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Driving Force

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F1000Research journal wants to publish more negative results

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It is often difficult for researchers to publish so-called “negative” results. The biology and medicine journal F1000Research is trying to combat this phenomenon by [waiving article fees](#) through August for papers that include negative results.

What are negative results?

When we talk about negative results, what are we actually talking about? [These letters](#) to the editor of the New England Journal of Medicine take issue

with the term because it is imprecise—in different contexts it can mean either proving the null hypothesis, seeing only a trend and not a significant effect, or seeing an opposite-from-expected effect. The term is confusing.

What do we do with them?

I would hazard to guess that most data collected fit into one of the above categories of “negative results” – data that prove the null hypothesis, fall short of significance, or show something other than expected. Because they are unexpected, these results can be difficult to interpret. Instead of answering a question, negative results create a set of new questions: Did I do the experiment correctly? Was this the right experiment for answering this question? Is there an alternative explanation? What should my next hypothesis be? This swarm of personal and scientific doubt can make scientists wary of even trying to publish the results. If they do try, reviewers often have the same questions. Also, negative results are often viewed as less exciting than other results. This means the editors of your favorite journal might not find your negative results interesting, let alone worthy of publishing.

Unfortunately, this all means that these data will likely never see the light of day—outside of a lab meeting presentation or a graduate thesis.

Is this a bad thing?

Not publishing these results can have a true cost—as [this blog post](#) clearly demonstrates with a fascinating example about animals that do or do not self-administer THC. If scientists don't publish an experiment's negative results then other scientists can easily believe that the experiment has never been tried. These new scientists might attempt the very same experiment and see no effect – and so on and so on.

So what about F1000Research?

I think F1000Research's effort to publish papers with solid but negative results is a step in the right direction. Hopefully, more journals will start to publish well-explained results—whatever they may be—with detailed methods. This might even prevent succeeding generations of grad students from banging their heads on the exact same brick wall.

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