

February 5th, 2014

From Jacques Ninio's web site : <http://www.lps.ens.fr/~ninio>  
(see at the bottom of the index page)

**EDITORIAL ACCIDENTS** or:

When editors do their job, and when they don't,  
What should we do when we are confronted with an editorial fraud?

**A miraculous, courageous decision by BioEssays.**

In 1999, I submitted an article to BioEssays. One of the reviewers pushed hard to reject the manuscript, and the Editor followed his advice, but the arguments raised by the reviewer against my manuscript were so idiotic that I sent the following letter to the editor:

*Dear Editor,*

*I have received your letter just before leaving for vacations. You could have spared yourself this tedious exercise. Imbecility has prevailed, this is all there was to say. Your attempt to give me a lesson in accuracy, sequence analysis and evolution, gives me the feeling that I have landed on the Planet of Apes.*

*Through his report, reviewer 2 appeared to me as a deeply dishonest, illiterate, self-infatuated imbecile. At first, I thought he was an undergraduate student. Then, I thought of a senior scientist who had read my MS laid on his steering wheel, while driving back home from the pub, and had written his report after being quarrelled by his wife.*

*(...).*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Jacques Ninio*

Now, the miracle: the Editor, Adam Wilkins responded positively, and in a chivalrous manner to the letter:

*Dear Dr Ninio,*

*Thank you for your letter. On first reading, I admit that I was a bit annoyed my reaction being "Just who does this arrogant, petulant, asshole thinks he is?" (we are having a frank exchange of views, as they say in diplomacy, no?). But then I decided*

*that that was unkind and unjust, that you were just having a bad day and that this was just your way of expressing yourself.*

*I am sorry that you thought I was trying to give you a “lesson“ in certain areas of biology. No, I was just trying to explain where I thought the problem — really the gaps in your explanation — in the argument were. I consider this a basic courtesy to extend to an author, if one is turning down his/her paper. But I have never been so profusely “thanked“ for my pains. Of course, you might be right — my answer may show my “imbecility“. I try to avoid the latter, of course, but, on the other hand, I have never claimed infallibility. (...).*

*In any event, I decided, on second reading, that this was such a luxuriant wonderfully OTT (over-the-top) response that it deserves recognition as a classic response to an editor. I am going to have it framed and will hang it in my office; it really is pretty funny.*

*Yours in imbecility and from the Planet of Apes\**

*Adam Wikins*

*\* In the film of course, the apes are actually quite intelligent and sympathetic. One could be in worse company, n'est-ce pas?*

After this exchange, Adam Wikins guided me in the preparation of a revised manuscript. There was a very long exchange of letters, he spent a considerable amount of time on refining the arguments. He excavated from his memory old, largely ignored, publications in genetics that contained data pointing in the same direction as my MS. The revised MS was finally accepted and published as:

Ninio, J. (2000) Illusory defects and mismatches : Why must DNA repair always be (slightly) error prone ? BioEssays 22, 396-401.

That DNA repair can be error-prone is a paradox, yet it is mathematically sound. Assume that the errors are detected with a near to one probability. Then, if one per cent errors are made in repairing the initial errors, replication accuracy increases. The error-prone character of DNA repair is now well accepted.

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### **A case of editorial fraud by Nature Immunology.**

*First step: Nature Immunology claims that it is examining my manuscript.  
March 29th, 2001:*

*“We received your manuscript (...). It is currently undergoing internal review and we will contact you as soon as a determination is made regarding your manuscript. (...)”  
Signed Michael Jackman, Editorial Assistant.*

*Second step: Nature Immunology rejects the article.  
March 30th, 2001:*

“(...) We have carefully examined the work but came to the conclusion that the paper does not yet warrant an in-depth review. We are therefore returning your manuscript copies so that you may submit to another journal.”

Signed Melanie Brazil, Assistant Editor

*Third step: I request a motivated rejection.*

(...)

“I would like very much to have a letter from you stating more precisely the reasons for the rejection. The letter you sent me was a kind of standard letter that could be raised against any paper, without evidence that the MS had been evaluated in any serious way.

“Please take your time to do it, and send your evaluation by regular mail. Even a few lines of this kind:

“This MS deals with what we believe is a false problem. Indeed, it is our opinion that antigen purification before presentation is a gratuitous speculative idea (...) “

*Fourth step: Nature Immunology admits that it did not evaluate the MS*

April 2nd, 2001

“(...). Nature Immunology requires that experimental data be presented in both research articles and commentaries. Your manuscript is theoretical and therefore does not fall in this category. Thus it is unsuitable for our journal (...)“

Signed Melanie Brazil, Assistant Editor.

*Fifth step: I point out that Nature Immunology does publish theoretical contributions.*

“I am stunned by your statement that you do not accept theoretical articles. If this is the case, it should be indicated unambiguously in your instructions to the authors.

“(...) I have on the top of my desk Rolf N. Zinkernagel's commentary (Nature Immunology, volume 1, number 3, pp. 181-185) in which he discusses data, as I do, but does not present any original result. (...)“

*Sixth step; I write a detailed letter to the Editor.*

April 11th, 2001

(See this letter below, it may inspire you in your future fights with editors!).

*Seventh step: The Editor claims that theoretical articles must be invited.*

April 16th, 2001

This time, Nature Immunology explained and justified its “policy“ in great detail. It said that Zinkernagel's commentary was written on invitation, and that there was no designed slot for hypotheses.

The letter was signed Linda J. Miller, Editor.

This is a kind of “happy end“ inasmuch as both the author and the Editor now agree on the basic facts.

In my opinion, authors should never accept rejection letters that do not provide evidence that the Editor has read the manuscript. Such letters must be considered as illegal, and the authors should request that the rejection be cancelled. If not, it can be taken as a case of editorial fraud.

Looking into my archives, I find that the manuscript was also rejected by EMBO reports, that Philippa Marrack, after some hesitations, did not present it to PNAS. My ideas on the topic of "antigen purification" evolved through discussions with Sebastian Amigorena. A short note was, after hesitations, rejected by Trends in Immunology. Thomas Weissensteiner was the Editor. A complete manuscript finally appeared in the Journal of Theoretical Biology:

Ninio, J. and Amigorena, S. (2004) How B cells and dendritic cells may cooperate in antigen purification. J. Theoret. Biol. 231, 309-317.

I am proud of this article which, I think, is in advance upon its time.

*Appendix: my April 11th letter:*

*Sir,*

*Two weeks ago, I submitted a manuscript entitled: "How B cells and dendritic cells may cooperate in antigen purification" (NIO 1439).*

*This manuscript was not sent to the reviewers, and apparently, it was not even submitted to internal evaluation. The rejection letter by Dr Melanie Brazil was a stereotyped letter, listing the official criteria of selection, but not showing the slightest awareness of what the manuscript was about. When asked about the scientific reasons, if there were any, for the rejection, she replied by a lie, writing that theoretical manuscripts are not taken by Nature Immunology, be it as articles or as commentaries.*

*I then insisted to have some truly scientific evaluation, but then she replied that "we have carefully evaluated the work but came to the conclusion that the paper does not yet warrant an in-depth review ». I doubt that such an evaluation has ever been done. Otherwise, she would have been able to make a statement referring explicitly to the content of the manuscript, for instance "it is our opinion that antigen purification is a false problem" or "it is our opinion that there is no place for B cell - dendritic cell interactions in immunology".*

*Thus, I demand from you a statement in which you take your responsibilities, and state precisely what you consider to be the basic weakness of the manuscript, referring explicitly to the thesis of the paper. I understand that Dr Brazil — who does not seem to know what science is about — may consider Nature Immunology as a commercial rather than a scientific journal. But even in trade, there are rules to be respected.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Jacques Ninio*

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## **A case of collective editorial fraud in a journal of psychological science**

(in preparation, to be detailed later)

- One reviewer was drunk, the other was in a psychotic state
- Initial fraud: the editor did not read the manuscript
- detailed reply to the reviews
- the editor tries to cut the grass under my feet
- the chief editors back the editorial fraud
- in the absence of any valid scientific objection against the manuscript, they confirm the rejection decision and motivate it by a tissue of false accusations. They invent, for the circumstance, the totally insane "computer hardware theory of memory artefacts".