

Hoisting the Black Flag

by Theodore P. Hill

It is notoriously difficult to publish negative results in other sciences, but the Queen of the Sciences is supposed to be different. Three years ago, in December 2006, the *Notices* published an article containing theorems and mathematical claims for which I found a dozen counterexamples. The *Notices*, however, refused to publish my counterexamples even after I condensed them and their own referee verified them. The Editorial solution was a “correction” that not only omitted many of the flaws I had found, but also introduced a new mathematical error into the permanent record, in spite of an additional counterexample I had provided them to the new claim. The same errors that appeared in the 2006 *Notices* article continue to be propagated in the literature, including published research articles and a new book. More than two years later, I am still trying to publish the counterexamples, and will continue to do so.

In the meantime, however, I have three suggested improvements to the editorial process of the *Notices*:

- (1) When AMS Editors become aware of serious mathematical errors in a widely-publicized paper they published, they should not only correct the record completely in their own journal, but should also notify the relevant media sources and ask for public corrections or retractions (e.g. *AMS News Release*, *Scientific American*, *Discovery Channel*, and *Mathworld*, as in the above case);
- (2) AMS Editors should not pass judgment on papers or letters that refute articles published under their own watch;
- (3) When Editors announce a policy that appears to conflict with basic established AMS standards and ethics (e.g. that exposition overrides mathematical correctness), they should first consult the Associate Editors and AMS officers.

To appreciate the events that motivated this letter, see the diary “How to Publish Counterexamples in 1 2 3 Easy Steps”,

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/19819297/How-to-Publish-Counterexamples-in-1-2-3-Easy-Steps>

It is our duty, as rank-and-file AMS members, to help guide our *Society's* editors. Our legacy is the scientific culture we leave to the next generation. To paraphrase the inimitable words of H. L. Mencken, “Every normal mathematician must be tempted at times to spit on his hands, hoist the black flag, and begin slitting throats.”