

Radu's Ride: In Praise of Praise

Radu Craiu resolves to not stay silent when praise could be given:

Many people feel tempted at the beginning of a New Year to express their ideas and intentions in resolute terms. I opt to plead in favour of gratitude and praise. The fog of insecurity blurs the contours of a happy academic life. Sheltered by its murkiness, sociological and psychological pathologies take over and wreak havoc with our lives. Whether it's the imposter syndrome recently featured in the *Written by Witten* column (in the December 2022 *Bulletin*), or suspicion, deflation, disenchantment and its nasty cousin, disillusionment, the effects are clearly damaging. As statisticians, we are familiar with our long history of holding off praise, subtle disassembling of any achievement scaffolding, and skepticism about reasonable solutions. Impress a statistician, and you can write home about it. There is certainly good that comes from not applauding indiscriminately at everyone and everything. But that doesn't mean that we should praise *nothing*.

Our culture used to be one in which one published rarely and exceedingly well, and no one even bothered to hear from the juries which are forever out, probably split evenly down that elusive middle that separates geniuses and idiots. Dostoyevsky would disagree, of course.

Evidently, I am not completely fair since praise is not invisible. It comes in the form of prizes, conference and colloquia invitations, referee reports and editorial decisions. (While we're at it, can we get rid of the abhorrent "rejection with possibility of resubmission" category?). Our success is measured in minutes per talk and pages per referee report rebuttal.

To be fair, reservation about research is perhaps the right *modus vivendi*. Who in their right mind would get up and applaud in the middle of a Rachmaninov piano

concert when so many difficult passages remain to be played? After two years of chaos, I hesitate to pretend that I stand on firm ground. If there is a resolution to be found, it must be one that was born in the last few months of a gone-but-not-missed 2022, as I took advantage of some time to travel and seek out my statistical community. Alone in my room, it had been easy to get overwhelmed by an abundance of papers built on skeletonized theory, over-compensated by bloated gloating and tortuous illustrations. I knew there was more out there.

Thankfully, my travels brought me in the vicinity of statisticians in their natural habitat, doing their usual thing. The contrast was stark and the gratitude I felt for the mere fact of their existence has not been stronger since my graduate school days. All of a sudden, I was immersed in terms I could grasp, guiding principles that made sense, and proofs that were coyly presented and summarily glanced. I was home! Data sets were large but not enough to circle the world if printed on toilet paper, and models had a beginning, a middle and an end. On a sunny day, one could say they were a poem rather than a shopping list written in Morse code.

Take, for instance, the wonderful ICSDS conference in Florence [*of which, more on the preceding pages*], which was teeming with statistics researchers, some not-so-young sampling from their past, and some very young preoccupied with predicting their future, despite the latter's maddeningly elusive nature. The whole time I felt warm gratitude for the organizers' courage in venturing off the beaten path, and towards all the

researchers who traveled long distances, perhaps at great cost, so we could all be in one place at the same time.

There is plenty of goodness flowing within our community and it needs to be recognized. Otherwise, the harshness of our judgment incurs too large a tax on our future. As an illustration, take the Canadian funding landscape, where for years the NSERC grant of a Canadian mathematician was stochastically larger than that of their statistical counterpart. Our tendency to disparage our peers' work and propensity for lengthy and obstacle-laden reviews make it very difficult to compete with other disciplines on the job market (as I wrote in 2019: <https://hdsr.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/v9fdn7n7/release/5>.) It is in the spirit of combating these negative tendencies that I absorbed Nancy Reid's recent Q&A (in *Canadian Journal of Statistics*, <https://doi.org/10.1002/cjs.11750>) in which she urges statisticians to be kinder to each other.

So, traditions of coldness be damned. My resolution, you ask? When I like something created by a fellow statistician, I will emerge from my ivory shell and say so. When one of my colleagues does more than look out for Number One, I will congratulate them. When progress is made, in whichever form it may come—and I am smart enough to recognize it—I shall not be silent.

