Optical Engineering

SPIEDigitalLibrary.org/oe

# Mean Reviewers

Ronald G. Driggers

SPIE

# Mean Reviewers

Some people can be just downright mean. The pen (now keyboard) and the tongue can cut people in damaging ways. A quick online search shows that some pretty famous people have said some really mean things. Walter Kerr once said, "You have delusions of adequacy." Winston Churchill, who was famously insulting, once said, "You have all the virtues I despise and none of the vices I admire." Then there's the well-known intellectual insult, "I could agree with you, but then we would both be wrong."

I recently read an article by Erik Schneiderhan in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* entitled "Why You Gotta Be So Mean?" (http://chronicle.com/article/Why-You-Gotta-Be-So-Mean-/140469/) Schneiderhan describes how brutal journal reviewers can be in their assessment of manuscript originality, significance, correctness, and overall quality. His theory is that since reviews are anonymous, the reviewers have free reign to be mean. To support his statements, he cites the famous research by Milgram and Zimbardo where they show that anonymity brings out the worst in all of us. It is an interesting article and I would encourage you to read it. His second theory is that editors are too timid to address the issue of meanness in reviews since their success depends on reviewer participation.

As an editor, I want to provide some guidance for reviewers and what I would like to see in the review process. It differs from other opinions, but since this is my watch at *Optical Engineering*, I would like to provide an example and guidance. Consider three statements:

1. "Equation 3 is wrong which demonstrates that the author does not have an adequate background in this technical area and has not sufficiently performed his/her homework."
2. "Equation 3 is wrong, but the author has obviously worked hard on this paper and, if corrected, could continue to offer advances in this field.
3. "Equation 3 is wrong and is missing two parameters. See reference XX."

The first review comment is mean, and I agree with Schneiderhan that such a comment is not useful and it is certainly not appropriate. There is no added benefit to the author, reviewer, or journal to make the author feel badly about the error. They will feel bad enough about the mistake regardless. The second comment is also a problem. The reviewer feels bad that the author has made a mistake and wants to apologize for having to point it out. In addition, the reviewer wants to be supportive and encouraging. We all want to be supportive, but a paper review is not the appropriate place to do so. Please keep your manuscript review in *Optical Engineering* to the facts and limit degrading or encouraging remarks. The third comment is short, to the point, and has relevant information that is useful. It is not intended to run down or prop up the author. It is not intended to have emotional content and serves the author and the journal well.

I am not suggesting that a review should not be thorough. I am just requesting that reviewers keep their encouraging/discouraging comments to a minimum. Schneiderhan suggests that reviewer identities be made public so that they are accountable for their comments and that encouraging comments should be welcome. I do not support either of these suggestions, but I do think that editors should lean forward and provide guidance in these areas.

I want to thank all of our reviewers for their important service and our authors for their hard work and submissions. The editorial board, staff, and I are very appreciative, and we depend on both reviewers and authors for a successful journal that best supports our constituents. I don't think there is a place in *Optical Engineering* for mean reviews. I hope this guidance is helpful for our reviewers.

**Ronald G. Driggers**
Editor