

Come all ye scientists, busy and exhausted. O come ye, O come ye, out of the lab

SIR — Will you be working on Christmas Day this year? We have found evidence that increasing numbers of scientists are swapping party hats for mouse mats during the festive season.

We searched for ‘Received on 25 December [year]’, using Google Scholar, to find out how many submissions were made to academic journals on Christmas Day between 1996 and 2006. Even taking into account the overall increase in the volume of submissions, there were about 600% more manuscripts received by journals on 25 December in 2006 than in 1996 (Figure 1). This trend is still apparent when papers submitted from institutions in Europe and North America are considered in isolation.

We suggest four potential reasons for this move towards seasonal workaholicism among scientists.

First, we are collectively falling victim to the ‘publish or perish’ institutional culture, in which our professional success depends almost exclusively on our publication record.

Second, the pressure on scientists to publish is paralleled by an increase in their administrative and teaching workloads. This pushes research and, in particular, writing into vacation periods.

Third, with the wide-scale implementation of electronic submission systems in the late 1990s, most journals are now ‘open for business’ every day of the year.

Finally, the demography of religious beliefs among scientists submitting papers may have changed over the years.

Although Christmas Day seems to be an ideal opportunity to get on with some blissfully uninterrupted research, we would urge our fellow scientists to keep their laptops turned off and enjoy a bit of Christmas spirit. You never know, Santa might then be more inclined to bring you that most popular of

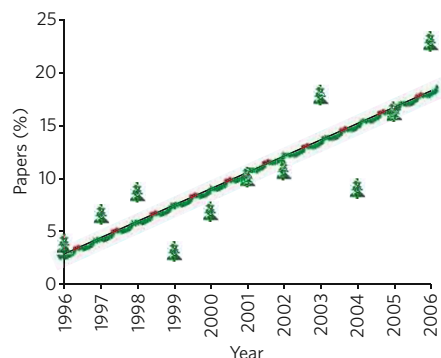


Figure 1 | Can't see the wood for the trees? Take a break. Proportion of published papers submitted on 25 December relative to mean number submitted on the 25th of the month (excluding weekends) for all other months in that calendar year. $R^2 = 0.69$.

presents — a paper published in *Nature!*

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Public control could be a nightmare for researchers

SIR — Last night I had a nightmare. In my dream, all the recommendations made by Pierre-Benoit Joly and Arie Rip in their Essay ‘A timely harvest’ (*Nature* 450, 174; 2007) became a reality here in the United States. The public were consulted and actively engaged in practical scientific matters.

I dreamed that the dos and don'ts of science and research were dictated democratically by the American public, of whom 73% believe in miracles, 68% in angels, 61% in the devil and 70% in the survival of the soul after death (see www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/index.asp?PID=618). In my dream, this majority dictated through vigorous ‘public engagement’ that science should deal with virgin birth, the thermodynamics of hell, the aerodynamics of angel wings, and the physiology and haematology of resurrection.

Suddenly, I found myself in my old lab. There my students were not dealing with the prevalence of gene duplication in bacterial evolution, but were engaged in a heated argument on the virtues of old-Earth versus new-Earth creationism. I woke up in a cold sweat, thinking of what Bishop Samuel Wilberforce's wife reputedly said when confronted with Darwin's theory: “Let us hope it is not true. But if it is, let us hope it does not become widely known.”

If Jolie and Rip's proposal for public engagement is workable, let's hope no one ever finds this out.

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A brief proposal, 150 words

SIR — A common belief about the ways science and art differ is that science convinces with evidence, whereas art persuades through rhetoric. Therefore, we tell ourselves, style does not matter in scientific writing. And yet, of course, it does. Even scientists wish scientists would write more readably.

One place to start is to avoid long words where short ones will do. However, science journals paradoxically foster the use of long words through their 150-word limits on abstracts. Authors who exceed the limit may spend hours looking for bulky portmanteau

words to replace several simple ones.

This unfortunate practice has a simple solution. If journals change their word-count limit to a character-count limit that does not include spaces (a function available on most word-processors), scientists will suddenly have an incentive to use short words.

Can such a rhetorical constraint shorten word length? The next call for abstracts could test its effect.

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Tracking early arrivals on the *Nature* trail

SIR — Following the ‘History of *Nature*’ timeline on your website to 1875, I arrived at the section on ‘Continental copycats’, which lists European publications with the same name that appeared after the birth of *Nature* in 1869 (www.nature.com/nature/history/timeline_1870s.html). It mentions, among others, a Dutch version; the illustrated monthly *De Natuur* was published from 1881 to 1930.

You don't, however, mention the German journal *Die Natur*. This was founded before *Nature*, in 1852, by teacher-journalist Otto Ule and botanist-pharmacist Karl August Müller. In total, 51 volumes of *Die Natur* were published before it closed in 1902. Issues were held in Kiel University library and elsewhere.

Do readers know of any other titles older than Germany's *Die Natur* and this esteemed journal?

Helmut Zacharias

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Space travel's no problem, but mice? They're scary

SIR — In the Futures story ‘A better mouse-trap’ (*Nature* 450, 456; 2007), a team of scientists, four men and two women, enter an abandoned space station. Upon encountering mice, “one of the women screamed, and the other jumped on a chair” and “three of the men started cursing”.

How interesting that even in the distant imagined future of AD 3014, gender stereotypes persist (although, to be fair, one of the men fainted).

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