

Address to my students

Reading the literature almost always tempts me to conclude that the quality of the standard paper is below average. Let me list a few of the standard shortcomings of the standard paper:

- the nontechnical prose is salestalk
- the technical prose is sloppy and verbose
- the notations are ill-considered and pompous
- the formalisms adopted are clumsy
- the definitions are unclear and incomplete
- the proofs are omitted or a caricature of what they should be
- the problem tackled is not worth solving (eg. because it is easily avoided)
- the author fails to challenge his tacit assumptions and to separate his concerns
- the problem can be presented and dealt with better and in only a tenth or a fifth of the space.

So far, so bad. Worse often surfaces when one discusses these shortcomings with the author. While agreeing in an abstract way, he yet defends his article with arguments in the following vein:

- the paper is addressed to the XYZ community, which habitually expresses itself in that style, deviation from which would result in failure to reach his intended audience
- the shortcomings don't matter because the intended audience knows how to resolve the ambiguities (if it notices them) and how to supply what has been omitted
- had he followed the suggestions for improvement,

- the paper would have become so short that no one would notice that he had achieved something
- in improved form, the paper would be rejected by the editorial boards and program committees of the XYZ community and, being untenured, the author cannot afford the luxury of that rejection.

Having a solid germ of truth, his defence sounds almost plausible. But we should not forget the following:

- scientific research as planned by managers is planned as if the available budget is the limiting factor, whereas the problems worth tackling are our scarcest resource
- the publish-or-perish syndrome has opened the flood gates for the write-only journals and the analogous speak-only conferences; there are more of those than we can form competent editorial boards and program committees
- education has always been an up-hill struggle, and it is naive to expect from the XYZ community gratitude for showing that its pet problems are disposable
- life of a scientist was never meant to be comfortable; exciting, yes, but comfortable, no.

We should never forget the crucial distinction between the salesman and the scientist. It is the salesman's duty to please his customers or, if that is too difficult, to fool them. It is the scientist's duty to raise our abilities by increasing our standards for quality and effectiveness, to show what can be done well by pursuing the just possible, and to

clarify ruthlessly, independently of the fact that complexity sells better.

In these respects, there is no room for compromise: the alternative is no less than scientific corruption, and remember that the commonness of the latter phenomenon does not make it respectable.

Of course you are free to join "for your protection" an XYZ community by accepting its standards as law; but if you do so, know that the scientist in you has been replaced by the party member.

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