

APS Observer, in press

Mob Rule or Wisdom of Crowds?

Introduction by APS President Susan Goldin-Meadow: New forms of media are making it easier and easier for us to react to, and comment on, research within our community. Although free-flowing comments and criticisms can often push an argument or research program forward in a good direction, they can also derail, and perhaps even threaten, the process. I invited guest columnist Susan Fiske, a former APS president, to think about the impact that the new media are having not only on our science, but also on our scientists.

Susan T. Fiske

APS Past President

Our field has always encouraged – required, really – peer critiques. But the new media (e.g., blogs, twitter, Facebook posts) are encouraging uncurated, unfiltered trash-talk. In the most extreme examples, online vigilantes are attacking individuals, their research programs, and their careers. Self-appointed data police are volunteering critiques of such personal ferocity and relentless frequency that they resemble a denial-of-service attack that crashes a website by sheer volume of traffic.

Only what's crashing are people. These unmoderated attacks create collateral damage to targets' careers and well being, with no accountability for the bullies. Our colleagues at all career stages are leaving the field because of the sheer adversarial viciousness. I have heard from graduate students opting out of academia, assistant professors afraid to come up for tenure, mid-career people wondering how to protect their labs, and senior faculty retiring early, all because of methodological terrorism. I am not naming names because ad hominem smear tactics are already damaging our field. Instead, I am describing a dangerous minority trend that has an outsized impact and a chilling effect on scientific discourse. I am not a primary target, but my goal is to give voice to others too sensible to object publicly.

To be sure, constructive critics have a role, with their rebuttals and letters-to-the-editor subject to editorial oversight and peer review for tone, substance, legitimacy. Some moderated social-media groups monitor individual posts to ensure they are appropriate. Always, of course, if critics choose to write a personal message to the author, that's their business. If they request the original data, scientific norms demand delivery within reasonable constraints. All these venues respect the target.

What's more, APS has been a leader in encouraging robust methods: transparency, replication, power analysis, effect-size reporting, and data access. All this strengthens our field because APS innovates via expert consensus and explicit editorial policies. Individuals' research is judged through monitored channels, most

often in private with a chance to improve (peer review), or at least in moderated exchanges (curated comments and rebuttals). These venues offer continuing education, open discussion, and quality control. These constructive efforts draw on the volunteer talent of many, in the greater good and respecting the individual investigator.

In contrast, the self-appointed destructive critic's role now includes public shaming and blaming, often implying dishonesty on the part of the target and other innuendo based on unchecked assumptions. Targets often seem to be chosen for scientifically irrelevant reasons: their contrary opinions, professional prominence, or career-stage vulnerability.

The destructo-critics are ignoring ethical rules of conduct because they circumvent constructive peer review: They attack the person, not just the work; they attack publicly, without quality controls; they have sent their unsolicited, unvetted attacks to tenure-review committees and public-speaking sponsors; they have implicated targets' family members and advisors. Not all self-appointed critics behave unethically, and some do so more than others. One hopes that these critics aim to improve the field, not harm people. But the fact is that these vigilante critiques are harming people. They are a far cry from peer-reviewed critiques, which serve science without destroying lives.

Ultimately, science is a community, and we are in it together. We agree to abide by scientific standards, ethical norms, and mutual respect. We trust but verify, and science improves in the process. Psychological science has achieved much through collaboration, but also through responding to constructive adversaries who make their critiques respectfully. The key word here is *constructive*.

APS Past President Susan T. Fiske is Eugene Higgins Professor of Psychology and Professor of Public Affairs at Princeton University. Her research focuses on how stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination are influenced by cooperation, competition, power, and other social relationships. She is a recipient of the 2017 APS James McKeen Cattell Fellow Award.