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Is ‘right-of-reply’ right for science?

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Debate is fundamental to scientific discourse. At some journals, a researcher whose work is treated critically can assume a right-of-reply, to debate and rebut the criticism. Sometimes further replies and rebuttals are added to extend the exchange. These pieces could potentially be incisive, but they are hardly ever subject to the same rigorous peer review as the original work, and they rarely make important contributions. Too often, the right-of-reply elicits a generic opinion piece that seems focused more on reputation-management than on science. To the extent that readers engage, it may be partly for the ‘sport’ of seeing research teams facing off, with the frayed mix of pseudo-objectivity and strained politeness that typifies such exchanges. The right-of-reply becomes a trite routine that tends to protract and personalize debates, with little prospect of resolution.

At *Cortex*, we have two article types that encourage researchers to apply independent scrutiny to prior research findings. *Registered Reports* is a format for the planning, execution and publication of pre-registered studies, and is particularly well-suited to direct replications of previous work (Chambers, 2013). *Verification Reports* is a recently added article type that explicitly targets prior published research, subjecting the original data to tests of reproducibility and robustness (Chambers, 2020). This means that *Cortex* is now particularly likely to publish replications and re-analyses of prior work, whether supportive or critical. It is thus timely for us to clarify the journal’s policy on the right-of-reply for original authors of studies targeted by these articles, or any other format.

We do not believe that right-of-reply should be a knee-jerk response. We do not routinely offer it, because it does not routinely add value. The received norm may be that the authors of an original study are owed a special status in shaping the narrative around criticisms of their work; but, as scientists, we do not ‘own’ our research questions or findings after we have shared them by publication. To treat our prior findings as a personal interest is to confuse the personal with the scientific, creating conflicts of interest. Routine right-of-reply thereby blurs

the distinction between the scientist and the science, and risks diminishing both. Science is a social process, but we should strive to depersonalize scientific debate as far as possible, to concentrate on the real issues at stake.

Cortex will often seek to engage original authors of a target article in the review process for replications and *Verification Reports*, because they can have relevant expertise and insight. However, an original author's voice has no automatic priority over other expert reviewers. Similarly, once a critique of their work has been published, they have no automatic priority over any other credible individual who may wish to comment. Of course, if errors have been made or data overlooked, we will always publish amendments and corrections to set the records straight. Moreover, if any researchers, including authors of a targeted study, have scientific commentaries to offer on any paper published in *Cortex*, they can always approach the Editor-in-Chief to propose a contribution to the Discussion Forum.

Cortex will always consider informed scientific commentaries that advance the debate, subject to editorial judgement and peer review; but there is no routine right-of-reply.

References

Chambers, C. D. (2013). Registered Reports: A new publishing initiative at *Cortex*. *Cortex*, 49(3), 609-610.

Chambers, C. D. (2020). Verification Reports: A new article type at *Cortex*. *Cortex*, 129, A1-A3.

Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.