

Rejoinder: Concluding Remarks on Scholarly Communications

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Abstract

We are grateful to DeFord et al. for the continued attention to our work and the crucial issues of fair representation in democratic electoral systems. Our response (Katz, King, and Rosenblatt Forthcoming) was designed to help readers avoid being misled by mistaken claims in DeFord et al. (Forthcoming-a), and does not address other literature or uses of our prior work. As it happens, none of our corrections were addressed (or contradicted) in the most recent submission (DeFord et al. Forthcoming-b).

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We also offer a recommendation regarding DeFord et al.'s (Forthcoming-b) concern with how expert witnesses, consultants, and commentators should present academic scholarship to academic novices, such as judges, public officials, the media, and the general public. In these public service roles, scholars attempt to translate academic understanding of sophisticated scholarly literatures, technical methodologies, and complex theories for those without sufficient background in social science or statistics.

Consider two approaches to this difficult communications task; the first is easier and perhaps more common, but the second is far preferable. In the first, researchers *dumbing down* their work. Simplistic methods with “bright line” rules and no ambiguity are preferred, so anyone can follow. Unfortunately, the resulting explanation assumes away so much of importance that it would be quickly rejected in a scholarly journal article, and for good reason. After dumbing down your work, you are in fact likely to be left with something dumb—which anyone would recognize if they truly understood the simplifications. And if they do not object, and think they understand when in fact they do not, then all you are doing is fooling your audience.

Thus, we prefer an alternative method of communicating to broader audiences: *teaching*. That is, instead of dumbing down our work, we elevate our audience. We try to explain the predominant scholarly viewpoint so our audience can truly understand. Teaching is what most academics do all year long with students and colleagues, and they are surprisingly good at explaining difficult concepts in ways others can learn. Teaching well is not easy, and takes considerable practice, but it is our job in universities and our social responsibility in communicating outside of the academy. We have each tried to elevate novice audiences ourselves in many public contexts and have been proud to see so many other scholars rise to the same challenge in so many different fora.

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Academics are privileged to work in beautiful little oases scattered across the world known as college and university campuses, funded by public dollars, liberated to focus on teaching, learning, discovery, and the creation of social good; teaching our students, our colleagues, public policymakers, and the general public is one way we give back. We should get it right; we should make sure there is no disconnect between our scholarly conclusions and what the public learns from our work.

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