Tolerating New Ideas

Occasionally a paper is submitted for publication with a message which is very unique and/or highly controversial and unpopular. When this happens, our review system (which is usually beneficial and effective) can fail miserably. A reviewer, who is typically a recognized authority on the topic being considered, can also be so biased that he fails (or refuses) to recognize the merit of such a paper. Many examples in the history of science can be cited in which erroneous notions have persisted for decades, or even centuries, because of reluctance to consider alternative views.

A possible way to improve our existing system is to submit one copy of each controversial manuscript to a reviewer who has not published in that particular niche (hence has no vested interests) and who is convinced that science thrives on new ideas. He would not necessarily be asked to judge the technical merits of the manuscript. If he thinks it is worthy of consideration by others, even if the expert reviewers disagree, then it would be accepted for publication. It might be condensed and located at the rear of the journal and entitled “Speculation” or otherwise made as inconspicuous and inobtrusive as possible.

In every science there is a need for some daydreamers who will simply throw caution to the winds and provide some speculative notions regarding unknown or poorly known phenomena. These rare individuals are the ones who have not become obsessed with fear of making a mistake in print and, like mad, impetuous turtles, are willing and able to stick their necks out. We need their ideas and their talents. Let’s do something to reduce the battering they usually receive from reviewers. There is a relative abundance of the rest of us who are placidly ruminating over the scheme of things from within the security of our own carefully circumscribed little turtle shells. Newton noted that the rest of creation apparently lay undiscovered about him like sand grains on a seashore. It still is . . . or, at least, it still may be.

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Ralph A. Olsen

Montana State University
Department of Chemistry & Chemistry Station
Bozeman, MT 59717

Reply to “Tolerating New Ideas”

The concerns raised by Dr. Olsen are certainly worthy of our consideration. There is undoubtedly a tendency on the part of many Associate Editors to ask colleagues to make reviews. An attempt to broaden the base of reviewers, therefore, is needed. I cannot, however, agree with Dr. Olsen that papers should be published when recommended by scientists that have not published on the subject when reviewers within the subject matter area advise against publication. The review process by peers has a long and trusted record in spite of its shortcomings. A good example is the following quote taken from a recent letter: “Thank you for your letter releasing our manuscript. To date we have been unable to come to a satisfactory resolution of the questions raised by the reviewers. Their comments have, at least, helped us avoid publication of what may be a serious error.” The review process is sound, but we sometimes make mistakes because we are human.

The Society has recently obtained a computer to assist with membership records. We are exploring ways to use this equipment for identifying reviewers. A possibility is for members to indicate at the time they pay their annual membership dues their willingness to serve as a reviewer. If we can work out a manageable process in which a reviewer’s willingness can be categorized by Divisions and specializations, then a list of willing reviewers for particular subjects can be sent annually to Associate Editors. This could enlarge our base of reviewers and might also tend to speed the review process.

We thank Dr. Olsen for his comments because they remind us how important the review process is and what a responsibility it is to review a manuscript. Every person who has the opportunity to serve the Society as a reviewer should forever be conscious of this responsibility and the necessity for objectivity.

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B. A. Stewart

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