

## Offline: One evening in Lombardy



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“Don’t tell me. I don’t have the possibility to cry any longer. After everything we have done, many times, what is all this for? I don’t know—for nothing. In some sense my future depends on this particular paper. I have lost all my energy already. Where is science going? I don’t want to read this letter. It will be tomorrow.”

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My friend translated this note (written in Italian) as we sat together outside his home near Milan, eating food his 84-year-old mother had prepared for us earlier in the day. The evening’s darkness was closing in. The words he spoke had been written by a 34-year-old scientist who worked at the nearby Institute directed by my companion. A not uncommon event, to be sure: a research paper rejected by a journal, and one that had come very close to being accepted. The editors had invited a revised paper based on mostly supportive comments from reviewers. But something went wrong. Perhaps the editors changed their minds based on new reviews. Or perhaps one editor had objected strongly, leaving the others less confident of moving forwards towards publication. Whatever the details, an especially cruel twist was that the same set of events had taken place only a few months previously. The editors of another journal had sent the paper for peer review, offered encouragement by putting the reviewers’ points to authors, raised expectations by inviting a resubmission of the revised paper, and then inexplicably changed their minds. My friend pressed me firmly. The task of any institution’s director is to promote new ideas and young people, he told me. Didn’t I agree? Yes, of course. So what are editors doing to young scientists? We are crushing them.

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He handed me a copy of an article *Nature* had published on April 29 this year. MIT biologist, Hidde Ploegh, accused journals (“top journals” in particular) of unnecessary bureaucracy. He wrote: “The problem is made more acute by the unwillingness of editors to express their opinions. Instead, they consult an increasing number of reviewers... in search of a majority opinion. Rather than taking a hard look at reviews...editors seem to default to the position that almost every requested experiment or revision can be justified. Editors often do not (or cannot?) assess

revised manuscripts, and so send them out to reviewers again, losing more time and often bringing still more demands for further experiments.”

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One answer to the gridlock of publication has been the advent of a new category of journal: the journal with a bias to publish. The leader in this category is PLoS ONE. It is an open-access publication and the author can be reasonably sure, provided the work is not flawed in some terrifyingly obvious way, of publication. The author fee is US\$1350. Open-access publishing is now diversifying, partly in response to the kind of scientist-led frustration expressed by my friend. Wiley is a traditional commercial publisher that has recently announced Wiley Open Access, “a new publishing program of open access journals”. The Royal Society has launched a new open-access and online-only title, Open Biology—“covering research in cellular and molecular aspects of biology.” The publication fee is US\$2040. And next year the Wellcome Trust, together with the Howard Hughes Medical Institute and the Max Planck Society, will launch a new open-access title in the life sciences. This journal will be completely free to all, including authors. Costs of publication will be borne by the three funders. (The email I received describing this new title came with the *Nature* article attached.) This extraordinary period of invention in medical publishing today is unquestionably good for science.

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Where does that leave a journal like *The Lancet*? With some important lessons to learn, is one obvious answer. Still, I don’t think it intrinsically unreasonable to set a high bar for publication. But the only way that high bar will be accepted by scientists is if two conditions are met. The first is the *Nature* lesson: editors have to be more decisive in their judgments and not flirt with authors, only to abandon them at the last moment. This approach makes one enemies in love. It makes one enemies in science too. The second condition is that the values the journal stand for must matter to authors and readers. If not, the journal will die, and deservedly so.

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Joerg Boethling/Still Pictures