

Economic Notes from the Underground

EJW editorial note: The following four articles are introspective essays about what Timur Kuran has called “preference falsification.” We are grateful to Peter Gordon for his help in organizing the symposium and to Timur Kuran for his input.

Confession of an Economist: Writing to Impress Rather than Inform

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ABSTRACT

Think back to your first years in graduate school. The most mathematically complex papers required a great deal of time and effort to read. The papers were written as if to a private club, and we felt proud when we successfully entered the club. Although I copied the style of these overly complex and often poorly written papers in my first few research attempts, I grew out of it quite quickly. I didn’t do so on my own. I was lucky to be surrounded by mature confident researchers at my first academic appointment. They taught me that if you are confident in your research you will write to include, not exclude. You will write to inform, not impress. It is with apologies to my research and writing mentors that I report the following events.

The preference falsification in which I engaged was to intentionally take a simple clear research paper and make it so complex and obscure that it successfully impressed referees. That is, I wrote a paper to impress rather than

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inform—a violation of my most closely held beliefs regarding the proper intent of research. I often suspected that many papers I read were intentionally complex and obscure, and now I am part of the conspiracy.

A colleague presented a fairly complex paper on how firms might use warranties to extract rent from certain users of their products. No one in the audience seemed to follow the argument. Because I found the argument to be perfectly clear, I repeatedly defended the author and I was able to bring the audience to an understanding of the paper. The author was so pleased that I was able to understand his work and explain it to others that he asked me if I was willing to coauthor the paper with him. I said I would be delighted.

I immersed myself in the literature for a few of months so that I could more precisely fit our contribution into the existing literature. We managed to reduce the equations in the paper to six. At this stage the paper was perfectly clear and was written at a level so that it could reach a broad audience. When we submitted the paper to risk, uncertainty, and insurance journals, the referees responded that the results were self-evident. After some degree of frustration, my coauthor suggested that the problem with the paper might be that we had made the argument too easy to follow, and thus referees and editors were not sufficiently impressed. He said that he could make the paper more impressive by generalizing the model. While making the same point as the original paper, the new paper would be more mathematically elegant, and it would become absolutely impenetrable to most readers. The resulting paper had fifteen equations, two propositions and proofs, dozens of additional mathematical expressions, and a mathematical appendix containing nineteen equations and even more mathematical expressions. I personally could no longer understand the paper and I could not possibly present the paper alone.

The paper was published in the first journal to which we submitted. It took two years to receive one referee report. The journal sent it out to a total of seven referees, but only one was able to write a report on it. Apparently he was sufficiently impressed. While the audience for the original version of the paper was broad, the audience for the published version of the paper has been reduced to a very narrow set of specialists and mathematicians. Even for mathematicians, the paper may no longer pass a cost-benefit test. That is, the time and effort necessary to read the paper may exceed the benefits received from reading it. I am now part of the conspiracy to intentionally make simple ideas obscure and complex.

The story does not end here. A year later at an economics conference I sat on a panel composed of editors of economics journals. The session was charged with instructing young professors on how to get published. Because I was involved in a number of other sessions, I paid little attention to the names and affiliations of my colleagues on the panel. When it was my turn to speak, along

with other advice, I told the story described above. When the next panelist was introduced, I was embarrassed to see that he was the editor of the journal that had published our incomprehensible paper. To reduce the level of embarrassment for both of us, I explained that our paper was handled through the U.S. editorial office of his journal, not the U.K. office which he manages. As an aside, to demonstrate just how small the world has become, we later discovered that my eldest daughter had studied in the editor's department while in the United Kingdom during the previous semester.

In conclusion, I wish I could promise that in the future I will always write to inform rather than to impress. But although confession may be good for the soul, it does not inoculate us from future sin. If in the future a referee or an editor suggests that I “generalize the model” or “make the model dynamic” when I feel that the change is an unnecessary complication which will likely cloud the issue rather than illuminate it, I will probably do as they requested rather than fight for clarity. That situation aside, I plan to redouble my efforts to write to inform rather than impress, to advise young researchers to do the same, and to be careful when criticizing referees and editors because they may be sitting next to me.

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