



## Are Editors free from bias? The special case of Letters to the Editor

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## EDITORIAL

## Are Editors free from bias? The special case of Letters to the Editor

**B Pless**

Readers may occasionally wonder whether an Editor can truly be unbiased when it comes to deciding what to publish. In general the answer is “probably not”, but a better answer is that it depends on what sort of material we have in mind. In the old days, it was only print publications that concerned us. Nowadays, we need also to consider what is published electronically. For papers or similar material that may appear on websites, the decision-making process is almost identical to that used for print publication. The process of deciding which papers to publish has been well studied. I am convinced the peer review process minimizes some biases. But Letters to the Editor are an entirely different matter.

There are several types of letters. One is “Research letters”. These are short communications addressed to the Editor that report data. In *Injury Prevention*, they were effectively the same as a Brief Report. As such, they were peer reviewed, but their limited length made them interesting but insubstantial. As a result, they are not often quoted. Editors with an eye on their impact factor may conclude (as we have done) that as long as they are counted in the denominator, they are likely to be deadweight. Hence, we, along with other journals have decided to eliminate them and instead encourage authors to submit the material as a Brief Report.

The other type of letter is more personal. These are almost always written to support or, more often, take issue with a paper we have published. While ostensibly written to the Editor, the intended audiences are the authors, and, of course, any interested readers. Because they rarely contain actual data, they are not peer reviewed in the usual manner. Instead, they are screened for possibly defamatory or otherwise scurrilous content. All others are accepted for posting. But does this mean that I approve of the content or agree with the arguments?

This question—and this response—was prompted by several recent postings regarding bicycle helmets and helmet legislation and, more specifically, those opposed to such legislation.<sup>1-10</sup> If I were

to permit my biases to guide my actions, most of this critical material would not have seen the light of day. But, Editors have a responsibility to their readers and must not censor material with which they disagree, however tempting it might be to do so.

Why do I disagree? The critics contend that helmet legislation sends a message that bicycling is dangerous. Is bicycling dangerous? Of course it is, and not just because bicyclists can be hit by a car. Potholes, rocks, curbs, people, and car doors are more frequent causes of bike injuries than collisions with moving vehicles. (The photo is me after colliding with a car door that was suddenly and carelessly opened).

Also, the critics argue that the biking-is-dangerous message discourages riding and that other measures are needed to make the roads safer.

I am in complete agreement with the second argument: many measures are needed to improve safety for all users, especially the most vulnerable—pedestrians and bicyclists. But doing so and supporting helmet legislation to protect bicyclists are not mutually exclusive. If the anti-helmet legislation group genuinely believes that political decision makers cannot do one if they do the other, they have much to learn about how policy is formed.

This aside, I have two fundamental problems with the anti-helmet legislation argument and have expressed these in print.<sup>11 12</sup> First, the evidence that helmet legislation does discourage riding, with or without enforcement, is inconclusive. Second, the health consequences of any such decline in ridership are also uncertain. Those who favour helmet legislation have asked for evidence that the average child or adult cyclist pedals long enough and far enough to promote fitness. We provided some evidence that most cycling is insufficient to enhance fitness, but this and other rebuttals continue to be ignored.

Even if it were true that helmet legislation causes cyclists to quit and that quitting diminishes fitness, it is still reasonable to ask whether this matters more than preventing a serious head injury. The anti-helmet legislation lobby

avoids this question and relies instead on presenting data based on fatalities rather than injuries. No sensible helmet advocate has argued that a typical bike helmet provides adequate protection against several tons of moving metal. The pro-helmet lobby is convinced that helmets protect against serious head injuries based on evidence coming mostly from case-control studies. The critics dismiss these findings, preferring instead the weaker evidence provided by ecological time series, usually of fatalities. The moral here is that solid research designs cannot be discounted just because you don't like the answers they give.

Unlike Letters to the Editor in basic science or clinical journals (where the issues are usually scientific), in journals like this one, many letters put forward points of view that may have little to do with what an author has actually written. I am distinctly uncomfortable about the possibility that our website could become a home for pressing causes rather than disputing science.

As the author of several pro-helmet papers<sup>13-15</sup> I make no bones about my conviction that enforced legislation is an effective preventive measure. Does this bias permit me, however, as Editor, to suppress letters that I disagree with or even those I judge to be scientifically wrong? No matter how frustrating or irritating I might find them, I cannot. I wish I could because I find the repeated, almost boilerplate arguments, tiresome and suspect many readers share that view. But no self-respecting Editor can allow his or her views to influence what they publish, even in the large grey zone of letters.



The Editor, who wore a helmet, after colliding with a suddenly opened car door.

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## ONCE AGAIN, WITH FEELING: THANKING OUR REVIEWERS

During the past 12 months (actually, to be precise, from 15 October 2005 to 15 October 2006) 330 experts provided advice about one or more papers we sent them for review. No one did so for financial gain and few for glory. The fame attached to being listed in this annual notice of thanks on our website is far too little and too fleeting. It is in no way commensurate with the effort involved in a good review, especially the need to balance solid judgement, constructive comments, and tact. Still, listing names is our only way of thanking our reviewers for the time and effort invested in this otherwise thankless task.

*Injury Prevention* is a far better journal than it would be with fewer, more superficial reviews. After more than 10 years in this position I am still astonished at how much care and attention most reviewers invest in the task. I am certain that our authors share our gratitude, perhaps as much or even more in the many instances when we are forced to reject their offerings. Clearly, from the enthusiasm you hear in these lines, I am not one of those who have serious doubts about the peer review system. Whatever the criticisms, it seems that thoughtful advice always helps authors improve their work.

This is one of many times when we are entitled to a bit of crowing. So crow I do about some key statistics regarding our review process because I wonder how many other journals can emulate or surpass them. First, since January of this year we made 721 requests for review and 502 were accepted (about 70%); moreover, they did so on average within 4 days. Second, the average turnaround was 2 weeks and 75% were returned within one month. Finally, and equally important, I want to briefly brag about our editorial board. It is not just a collection of largely idle big names or pretty faces. Our board works hard, with each member reviewing an average of 4 papers in the past year, although the range is up to 7 for one stalwart (LF). And, they do so slightly more promptly than other reviewers (as they should).

No journal can aspire to excel, as I believe we do, without the unstinting support of many colleagues. Although space does not permit reviewers' names to appear here, they are not nameless: the list appears on our website with heartfelt thanks to all.

**Barry Pless, Editor**