

Should editors ever redact a reviewer's comments?

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Several years ago, I was involved in a car accident where the motorist who caused the multiple car pile-up took off. Fortunately, I recorded the car's registration number and passed it to the police who attended. Somewhat agitated at the time, I used colourful language when describing the other motorist's speedy, expedient departure. 'Other motorist drove away without leaving details,' the police officer paraphrased while writing in his book. 'That's what you meant to say, isn't it, sir?' That experience has stayed with me as an example of how the same information can be expressed in language with very different connotations. I was reminded of it recently when an author complained of rudeness in comments made in a review of a *Pacific Conservation Biology* paper.

There can certainly be tensions between authors and reviewers. Pressures to publish are strong, so aside from their personal involvement in their work authors are aware that their career prospects hang on the success or otherwise of their papers. That can make them particularly sensitive to criticism, especially if it is in error, self-promoting, rude or insensitively phrased. As [Rosenfield and Hoffman \(2009; p. E301\)](#) expressed it: 'Although this feedback is usually helpful, it can also be incomprehensible, rude or plain silly.' Reviewers, however, are chosen for their knowledge of the subject and their established track records, so they are likely to be busy people taking time from demanding schedules to review with limited opportunity for remuneration or recognition ([Smith 2016](#)), although the advent of Publons ([Smith 2016](#)) does provide a systematic avenue for recognition and some publishers may offer discounts on page charges or other incentives ([Gasparyan et al. 2015](#)). That can leave reviewers with little patience for work they find ill-conceived, carelessly executed, or poorly written, irrespective of the views of the authors. Sometimes that frustration spills over into brusque or rude comments, which may be excessive or unfair.

[Mavrogenis et al. \(2020; p. 414\)](#) note that rude reviews '... offer condescending or outright offensive comments, and/or urge the irrelevant citation of their own work.' [Silbiger and Stubler \(2019\)](#) found that 58% of the respondents in their study believed that they had received an unprofessional review, which was particularly damaging to the self-esteem of minority groups among the authors. Some egregious examples of actual comments are given in [Hull \(1988; chapters 5 and 9\)](#), while [Rosenfield and Hoffman \(2009\)](#) provide a categorisation. Authors are, though, looking from a very personal perspective and may be inclined to rationalise manuscript rejection as a

result of poor reviewing. For example, [Cassey and Blackburn \(2003; p. 376\)](#) noted that 'rejection is still not easily taken among even the most successfully publishing ecologists, and appears to be swallowed with sour grapes.'

Some believe that the advent of open peer review, in which reviewers' reports and authors' responses are published alongside the final article, will curb negative tone or rudeness in reviews. Data to date are ambivalent, with [Bravo et al. \(2019\)](#) finding no strong effect of open peer review on the tone and subjectivity of reviews, although there was weak evidence that male reviewers tended to write reports with a more positive tone when the review was open. My personal view is that publication has not prevented some sharp exchanges in the past published literature (e.g. [Paine \(1991\)](#) cf. [Foster \(1990, 1991\)](#)), to pick a case from so long ago that mentioning it is unlikely to reopen wounds), so it would be naïve to expect to eliminate such clashes in open peer review.

Such discussions about the quality and tone of reviews go to the heart of a thorny question for editors: is it ever acceptable to redact parts of a review for reasons such as intemperate comments or language, factual errors, self-promotion by the reviewer, or grammatical or typographical errors? [Silbiger and Stubler \(2019\)](#) argue that editors should be the gatekeepers of peer review, which would justify redaction. [Mavrogenis et al. \(2020\)](#) note that actual practice varies widely along a continuum from one extreme where editors do redact unprofessional or discourteous comments to another where editors are obliged by policy to pass on reviews unchanged. These days, any redactions are known to reviewers because it is considered good practice to share the decision letter and the reviews with all reviewers.

The Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) offers little clear advice at the moment, although recommendations may emerge from their recent COPE Forum on the topic in March this year (<https://publicationethics.org/news/case-discussion-editing-peer-review-comments>, accessed 12 May 2020). The only case studies on their site make it clear that (i) confidential comments to the editor should never be forwarded to authors, and (ii) it is recommended that, where possible, reviewer comments should be sent to all authors. Nevertheless, numerous comments from readers on the topic on the COPE website favour redaction of rude or discourteous comments in reviews.

I'll be watching closely to see if further guidance from COPE is forthcoming. In the interim, I will be looking intently at reviews to see if, in the words of [Paine \(1991; p. 92\)](#), the language appears 'designed to offend rather than amuse or

instruct.’ My judgement may be imperfect, but I will redact or rephrase if I believe that a comment is potentially offensive. The original review will remain unchanged on file as a document of record, but the redacted or rephrased version will be the one forwarded to the authors and shared with all reviewers.

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