

on Ermakova's text from other researchers after approaching Ermakova, when in correspondence described by GM Free Cymru the editor indicated to Ermakova that the request for her data came from a group of authors that had an interest in criticizing her work. If the latter is in fact correct, the readership might feel misled about your motivations for the Feature. *Nature Biotechnology* should not appear to be colluding with groups or individuals that have preformed views on a researcher or a data set, because we doubt that *Nature Biotechnology* would like to give the impression to its readers that a privileged few could organize an attack on a scientist with the collusion of the editor. It would be helpful to us if you were able to describe in full your motivations for your approach to Ermakova and the timeline of events.

Second, was it ethical and just treatment of Ermakova that she neither had the option to review the comments nor withdraw from your invitation? It is alleged that the article in proof form had her name as author, whereas the final piece has your name instead. This difference could reasonably have led Ermakova to the view that she would be able to present her story in the September edition, with the views of the four commentators and other community feedback in subsequent editions. That structure could also have left Ermakova with the impression that a larger audience than just the four commentators would be able to make fair input.

Third, it is alleged that Ermakova also did not see a proof of the article in a form that included either the comments or blank spaces into which the comments would later be placed. Was this the case? If so, has *Nature Biotechnology* done this at other times? If this allegation were true, we would suggest that some discussion is warranted on the appropriateness of this practice.

And fourth, was it ethical and just treatment of Ermakova that *Nature Biotechnology* provided her with no automatic right of reply to the critiques of Chassy *et al.* before publication, as has been alleged? In all other processes that we are aware of, authors of original science have an opportunity to reply to criticism. For example, if this had been a peer-review process, then the author could have disputed reviewers' remarks leaving it to the editor to draw his or her own conclusions or decide whether more reviews were necessary. It is highly unusual, and as far as we are aware unprecedented in *Nature Biotechnology* for the review reports to be published along with an article or for authors not to be invited to respond to a critical letter

of an article and have the response and letter published together.

We are aware that some journals simultaneously publish articles and reviews, but that is not what Ermakova would have expected of *Nature Biotechnology*. Nor is that practice in any way comparable because those journals provide the author with space to make their complete and formal cases. *Nature Biotechnology's* peer-review process also provides criticism in confidence. Although an author is not always given the opportunity to reply or rebut comments from reviewers, the author is also not required to publish an article just because it has been submitted. In this case, Ermakova does not appear to have been given an option to withdraw her text or reply to the commentators.

We understand *Nature Biotechnology's* prepublication policy and therefore reasons for not publishing an article with the data from the 2005 conference. It would have been laudable of *Nature Biotechnology* had this been an experiment with a quasi-peer-reviewed structure to properly bring information of great public interest back into the normal format of peer-reviewed publications. However, we are not left with confidence that in fact the motivation of *Nature Biotechnology* was to create a space for such work because you did not list this among your motivations.

Nevertheless, if the structure of this article is to be a normal or regular format for *Nature Biotechnology*, then we would recommend that you repeat it using existing unpublished feeding-studies from industry that a self-selected group of critics discusses without concern for a reply from the authors. We could probably provide you with a list of commentators who would be prepared to do this for you.

The research community tolerates the power of editors because they have earned the trust of the community. Although we may not like what you decide, we in the main know why you do or do not publish our work and can ruminate privately on the substantive issues raised by referees. However, the commissioning process for your Feature appears to be nonstandard in several ways that could potentially undermine the trust of the community.

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To the editor:

I am writing concerning the Feature that you 'authored' in the September issue.

I wish to point out that Irina Ermakova had no opportunity to respond to the criticism of your panel of 'researchers working in the field'. The lack of an opportunity to face those hostile comments lacks any sense of fundamental justice. Next, your researchers working in the field had not published animal feeding studies and their fields, like yours, were primarily public relations on behalf of the biotech industry. Furthermore, you have no 'neutral point of view' and should have sought a neutral person to put together an article. And, finally, you should have agreed with Ermakova as to the takeover and change of authorship of the article authored by her, as agreed in a publication proof!

Plagiarism (from the Latin, *plagiarius* meaning 'a plunderer', or an older term *plagium*, meaning 'kidnapping', or possibly *plagiare*, which is 'to wound') is the practice of claiming, or implying, original authorship of (or incorporating material from) someone else's written or creative work, in whole or in part, into one's own without adequate acknowledgement, according to Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plagiarism>). On the basis of this definition, you seem to have plagiarized Ermakova's article by incorporating it into your article without first obtaining permission from Ermakova. You may be surprised to know that editors have no right to scoop up others' articles and incorporate them into their own or others' articles, without first obtaining agreement from the authors. If *Nature Biotechnology* is planning to promote plagiarism by editors as a general practice, you should inform the scientific public that you have moved in that direction.

The world requires that you should provide Ermakova a publication platform to reply to the critics of her work. Furthermore, I urge you to take time off, go back to the microbiology laboratory and reeducate yourself in the practice of full and truthful scientific reporting.

Joe Cummins

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Bruce Chassy, Vivian Moses, Alan McHughen & Val Giddings respond:

We limit our comments here primarily to the issues relating to Ermakova's experiments