



Letters of Denunciation (If You Must)

The Problem

Communal inquiry and debate are at the heart of the academy. As researchers, we put our ideas into the crucible of open inquiry and rely on debate and discussion to refine understanding and advance solutions to complex problems.

The practice of issuing open letters attacking scholars for their contributions undermines this important goal by evicting academics and their ideas from the arena — often on flimsy evidentiary grounds. More constructive responses can and should be employed.

The Solution

In the rare case where a scholar feels the need to sign a letter of denunciation, calling for consequences for other scholars and their work, we recommend the following principles guide such efforts.

Advice, Recommendations, & Examples

Scholars should not be punished for good-faith research. While the value of many lines of research are disputed (often on reasonable grounds), criticisms about research should be aimed at ideas, arguments, methods, and empirical claims rather than trying to demean, discredit or punish the individuals who made them.

There are processes in place for identifying and addressing bad work. As often as possible, people should stick to those processes. If you believe there are flaws with an author's work: (1) reach out to that author, express one's concerns, and seek more information; (2) bring your concerns to a journal editor; and (3) if these methods prove unsatisfactory, criticize the work in other journals, online outlets, in public talks, etc.

Public condemnations of work should include specific citations of bad research, and explanations of how and why it is low-quality or otherwise pernicious. This will allow others to more accurately evaluate the merits of the relevant work and its criticism — and allow for targets to better explain or defend themselves in the event of a misunderstanding.

Scholars should refrain from taking strong stands on the merits of work beyond their area of expertise. Without sufficient background on the relevant literatures, methods, theories, data, and disciplinary norms a scholarly contribution is speaking to, you may not be in a position to credibly evaluate — and criticize — the work. Here is an opportunity for intellectual humility.

Each and every signatory is obligated to personally investigate and verify the legitimacy of the complaints being made before signing onto a statement. People sign on because they agree, in principle, with the statement being made — and they trust that other scholars on the list have done sufficient research to ensure that the target deserves public shaming. Yet, if most other

signatories are also making this same calculation, then the heuristic doesn't work: everyone is relying on other people to have done the relevant research when, essentially, no one has. If you are willing to throw your own weight behind the destruction of another scholar's reputation and career, at the least, verify that severe breaches of scholarly or ethical norms actually took place, and determine that the situation calls for extreme measures because the normal process is somehow insufficient to resolve it.