papers that presented ideas that are

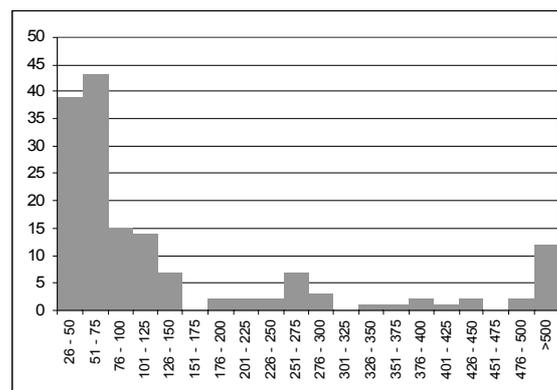
- new
- clear and coherent
- not incompatible with fact
- testable

In themselves, these have proven problematic. How can we know if an idea is new? So this is a judgement call. Facts can be wrong (Francis Crick commented that any theory that accounts for all the facts *must* be wrong, as some of the 'facts' are themselves wrong.) So we should rather say that hypotheses should explain the facts, even if this explanation is that a previously accepted 'fact' is, in fact, wrong. But if your theory contradicts a well-known 'fact', just hiding that is not good enough. Your hypothesis is making a specific, testable prediction, that that 'fact' is wrong, and that aspect should be brought out. Of course, what constitutes a testable prediction is itself controversial. So that is also a matter of judgement (although, as readers of *Medical Hypotheses* will know, I prefer predictions that the writer or the reader can actually do for themselves (1)).

I intend to stick with editorial review, to avoid the inherent conservatism of peer refereeing. (That is why this editorial is cast in the mode of what I, the editor, will do, not what 'will be done' by an abstract and impersonal publishing machine.) In some cases I call on expert referees, especially in evaluating the novelty of an idea, but I take their comments as advice, not as judgement. This Journal publishes things that are interesting, stimulating and original, and the onus on checking whether they are right lies with the authors, not the Journal.

But what if they are not right, but also not wrong? This has come up many times over the last year. Figure 1 shows the length of my response to papers that have not been accepted, that is those that have been rejected outright or sent back for revision. On acceptance, I follow the famous Science Fiction editor, the late John W. Campbell Jr, who often sent aspiring authors long rejection letters, but signalled acceptance simply by sending a cheque. Acceptance itself is all you need to know¹. The rest I usually reject with a short and, I hope, polite note of around 100 words, that they are not suitable for one reason or another. But there is another class of response that seems to run to pages of text. A couple ran to over 1000 words. There is no place in the 'editor as filter' scheme for such responses. These are more like the replies you get from expert referees, or John W. Campbell Jr.. I have ended up typing over 35,000 words of commentary in the last 12 months. What is going on?

FIGURE 1



Length of 'comments to the author' section of e-mail rejecting papers from Bioscience Hypotheses, February thru December 2008. X axis – length of commentary in words. Y axis – number of rejections. (Note that acceptance e-mails rarely have any commentary.)

Two types of paper cause long responses. The first those that I start reading with high hopes that it would be very exciting, only to be hugely disappointed as I read further. It is tempting to rail at the authors for not fulfilling my expectations, and occasionally I succumb to the temptation. My apologies, gentle reader, but this has some overlap with the second reason, so I retain the right to rant.

The second reason is that I occasionally see a paper with something that I think it interesting, intriguing, possibly even radical, and potentially worth publishing in Bioscience Hypotheses. But the paper does not bring this out. There are several potential causes, some of which I have tried to address in previous editorials(2,3). Usually these are:

- focus. There are two versions of this. The article might be written for a different audience, usually a much more medical one, and so focuses on a very specific medical conclusion rather than a more basic biological one. Or the article may try to present many ideas or components at once, so the message of each is lost.
- argumentation. The argument is so tangled that it takes several readings to be able to even guess at what the key point is.
- logic. The reasoning has (to my mind) major problems in it, which either suggests that there are major problems, or that the author has not explained their solution properly. These might be gaps, contradictions with 'known facts', or other gaps that cause me to say 'no, hang on, that just is not right'.
- language. The paper just does not make sense to me, an English speaker.

The last of these I regret that I can do little about. The Journal cannot undertake to help authors write their papers, no matter how unjust it might be that non-Anglophone scientists are forced to write in English to get published here. The other aspects, however, are related not to syntax but to semantics, and in this case I think there is, sometimes, a role to be played by the Journal, and in particular for this Journal which strives to bring new and controversial ideas to the readership.

What I have been doing in those outliers in Figure 1 is to suggest to the authors what aspects of their ideas are interesting, what parts I think flawed, and what they might want to do about both. I emphasise that this is distinct from reviewing the papers as to whether they are 'right'. On two occasions I have worked with authors to develop papers whose conclusions I do not

1 Alas, Elsevier cannot afford to pay you for your papers – quite the reverse

agree with (4). My object is not to restrict publication to papers that are 'right' .Rather, it is to bring out a strong argument leading to a conclusion that the readers of this Journal would be interested in reading. This might include addressing flaws that I find obvious (and thus that I think other readers will find obvious), or some restructuring of the article to make the argument clearer. Radical stuff indeed, on the surface, but in reality not because the basic ideas remain the responsibility of the author, not of the Journal, so those should remain.

Such correspondence can run to pages, and is quite different from the role of 'editor as selector' that I envisaged when we started this Journal. One author complained that it was counter to the spirit of Editorial Choice, and I think that they have a point. Hence a change in policy is called for. In future I will implement 'Editorial Choice' to mean selection by the editor (sometimes helped by referees, but not governed by them), with the editor reserving the right to select parts of a paper or an idea, or to suggest improvements, even additional ideas if I dare, to make the paper more attractive to our readership.

Such suggestions, or interference, will not be the norm for the Journal. This will only happen occasionally, and is not an invitation to authors to contest every decision. Most articles will be accepted or rejected as they are. Sometimes there are minor alterations to be done to fit with the style of the Journal. But just occasionally you, dear Author, will receive a longer response. In those rare cases I welcome our discussion, and hope that I can help to bring your ideas into the light of publication

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to Bruce Charlton and Camilo Colaco for their comments, and to all other members of the Editorial Board for their continued support.

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