

# Making sense of preprints by adding context – The Publish Your Reviews initiative

*Improving scientific publishing is often framed as an issue of openness and speed and less often as one of context. In this post, Ludo Waltman and Jessica Polka make the case for a more contextualised approach to open access publishing and preprinting, and introduce the [Publish Your Reviews initiative](#). Launched today by ASAPbio, the initiative allows reviewers to provide richer contextual information to preprints by publishing peer reviews and linking them to the preprint versions of the articles under review.*

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## The need for openness

Openness of research articles and underlying materials is critical to maximise the value of research in addressing urgent challenges facing society. The open access movement has made [substantial headway](#) in realising open access to research articles, both in journals and in institutional repositories and preprint servers. While APC-based open access publishing in journals creates barriers for authors, preprint servers have the benefit of being available [free of charge both for readers and for authors](#).

## The need for speed

As most researchers know, disseminating new scientific findings can be frustratingly slow. An article often goes through the peer review processes of several journals before being accepted for publication. At each journal, peer review can take months or even years. Reviewers tend to be overburdened and journals struggle to keep their peer review processes going, a challenge that has increased [as a result of the pandemic](#) – A pandemic which has also underscored the critical importance of speedy dissemination of new scientific results. Despite the [efforts made by publishers, editors, and reviewers](#), most peer-reviewed journals were unable to disseminate pandemic-related research in a sufficiently rapid way. Preprint servers played an essential role to enable rapid sharing of COVID-19 research.

## The need for context

In addition to openness and speed, providing context around published research is crucial to a well-functioning publishing system. The number of new research articles published daily, both in journals and on preprint servers, is overwhelming, making it essential for readers to have access to information that enables them to identify the most relevant or most trustworthy studies. Readers often rely on the reputation of a journal and its publisher, or the impact factor of a journal, to assess the relevance and credibility of a study, but these signals offer limited information. There is therefore a need for richer contextual information. Journals are increasingly providing such information by making the peer review reports of articles they publish [openly available](#). For preprints contextual information can be obtained from comments posted on preprint servers and increasingly also from platforms for [preprint peer review](#). However, despite these developments, the overall availability of contextual information around articles published in journals and on preprint servers is still very limited.

## Publish Your Reviews

To address the need for context, we have developed a new initiative called [Publish Your Reviews](#). The initiative, launched today by ASAPbio, encourages researchers who perform peer review for a journal to publish their review alongside the preprint version of the article under review (provided that the article does indeed have a preprint version). Researchers can publish their review on platforms such as [PREreview](#), [Qeios](#), [ScienceOpen](#), and several others. Some preprint servers also enable researchers to publish their review directly on the preprint server.

Publish Your Reviews is supported by a large number of organisations, including publishers, preprint servers, peer review platforms, and research funders. **We invite individual researchers to [sign a pledge](#) to express their support for Publish Your Reviews.**



If researchers en masse join our initiative and start publishing their reviews, this will lead to an immense increase in the availability of valuable contextual information around preprints, enabling both the research community and society at large to make much better use of the preprint literature. Authors of preprints will benefit from the increased impact of their work, and reviewers may feel that their peer review activities are [more useful and rewarding](#).

## Culture change

In preparation for the launch of Publish Your Reviews, we had many conversations with researchers, publishers, funders, and others, asking them for their feedback on the initiative. We received lots of positive and supportive responses in these conversations, but we also became more aware of the challenges of moving toward a culture of open feedback on scientific work.

In general, reviewers are the legal owners of their reviews and consequently are [entitled to publish their reviews](#). However, to foster a healthy culture of open feedback on scientific work, developing and respecting community norms is at least as important as abiding to legal requirements. We therefore advise reviewers who publish their reviews to follow the [FAST \(Focused, Appropriate, Specific, and Transparent\) principles](#) developed by ASAPbio. We also ask reviewers to be respectful of the preference of some authors and journals for a double-anonymous approach to peer review, in which the reviewers of an article are supposed not to have any information about the identity of the authors. Publication of a review alongside the preprint version of an article is incompatible with this approach to peer review.

Confidentiality of peer review is an important community norm. Most journals consider peer review to be confidential, and reviewers should respect this confidentiality. We therefore encourage reviewers to publish their reviews only if the article under review is available as a preprint. In addition, a published review shouldn't reveal the identity of the journal to which an article was submitted. From the perspective of providing useful context to readers of a preprint, there may also be other information that can best be omitted from a published review. For instance, an in-depth assessment of the extent to which an article meets the scientific standards of a specific journal (e.g., is the size of the data set sufficient for publication in journal X, and do the authors perform enough robustness checks?) probably won't be of much interest to readers of the preprint version of the article. Likewise, detailed feedback on presentational issues (e.g., quality of the figures and the language) – while highly valuable for the authors of an article – is unlikely to be of much use for readers. There may be no benefit in including this type of information in a published review.

Reviewer anonymity is another tricky issue. Some platforms, such as [PREreview](#) and [Publons](#), allow reviewers to publish their reviews anonymously. To maximise the value of published reviews and to foster a culture of open dialogue between authors and reviewers, we prefer signed reviews over anonymous ones. However, our conversations with researchers, in particular with those who find themselves in vulnerable positions, made clear that it is not always reasonable to expect reviewers to disclose their identity. Publish Your Reviews therefore doesn't request reviewers to sign their reviews. We do ask reviewers to be mindful of the pros and cons of signed vs. anonymous reviews.

## Looking ahead

We are not the first to recognise the value of openness, speed, and context in improving scientific publishing. The various publication platforms operated by [F1000](#), including those of important research funders such as the [European Commission](#), [Gates](#), and [Wellcome](#), are based on a similar philosophy. The same applies to the 'publish, then review' model adopted by eLife and to many of the recent initiatives around [preprint peer review](#). Likewise, the [Octopus platform](#), launched last week, can be seen as yet another way to promote openness, speed, and context in scientific publishing. Importantly, some funders have also started to give [formal recognition in their assessment processes](#) to new approaches to scientific publishing resulting from these developments.

Unlike some of the above initiatives, Publish Your Reviews requires hardly any changes in researchers' established ways of working. Researchers can keep publishing their work in their favourite journals, and they can keep reviewing for these journals. When doing peer review, we only ask them to spend a couple of minutes to publish their review. This minimal amount of additional effort is sufficient to contribute to a crucial step in improving scientific publishing: Providing context around published research.

In its [Recommendation on Open Science](#) published last year, UNESCO encourages its member states to promote "open peer review evaluation practices including possible disclosure of the identity of the reviewers, publicly available reviews and the possibility for a broader community to provide comments and participate in the assessment process." Publish Your Reviews offers a practical way to start implementing this recommendation.

Open access publishing and preprinting were initially seen by many as somewhat obscure and perhaps even questionable developments, but recently they have been embraced by large parts of the research community. We expect the publication of peer review reports to go through a similar process in the coming years.

We invite you to [join us](#) on this important and exciting journey!

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