

If you comment online, you're on stage

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Apparently, the outrage of science denialists over their exposure in a recent psychological paper [shows no signs of abating](#). It was denialists' complaints and legal threats of libel/defamation suits that started the investigation of the paper and also in the comments to my [post announcing my resignation](#) as editor for *Frontiers*, the denialists complained that their public blog comments were used in a scientific paper. Blog responses by Henry Markram, editor-in-chief of *Frontiers*, confirmed my decision to resign: essentially, [he sided with the denialists](#) and opined that public comments were not fair sources for psychological study.

Let's stop for a moment and ponder if there are some analogous offline scenarios to taking a public online comment and analyzing it.

Literature springs to mind: every literature department at every university takes published words and analyzes them. Apparently, Markram and the science denialists think this should all be abolished, or at least that it is a questionable practice which ought to be better regulated. Perhaps they think that literature departments should study literature without mentioning the authors? Once literature departments are up for grabs, why stop there? Why not prohibit political analysts from telling the public about their politicians? Obviously, you'd start with those analysts unfavorable of the ruling politicians. Why not fire all music critics from newspapers and magazines (those that still have such employment, that is)? Heck, isn't "American Idol" or "America's Next Topmodel" and all the other casting shows exactly analogous: taking a public performance and scrutinizing it publicly? It's perhaps worth reminding everybody that online comments are public performances, like it or not.

In essence, what Lewandowski et al. have done in their 'recursive fury' paper is in more than a few ways akin to what the jury does in casting shows. They've been the jury when the science denialists went up on stage to sing and dance. If that had actually happened offline, maybe Lewandowski et al.'s jury comments might have gone like this:

"When you sing, it sounds like the quaking of a duck!"

"When you dance, you have the grace and elegance of an antelope – no, wait, what was the name of that animal with the trunk again?"

"You are seriously coyote ugly!"

After it occurred to them what fools they had made of themselves on stage, the denialists went to the TV station airing the show (*Frontiers*) to complain that broadcasting their embarrassing performance with the negative jury comments were defamatory. Obviously, in the real world, the TV channel people would have ROTFLTAO. In science publishing, *Frontiers* caved in and axed the broadcast.

Morale of the story: if you can't take the consequences, don't get up on stage.