

Five Minutes with Timothy Gowers: “Academics can publish journals of the highest quality without a commercial entity”

Fields Medal-winning Cambridge mathematician Sir Timothy Gowers and a team of colleagues have recently launched a new editor-owned Open Access (OA) journal for mathematics. *Discrete Analysis* is an arXiv overlay journal, which means articles are submitted and hosted via the preprint server arXiv first. The journal coordinates peer-review and publishes via Scholastica with no cost to reader or author. Gowers reflects here on his vision for the future of editor-owned journals.



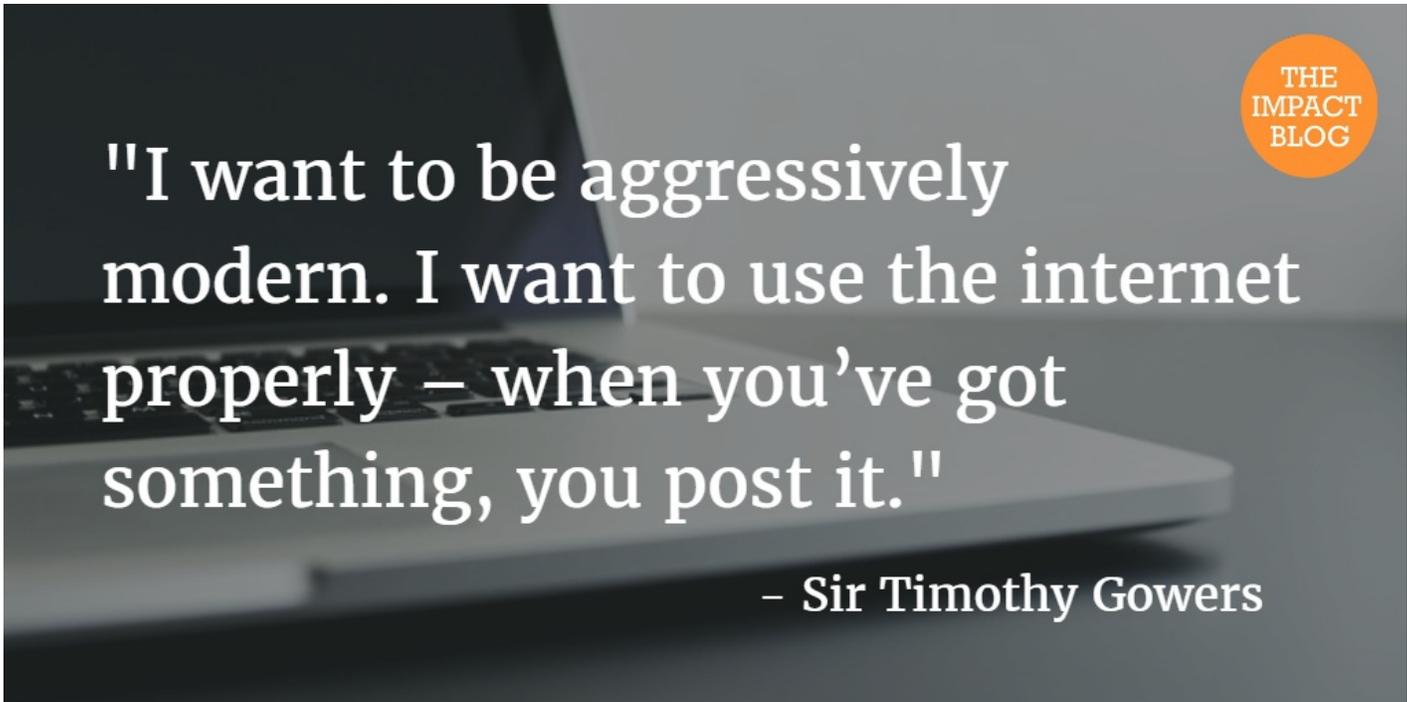
This interview originally appeared on [Scholastica's blog](#) and is reposted with permission.

What was your impetus for launching Discrete Analysis?

TG: In recent years, I've joined a growing chorus criticizing commercial publishers, particularly the fact that the subscription fees charged by commercial publishers are generally harmful to academic institutions. I was very involved in the start of a [boycott against Elsevier](#).

At one time the answer seemed to be to switch journals from a subscription model to an article-processing charge (APC) model. But, I was taken aback by the hostility most mathematicians had towards the idea of it. I think even if APC journals did end up being cheaper for the community than subscriptions in aggregate, the model is just not appropriate. Meanwhile, I was interested in finding a better more radical solution to how we publish OA journals.

An obvious idea that a number of people were discussing at the time was to create [arXiv](#) overlay journals. In this model the journal performs refereeing services but doesn't actually publish articles, it links to them on the arXiv preprint server. I found some initiatives working to enable such journals, but they seemed difficult to set up and maintain. Then I found Scholastica and saw we could get the journal going quickly.

A quote by Sir Timothy Gowers is displayed in white text over a dark, blurred background of a laptop. In the top right corner, there is an orange circular logo with the text 'THE IMPACT BLOG' in white.

"I want to be aggressively modern. I want to use the internet properly – when you've got something, you post it."

– Sir Timothy Gowers

What makes Discrete Analysis different from other arXiv overlay journals?

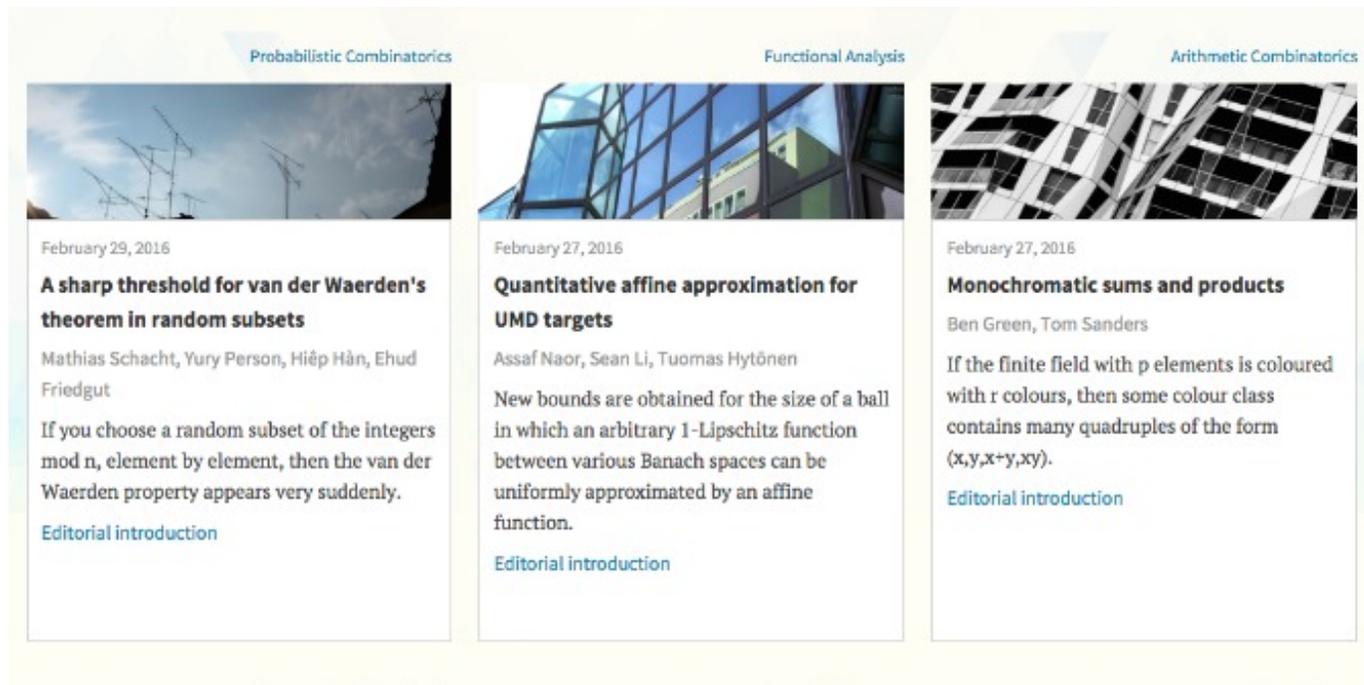
TG: One of the things we're doing that's different is each paper we publish will have a description on the journal's website, written by the editors, that will explain the paper and why it's worth reading. We want our website to feel like a nicely-browse-able library.

I think the only barrier keeping journals from becoming online-only, and minimizing the need for publishers, is that some scholars feel print issues makes journals appear more high-quality. Discrete Analysis will have a high-quality website through Scholastica. Ours is easier to navigate and nicer than the websites of any other journals or commercial publishers I've seen. We're showing that you can have an online reading experience that's as high quality as print.

We're also not dividing our articles into issues. We're going to have a rolling publication model – whenever a paper's accepted we'll put it up.

What do you think are the benefits of publishing articles on a rolling basis?

TG: First of all, why waste time waiting to publish a paper once it's been accepted? Also, If you have journal issues – you're implicitly admitting that the old way of doing print was the right way, and what you end up with is a pale shadow of a proper print journal. I don't want to be that, I want to be aggressively modern. I want to use the internet properly – when you've got something, you post it. We're not pretending to be a traditional journal, we're something else.



The screenshot displays three article cards from the Discrete Analysis journal website. Each card features a header with the journal's name, a date, a title, authors, a short abstract, and a link to the editorial introduction.

- Probabilistic Combinatorics**
February 29, 2016
A sharp threshold for van der Waerden's theorem in random subsets
Mathias Schacht, Yury Person, Hiép Hàn, Ehud Friedgut
If you choose a random subset of the integers mod n , element by element, then the van der Waerden property appears very suddenly.
[Editorial introduction](#)
- Functional Analysis**
February 27, 2016
Quantitative affine approximation for UMD targets
Assaf Naor, Sean Li, Tuomas Hytönen
New bounds are obtained for the size of a ball in which an arbitrary 1-Lipschitz function between various Banach spaces can be uniformly approximated by an affine function.
[Editorial introduction](#)
- Arithmetic Combinatorics**
February 27, 2016
Monochromatic sums and products
Ben Green, Tom Sanders
If the finite field with p elements is coloured with r colours, then some colour class contains many quadruples of the form $(x, y, x+y, xy)$.
[Editorial introduction](#)

How do you hope Discrete Analysis will challenge current publishing models?

TG: If somebody has an article they could send to Discrete Analysis and publish for free, if accepted, or that they could send to another journal and publish for \$15,000 – I think the choice is a no-brainer. I hope others will see this. We'll be able to cover all journal costs using a small grant from University of Cambridge. But, even if we ran out of money for some reason, I don't think authors would mind spending \$10 for a submission, which is all we'll need to cover the Scholastica software for peer review and publishing. It seems like a much more reasonable model.

We feel what we're doing is critical, because it's setting an example that academics can publish journals of the highest quality without a commercial entity.

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Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Impact blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Author

Sir William Timothy Gowers, [FRS](#) is a British mathematician. He is a [Royal Society](#) Research Professor at the Department of [Pure Mathematics](#) and Mathematical Statistics at the [University of Cambridge](#), where he also holds the [Rouse Ball chair](#), and is a Fellow of [Trinity College, Cambridge](#). In 1998 he received the [Fields Medal](#) for research connecting the fields of [functional analysis](#) and [combinatorics](#).

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