

Blog fog? Using rapid response to advance science and promote debate

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As editors of *Tobacco Control* we are always pleased to see readers thinking critically about what they read in this journal and using the 'Rapid Response' forum to engage in constructive academic debate. However, the growing use of personal blogs to criticise published articles has led us to reflect on appropriate ways of engaging in such debate and how we as editors should respond to comments made outside the 'Rapid Response' forum. This editorial summarises these reflections and clarifies our policy on postpublication discussion of research articles.

Tobacco Control provides a valuable forum for analysis, commentary and debate in the field of tobacco control. This includes public presentation of research undertaken and reviewed by scientists and practitioners in the field, so that it may inform and progress scientific inquiry, health policy and debate. While the editors make decisions about what is and is not published in this forum, these decisions are made with expert advice and balancing many factors—including research quality, contributions to the field, innovation, international impact and policy relevance.

Despite careful review and selection procedures, no journal can guarantee that everything published is accurate, or that all readers will agree with the authors' interpretation of findings.

Recent comments posted on some personal blogs impugn the objectivity of *Tobacco Control* and its reviewers, questioning our motives and the veracity of peer review. The editors take complaints about

scientific rigour very seriously and, when indicated, we undertake further internal review of papers and peer-review reports to ensure appropriate processes were followed and the decision to publish is defensible. Our role is to facilitate the processes of peer review, transparency and accountability which underpin the legitimacy and independence of academic research.

It is not the place of journal editors to defend the detailed content of research articles that are published in the journal, since this reflects the work of the relevant authors. Ultimately, the author is the guarantor of his or her work and is entitled to be aware of and respond to critiques of that work, particularly when those critiques question accuracy or scientific integrity. Thus the proper place to pose questions and debate conclusions from research published in *Tobacco Control* is directly to the authors, in the form of a Rapid Response. This mechanism provides a public forum for discussing concerns about a study and, since it is permanently linked to the paper electronically, allows readers to consider the critique alongside the original paper. PubMed Commons provides a similar forum which links to the paper's index in PubMed and also provides for a public record of the comments and any responses.

The participation of scientists and scholars in peer review is critical to advance science, since this is how any errors of concern could be identified and addressed. As editors, we sometimes struggle to secure reviewers for papers, facing many declinations or non-responses. This is a particular frustration when declining reviewers are those who have been vocal about the flaws in others' work. Occasionally, an individual who has written a postpublication critique has declined invitations to review similar papers prepublication. While there are many reasons why one may be unable to review at a given time, assisting with prepublication rather than post hoc external critique is the best way to improve the quality of the research that is published in *Tobacco Control* or any other journal.

Peer review is imperfect and mistakes are known to happen. Some issues may

arise from misinterpretation on the part of the reader, or inelegant phrasing by the author. Others may arise due to the limitations of the study or differences in interpretation of results. As noted above, the Rapid Response process provides a forum for exploring such issues. In contrast, placing personal blog posts or social media messages complaining about a study, alleging flaws in the review process, or making ad hominem attacks on authors or editors do not advance the field or allow an appropriate scientific dialogue and debate. This is especially so for topics that are controversial, where discussion of alternative views about the interpretation of findings would be beneficial for readers to view alongside the published article.

As a result of discussion about these issues, the *Tobacco Control* editorial team has now established a policy that editors will not respond to external blog posts or social media messages about specific studies. Rather, to ensure authentic, respectful scientific debate that makes a genuine contribution to the field, we encourage readers to submit comments about individual *Tobacco Control* publications as Rapid Responses. This allows the authors to respond and maintains a public record of the discussion. To submit a Rapid Response on any paper, click the link on the title page of the electronic version. Rapid Responses should be succinctly written without emotive language and be respectful to the authors of the original publication.

Blogs and social media have important roles to play in disseminating research, but sometimes do not serve well the advancement of scientific discourse. We will always welcome legitimate criticism of methods, results and interpretation of published research. But we will discourage engagement with and dissemination of polemics that contribute to public misunderstandings and create conflict. As journal editors, we encourage constructive criticism and debate in ways that strengthen the evidence base for effective tobacco control policy rather than amplifying individual voices.

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