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Commentary on "Publishing Opinions: A Note on the Usefulness of Commentaries"

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Abstract
Comments on J. J. Christensen-Szalanski and L. R. Beach's (see record 1984-21471-001) conclusion that the attention given to commentaries and replies to articles did not justify the extra space. The author indicates that a 40% increase in space was associated with a 91% increase in citations; data do not argue against the use of commentaries.

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Christensen-Szalanski and Beach (December 1983) concluded that the attention
given to commentaries and replies to articles did not justify the extra space. Here is another way to look at their data. The increase in journal space due to commentaries and replies was 40% in their sample. The "attention" given to the original article plus commentaries plus replies, was, they said, assessed by the number of citations (not counting cross-citations among the commentary and replies). The median of 21 citations for the articles plus commentaries was 91% larger than the median of 11 citations for the articles in the control group. In other words, a 40% increase in space was associated with a 91% increase in citations. Looking at it this way, these data do not argue against the use of commentaries. In the interest of fairness, I must admit to being an editor, a commentator, and the target of commentators on numerous occasions. Although some commentators did not seem to invest much energy, many did. My impression is that the efforts were useful overall. But I am biased. Commentaries may serve the useful function of pointing out errors in a paper—thus leading to fewer citations. From my experience, the commentaries added emphasis and helped in the understanding of important contributions—thus leading to more citations and to classroom use. I agree with Christensen-Szalanski and Beach on the need for guidelines that call for short commentaries. The editor can then relax the requirement for commentators who add data.

REFERENCE