

3 October, 2013

To the publishers of the Journal of Physics A:

Attn: James Dimond, Jessica Thorn, Rebecca Gillan, Steven Brett, Alex Haywood, and Eimear O'Callaghan

The purpose of this letter is to make sure that you are aware that the report of the Board member in the copy below of your 19 August email directly violates the following standard of editorial ethics taken from your website:

“An editor presented with convincing evidence that the substance or conclusions of a published paper are erroneous should promote the publication of a correction or retraction.”

A similar standard for authors taken from the same website reads:

“When an error is discovered in a published work, it is the obligation of all authors to promptly retract the paper or correct the results.”

Before commenting on this on my website, I want to be sure that the Board member's report accurately reflects the policy, practices, and ethical standards of the highest levels of the administration of the Journal of Physics A.

Since I am presumably addressing a non-technical audience unfamiliar with this particular situation, I will start by briefly outlining it. I had submitted a “Comment” paper, manuscript code A/417115/COM/28089, on a paper of J. Dressel and A. N. Jordan. This paper will be abbreviated DJ below, along with the authors. The Comment pointed out a serious gap in the proof of the main result of DJ called the “General theorem” (GT).

J. Phys. A (JPA) held the Comment for nearly a year before rejecting it without any referee's report and for the sole stated reason that rejection was “most satisfactory” “course” for JPA. Authors DJ admitted a gap in the proof and attempted to fill it in a Corrigendum published in JPA. The sole mathematical result of the Corrigendum was a lemma, which will simply be called “Lemma” below.

However, there was a simple error in the proof of the Lemma which invalidated both it and the previous attempted proof of the GT. The error was an incorrect multiplication of two matrices.

In Feb., 2013, I submitted a second “Comment”, A/463696/COM/28089, pointing out the error in the Corrigendum. With the submission, I offered to withdraw the Comment if the authors would retract the GT from all journals in which it had been claimed, including Phys. Rev. Lett., JPA, and Phys. Rev. A. (I made the offer to JPA because the authors refuse to communicate with me.) JPA never acknowledged the offer, and a subsequent letter explicitly asking about it was ignored.

Six months after the February submission, JPA rejected the Corrigendum Comment in the Board member's report reprinted below. The pretext for rejection (that the substance of the Comment had already been posted in the

arXiv) is so flimsy that it scarcely deserves the name “pretext”. If that were the real reason, JPA could and should have informed me immediately after the Comment’s submission in February, instead of holding it unrefereed for six months.

Moreover for consistency, PRA should then disallow all submissions which had previously appeared in the arXiv, which would mean that almost no papers would be eligible for submission. It is impossible to take that pretext seriously.

However, the unprofessional and discourteous handling of the Comment is not the main concern of this letter. The main concern is that JPA knows to a certainty that the proof of the GT which it published is invalid, yet it refuses to correct this in print. This unequivocally violates its own ethical standards quoted above.

It cannot be claimed that JPA is not certain of the incorrectness of the proof of the GT which it published. The Board member himself affirms that the GT is unproved because he invites me to prove it! Moreover, the simple and unequivocal nature of the Corrigendum’s error will leave no doubt in the mind of any competent referee.

DJ also published the GT, along with the Corrigendum’s Lemma, in Phys. Rev. A (PRA). A month after JPA ignored my offer to withdraw the JPA Comment, I submitted a similar Comment to PRA, which agrees that the proof of the Lemma is fundamentally flawed. Recognizing its professional responsibility to correct known errors, PRA asked the authors to submit an erratum, which has just been published (26 Sept., 2013) in

Phys. Rev. A 88, 039902.

JPA’s refusal to correct the unproved claim of the GT has at least two negative consequences. First of all, others may mistakenly rely on the GT. Second, others may be restrained from working to prove or disprove it, believing on the authority of JPA’s reputation that it has already been proved.

If there is any aspect of the above with which you disagree, I hope you will let me know. My present understanding, which if uncorrected will be passed on to others, is that despite fine words on its website, JPA feels no obligation to correct known errors that it has published.

If this is the kind of reputation that JPA wants to foster, then so be it. But despite the Board member’s report, it is still not too late to publish some sort of correction to the claims of the GT and the Corrigendum.

Sincerely,

Stephen Parrott

For your convenience, a verbatim copy of your 18 August email follows:

Ref: A/463696/COM/28089

Dear Dr Parrott

TITLE:     Calculational error in the Corrigendum to Dressel and Jordan's  
"Sufficient conditions for uniqueness of the weak value"

AUTHORS:   Dr S Parrott

Your comment submitted to Journal of Physics A: Mathematical and  
Theoretical has now been considered by the Editorial Board and the Board  
Member's report is attached.

I am sorry to tell you that the Board Member has recommended that your  
comment should not be published in Journal of Physics A: Mathematical and  
Theoretical, for the reasons given in the enclosed report. Your comment has  
therefore been withdrawn from consideration.

I would like to thank you for your interest in Journal of Physics A:  
Mathematical and Theoretical.

Yours sincerely

James Dimond - Group Publishing Administrator  
Jessica Thorn - Publishing Administrator  
Journal of Physics A: Mathematical and Theoretical

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Article under review for Journal of Physics A: Mathematical and Theoretical  
Calculational error in the Corrigendum to Dressel and Jordan's "Sufficient

conditions for uniqueness of the weak value" - Dr S Parrott

ID: A/463696/COM

BOARD MEMBER'S REPORT

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I have looked at the proposed Comment along with the extra material provided by the author. My view is that it is not necessary for J Phys A to consider this Comment in detail. The author has already made claims about errors in the paper by Dressel and Jordan and their Corrigendum in a series of versions of the comment posted on the arXiv. It is for the readers interested in this area of activity to read this material and make their own decision. If the author can make sufficient progress on the validity (or not) of the "general theorem" then the best course of action would be to write a regular paper on this contentious issue, which would be more than welcome for further consideration.

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