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Economics in Practice

Decline in Critical Commentary, 1963-2004

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[Abstract, Keywords, JEL Codes](#)

IN THE LAST FEW DECADES, THE SPACE DEVOTED TO CRITICAL commentary has declined sharply at top economic journals. We inspected economics journals to collect data on trends in critical commentary—defined as articles classified as comments, replies, rejoinders, and the like. For the period from 1963 to 2004, data were collected for: *The American Economic Review* (AER), *The Economic Journal* (EJ), *The Journal of Political Economy* (JPE), *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* (QJE), and *The Review of Economics and Statistics* (REStat).

In 1989 an editor of the *American Economic Review*, Orley Ashenfelter, explained the decline in critical commentary as follows:

Although the number of articles has now stabilized at about its 1984 level, our publication of notes, comments and replies has decreased steadily since 1985. Both I and my co-editors believe this is a desirable editorial change. Our goal is to increase the number of major, important research papers in the *Review*, and we expect this to come mainly at the expense of our publication of brief notes and comments. (Ashenfelter 1989, 405-406)

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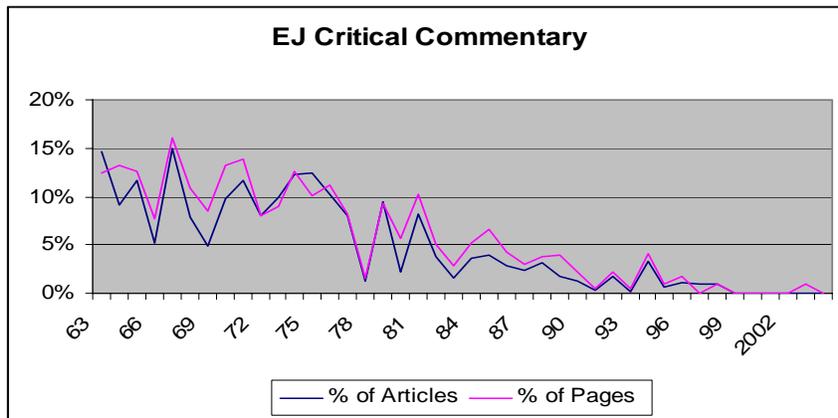
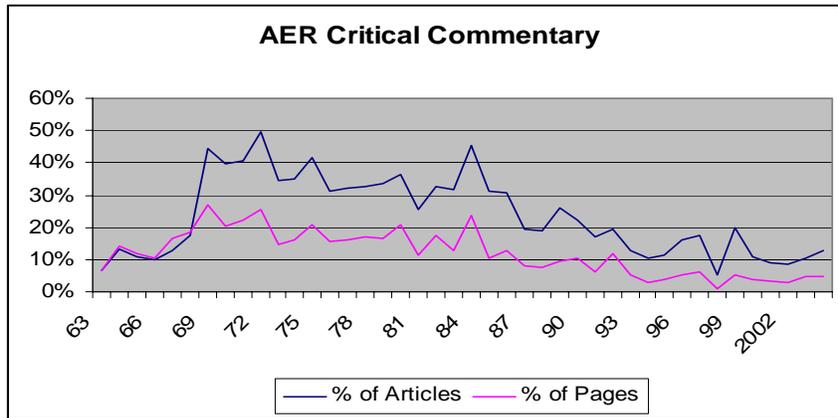
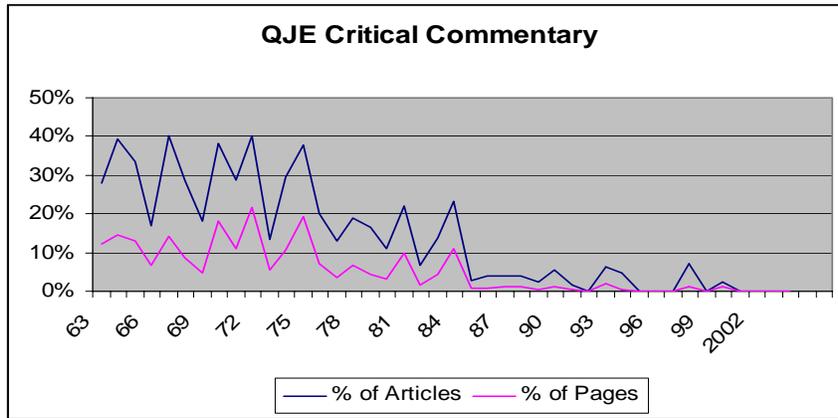
Clearly Ashenfelter and his co-editors believed that a prejudice against critical commentary was desirable. Beyond this, an *AER* co-editor advocated active animosity.

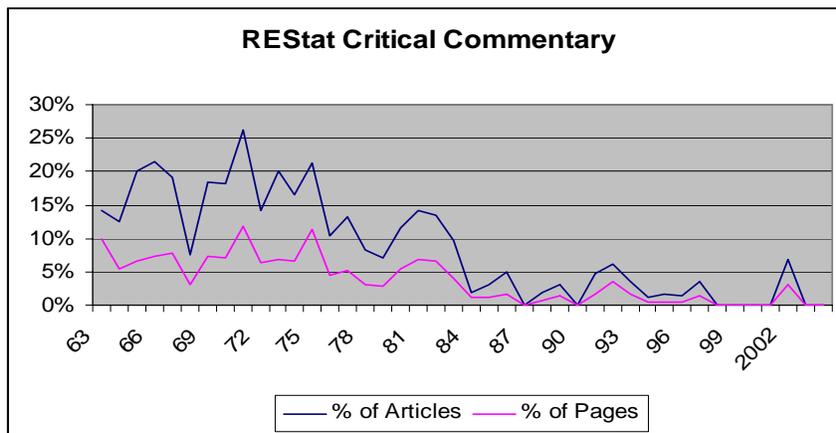
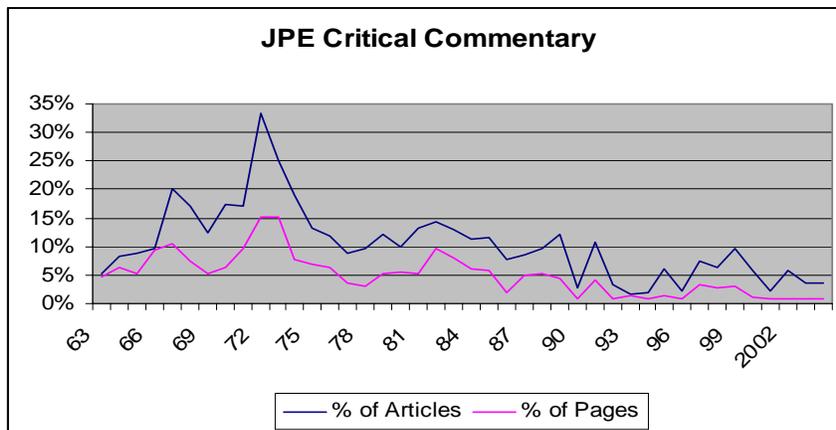
As a matter of policy, the *Review* is intentionally hostile to comments and notes, for overall the readership for comments and notes tends to be restricted to the readers of the original article (see Ashenfelter's editorial statement in any recent *Proceedings of the AER*). It is my personal opinion that many of the comments and notes published in the *Review* historically actually belonged in *Economic Letters*. (R. Preston McAfee 1996)

Laband, Tollison, and Karahan (2002) compiled proxies of authors' inputs (e.g., co-authorship and acknowledgements to referees) and journal-supplied quality controls (e.g., submission fees and editorial board size) and used them as explanatory variables in a time-series analysis of the amount of space devoted to commentary in the *AER*. Among their findings are that commentary is negatively and statistically significantly related to the increasing size of the editorial board, and with the increasing fraction of papers in which colleagues were thanked in the acknowledgement notes that begin papers.¹

Laband et al. provide two explanations for the decline in commentary. The first is that critical commentary has become less and less warranted over time. "We find that there is empirical evidence in favor of the idea that these trends [of declining critical commentary] are mostly due to more *ex ante* investment by authors in their papers. . . . In summary, there appears to be evidence in support of the notion that increasing editorial and author attention to papers before they get published has led to a decline in quality control provided by 'the market' in the form of post-publication commentary" (322).

¹ Laband et al. (2002) also considered contents of articles in terms of usage of tables, equations, figures, appendices, and references. Another statistically significant finding is that the number of equations per article is positively correlated with space devoted to commentary; their interpretation is that formal methods make assumptions more explicit and riper for commentary. Alternatively, this result could have arisen from the reductions in the costs of doing empirical work, which has given rise to a general trend in economics toward empirical publications which typically show fewer equations.





These figures show the time paths, by journal, of critical commentary as a percentage of numbers of articles and the percentage of journal pages. Appendix 1 provides the hyperlink to the Excel file containing the complete data and figures (as well as data on book reviews).

A second explanation provided by Laband et al. is that because *AER* papers have less and less to say over time there is less and less reason to publish an exchange about what is published. “The decline in critical commentary may also be associated with, perhaps in large measure, a long-term decline in the relevance/importance of significant and encompassing ideas in economics. . . . A long-run decline in the relevance/importance of

economic research would be consistent . . . with a decline in critical commentary over time” (329). This rationale dovetails with McAfee’s statement that, “the readership for comments and notes tends to be restricted to the readers of the original article.”

Coelho and McClure (2005) show that over the past three decades there has been a trend in top economics journals toward complex, non-operationalized theories. Meanwhile, empiricism in economics has been rising. Empirical research has advanced with the availability and low prices of computers, data sets, and software. The data may be manipulated to test hypotheses (“forced to confess”). These manipulations are, more often than not, neither transparent nor obvious. Empirical methods and research are more reliable when scrutinized and subjected to debate. It is strange that the profession eschews debate now when it is even more critical to scholarship.

IN PRAISE OF CRITICISM

The benefits of critical commentary are:

1. Errors and limitations are prominently publicized, reducing the likelihood that other scholars will repeat or build on the errors.
2. Readers and the researchers achieve a broader and deeper comprehension of the matter at hand. Readers may be presented with conflicting interpretations.
3. Self-serving behavior by editors is constrained.²
4. The interest of readers is piqued. Not only is criticism inherently interesting, but because publication in such journals is highly valued, readers will be encouraged by the prospect of uncovering errors and writing comments.³

² For empirical estimates of editorial “favoritism” in “full articles” in economics see David N. Laband and Michael J. Piette (1994).

³ Glenn Ellison (2002, 959-960) indicates that “the weighted fraction of pages in the *AER*, *QJE*, and *JPE* written by authors from the top eight schools [suggest] an increase in school-level concentration, both between the 1970s and the 1980s and between the 1980s and the 1990s.” A difficulty is that Ellison’s sample excluded comments, replies and rejoinders. The reliability of a number of Ellison’s results is undermined by this sampling bias (because it is

An editorial posture that eschews critical commentary subjugates the spirit of scientific inquiry. As Michael T. Ghiselin observes, “Error is eternal, and wisdom consists in living with it, not letting our vanity tell us that it has been transcended” (1974, 13).

[Appendix 1:
Link to the Excel file containing
the complete data and figures.](#)

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highly unlikely that the population of authors writing comments, replies and rejoinders has the same representation at top eight schools as the population of authors writing full articles).

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