

Online commenting

Would you welcome or loathe the ability to post online comments on articles published in *Nature Photonics*?

For science and technology to advance in a constructive manner it is vital that healthy debate can take place between researchers, particularly when it comes to discussing the consequences, validity and interpretation of recently published results. In the past, there has been a clear distinction between whether such discussions are of an informal, private nature — such as conversation over coffee, firing off an excited e-mail or making a phone call — or raised in a formal, public manner through a letter to the journal editor or publication of a correspondence-style article.

Today's online world of blogs and social-networking sites has blurred this boundary by providing informal yet highly public arenas for discussing science. These methods of communication allow and indeed encourage the broad dissemination of views in a manner that historically would usually have been confined to far smaller audiences, or perhaps never even seen the light of day.

The recent "Trial by Twitter" article published in *Nature* (*Nature* 469, 286–287; 2011) highlights just how powerful blogs and tweets can be in raising awareness not only of the initial publication of a paper but also of any serious flaws that it may contain. In essence, such tools make it possible to perform rapid, post-publication, open and anonymous peer-review on a massive scale with little or no regulation.

Online commenting in a more controlled manner was recently introduced at nature.com for primary research papers and general-interest articles published by *Nature*. Posts are moderated to ensure that the *Nature* community guidelines are adhered to (www.nature.com/info/community-guidelines.html), and the use of posters'



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actual names provides transparency and accountability. The question now is whether *Nature Photonics* would benefit from online commenting, and what potential issues would need to be considered? This editorial should hopefully entice some discussion into the merits and risks of online commenting.

A commenting system that is well-implemented, widely embraced and not abused potentially allows users to exchange ideas and opinions that enhance the value of a paper well beyond the initial static

presentation of data. In essence, the paper and its associated comments can together become a highly accessible and dynamic medium for fruitful scientific debate. Points of confusion can be quickly clarified, consequences of the work discussed and new ideas formed in an interactive environment that is continually updated. Concerns over any claims, the integrity of data and their interpretation can be raised and debated in a rapid fashion and may help to identify innocent mistakes or even fraud. Knowing that their results can be easily discussed in a highly visible forum after the peer-review process may also encourage authors to raise the standard of their work before submitting it. In the same light, given the ease and interactive nature of online commenting, other researchers in the field may feel inclined to raise important points that would otherwise not be made. Although this list of benefits is compelling in principle, in practice there are no guarantees that such a functionality will actually fulfil its potential.

The ability to write and read online comments could be largely ignored or, worse, be subject to continual attempts at abuse. Scientists in optics and photonics may simply be disinclined to get involved due to lack of time or motivation. At the other extreme, such a service could attract large quantities of inappropriate comments (including libellous posts, offensive remarks and personal attacks) requiring considerable moderation time. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, would knowing that such functionality exists actually deter authors from submitting their papers?

We welcome your views on this topic. □

Graphene gathering

Researchers around the world prepare for the next Nature Publishing Group conference.

Those interested in the science and applications of the popular carbon allotrope graphene may be pleased to know that Nature Publishing Group is holding a three-day conference entitled "Graphene: The Road to Applications" in Boston, USA, on 11–13 May 2011. Through a series of invited talks and a poster session, the

event aims to discuss the applications of graphene that are most likely to reach the market over the next decade, as well as strategies to overcome any potential problems that occur along the way. Specific topics include the role of graphene in photovoltaics, microelectronics, sensors and novel material designs. Around 25

scientists from both academia and industry, including IBM, Intel, MIT, Samsung and Texas Instruments, are due to be present. The keynote speaker at the event will be Philip Kim from Columbia University in the USA.

For more details please visit www.nature.com/natureconferences/graphene. □