

An occasional column, in which Caveman and other troglodytes involved in cell science emerge to share their views on various aspects of life-science research. Messages for Caveman and other contributors can be left at [caveman@biologists.com](mailto:caveman@biologists.com). Any correspondence may be published in forthcoming issues.

HEY CAVEMAN - I JUST  
READ A REALLY MEAT PAPER  
ON FLY X-BOX DOMAINS...  
DIDNT YOU JUST GIVE A  
LAB TALK ABOUT SOMETHING  
LIKE THAT?

OH HI THERE SANDRA...  
" COULD YOU JUST PASS ME  
THAT PAPER, PLEASE !



## A scoop of humble pie

Listening to a talk at a meeting or critiquing a paper in a journal club, or browsing the contents of a Journal online are common activities. But, there is an academic, a non-personal interest in the topics. You listen or read to learn about areas of science that are not the focus of your own work, to broaden your knowledge of experimental design and techniques that could be useful in your work, to help in teaching the field to students. Sometimes, you understand a part of your own work because of a transient overlap of topics, or you learn of a new technique that could be useful or a reagent that is now available. But there is a degree of detachment in your listening and reading. You are separated from the work because it is not your field or at least the patch you work in, they are not your experiments and there is no infringement of your ideas. With this detachment, one can appreciate, even applaud, the work.

But occasionally, as you are listening to a talk at a meeting, reading a book of abstracts or scrolling down the contents

page of a journal, you realize that the line has been crossed between academic detachment and nervous focus. A cold realization comes over you that this is pretty close to the work in your laboratory. Or worse, someone else not only had the same idea and experimental approach as you but managed to do it faster and get it out before you did. You sit listening to, or reading, your own work, except that someone else is presenting it; they are drawing the interesting conclusions, citing their previous publications (and getting the credit).

You have been scooped!

Now you are blinking from the dust thrown up by someone who is in front of you; you are behind another lab, no longer out there trail-blazing for the field. What you once thought of as a snow-covered field without any footprints has in fact already been traversed successfully, the surrounding boundaries scaled and the next field breached. And worse, the reported work affects a graduate student in your lab who has been working on this topic for

a year; the renewal of your grant might be in jeopardy because someone else has already done the work.

How could this be? The original idea was not obvious from previously published data, and you had not heard any discussion of the new direction at meetings. So, how could someone else have the same idea? The experiments that you had designed required certain reagents and methods that were not commonly available. So, how come someone else manage to acquire these tools?

This is a humbling experience. Your view of the originality of your work is not so vaunted. Your ego is bruised, you feel like a victim. Someone else from another lab has come into your sanctuary and stolen your work, your ideas, your approaches. And now everyone else in the field thinks that those ideas, data and conclusions belong to them, and not to you. The big surprise you were going to spring on the field has been sprung by someone else. You are no longer alone at the top; you have been supplanted, relegated to the 'also ran'.

Critiquing the work that your are listening to or reading now takes on a different focus, a more stringent one than that applied to other work not directly in your patch. It is personal, they are on your patch, playing with your ideas, drawing your conclusions. The flaws in the work are identified triumphantly. The poor presentation of data, the missing control, the reference to important experiments as 'data not shown' are ridiculed. The fact that a specific mutation was not analyzed is highlighted because you know from the work of your graduate student that this mutation provides new understanding to the problem. But wait, there is more. They did not draw the same conclusion as you – well how could they without the data from that mutation? And, they did a poor job of relating the work to several recently published studies.

But, to be honest, they also did some experiments that you had not thought of, and your graduate student had not done. Those results are pretty interesting, and they definitely took the project in an unexpected direction. Interestingly, some of these mutants

give a phenotype slightly different than yours. Upon closer inspection, you realize that there are differences in the sequences that actually indicate a domain of the protein that you had not been focusing on might be functionally important. In fact, if you compare the sites of the mutation between the published work and yours, you realize that you need to make several simple deletions and insertions to be able to nail down the precise domain required for protein function. Not only can you salvage your (and your student's) work, but in fact you can make a bigger advance than was likely with the data that you had in hand. The paper is going to be even better than you had originally thought.

Your student will graduate and your grant will be renewed. And all you have to do is add towards the end of the paper the following: "During the course of completing this work, another study was published reporting some overlapping results."

Caveman

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