

EDITORIAL

Misuse of Letters

Apparently it is necessary every now and then to remind our readers and our future authors of the intended function of Physical Review Letters. Several incidents during the past few weeks suggest that the time has come again.

The original, and still the primary, purpose of our journal was to provide rapid publication for short notes in cases where the readers (not necessarily the author) would benefit from such speedy handling. We have admitted many times that an objective judgment on the need for quick publicity is very difficult, and we do make mistakes. However, Physical Review Letters is emphatically not to be regarded as a substitute for the conventional publication channels. We expect Letters to be followed up eventually by more detailed papers, even in the physics of elementary particles.

There are signs that this aim is being disregarded. A recent communication was sent in as a Letter rather than an Article because "the bulk of publication in this area has been in the Letters and these have become the dominant medium of communication. The material would be overlooked by many if it were published in The Physical Review." Another author complained that his paper had been "relegated to the obscurity of

The Physical Review" and "as a result" had been overlooked by the compiler of a review.

We absolutely refuse to accept this view. It is true that with the growth of physics and the enormous expansion of journals, each individual physicist reads an ever-diminishing fraction of all published material. However, the total amount read by each active physicist, like the amount published per research worker, has probably changed very little from what it was several decades ago.

Publication as a Letter was urged for another communication on grounds that it reported "the first measurement of its type" on an especially "basic" system. The fact that rapid publication would have no particular effect on other work and thus would not help the readers was ignored.

We are, of course, willing to publish startling new results in any field, but it is usually only in those areas that are highly active that the extra expense of rapid publication can be fully justified. Such a policy may appear to encourage competition; we believe that it is rather the misuse of the Letters that has this effect, and that adherence to the policy would be beneficial to all.

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