

# Gowers's Weblog

Mathematics related discussions

## Why I've also joined the good guys

For some months now I have known of a very promising initiative that until recently I have been asked not to publicize too widely, because the people in charge of it did not have a good estimate for when it would actually come to fruition. But now those who know about it have been given the green light. The short version of what I want to say in this post is that a platform is to be created that will make it very easy to set up arXiv overlay journals.

What is an arXiv overlay journal? It is just like an electronic journal, except that instead of a website with lots of carefully formatted articles, all you get is a list of links to preprints on the arXiv. The idea is that the parts of the publication process that academics do voluntarily — editing and refereeing — are just as they are for traditional journals, and we do without the parts that cost money, such as copy-editing and typesetting.

The organization setting up this platform is called the Episciences Project (<http://episciences.org/>), and they are referring to the journals as epijournals, which I'll do here, though epijournals will probably not use the word “epijournal” in their titles (since they will want to make clear that the stamp of quality that they confer is every bit as legitimate as the stamp of quality conferred by a traditional journal). They aim to make the software good enough that the administrative burden on editorial boards is no greater than it is for a traditional journal. If they succeed in that aim, then it should be possible for epijournals to be “Diamond” open access — free to read and free to publish. Certainly the intention is that there should be no charges of any kind, with the costs of maintaining the site met, if I understand correctly, by an organization called Centre pour la Communication Scientifique Directe (<http://ccsd.cnrs.fr/>) (CCSD) in collaboration with the Institut Fourier at Grenoble University (<http://www-fourier.ujf-grenoble.fr/?lang=fr>).

One possibility being discussed, which I am very much in favour of, is each accepted article having not just a link to the arXiv but also a web page for (non-anonymous) comments and reviews. For example, the editor who accepts an article might wish to write a paragraph or two about why the article is interesting, a reader who spots a minor error might write explaining the error and how it can be fixed (if it can), and an expert in the area might write a review that could be very useful to hiring committees.

This may even go further, with comment pages being set up for other preprints and journal articles — not just the ones that have appeared in epijournals.

Apparently, the plan is for the whole thing to start this April. Because I have known about the project for some time, I have quietly sounded out a few people in additive combinatorics, and it seems that there is enough enthusiasm that we will be able to start an epijournal broadly in that area (with a title that is not yet decided, but that will definitely not be “The Epijournal of Additive Combinatorics”). I am also on a committee (actually, they call it an Epicommittee) that is discussing some of the details of what the platform should be like — any comments you might have will be read with interest.

[Added later: now that he has said so on Google+, I feel I can add that Terence Tao is also on the Epicommittee, so he has joined the good guys too.]

One question that some people might have is why, when there are a number of initiatives out there, this one should be regarded as particularly promising and worth supporting. I don't know enough to give a detailed answer to that, but my impression is that this initiative has significant institutional back-up, including funding, that makes it more likely to succeed. Also, it is being designed for mathematicians and with the needs of mathematicians very much in mind, though it may later expand into other subjects.

April is very soon, but I hope people reading this, especially people who are critical of FoM and would rather move straight to a more radically different publication model, will give serious thought to setting up epijournals or encouraging others to do so. Another possibility envisaged by the people running the project is that some existing journals might like to convert to epijournals, which would certainly be interesting if it happened. And finally, if and when people do start to set up epijournals, please support them: if an epijournal gets plenty of good papers, then it will be much easier for it to establish the kind of reputation that will impress hiring committees (though I hope that if post-publication comments and reviews take off, they will be seen to provide more useful information than what can be deduced from which journal a paper gets into).

The Episciences project will soon be releasing a statement about the project. When it has done so, I'll provide the link here.

I've been slightly vague about who the people behind this project are, which is because I am not 100% sure. However, the initial approach came from Jean-Pierre Demailly, Ariane Rolland and Benoît Kloeckner and subsequent emails have come from Jean-Pierre Demailly, so I think it's them — my uncertainty is over whether there are other people I should be mentioning too. If I discover that there are, then I'll add their names.

Added later: Benoît Kloeckner makes the following comment below.

I can clarify a bit the "epi-team" composition. Jean-Pierre Demailly tried to launch a similar project some years ago, but it had much less institutional support and did not work out. More recently, Ariane Rolland heard about this tentative and, having contact at CCSD, made them meet with Jean-Pierre. That's the real beginning of the episciences project, which I joined a bit later. The names you should add are the people involved in the CCSD: Christine Berthaud, head of CCSD, Laurent Capelli who is coding the software right now, and Agnès Magron who is working on the communication with Ariane.

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## 200 Responses to “Why I’ve also joined the good guys”

**chorasimilarity Says:**

January 16, 2013 at 6:18 pm | [Reply](#)

Congratulations, let's hope that it will work (however I don't understand the secrecy behind the idea). For some time I try to push an idea which emerged from several discussions, described here [Peer-review turned on its head has market value](#) (also see [Peer-review is Cinderella's lost shoe](#)) with very valuable contributions from readers, showing that the model may be viable, as a sort of relative of the pico-publication idea.

**Good news from the good guys « chorasimilarity Says:**

January 16, 2013 at 6:43 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] very recent post of Gowers “Why I’ve also joined the good guys” is good news! It is about a platform for “epijournals”, or in common (broken, in [...])

**Noah Snyder Says:**

January 16, 2013 at 7:04 pm | [Reply](#)

If such comment pages exists I think it's important that:

- 1) Epijournals have the option of choosing not to allow such comment pages when setting up a journal. That way distaste for such comment pages won't sink the whole project.
- 2) Such comment pages are moderated. In particular, no comments are publicly posted until they have at the very least been approved by the editor who handled that paper. (I also think the authors should have the chance to reply privately to the editor.)

I think this second point is completely necessary, but I also worry that the extra time commitment for editors might make it unpopular.

**gowers Says:**

January 16, 2013 at 7:56 pm

I agree on both counts. I also think that there should be a general policy that negative comments are not allowed (apart from factual comments such as, “The following appears to be a counterexample to Lemma 2.1”).

**gowers Says:**

January 16, 2013 at 8:28 pm

Actually, I'm not sure whether I agree with the first point after all. If the site becomes somewhere where anybody can post a (moderated) review of any paper, then publishing in a traditional journal, or even just posting it on the arXiv, won't stop other people from reviewing your paper. So I think I would modify 1 to say that epijournals can choose whether to have a policy of always providing reviews (perhaps written by the editors) or just leaving the comment page to the whim of the mathematical community at large. In the second case, the epijournal would be just like a traditional journal.

**chorasimilarity Says:**

January 16, 2013 at 8:40 pm

Wikipedia is a good example that it is possible to have quality results without over-regulating.

**Mike Taylor Says:**January 16, 2013 at 11:10 pm

For what it's worth, and from my non-mathematician perspective ...

First, I think epijournals are awesome, and I am really excited about this initiative (even though, as usual, we biologists are trailing years behind you).

Second, I think that having the commenting facility is absolutely crucial for making these epijournals live venues rather than just dead lists.

Third, I *disagree* that all comments should be moderated: at least, this should be left to the choice of the individual journals. In general, moderation destroys interactivity and prevents real discussions from getting up and running, and that is a real loss.

**gowers Says:**January 16, 2013 at 11:39 pm

@Mike Taylor, are you referring to pre-moderation or post-moderation? I think if there are clear policies about what kinds of comments are acceptable, and if comments are removed or edited when they are found to be in violation of those policies (rather than having to wait for moderation before they appear), then they shouldn't kill interactivity.

**Mike Taylor Says:**January 16, 2013 at 11:44 pm

Agreed, post-moderation (i.e. removal of unacceptable comments) does not impede discussion. Much better than pre-moderation. Personally I like the approach of allowing all comments except spam and extreme personal abuse, but I can easily see that some journals will want to do things differently.

**tom denton Says:**January 19, 2013 at 12:56 pm

I'd say the main reason for lack of discussion in journals is that it's hard to leave public comments in a piece of paper.....

As in many areas of life, the question of whether to allow public comment comes down to whether we think human nature is basically good or bad. I think it's clear that there's a great potential for public comment to improve the quality of science being done. One could just as easily post counterexamples as links to important follow-up papers with a more comprehensive view of the subject. There's of course worry of cranks and so on, but one hopes that the positive outweighs the negative.

I've been a member of Metafilter for many years, which has used post-moderation very effectively to keep the general level of discussion high. A few additional nice features that help the effort are:

a) User flagging. This lets users call attention to bad comments in stead of expecting the moderators to wade through everything coming in. In fact, one would expect that authors would provide a good amount of this function, even on articles with very light discussion. Obviously, it will need to be very clear what kinds of comments are 'flaggable;' spam yes, criticism of the paper, probably not.

b) Shutting down comments after a set period of time (30 days, in Metafilter's case). Something like a year or three might be appropriate for an epijournal, if anything, givent hat one would expect the author to be providing some level of moderation of discussion on their own articles. But the idea is that much of the post-moderation is driven by a flagging

mechanism, where users bring moderator attention to Bad Things. This is less effective on old or inactive posts, since there are fewer eyes seeing the comments. As a result, old open posts are subject to abuse, often from spammers looking for new places to peddle prescription drugs.

c) Barrier to entry. Metafilter has a \$5 entry fee (or one can send a postcard), which helps ward off most spammers, who don't expect to make that much off the one or two comments that get through before their accounts get banned. The arxiv already has a barrier to entry in its referral process, which should already be helpful in keeping the comment systems productive. Along these lines, requiring identity-linked accounts could help with this, too; the desire to spam and/or troll should be low if your ability to publish rests on not doing it...

In summary, open comment systems should be workable with some thought about implementation, and could greatly improve the value of the publication system.

### **Izabella Laba Says:**

January 19, 2013 at 7:15 pm

I would not submit a paper to a journal that would force me to have a mandatory comment page on every article. I have written several long posts already on this type of issues, so here I'll only say that this is my well considered opinion based on my decades of experience in mathematics, several years of blogging, and following (and sometimes commenting on) blogs with comment sections of varying quality. No amount of talk about possible fixes etc. will make me change my mind.

Instead, I want to mention a few additional points.

1) A new journal needs to develop a critical mass of authors. While having comment pages for articles may well attract some authors, making them mandatory pages will likely turn off just as many. In particular, the more senior and established authors are less likely to worry about the journal being accepted by promotion committees etc, but also less likely to have the time and inclination to manage and moderate discussion pages.

2) It is tempting to think that every paper would have a lively, engaging and productive comment page. In reality, I expect that this would only happen for a few articles. The majority of papers might get one or two lazy comments. The editors would have to spend time debating whether this or that lazy comment is negative enough or obnoxious enough to be removed, in response to the inevitable requests from the authors; but the point is that no greater good was achieved by having the comment page in the first place.

3) It is also tempting that such comment pages would contain at least a reasonably comprehensive summary of follow-up work (Theorem 1 was extended to a wider class of functions in [A], Conjecture 2 was proved in [B], and the range of exponents in Theorem 3 was proved to be sharp in [C]). But I don't believe that this will happen. When I write an article, it is my job to explain clearly and informatively how my results relate to existing literature. It is *\*not\** my job to also post explanations of that on multiple comment pages for cited articles, I certainly would not have the time to do that, and I'm not convinced that we could always count on the existence of interested and willing third parties.

A better solution would be to allow pingbacks (say, from the arXiv), so that the article's journal page shows also the list of articles citing it. Alternatively, authors and editors might be allowed to add post-publication notes of this type (separate from the main article).

information has already been taken over by the internet. I believe that the most important thing that journals should be doing now is consolidating information, improving the quality of it, raising the signal to noise ratio.

I can see how this goal would be served by having a small number of discussion pages where the commenters are knowledgeable and engaged. In effect, these pages would serve as de facto expository papers in a different format. I do not think that having a large number of comment pages with one or two comments on them would have the same effect. It would not consolidate information – instead, it would diffuse it further.

On a related note, since I mentioned expository papers – it would be excellent to have a section for those. Right now, the journal market for expository papers is very thin: basically, it's either the Monthly (limited range of topics) or the AMS Bulletin (very small number of papers, each one some sort of a "big deal"). But there is no venue, for instance, for the type of expository papers that researchers often write when they try to understand something themselves. (Except maybe for conference proceedings, but this is not a perfect solution, for many reasons.)

I will likely have more thoughts on it – if so, I'll post a longer version of this on my own blog.

**Mike Taylor Says:**

January 19, 2013 at 8:49 pm

"I would not submit a paper to a journal that would force me to have a mandatory comment page on every article ... No amount of talk about possible fixes etc. will make me change my mind."

I am sorry to hear that. Without in the slightest expecting or intended to change you're mind, I'll say this: I can easily imagine that within a few more years, I will be refusing to submit to journals that *do not* have a comment page on my article. From my perspective, the principle purpose of publishing an article is to catalyse discussion and further work. I am loath to waste my work on venues that discourage this.

"It is tempting to think that every paper would have a lively, engaging and productive comment page. In reality, I expect that this would only happen for a few articles. The majority of papers might get one or two lazy comments."

The solution to this is probably for us to write more interesting papers.

**Izabella Laba Says:**

January 19, 2013 at 9:10 pm

"The solution to this is probably for us to write more interesting papers."

I don't think so. My experience with my blog has been that the feedback I get by email or in person is incomparably more valuable and insightful than most of the public comments I was getting. Furthermore, if having only one or two comments creates the impression that the paper is uninteresting, then that's one more reason to not have that page in the first place. The scarcity of comments could mean that discussion is taking place by email (my own preferred mode of engagement), or that there's already a related thread somewhere else, or any number of other things.

I'm perfectly fine with having comment pages on a voluntary basis. If the idea is for it to be an attractive feature for authors, why not start with those who are willing and let everyone else see how awesome it is. I might in fact want to have a comment page, under the right circumstances. But I object very strongly to making it mandatory.

**Jed Brown Says:**

January 19, 2013 at 9:28 pm

@Izabella What about papers that contain misleading or even incorrect content, the authors of which will naturally not be thrilled about a comment page? Currently, there is no place to put such responses short of publishing a formal reply in the journal, a time-consuming and confrontational process, the result of which is still often not found by future readers. I believe that every one of today's journals would be better off with a forum for continuing peer review.

**Mike Taylor Says:**

January 19, 2013 at 9:25 pm

I would be happy with comment pages or not according to the authors' choice.

I think that authors who opt out will be making a bad mistake; but at least it's *their* mistake. I hope that at least our having had this conversation will demonstrate to the epijournals people that different people have very different perspectives on this, and that the best approach is to build infrastructure that can accomodate either.

**Izabella Laba Says:**

January 19, 2013 at 9:34 pm

One other point: @Mike Taylor, you said you were not a mathematician? Mathematics works on a longer time scale than most other disciplines of science. A paper may be extremely interesting to many readers and inspire a great deal of work, but this does not happen immediately. It usually takes us more than 30 days (the cut-off date that someone suggested) just to process it and start thinking about new ideas, and that's assuming that we have plenty of free time on our hands at the moment. More often, it takes months or years.

A comment page would offer no evidence of that process taking place. Instead, it could easily become a popularity contest on a much lower level.

**Mike Taylor Says:**

January 19, 2013 at 9:44 pm

I am a palaeobiologist. As such I routinely cite papers that are a hundred or 200 years old. As a sample, my recent paper on sauropod neck anatomy <http://arxiv.org/abs/1209.5439> has 148 references. The average date of cited papers is 1968, the median is 1994 and the mode is 2006. The three oldest are all from the 1700s and the newest is from 2012.

I'm not sure what any of that tells us, but it's data, and we like data.

**Izabella Laba Says:**

January 19, 2013 at 9:47 pm

@Jed Brown – how about contacting the author, and possibly copying the email to the editors if there is a suspicion that the author might not be receptive? I agree that the author should correct the paper, or publish a correction that would be linked to the original journal page.

But I'm also guessing that for every instance of this, there will be 10 or more incidents where someone misunderstands a part of the paper (maybe because they're used to different conventions, or something similar) and starts a long exchange about that. I don't necessarily think that a public forum is the best place for such exchanges; myself, I'd rather answer this type of questions individually.

(I will be away from computer for a few hours now. If there are any more responses to me, I will get to it later.)

January 19, 2013 at 11:41 pm

For cases where someone has misunderstood a part of the paper:

Try looking through the Ubuntu forums some time. Or Stack Overflow. Or Math Overflow. One of the most important parts of enabling discussion is creating spaces for /better/ understanding... And sometimes (often?) these misunderstandings happen not because the student is a dumb member of the public, but because content could be better written.

Additionally, the context is very different from your average blog, in terms of barrier to comment (capable of posting to the arxiv), as well as scope. Many blogs, because of their relatively small scale, have very bad commenting systems. Many big places (like, say, youtube) also have very bad comment systems. Keeping a good comment system requires a bit of system planning and a certain amount of community expectations. There will undoubtedly be pains, but I see a real potential here for improving communication within the field.

Of course, one could easily take a more experimental approach, try some different ideas, and see how things play out in reality. If we're expecting a number of epijournals, there will be space to try different approaches and see what shakes out. (Discounting the possibility that some subfields might attract more obnoxious people than others!)

(Also, the 30-days cutoff is one that works for one particular community; I agree that a reasonable cutoff date for comments in a math journal would be significantly longer, if it should exist at all.)

**Mike Taylor Says:**

January 19, 2013 at 11:45 pm

For whatever it's worth ... I have no comment cutoff on either of my blogs, and do get useful and insightful comments literally years after the articles were posted.

**Marcin Kotowski Says:**

January 20, 2013 at 1:31 am

@Izabella:

1. When objecting to comments being mandatory, are you afraid of trolling/hating/spamming or something else? If it's the former, there are pretty good mechanisms for dealing with those. Compare e.g. with StackExchange sites (e.g. MathOverflow that you seem to have mixed feelings about) – flame wars or trolling are virtually nonexistent there, thanks to good community standards and clever mechanism design (user flagging, downvotes etc.). If it's something else, what is it?

2. I imagine a typical use of comments section would be the following – there is a section in the paper which is unclear, confusing or maybe wrong in a non-obvious manner. If I struggle with the paper and finally figure out what's going on, I'm fine, but dozens of other readers will have to repeat the same work to arrive to the same conclusion. Why not save them the hard work and post my explanation? Now, this has nothing to do with the author's opinion on allowing comments – even if the author doesn't care, I may still want to extract something valuable from the paper.

3. From perusing MathOverflow and math blogs, I think there is much demand for good expository writing. Many times there is an argument or proof in a paper that can be explained in a simpler or more enlightening way (or at least, an enlightening proof can be given for a toy version of the problem). There are lot of wonderful posts on MO providing exactly such insight – wouldn't it be more natural to have them tied directly to the paper?



cannot infer that people writing this sort of useful stuff on MO will automatically do so at Epijournals – but it's not impossible either).

To finish, I agree that having discussions/comments coupled with publishing itself might seem artificial or awkward. Unfortunately, at present there is no Internet platform facilitating high level \*discussions\* of this kind (StackExchange serves this role perfectly with respect to \*specific questions\*; however, discussion is explicitly discouraged there, for valid reasons), so one has to get by with whatever is available at the moment.

It may well happen that the “market for high level comments/discussion about math” is much shallower than it seems, i.e. people complain about lack of it, but won't really use it when it's available. However, the same could have been said about MO 5-6 years ago: “You really think that people are going to spend valuable time writing well-researched posts on some silly forum with upvotes and karma? Duh.” So I don't see a reason for not trying.

**Izabella Laba Says:**

January 20, 2013 at 1:35 am

@Tom Denton: I did not and would not say anything about “dumb members of the public”, As it happens, I have fairly extensive experience talking with students and/or mathematicians in other fields, and I understand the problems involved in that. But as I said above, it was not my intention to discuss specific scenarios.

**Izabella Laba Says:**

January 20, 2013 at 1:53 am

@Marcin Kotowski:

1) I have written several long posts on that type of issues already, and I take it from your comment that you have seen them. Also, I would advise you against using the word “afraid of”. (I would also point out that this could be gender bias showing up. Would you ask Tim Gowers why he was “afraid of” Elsevier?)

2) and 3) I agree that there should be more good homes for expository writing, indeed I said so in my first comment. But what you are describing does not resemble any kind of “comment pages” that I've seen. Instead, it sounds more like (a collection of) expository papers or notes. I would have no objection to having such notes pinged back to my papers.

And once more, I have absolutely nothing against it if other authors would like to have comment pages.

**Alexander Woo Says:**

January 20, 2013 at 7:12 am

@Mike: Just a couple things you ought to be aware of about mathematics.

1) Reading a paper carefully, to the point where one has actual useful comments on the details, is an enormous amount of work. An average 25 page paper can easily take 40 work hours to read carefully. Of course, one can skim the introduction in an hour or two and, assuming the paper is well written, get a good idea of what the paper is about and what claims are made. However, just skimming the introduction hardly qualifies someone to make insightful comments on the content.

2) Specialties are very small. Certainly for any paper there are hundreds of people who could work through the paper and check its correctness without resorting to looking up everything in textbooks. However, the number of people who know the specific subject of a paper well enough to have insightful comments is usually very small, perhaps a dozen at most and likely

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all personally known to the author. Of course, it is possible (and happens with some frequency) that someone from a different area (or more likely a very closely related but not exactly identical area) will have unexpected insight, but this is unexpected and uncommon.

There are certainly some papers I have reason to believe I am the only person who has read it carefully. There are some of my papers, even in fairly good journals, that I doubt has been read carefully by anyone, including the referee(s). (People have heard the associated talk and gotten what they needed to know from that.)

Put together, this greatly limits the utility of comment pages for mathematics.

**Piotr Migdal Says:**

January 21, 2013 at 11:12 pm

@Izabella Laba

I understand some of your reservations about comments. And yes, if they were totally unmoderated, then I am also afraid about their quality.

However, there are mechanisms to keep high quality of posts (including: comments only by registered scientists, up- and down-votes, community-driven moderation) and to enforce that they need to be on topic (think – as in issue tracking system for software).

Moreover, here the comments are not only for the author. They are as well for others, in particular to discuss doubts, pointing good points and flaws. And: no, no one is infallible. So if some people were allowed to say “well, but I'm a  $x \in X$ , so I don't need comments from mortals” it would be incredibly counterproductive.

$X = \{\text{Noble Prize winner, Fields Medalist, No 1 Guy in the Field, ...}\}$

Pingbacks? Nice, but let's not start with making epijournal and epiepijournal just for comments, OK?

**Izabella Laba Says:**

January 25, 2013 at 3:45 am

@Piotr Migdal

It's not the hypothetical trolls that I'm concerned about. It's the unconscious gender bias in the entire community, including you, me, and every other “registered scientist”. Community moderation, even when it works (which it might not, in this case), only ensures that the conversation conforms to the collective expectations of the group. If the group is biased, the conversation may well end up biased, too. It is hard enough to guard against this in formal settings. (I've seen enough committee meetings where women's work was denigrated, not by trolls, but by registered, card-carrying mathematicians.) In informal settings, it's next to impossible, not to mention time-consuming and disheartening.

**Gil Kalai Says:**

January 25, 2013 at 10:21 pm

Dear all, there are many serious problems with comment pages as part of the journal, and one problem is that many mathematicians do not want this feature. (Naturally, those are also less represented in comment sections of blogs.) So it will be wise not to include comment pages.

**Piotr Migdal Says:**

January 29, 2013 at 3:40 pm

I am aware that various biases are carried also by otherwise well-respected scientists (IMHO the strongest ones are related to prestige, position and networking aspects).

However, once things are visible online, it provides ways to diagnose it, and fight with it. In particular, it will be obvious that e.g. scientist X belittles works by women, or scientist Y tends to strongly favour works by people from his country.

Currently, when individual comments are not publicly available, it's hard to fight with it.

When it comes to gender biases, one solution is to use initials (it can be done automatically), which can partially hide one's gender. And compare results, to see whether it helps.

@Gil Kalai

And how about issue tracking, instead of comments? If readers could point errors or omissions, I can hardly find an argument against it. Do you have one? (Or, are you aware of any, even if you don't support them?)

**Izabella Laba Says:**

January 29, 2013 at 7:07 pm

@Piotr Migdal

I'm sure that you have good intentions, but this strikes me as dangerously naive.

1) Visibility means nothing. People do not announce their bias and say "this paper sucks because it was written by a woman". Instead, they just say that this paper (written by a woman) is less interesting than that other paper, or something similar.

2) Ability to argue also means nothing. Do you understand what it really means that a group is biased? It means that if X is unfair to women authors, and if you call him out on that, everyone else sides with X. You, on the other hand, become known as the uncollegial troublemaker, especially if you yourself are female. Your criticism of X (you accused him of sexism!) becomes a worse offence than X's unfairness towards women authors. (Yes, I have in fact seen this happen. Many times.)

3) What makes you think that women will want to have negative comments posted on their papers just so that you could collect evidence of sexism? We don't need that evidence. We've seen it already. We would much rather see a system where X does not get the opportunity in the first place.

**Mike Taylor Says:**

January 29, 2013 at 9:00 pm

"Visibility means nothing. People do not announce their bias and say "this paper sucks because it was written by a woman". Instead, they just say that this paper (written by a woman) is less interesting than that other paper, or something similar."

This is why the open availability of many comments is beneficial. Mining such data makes it possible to discern patterns.

**Izabella Laba Says:**

January 29, 2013 at 9:39 pm

@Mike Taylor

For the purpose of “discerning patterns”, see the recent PNAS study: <http://www.pnas.org/content/early/2012/09/14/1211286109>

Also, regarding your example from paleobiology: are you saying that paleobiologists do not blog their papers \*before\* publication? That's what I, as a mathematician, find strange. We post papers on arXiv as soon as they're finished and blog them at that time. We also often wait a week or two before journal submission, to see if there's any quick feedback, then revise papers accordingly. So in mathematics, a quick exchange of that type would've been sorted out before the paper was even submitted.

I'm tired of being told that those of us opposed to comments are really just chicken. (“Defensive”, “can't cope with”, etc.) I'm long past the age where I would do something just because someone dared me to do it.

**Mike Taylor Says:**

January 29, 2013 at 10:04 pm

I'll only respond to your actual question, since I can see we won't get anywhere with the rest of the issues.

It's unusual to blog palaeo papers before they published, but not unheard of. An example in my own work is [this post about a paper we'd deposited on arXiv](#), and which is currently in press. A more interesting example is when we blogged a paper before we'd submitted, or indeed written, it: [this post](#) and the five that followed it became the first draft of a manuscript which my lead author and I cleaned up and submitted subsequently. (This one is also in press.)

**Piotr Migdal Says:**

January 29, 2013 at 9:47 pm

@Izabella Laba

Ad 1) Sure. I was thinking in the line of Mike Taylor. E.g. you can mine that “a given scientist gives 70% favourable comments for men, and only 40% for women”. Otherwise you couldn't argue about a single case (anecdotal opinions are hard to judge, as it may be impossible to distinguish when there is bias (even unconscious), or when one just don't like the content).

Ad 2) If everyone is against women, then we are all doomed, and EOT. But unless I'm mistaken, most of open minded people are against discrimination. And the problem is that sometimes it is not visible. If it is obvious (for everyone, not only – one person) that a scientist X is sexist, he (or she) won't find it easy.

Ad 3) And what is your proposition? Let's consider 4 cases:  
{discrimination, no discrimination} x {comments, no comments}

D, C:

It will be obvious for everyone and changes are likely to follow. And a side there will be not a single women vs a professor with a high position, but a lot of scientist (male and female alike) vs the professor.

D, no C:

Some interesting works will be not accepted because of “lacking impact” (or some other vague argument, impossible to fight against), and discrimination will live a long and happy life.

no D, C:

Great!

We lose a potentially fruitful feature.

**Izabella Laba Says:**

January 29, 2013 at 10:57 pm

@Piotr Migdal

The short answer is that I do not believe that "D,C" will work out the way you think it will.

The long answer is this. I'm female. I've held academic positions in math departments for almost 20 years, since my Ph.D. in 1994. I'm on editorial boards of several journals. I've served on many committees (department, university, professional societies, grant selection panels) where a significant part of the work involved evaluating people, selecting prize winners, etc. In addition to my own, I've followed closely the careers of my graduate students and postdocs. Do you really think that it's appropriate for you to tell me that there's a simple solution to everything, if only I just listened to you, because you think it would work? Based on what kind of experience? In mathematics, there are simple solutions sometimes. In life, not so much.

That's really all I want to say about it. This is an experiment in which I do not consent to participate.

**Izabella Laba Says:**

January 29, 2013 at 11:32 pm

@Piotr Migdal

Please also see the PNAS study I linked above. It shows very clearly that you have misidentified the "problem". It's not just a few "bad" scientists who are sexist and should be ostracized accordingly. The real problem is that most of us, no matter how open-minded, have an unconscious and involuntary bias. (Even if we're "against discrimination" when asked about it.) This bias is not easily noticed. (Note how you contradict yourself on that. On one hand, you claim that a statistical approach is needed. On the other hand, you also claim that instances of sexism will be easy to spot and point out.)

This bias can affect us to different degrees, depending on the circumstances. I believe, based on my experience, that internet comments do not serve us well. And even if I were to be proved wrong about that, I still believe in making our own choices. Mine is to opt out of comment boards.

**Gábor Pete Says:**

February 23, 2013 at 2:36 am

Izabella, here's a tiny piece of support for Piotr's naive approach towards gender bias. I'm guessing he's way younger than the average faculty you work with in committees, and I'm also younger. I think that, just how fe/male roles have been changing for many decades now, slowly but steadily the views are also catching up. E.g., I feel that stupid blonde jokes in Hungary were definitely more popular 15 years ago and among people 5 years older than me. And these changes among young academics are faster. And I think that visibility through comment pages can only speed up these changes, exactly because of the young people who care less and less about all sorts of tradition.

This is getting beyond the topic of epijournals, but what is your alternative? I can only think of hiding identities, which would be pretty much a nightmare.

February 26, 2013 at 7:35 pm

@Gabor Pete: My alternative is that, if you believe you are less biased than previous generations, you might want to stop telling women what's best for them, and accept that they might want to make their own decisions in that regard.

**Gábor Pete Says:**

February 27, 2013 at 1:21 am

Isabella, I don't think I was telling you what you should do. Even less what women should do. In fact, I had thought that only sexist people would think in these terms "what's best for women", so I'm quite shocked to see your reply. Maybe you consider yourself an expert, compared to me, on this topic, that's why you use this phrase, which is completely possible, but then I would be happy to see your suggestions on what all female mathematicians should do.

All I said was that I think that open communication about the values produced by the members of a democratic community helps destroy the prejudices about the members themselves, assuming of course that the members are more interested in the values than in the prejudices. I said I thought this was the case with young mathematicians. To put it differently, it feels totally absurd that women would always play an inferior role in science; there seems to be a clear evolutionary drive to diminish this imbalance. So my best idea would be to speed up evolution by speeding up communication.

Of course, as an evolutionary process, even if it goes in the direction that I'm hoping, it still could be slow, and there still could be mistakes. If you don't want to participate in this by making your papers available for online commenting, that's totally up to you. But if you are convinced that this would not be going in the right direction, I would like to know why. And if you have a better suggestion, I would like to know that even more.

**Gil Kalai Says:**

February 27, 2013 at 3:46 am

Dear Gabor,

I do not think that the issue of gender bias, while very serious, is the only problematic issue in the brave new world of open, public, pseudo-democratic, Internet-based science, which comments in epi-journals is a small part of. The bias is in favor of the more well-known, more well-connected, more vocal, and more provocative members of the scientific community. Enhancing such bias (which exists also in the system we already have), and moving it to the area of peer-reviewed scientific publications is not good for science and not good for the scientific community. In addition to the matter of bias, comments and other aspects of open science require from individual scientists substantial additional time and effort.

In my opinion, perhaps the most crucial point is this. Academic freedom means that individual scientists have freedom in most aspects of their academic and scientific work. One of the dangerous aspects of the "academic spring" is the attempt to force on scientists, either by peer-pressure, or even by regulations, some models of publishing (and scientific interactions) that not everybody support. Some scientists would like to see their work open for the public and subject to discussions and comments by laymen and beginners, and some other scientists do not care about it and mainly aim at the few individuals in their own exclusive areas, and there are many intermediate and different ways.

Regarding gender-bias, the fact of the matter is that in all comment-rich interactive mathematical arenas women's participation is very small – much below their (already small) proportion among mathematicians. This fact, Gabor, contradicts many of the statements you make.

Why I've also joined the good guys | Gowers's W... <http://gowers.wordpress.com/2013/01/16/why-iv...>  
you make with so much confidence but with little evidence. I fully identify with your wishful thinking and sentiments but we do have to examine the factual matter.

**gowers Says:**

February 27, 2013 at 5:24 pm

“One of the dangerous aspects of the “academic spring” is the attempt to force on scientists, either by peer-pressure, or even by regulations, some models of publishing (and scientific interactions) that not everybody support.”

I may be misinterpreting you, but that sounds like an example of status quo bias. The current model with expensive subscriptions and decisions made in secret is one that not everybody supports, but it is “forced on scientists” by the historical accident that it was the natural model in a pre-internet age. I myself don't want to force models on anybody, but rather to try out various different models and see what works. If we ended up with more than one way of doing things, with some people preferring to publish in one way and others in another, then that would in my view be a satisfactory outcome. In particular, if a journal had comment pages, I would support the right for authors to opt out.

**Izabella Laba Says:**

February 27, 2013 at 8:07 am

Gabor – Your exact words were “visibility through comment pages can only speed up these changes”. How is that not telling me what's good for women? I have no suggestions for “all female mathematicians”, because not all female mathematicians are the same. I have explained my own preferences and reasons many times already, in this thread and on my own blog. I don't have the time to repeat it all from the start.

**Gil Kalai Says:**

February 28, 2013 at 6:55 pm

“I myself don't want to force models on anybody, but rather to try out various different models and see what works.”

Tim, I am very happy that we are in agreement on this important issue. Indeed one thing that I found missing from the one-year later letter (next post) is a clear objection to any attempt to force any model on anybody, and especially a clear objection to the idea of forcing (the “author pays”) open publishing model on scientists by grant agencies and governments.

Enforcing open access publication on scientists is in clear violation of the academic freedom principle

**Mike Taylor Says:**

February 28, 2013 at 7:20 pm

Gil Kalai Says: “Enforcing open access publication on scientists is in clear violation of the academic freedom principle.”

I am sorry to be oppositional, but I think this is complete nonsense. Academic freedom means the freedom to choose what to study and to state conclusions that may be unpopular. It does not mean the freedom to lock work that the public paid for behind walls that prevent them from benefitting from it. In my book that remains completely unacceptable, and any “publishing” regime that does not make all published papers immediately available with no barriers and no embargoes is not really publishing at all.

**Gil Kalai Says:**

February 28, 2013 at 7:59 pm

Hi Mike

Let me just repeat the part of my comment which I hope is non controversial.

"I myself don't want to force models on anybody, but rather to try out various different models and see what works."

Tim, I am very happy that we are in agreement on this important issue. Indeed one thing that I found missing from the one-year later letter (next post) is a clear objection to any attempt to force any model on anybody, and especially a clear objection to the idea of forcing (the "author pays") open publishing model on scientists by grant agencies and governments.

(Actually I did not intend to include the last sentence. This is a complicated issue and, in any case, there were various other good reasons against the model of author pays. But when I glued and pased it was unintentionally included. Still, I do stand also by my comment that enforcing scientists the form of publishing is harming their academic freedom, and let me add, Mike, that I disagree with your position and find your language disappointing.)

**Mike Taylor Says:**

February 28, 2013 at 8:12 pm

"[...] and let me add, Mike, that I disagree with your position and find your language disappointing."

It that refers to my describing your comment as "complete nonsense", then you're quite right, and I withdraw that description, with my apologies. I do think you are completely wrong on this, but that's not at all the same thing as nonsense. My bad.

**rob (@robwalsh0) Says:**

January 16, 2013 at 7:16 pm | Reply

Congrats to the Epijournals team!

Scholastica ([www.scholasticahq.com](http://www.scholasticahq.com)) makes it simple to create arXiv overlay journals too! There's a video that serves as an example here: <http://bit.ly/yuD2G2>. We developed a Ruby gem to interact with arXiv as well that can be found in the blog post.

**Richard Baron Says:**

January 16, 2013 at 7:57 pm | Reply

This looks like a brilliant solution, and not just for the disciplines covered by the arXiv – although having a single repository clearly makes the thing easier to manage. Subject to this repository point, the solution could equally be extended to other disciplines, including the humanities, where there are just as many arguments about how best to approach open access, and perhaps greater worries than in mathematics and the natural sciences about the willingness of governments to come up with funding.

You say that the title "The Epijournal of Additive Combinatorics" will not be used. This might be because "The" would be inappropriate. It is perfectly possible that more than one epijournal will be created, even for a fairly narrow subdiscipline – although I suppose that once you get down to some fairly modest number of practitioners, and they all know one another, they will realize that this would be silly and would not allow it to happen.

Multiple epijournals for a subdiscipline might be useful, if the different epijournals had different approaches to the acceptance of comments. That would allow for experimentation, and the improvement of approaches as the epijournals learnt from one another. On the other hand, it would become more trouble to track down all the recently published papers on a given topic, and commentators would create more work for moderators by leaving the same comments in several places.



Another consideration is that of what might happen if several epijournals included links to a single paper. One might get a wider range of comments on that paper than if only one epijournal linked to it. On the other hand, it would take longer to track down all comments on a paper.

Perhaps the best thing to do is to have one (and only one) epiepijournal for each subdiscipline, or perhaps one just needs an intelligent search engine, thereby separating the business of finding papers from the business of evaluation for quality.

**Richard Baron Says:**

January 16, 2013 at 8:03 pm

Whoops, my comment about creating more work for moderators belongs to the penultimate paragraph, about several epijournals linking to a single paper, not to the antepenultimate paragraph, where I put it.

**sswarnendu Says:**

January 16, 2013 at 8:46 pm | [Reply](#)

great idea

**John Baez Says:**

January 16, 2013 at 9:14 pm | [Reply](#)

Great! Let the epiphenomenon begin!

**josephina@joey.com Says:**

January 16, 2013 at 9:56 pm | [Reply](#)

Professor Gowers, what do you think of this

<http://mathbabe.org/2012/12/03/diophantus-and-the-math-arxiv/>

?

**Qiaochu Yuan Says:**

January 16, 2013 at 10:49 pm | [Reply](#)

"Epijournal" is an oddly awkward phrase to see in English. The juxtaposition of the i and the j looks Dutch.

Anyway, this sounds great!

**Peter Says:**

January 16, 2013 at 11:15 pm | [Reply](#)

If Epijournals are worried about authors not liking comment pages, they could allow authors to opt out of comment pages for their article.

**telescoper Says:**

January 16, 2013 at 11:45 pm | [Reply](#)

This is very like the idea I've been blogging about for some time for astrophysics. See this latest post

<http://telescoper.wordpress.com/2013/01/14/aaron-swartz-and-open-access/>

and subsequent comments for a discussion.

**Michał Kotowski Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 2:07 am | [Reply](#)

17 sur 43 An important question here is whether it is possible to move already existing journals to the new platform. I imagine that if the new platform turns out to be functioning smoothly, editorial boards

Why I've also joined the good guys | Gowers's W... <http://gowers.wordpress.com/2013/01/16/why-iv...>  
of traditional journals might want to "liberate" their journals and move all their operation there. This would raise an obvious continuity issue (the publisher won't be delighted to see this sort of "betrayal", so presumably the editorial board would have to assume a new name for the journal etc.), but the benefits would be so huge that it's hard to imagine that the editors are not entertaining this possibility. Can anyone closer to people running respectable journals comment on this possibility?

**Mike Taylor Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 8:35 am

I've often wondered about this: what do publishers *own* of journals? Does Elsevier own the name *Cretaceous Research*? If the editorial board of that journal all decided to move from Elsevier to an epijournal, what sanction would Elsevier have to prevent or impede that move?

**Chris Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 9:03 am

Mike Taylor- this has happened once before to a mathematics journal Elsevier owned, at the instigation of Donald Knuth. In brief, Elsevier own the title, but not the board. The board resigned en masse and set up a competing journal with a different name.

**Piotr Migdal Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 2:14 am | [Reply](#)

Interesting idea! But it is important to think about it well, not to end up as ghost town, like <http://www.scirate.com/>.

Personally, I see such thing as a traditional review process plus:

– ability for others to comment globally, or parts;

Not to end in a mess, it will be important to distinguish:

– general impressions, comments on general value,

– "issues" (like in software development), e.g. "[bug]: in (5) there should be '-x' instead of 'x'", "[notation]: using X for set and Y for its element looks misleading", ...

– cite or reference recommendations (this one hand side may be useful, but on the other also – bait people wanting to overly promote their work or line of research)

In general, some ideas from software development may be worth adopting (like version control (Git/Mercurial) and bug and issue tracking tools (like <http://www.atlassian.com/software/jira/overview>)).

**Jed Brown Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 2:56 am | [Reply](#)

Hopefully everyone here is aware of <http://arxiv.org>. The site has been up for a while and is a very capable "overlay" platform.

**Shalin Mehta Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 3:34 am | [Reply](#)

This is a great initiative. For biologists, similar initiatives of repute are taking shape. For life sciences, <http://www.elifesciences.org/> is a great new venue where you can publish not only your paper but all the crucial data. Nature setup a preprint server (<http://precedings.nature.com/>), arguably so that their traditional journals can become overlays. But, it was shutdown. Any one has an insight as to why nature decided to pull the plug on precedings? – surely they have enough money and manpower to run the server.

18 sur 45 **joshua vogelstein Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 4:00 am | [Reply](#)

Why I've also joined the good guys | Gowers's W...

<http://gowers.wordpress.com/2013/01/16/why-iv...>

<http://f1000research.com/> is a closely related approach that I also think is quite promising. It is geared more for biology than math.

**plm Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 5:23 am | [Reply](#)

That's awesome news. I remember rooting for such projects several times. I'll look at the link in comments here.

Also I think it's about the first anniversary of your statement against Elsevier. Happy anniversary.

**AZ open access « chorasimilarity Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 7:02 am | [Reply](#)

[...] of Diamond OA (as mentioned in Tim Gowers very interesting "Why I've also joined the good guys") I suggest that a better and inspiring name for this yet mysterious idea if epijournals [...]

**Benoît Régent-Kloeckner Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 8:39 am | [Reply](#)

I can clarify a bit the "epi-team" composition. Jean-Pierre Demailly tried to launch a similar project some years ago, but it had much less institutional support and did not work out. More recently, Ariane Rolland heard about this tentative and, having contact at CCSD, made them meet with Jean-Pierre. That's the real beginning of the episciences project, which I joined a bit later. The names you should add are the people involved in the CCSD: Christine Berthaud, head of CCSD, Laurent Capelli who is coding the software right now, and Agnès Magron who is working on the communication with Ariane.

**Ross K Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 8:58 am | [Reply](#)

What I find rather elegant about this approach is that existing journals could be "cloned" — that is, comment templates could be applied to the arXiv versions of their existing articles. Potentially, since most articles are in arXiv anyway, any journal "liberation" might be made to appear almost seamless, at least within the epijournal system.

**Chris Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 9:05 am

like!

**Piotr Migdal Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 12:27 pm

Yes, it's a good idea. And then with CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>).

It's important to remember that arXiv by itself allow to use CC license, but a default practice is to avoid to (because usually it may conflict with a journal's policy).

This would be good for opening science, with benefits for authors and society.

**Mike Taylor Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 12:31 pm

BTW., one terrible mistake in arXiv is that (unless I am being very stupid and missing something) the pages for the articles don't say what licence they are provided under. For example, my own article at <http://arxiv.org/abs/1209.5439> was deposited there under CC BY but I can't see any indication of this.

**Pavel Zorin Says:**

January 18, 2013 at 11:38 pm

In my opinion CC BY is not ideal for articles written in TeX or its flavors since it does not seem to require the distribution of the source code together with ps/dvi/PDF. The GNU FDL has a special provision for it: it requires “transparent” copies of documents to be distributed which makes it more adapted for this use case in my eyes.

**Kaveh Bazargan Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 8:59 am | [Reply](#)

The Emergency Physicians Journal ([www.epijournal.com/](http://www.epijournal.com/)) will be wondering why they are getting so many hits since yesterday.

**telescoper Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 9:13 am | [Reply](#)

Reblogged this on [In the Dark](#) and commented:

Again, no time to post properly today but here's another variation on the theme of Open Access. The idea described in this post sounds very familiar, actually...

**Oluwatoyin Vincent Adepoju Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 10:10 am | [Reply](#)

This idea has some relationship to a debate I am engaged in right now on publishing an academic journal as a blog, an initiative already represented by RECONFIGURATIONS: A Journal for Poetics & Poetry / Literature & Culture :<http://reconfigurations.blogspot.co.uk>

I wonder if anyone, including Gowers, would like to comment on using a blogging platform in publishing an academic journal.

**Mike Taylor Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 10:46 am

[Annotum](#) is a WordPress theme for running academic journals. It sounds like it ought to be rather low-rent and fragile, but apparently not: the Public Library Of Science is using it as the platform for [PLOS Currents](#), successfully. So it can be done.

BTW., I notice that Annotum is one of the themes freely available in the no-cost hosted WordPress-based blogs at [wordpress.com](http://wordpress.com). So anyone who's interested can quickly trial their own Annotum-based journal at no financial cost and for very little investment of time.

**Philip Gibbs Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 11:24 am | [Reply](#)

This is an exciting initiative and I hope it really takes off.

I have a quibble with using the term “diamond open access”. You have defined this to mean free for both author and reader, but open access is also about access being open to everyone. The word “diamond” makes to sound like the most open possible but arXiv is not open to everyone for submission.

The most open journal possible would also accept submissions from anyone. In fact most journals do accept submissions from anyone so this will be quite a significant restraint for the epijournals and should be reflected in the terminology.

**Mike Taylor Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 11:31 am

20 sur 43 <sup>14/10/2014 14:33</sup> Actually, I am not fond of the term “Diamond” either, but for a different reason: it implies something fundamentally different from Gold; whereas [the rival term Platinum OA](#) indicates

**gowers Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 11:50 am

Interestingly, that's exactly how I interpret "Diamond", because a Diamond anniversary is like a Golden anniversary but even better.

**chorasimilarity Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 11:37 am

Gold, diamonds and platinum are bad names for OA, because they show that the respective publication model is based on the old idea of SCARCITY OF GOODS. Instead, I propose AZ open access (open access from A to Z) as a possible name, see the ping-back which appeared earlier in the comments (is also a tribute to Aaron Swartz).

**Mike Taylor Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 12:00 pm

"AZ Open Access" is not a bad term, but I think Gold and Green are far too well-entrenched now to be supplanted.

I don't have strong feelings about Platinum being a better term than Diamond; but I do wish that we as a community could agree on one or other of the terms rather than having these synonyms floating around. I fear that we're eventually going to end up calling it "Platinum/Diamond" ... at which point we'll argue about whether "Diamond/Platinum" would be better!

**Philip Gibbs Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 12:19 pm

I don't see any problem with using metals and gems for the terminology. This is common in many walks of life from weddings to credit cards so everyone will appreciate it. If diamond is now set to mean free access and submissions I suggest that platinum should mean free access and submission open to anyone without restraint. Platinum comes after diamond on the anniversary scale so this is fitting.

**Piotr Migdal Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 12:33 pm

For me using things with valuable gems or metals is a bad analogy, as it suggests high prices, not free, easily accessible and reusable material.

However, "not all that glitters is gold" – some "open access" means the same academic journal scam, just they charge authors, instead of readers.

It's important to put the emphasis on making publishing (when it comes to copyright and non-profit standards) as possible (so, say, as for arXiv, but this time additionally CC BY).

A text of me and my friend on that matter, and others:

<http://offtopicarium.wikidot.com/v1:open-science-2-0>

**Andrew King Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 12:34 pm

Aside from the nomenclature: Who is prohibited from submitting papers to arXiv? I thought anyone could, after registering.

January 17, 2013 at 12:38 pm

Wikipedia dixit: Artificial Scarcity.

**Mike Taylor Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 12:47 pm

Andrew King asks: "Who is prohibited from submitting papers to arXiv? I thought anyone could, after registering."

Almost. But before your registration is accepted, it has to be sponsored by someone who is already registered. For a legitimate researcher, finding someone to do that should not be hard. The idea is just to keep spammers and cranks out, I think, not to raise a barrier to researchers.

**Philip Gibbs Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 12:59 pm

People who cannot submit to arXiv submit to viXra (of which I am an administrator), The intake is growing exponentially. There will be many papers there that you will no doubt consider as crank, but many others have been accepted in peer review journals. If future journals become tied to arXiv they will find it much harder to publish. I don't think it will be good for science if the ability to submit to journals becomes tied to the ability to make friendly contacts with established researchers in academia, not to mention the whim of the arXiv administrators who can still reject papers even when they are endorsed.

**gowers Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 1:08 pm

There is in fact a technical point that I didn't make in my post above, which is that the Episciences platform will be based on the HAL archive, but will allow links to other archives. So I think it is not part of the definition of an epijournal that it should be an arXiv overlay — that's just what I imagine most of them would in practice be.

**Philip Gibbs Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 1:12 pm

That sounds more promising, but it would still be good to have a distinction in the terminology so that when the epijournals appear we can classify them according to whether or not there are any restrictions on who can submit.

**Piotr Migdal Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 12:36 pm | Reply

Also, why we (i.e. scientists) cannot base research on a platform for open source, collaboration-friendly stuff?

Something like "GitHub for science"? (<https://github.com/>, see also: <https://bitbucket.org/>)

I have an impression that when it comes to open culture, scientist are way behind programmers.

**chorasimilarity Says:**

January 17, 2013 at 12:51 pm

That's the future, clearly. It already proved its viability, from the economic point as well. But (a) nobody has found a viral idea about how to do it (yet), (b) there are obvious (but vague) interests in delaying the announcement that the patient is dead, (c) you can change anything if you awake people's imagination, see for example the conjectures concerning why MOOC has more impetus than OA here: MOOCs teach OA a lesson by Eric Van de Velde.

[January 17, 2013 at 4:06 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

I think that this is a great idea. Congratulations and good luck!

**Heida Maria Sigurdardottir Says:**

[January 17, 2013 at 6:12 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

Related to this, I had an interesting discussion the other day on the possibility of a journal where you submit your research project BEFORE you collect data. As long as you do what you said you were going to do, the journal will publish your paper. This way, negative results won't be buried and people will be evaluated on their IDEAS, not their results (which they have no control over).

**Piotr Migdal Says:**

[January 17, 2013 at 6:55 pm](#)

Well, in some fields (e.g. mathematics, theoretical physics) you are not guaranteed to get results at all.

IMHO something other is important:

– to credit scientists for publishing negative data,

– to credit scientists for repeating experiments

(seriously, now the system is flawed, in principle science relies on repeatability, but now one get little to no credit for repeating someone's else experiment),

– to publish continuously, in chunks smaller than a publication, e.g. like open source projects on GitHub (so paper only as "summary and final version of", not the sole citable and recognizable way of communicating progress (or lack of it)); related – open notebooks.

**Richard Baron Says:**

[January 17, 2013 at 8:41 pm](#)

Helda's suggestion that we should do something to ensure that non-results get published sounds like a very good one, especially given that in the age of the Internet, that need not crowd out reports of interesting results. One obvious area in which it matters is drug trials. Ben Goldacre has been very strong on this, telling us how many trials that don't show that a drug is any good simply get ignored. Another nice example comes from Richard Feynman's essay Cargo Cult Science. He talks about a Mr Young (I don't know who this was), who in 1937 did experiments on rats running along corridors and going to particular doors. He didn't discover anything interesting about how rats learn, so his work was apparently ignored. But he did discover that you have to place the corridors on sand, otherwise the rats respond to the different sounds that are made as they run along different stretches of corridor, and that is (according to Feynman) a really important thing to know when designing that kind of experiment. Thus the fact of a non-result can carry an important lesson.

**Michael Carley Says:**

[January 18, 2013 at 12:43 am](#)

Such an idea is also current in medical research (see Ben Goldacre)

**chorasimilarity Says:**

[January 17, 2013 at 6:12 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

OK, I got it! You have served us a specimen of second degree british dry humour and you performed an impersonation of Anakin Skywalker. Empire strikes back followed by the Return of the Jedi, in just two blog posts.

**an example Says:**

[January 17, 2013 at 7:15 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

Here's an example of arXiv overlay journal: <http://about.eptcs.org/>

**Bart Homphile Says:**

[January 18, 2013 at 8:06 am](#) | [Reply](#)

You're doing the right thing. Dont let anyone stop you.

**mixedmath Says:**

[January 18, 2013 at 8:48 am](#) | [Reply](#)

I am completely and totally in favor of this. If there were anything that I could to to help, I would.

**Math journals and the fight over open access « **mixedmath Says:****

[January 18, 2013 at 9:01 am](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] sounds exciting. What more could there be? Gowers has just released that he has also joined 'The Good Guys,' by which he means that he is also supporting the establishment of a Green open-access set [...]

**Journals: for the Scientists, of the Scientists and now "BY" the Scientists !! | **sciencegeek Says:****

[January 18, 2013 at 11:09 am](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] Tim Gowers (pictured above) has created a quite a wave in the publishing industry. In a series of posts in his blog, he outlined a plan to launch a series of free open-access journals that will host their [...]

**Today's physics news: Royal Institution may sell home; Fermi might hunt dark matter » **The Institute of Physics blog Says:****

[January 18, 2013 at 11:10 am](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] journals that will host their peer-reviewed articles on the preprint server arXiv. The project was publicly revealed yesterday in a blog post by Tim Gowers, a Fields Medal winner and mathematician at the University of [...]

**Epjournals | **Peter Cameron's Blog Says:****

[January 18, 2013 at 11:40 am](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] Gowers has just announced on his blog that the long-mooted idea of "diamond" journals which are overlays to an open archive [...]

**Ajai Narendran Says:**

[January 18, 2013 at 1:51 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

Great to see this happening ... once people understand the fact that the quality of a journal paper is best judged by who wrote it and who reviewed it and NOT by who/which publishing company publishes it. Cheers !... i see the Brave New World in the making !

**Mathematicians aim to take publishers out of publishing – Nelson Faustino's webpage Says:**

[January 18, 2013 at 2:28 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] journals that will host their peer-reviewed articles on the preprint server arXiv. The project was publicly revealed yesterday in a blog post by Tim Gowers, a Fields Medal winner and mathematician at the University of [...]

**Bella Blithely » Blog Archive » Threads from the Web | **18 January 2013 Says:****

[January 18, 2013 at 2:48 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] slightly related news, mathematician Tim Growers has announced that he is helping to launch a series of free and open access [...]

**Mathematicians aim to take publishers out of publishing | **Geekation: where geeks go Says:****

[January 18, 2013 at 3:52 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] journals that will host their peer-reviewed articles on the preprint server arXiv. The project was publicly revealed yesterday in a blog post by Tim Gowers, a Fields Medal winner and mathematician at the University of [...]



**The Darker Side of Open Access « viXra log Says:**

January 18, 2013 at 4:05 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] week Field medalist Sir Timothy Gowers has announced a new initiative funded in France that will provide just such as infrastructure. Scientists will be able to pull [...]

**Libres pensées d'un mathématicien ordinaire » Coût des publications : un exemple instructif Says:**

January 18, 2013 at 6:44 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] Why I've also joined the good guys par T. Gowers et [...]

**From Nature.com: Mathematicians aim to take publishers out of publishing | Thinking Machine Blog Says:**

January 18, 2013 at 7:19 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] Additional information can be found at Tim Gowers' blog. [...]

**petermurrayrust Says:**

January 18, 2013 at 11:07 pm | [Reply](#)

Tim,

I congratulate you and your colleagues. I hope it acts as a beacon in helping other disciplines change. Unfortunately chemistry (my own) will be the last.

As well as changing the culture of publishing it can also change the technology. STM publishing technology is two decades behind where it ought to be. And it costs vastly too much. There is no reason why authors cannot move to creating publication-ready manuscripts – after all they do this with theses and we've done it in the past. The publishers actually destroy semantic maths as part of their process, often rendering many of the symbols uninterpretable to machines.

Your effort will allow us to develop intelligent machine-based readers for indexing and content discovery, something that current publishers prevent by legal means.

**gowers Says:**

January 18, 2013 at 11:33 pm

I'd like to say that I feel embarrassed to be congratulated about this or credited for it in any way. The people who are to be congratulated and who deserve the credit are those listed at the end of the post. I'm just another person who is very excited about the project, so I want to do what I can to promote it.

**In Short: A cookbook to benefit Hurricane Sandy victims, the BBC covers TEDxSanaa | H Tanalepy Says:**

January 18, 2013 at 11:38 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] fascinating proposal for a new kind of academic journal. [Gowers] [...]

**Libres pensées d'un mathématicien ordinaire » Révolution numérique ? Says:**

January 19, 2013 at 9:17 am | [Reply](#)

[...] Why I've also joined the good guys par T. Gowers [...]

**Giuseppe Says:**

January 19, 2013 at 4:51 pm | [Reply](#)

Will authors "submit" their paper to only one epijournal? Will they be allowed to submit to several, thereby garnering several "stamps of approval"?

**gowers Says:**

January 20, 2013 at 8:30 am





2. There shall be no significant difference between the review process of a journal and that of an epijournal. Some epijournal may want to be fast journals, but certainly not all of them will be. In my opinion, it is the global architecture of journals, and the relation between them, that needs to be fixed to improve the efficiency of the peer-review. I hope episcience can help doing that, but it is too soon to tell.

3. We certainly hope that epijournals are recognized by funding bodies and evaluators; as electronic journals have been recognized and given the epicommittee composition, I am quite optimistic about that. However, I do not feel that it should have an effect on short-term project or new ideas ; as far as I know it is already customary to list accepted but not yet published articles in funding files, so the small acceptance to publication delay will not help.

4. Open archives maintained by universities and other institutions are not in competition with epijournal; if they are interfaced with the arXiv or HaL, it shall be very easy to submit a paper that has been posted in one of them. As far as the adoption of the epijournals is concerned, the decision is really on the community, not on universities and mathematical society; I hope we shall help each other in this matter rather than compete, though.

5. Easy: you can do for epijournals the exact contrary of the Elsevier pledge: submit your papers, accept to review paper, accept to participate to editorial boards. You can also treat papers published in epijournals as any others published papers when you sit in a hiring or evaluating committee.

**Comments in epijournals: we may learn from Wikipedia « chorasimilarity Says:**

January 21, 2013 at 12:15 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] be found in the dispute over the value of commenting, happening in the comments to the post "Why I've also joined the good guys" by Tim Gowers. There you may find both pros and cons for allowing comments to articles [...]

**Comments in epijournals: we may learn from Wikipedia « chorasimilarity Says:**

January 21, 2013 at 12:15 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] reply I mentioned in one comment Wikipedia. Because Wikipedia is one big example of a massively networked collaboration which [...]

**Another Week of GW News, January 20, 2013 – A Few Things Ill Considered Says:**

January 21, 2013 at 2:02 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] 2013/01/16: TGowers: Why I've also joined the good guys [...]

**Dr. Gowers and Mr. Hyde | AMS Graduate Student Blog Says:**

January 21, 2013 at 5:30 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] charges, fees paid upon acceptance of a work. A more radical solution emerges in the second post, Why I've also joined the good guys, where he announces development of a platform that will "make it very easy to set up arXiv [...]"

**Open Library of Humanities – further envisioning | Tim McCormick Says:**

January 21, 2013 at 9:57 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] However, existing or new "full" pre-pub journals could, conceivably, operate as "overlay" journals on top of a megajournal or even an unrestricted archive — as in Tim Gower's recently-announced Episciences Project. [...]

**Open Access: Neuer Ansatz für Fachpublikationen | virtualfiles.net Says:**

January 22, 2013 at 3:15 am | [Reply](#)

Why I've also joined the good guys | Gowers's W... <http://gowers.wordpress.com/2013/01/16/why-iv...>  
[...] Ein französisches Forschungszentrum will die Zusammenstellung von Fachzeitschriften mit "Open Access"-Artikeln des arXiv-Servers deutlich vereinfachen und so Wissenschaftsverlagen stärkere Konkurrenz machen. Üblicherweise werden kostenfreie Online-Magazine gesondert formatiert. Bei der geplanten Variante solle das wissenschaftliche Magazin dagegen aus einer reinen Verzeichnisstruktur in Form eines klickbaren Inhaltsverzeichnis bestehen, erläuterte Tim Gowers, Mathematiker an der Universität Cambridge, das Vorhaben in einem Blogbeitrag. [...]

**Open Access: wetenschappers gaan strijd aan met uitgevers | ThePostOnline Says:**

January 22, 2013 at 12:57 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] hun onderzoeksresultaten peer-reviewed en gratis toegankelijk kunnen publiceren. Met het initiatief, dat ze het 'Episciences Project' hebben genoemd, hopen de wiskundigen te laten zien dat [...]

**undecidability Says:**

January 23, 2013 at 7:11 am | [Reply](#)

Is it possible for outsiders to help with coding this new journal software? (I'd just like to help)

**gowers Says:**

January 23, 2013 at 11:12 am

You'd need to address that question to the Episciences people (see end of post — at least some of them have emails that are easy to find) rather than to me, but many thanks for the offer.

**Steve Hitchcock (@stevehit) Says:**

January 23, 2013 at 12:33 pm | [Reply](#)

Overlay journals on arXiv are not new. The concept was advanced by arXiv founder Paul Ginsparg <http://people.ccmr.cornell.edu/~ginsparg/blurp/sep96news.html>. Two successful examples in the mid-late 1990s were Journal of High Energy Physics (JHEP) and Advances in Theoretical and Mathematical Physics (ATMP). Both became subscription journals. These preceded the mass transition to e-journals that began in the late 1990s, and also preceded BOAI open access and the subsequent emergence of green, gold and hybrid routes to open access (c. 2002-3). These were factors in the change to subscription status of the two overlay examples. There are lessons and motivations to understand and take account of if the new wave of overlay journals proposed here are to succeed as sustainable as open access services. Good luck.

**The Episciences Project: A New Open Access Initiative From the Mathematics Community | LJ INFOdocket Says:**

January 23, 2013 at 2:48 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] Last week Tim Gowers, Cambridge University mathematician and open access advocate who led the recent boycott of Elsevier, announced an exciting new open access initiative for mathematicians on his blog. [...]

**Ben Allanach Says:**

January 24, 2013 at 4:21 pm | [Reply](#)

Is it that the epijournal will accept a particular version of the arxiv preprint? I certainly hope so: I think that it is a useful psychological hook for an author to work towards a production version of a paper (rather than slowly and forever iterating versions).

Apologies if someone else has asked this and you've responded.

**gowers Says:**

January 24, 2013 at 6:06 pm

Someone (I think it was Benoît Kloeckner) has answered this. The answer in brief is that the normal pattern will be to submit by giving an arXiv link, then posting a new version to the

Why I've also joined the good guys | Gowers's W... <http://gowers.wordpress.com/2013/01/16/why-iv...>  
arXiv that will be the "official" version (modified in the light of comments from referees).  
There may also be a facility for linking from the Epijournal to further updates on the arXiv,  
but the official version would be the one that people referred to in other papers.

**Sylvain Ribault Says:**

January 25, 2013 at 8:42 pm | [Reply](#)

It will be difficult for epijournals to compete with the established journals, if their only advantages are to be free and open (cf Linux vs Windows). The most interesting feature of the proposed platform is however that each article can have a webpage for comments.

This should not be restricted to articles which are submitted by their authors: each article on arxiv should automatically have its own webpage, irrespective of whether or where it is published.

The platform's main aim should not be to compete against existing journals, but to provide new services, such as the webpage for comments. In addition, tools for annotating preprints and sharing the annotations would be very valuable.

Becoming mainstream thanks to such services may be necessary for having a chance against existing journals.

**Benoît Régent-Kloeckner Says:**

January 28, 2013 at 8:23 am

I think the most important thing to be able to compete with existing journal for getting submission is getting strong editorial boards, and we are in a promising situation here.

To compete with existing journal toward editorial boards, we hope to provide a few automated services that might help.

Last, the commenting pages of arXiv papers already exist (<http://arxiv.org>) as stressed in another comment. I think myself that having a page with links to the paper plus additional material (beamer file concerning the article, link to a video of a lecture presenting the paper like the excellent ones produced by BIRS, source files of programs used in the paper, worksheets giving the details of heavy computations in some formal computation language, and so on) would be less controversial, much lighter to the editorial board to manage, and at least as interesting than a commenting page.

**Sylvain Ribault Says:**

January 28, 2013 at 8:49 pm

Yes, having strong editorial boards is important, but what will attract them? Attracting editors, readers and authors all come down to having attractive features in your platform.

And being free of charge is not an important advantage over existing journals. In communities who already rely on arxiv (hep-th in my case), articles are openly accessible, we do not pay to submit articles to journals, and few people care about subscription costs. Anyway, switching a few journals to epijournals may not decrease these costs at all, due to subscription bundling.

The page with additional material sounds great. I only hope that it will eventually be available for all papers on arxiv, and that each paper will have one single page, independently from the history of its submissions to journals.

**Stevan Harnad (@AmSciForum) Says:**

January 25, 2013 at 9:36 pm | [Reply](#)

1. A journal is a peer-review manager (peers, chosen by editor, review free, editor adjudicates reviews and revisions) and copy-editor.

2. If the article is accepted, the accepted draft is certified with the journal's name.

3. The journal generates and distributes (3a) a print and/or (3b) online edition.

A journal that does not generate a print edition (3a) is still a journal.

A journal that does not generate an online edition (3b) is still a journal.

If costs are paid by subscriptions, it's a subscription journal.

If costs are paid by subsidies, it's a subsidized journal.

If costs are paid by the author, it's an author-pays journal.

OA is free online access, immediately upon publication.

If OA is provided by the journal, it's Gold OA publishing.

If OA is provided by the author, it's Green OA self-archiving.

If the journal is OA, it's a Gold OA journal. If not, not.

There is hence no need for (nor any new information provided by) new terms like "diamond," "overlay" or "epi" journal.

An OA journal that charges neither subscriptions nor author-fees is a subsidized journal ("diamond" adds no further information or properties).

An OA journal that generates neither a print nor an online version is an OA journal that generates neither a print nor an online version: the self-archived version is the only version.

The reasons (some) physicists and mathematicians speak of "overlay" journals is because many physicists and mathematicians, before submitting their papers to a journal for peer review, self-archive their unrefereed "preprints" in Arxiv. They also self-archive their final, peer-reviewed "postprints" in Arxiv. They think of the peer-review, copy-editing, and certification as an "overlay" on their unrefereed preprint.

But, by the same token, the peer-review, copy-editing is an "overlay" on every author's unrefereed preprint, whether the journal is print, online, both, or neither; and most authors don't self-archive their unrefereed drafts at all...

**Benoît Régent-Kloeckner Says:**

January 28, 2013 at 8:35 am

Dear Stevan Harnad, the definitions of Gold and Green OA you give have been coined, but not universally accepted. There is a very strong usage of "Gold OA" to mean "Gold OA with APC", so one \*cannot\* assume the term "Gold OA" to be interpreted as you interpret it. That's why there is a need for a term for what you call subsidized OA. Just like you admit "OA provided by the journal" can be named "Gold OA", you should admit that some can use a consistent "Diamond OA" terminology for "subsidized OA (without APC)".

Note that the last parenthese is mandatory, as many subscription journals are also subsidized in some way or another (in fact, if one counts Electronic Journal of combinatorics as subsidized, then all journal should probably be considered so as well given that editors time is taken from their institution). Therefore, subsidized OA is somehow unprecise as it does not

Note also that an overlay journal need not copy-edit any of its accepted paper. In that case, it cannot be considered Gold OA (the paper version is not provided by the journal), and hardly qualifies as Green OA (as there is more than self-archiving). There is here something quite different happening, hence the need for a word.

**Stevan Harnad (@AmSciForum) Says:**

January 28, 2013 at 1:39 pm

Dear @Benoît Régent-Kloeckner:

DON'T CONFLATE OA WITH COST-RECOVERY MODELS

The purpose of coining "Green" and "Gold" OA was lucidity, not obscurity or ideology.

There are two ways an article can be made OA (free online): by the author (Green) or by the journal (Gold). (3rd-party piracy is not classified.)

The journal's cost-recovery model (subscription, subsidy [partial or total], APCs) has absolutely nothing to do with OA. (There exist OA and non-OA journals of every possible combination of these components.)

The vast majority of free online journals (Gold OA) do not charge APCs. It is arbitrary and unilluminating to invent a spectrum of colours or precious metals to classify their various possible cost-recovery models as if they were forms of OA.

OA is not about cost-recovery models (nor about peer-review models); it is about research access.

**Benoît Régent-Kloeckner Says:**

January 28, 2013 at 2:06 pm

First and again, your terminology is not everyone's terminology.

Second, while access (physical, open, or whatever) is indeed distinct than the cost-recovery model, they are entangled (even the Annals did not manage to run as an overlay while selling subscriptions). As OA in itself prevents the traditional cost-recovery model to be sustainable, it is no surprise that people want to have words that include both the access type and the cost recovery model of a journal (somewhat unfortunately, the term Gold OA is often used in this way, meaning OA with APC).

I do not see the problem of having words to describe various combinations, which is not the same thing as confusing these two characteristics of a publishing model.

Finally, cost-recovery is one of the main issues in this matter, so why do you try to prevent us to speak of it with something else than circumlocution?

**Stevan Harnad (@AmSciForum) Says:**

January 28, 2013 at 6:07 pm

@Benoît Régent-Kloeckner

Anyone (including Humpty-Dumpty) can speak of whatever they like, using words in any way they like.

I'm rather more concerned with making sense — and progress on OA.

**Jin He Says:**

32 sur 43 January 26, 2013 at 12:18 am | Reply



A new journal from the true new idea is that it publishes new and true academic ideas!

**Anonymous Says:**

[January 27, 2013 at 1:26 am](#) | [Reply](#)

Sounds like an excellent idea, and I hope it takes off.

I would prefer that at least at first stage there will be no comment page, and the journal functions the same way as any other journal does (minus the costs and the copy-editor).

I suspect that usually comment pages won't be very lively, and negative comments, though unlikely, are a concern. Such a comment, regardless of whether it is fair or whether it was addressed in a subsequent blog discussion, could be misused by an administrator outside of math and end up delaying someone's promotion or tenure. Not being full professor yet, I'd rather not risk it.

**Anonymous Says:**

[January 27, 2013 at 8:29 am](#) | [Reply](#)

This is a great news.

I share the concern about comment and discussion pages, we will need moderators to either approve or deal with nonconstructive statements. However done correctly it can considerably increase the advancement of mathematics.

Endorsements would be a nice feature, e.g. if I am working in additive combinatorics I would like to know which papers gowers or tao have endorsed or found interesting and why.

I should also add that these developments make me feel proud to be a mathematician. We will be leading science to a new age. Thank you.

**Benoît Régent-Kloeckner Says:**

[January 28, 2013 at 8:38 am](#)

To both comments above: right now, comment pages are discussed but are not the core of the project. I guess some epijournal will want to try them, but probably not all of them and probably not from the very beginning. The real core to the project is simply to give the scientific community a better grip on its publication system. That can imply dramatic changes in the publication process, but it needs not to; ultimately, this is up to the community.

**Mike Taylor Says:**

[January 27, 2013 at 9:37 am](#) | [Reply](#)

I've got to say that from my perspective in palaeobiology, the dislike of comment pages looks very strange. Maybe it's because in my field there's more tradition of papers being questioned and discussed in blogs. But when I see someone wanting it to be impossible to comment on their paper, I can't help but read it as a defensive move, as though they want to evade scrutiny.

At least, it seems clear to me now what the people building the epijournals system should do: provide commenting infrastructure, but leave it to each journal whether to enable it or not. Or perhaps even give journals the facility to allow authors to decide, on a paper-by-paper case, whether comments are enabled.

**Gil Kalai Says:**

[January 27, 2013 at 12:57 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

Hi Mike, your comment is a perfect example for why some people don't want comment threads. We had a long discussion where people explained their opinion, and after all this discussion the best you can do is to refer to the opposite opinion to yours as "strange?"

I wonder also if your description of the reality in your field palaeobiology is accurate. Can you elaborate?

**Mike Taylor Says:**

January 27, 2013 at 2:13 pm

Hi, Gil. Well, I suppose that if you can't cope with someone considering your position "strange", comment threads really may not be for you.

There is a robustness and immediacy about the back-and-forth of comment threads that is very different from the Formal Response in a journal. You consider that a bad thing; I consider it a very good thing. Because the advantages are obvious (speed, transparency, freedom from the whims of reviewers with potential COIs), I find it strange that someone would prefer to forgo them.

An example from palaeobiology. I and colleagues published [a paper describing a new taxon of sauropod dinosaur](#). As is our custom, we [blogged about it](#). That initial blog post (there were [13 more of varying relevance](#)) attracted 58 comments, of which [some that were substantial and critical](#). Because we saw this comment so quickly, we were able to [respond in detail](#) only two days after publication. I read that as big win: *much* better than a two-to-four-year process of Jim getting his comment into formal publication and us doing the same.

**gowers Says:**

January 27, 2013 at 4:06 pm | [Reply](#)

For my part, I am very much in favour of comment pages, but I should qualify that by saying what kinds of comments I am in favour of. Broadly speaking, what I support is any kind of comment that *adds to the value of a paper*. This includes the following.

- (i) Remarks that the author might conceivably have put in the introduction but didn't.
- (ii) Alternative perspectives on results in the paper (such as different proofs, heuristic arguments, clarifications, etc.).
- (iii) Comments about how results in the paper have been used subsequently.

All those can help the reader. In fact, that's another way of saying what I mean: a comment is worth having if it helps the reader.

I am not in favour of negative comments. I think I would probably include even comments that are purely factual, for reasons that Izabella Laba explains. For example, suppose you think that the proof of a lemma is mistaken. If you write a comment about it, there is a risk that you yourself are mistaken, or that you are correct but that the mistake is very easy for the author to patch up. In either case, the right approach seems to me to be to send a private email to the author, who can assess the seriousness of the mistake and decide how best to deal with it. If the mistake is a "medium" one — that is, one that is fairly easy to put right but that requires some rewriting — then the author's moral duty (I would maintain) would be to produce a new draft and write a comment on the comment page saying something like, "I am grateful to X for pointing out that the proof of Lemma Y was not quite correct as written. I have posted a new version of the paper in which the proof has been corrected." Such a comment would again be helpful to the reader. If the mistake was much more trivial (of the kind where any experienced reader can see immediately how to correct it) then I don't think a comment would be necessary. And obviously if the mistake was serious, then the paper should be withdrawn.

The last thing I would like to see is a public dispute between the author and another mathematician carried out on a comment page.

**Mike Taylor Says:**

January 27, 2013 at 4:09 pm

"The last thing I would like to see is a public dispute between the author and another mathematician carried out on a comment page."

Whyever not? I'd have said it's the perfect place for it. Happens quickly, misapprehensions can be dealt with immediately, it's all in the open — perfect.

Are published papers really *so* sacred that they can never be questioned?

**Izabella Laba Says:**

January 27, 2013 at 6:39 pm

@Mike Taylor: "whyever not?"

Because having such disputes in public is not necessarily conducive to good mathematics. I don't know about palaeobiology, but in mathematics, nothing really "happens quickly" or "can be dealt with immediately". You should think before you respond to a concern. Comment pages, on the other hand, encourage rapid exchanges where you hurry up to say something – anything – before everyone else piles up on you.

Because a good math discussion in real time requires a certain level of flexibility, a willingness to step out of the comfort zone, to say something stupid. Which is a good thing in that context, but not necessarily what I want to have attached permanently to my formal professional record, where (for example) it could be easily taken out of context by an administrator. (Especially as a woman in a male-dominated field.) Which, also, I don't necessarily want to do in company that I don't get to choose. And which is the exact opposite of the posturing that many inexperienced commenters tend to adopt on web pages.

Because this debate is too often framed in terms where the commenters are assumed to be paragons of integrity and good judgement, professional, knowledgeable about the subject, ready and willing to acknowledge their own mistakes. None of that credit is extended to authors, who clearly set out to write lousy and incorrect papers, then hide them in caves lest someone should actually try to read them. Sorry, no. These are actually the same people. If the idea of a journal is to provide quality control, then it makes no sense to put a paper through a long refereeing process, multiple revisions, etc., then allow comments on the same paper with no quality control at all.

Because if I wanted my papers published on a blog, then I have one of my own already. And because I do not want my papers published on a RateMyProfessor type of website.

Because we have choices. You keep accusing me and everyone else on this side of the debate of acting "strange" and "defensive", but the fact is, people vote with their feet. Do you want the new journal to succeed? Or do you just want to berate everyone who does not think like you?

**Mike Taylor Says:**

January 27, 2013 at 6:51 pm

I think the best we can say, then, is that the use of comments is different in maths and palaeobiology. Which means unless the programmers of the new system want to explicitly limit its use to maths, they should — as I said — allow the editors of each journal to make the comments-or-not decision on a journal-by-journal basis.

I don't understand how that policy can be controversial. Or do you just want to berate everyone who does not think like you?

**Izabella Laba Says:**

January 27, 2013 at 7:19 pm

@Mike Taylor

That was both uncalled for and factually incorrect. I was not arguing with the policy you are describing (although I would also allow authors to opt out of the comment pages within each journal). I take issue with this:

Whyever not? I'd have said it's the perfect place for it. Happens quickly, misapprehensions can be dealt with immediately, it's all in the open — perfect.

Are published papers really so sacred that they can never be questioned?

And this, earlier:

But when I see someone wanting it to be impossible to comment on their paper, I can't help but read it as a defensive move, as though they want to evade scrutiny.

I don't see how that could be uncontroversial, or not subject to scrutiny. And I think I'd like to leave it at that.

**Richard Séguin Says:**

January 28, 2013 at 3:52 am

@ Mike Taylor: "Or do you just want to berate everyone who does not think like you?"

Are you speaking to that person in the mirror?

**Mike Taylor Says:**

January 28, 2013 at 9:32 am

"Are you speaking to that person in the mirror?"

Check the earlier part of the thread. I was quoting word-for-word what Izabella had (somewhat ungraciously, I thought) said to me.

**Benoît Régent-Kloeckner Says:**

January 28, 2013 at 9:00 am

@Mike: indeed, there is probably a great difference between fields.

There is usually very little room for interpretation in a math paper, so a dispute can be about whether the paper's result are interesting at all, or about them being provably plain wrong (or the proofs to be inadequate). Now, if this is the case, what is needed is a correction or a retraction, rather than a long dispute. It is considered a serious fault to let slip an error in a paper, so it is quite delicate to give such accusation in a public comment.

Add to this that a math paper can take a few hours to a few years to read, most papers being between these two extremes. There are famous examples, like Perelman's work which was posted on the arXiv in 2003, then was scrutinized for several years before it was completely certified. The recent proof of the ABC conjecture announced recently will probably take many years to be checked by several teams. Most of them need a great deal of effort (several weeks part time is really not uncommon) to be read thoroughly, and it often happens that a point in a somewhat sketchy proof looks suspicious, but can easily be detailed by the author.

Why I've also joined the good guys | Gowers's W... <http://gowers.wordpress.com/2013/01/16/why-iv...>  
sufficient immediacy given our time frame; and ultimately, many such discussion would end up with at most a minor change in the paper dealing with the issue. It is far better for the community to avoid keeping to much noise, and just get the retraction, modification, (or the paper that gives a counter-example if the authors does refuse to answer the raised objections).

**Olof Sisask Says:**

January 27, 2013 at 7:09 pm | [Reply](#)

I'm coming a bit late to the discussion; apologies if the point below has already been made. I didn't see it.

It would be great if the Episciences Project would allow most pieces of journal data to be exported in some reasonable format, so that if a journal running as an epijournal decided it wanted to move elsewhere, it could do so without facing too much hassle.

Of course, such an export function would be limited to users or groups of users with certain privileges — for example some subset of the editorial board. (A potentially sufficient criterion: say the entire editorial board wants to move the journal.)

I'm sure this would instil quite some faith in the Episciences Project in the minds of many in the community: the idea is that journals would stay with the Episciences platform because it offers the best service, knowing that they could easily move otherwise.

As an incentive to the Episciences team to include this feature: it would almost make going with your platform as first port of call a WLOG.

Incidentally, I think that Google offers this type of export functionality with its user data, but I have not checked the details.

Coding for this might not be a priority compared to getting the platform up and running in the first place, but it would certainly be a welcome feature down the line that I imagine wouldn't involve too much extra legwork.

Looking forward to seeing the project when it's ready!

**domotorp Says:**

January 28, 2013 at 6:46 am | [Reply](#)

Maybe initially epijournals should allow/encourage submitting to traditional journals as well, this way people would enjoy double benefits and would be more keen to submit.

**Benoît Régent-Kloeckner Says:**

January 28, 2013 at 9:03 am

I think that the traditional journals would not agree to that, as they ask the authors to certify they have not submitted or published their papers elsewhere. Therefore, whatever the policy enforced by epijournals will probably not make a difference on this.

Moreover, I think that this is the kind of difference with traditional journals that may prevent them to be considered seriously, but of course that is difficult to judge.

**domotorp Says:**

January 28, 2013 at 10:38 am

Of course this might happen but if they have accepted until now preprints to be published on arxiv, they might agree to this as well. Also, if someone has anyhow decided to publish in an epijournal, then the journal either publishes it this way, or does not publish it at all – their

am sure you know the situation and details much better than me...

**Benoît Régent-Kloeckner Says:**

January 28, 2013 at 10:56 am

You might be right that the agreement to let authors put their preprints on the arXiv (which is a great luck for mathematicians, ask a chemist how it works in her field...) could be extended to epijournals -but I would not bet on that.

One important issue here is duplicating the peer-review process. This applies also to epijournals: processing articles whose authors ultimately opt out because of another publication is a net loss to the journal, whichever model it runs.

**domotorp Says:**

January 28, 2013 at 11:10 am

Yes, with reviewing this might mean double work (unless the editors know each other and ask the same person to review), that is why I suggest this system only for the initial period, before epijournals become accepted by the community/can offer high impact factor and prestigious publication for authors.

**Epijournals | Physics Napkins Says:**

January 28, 2013 at 2:14 pm | Reply

[...] than I have started a project, called epijournals. So far, the only source of information is Tim Gower's blog and the comments on [...]

**javirl Says:**

January 28, 2013 at 2:44 pm | Reply

I love the idea!! I'm trying to spread it around... and I also have some questions/proposals:

\* About the JCR, which belongs to a private company (Thomson Reuters) which charges a "revolutionary tax" to the journals... shouldn't UNESCO take care of the task?

\* What about a two-stage refereeing system? A quick and dirty one, which would correspond to the current system, and another five years after publication, to assess what was the real impact.

We're discussing more proposals here: <http://physicsnapkins.wordpress.com/2013/01/28/epijournals/>

**Some links and announcements « Noncommutative Analysis Says:**

January 29, 2013 at 12:37 pm | Reply

[...] that being an editor of Forum of Mathematics makes him one of the bad guys) is now connected to another publishing adventure, that of epijournals, or arxiv overlay journals, which makes him one of the good guys (Just to set [...])

**Gil Kalai Says:**

January 29, 2013 at 2:20 pm | Reply

It was a pleasure to look at Mike's paper about dinosaurs and the related blog discussion. Certainly there are serious differences between the areas of mathematics and palaeobiology. Nevertheless, I think that Mike Taylor's approach regarding comments in professional scientific journals is problematic even when it comes to his own field palaeobiology, and more so when it comes to mathematics.

The whole idea about a scientific journal is that what is published (and in our case 'published' means just a link to an arxiv paper) has clear academic value and that it passed a very careful scrutiny. I have no problems with comments as long as they have clear academic value and as

Why I've also joined the good guys | Gowers's W... <http://gowers.wordpress.com/2013/01/16/why-iv...>  
long as they pass similarly a very careful scrutiny. This is entirely impractical, and therefore comments and discussions of the kind Mike described on his blogs should be left to blogs.

When it comes to critical comments on the paper, the best avenue is simply to email the authors and to discuss matters with them.

Blog posts and discussions can have strong flavor of PR and salesmanship. There is nothing wrong with that. Part of our duty as scientists is to “sell” our ideas, our approaches, and ourselves. But we do not wish to shift this aspect of blogs to professional journals. Blog discussions and the attention they get are also heavily biased, and, again, we do not wish to have such a bias shifted to professional scientific journals. It is not just that “bad comments critical to the authors” are bad but also “good comments flattering to the authors” are bad. Also, since blog discussions are not subject to careful academic moderation they can create a sort of “virtual reality” which is quite different from what we want to achieve in scientific journals.

**Mike Taylor Says:**

January 29, 2013 at 3:34 pm

I have nothing more to add on this subject — it seems our differences are irreconcilable, at least for now. Thanks for your comments, though.

**chorasimilarity Says:**

January 29, 2013 at 7:06 pm

After reading the rather heated exchanges around the subject of comments in epijournals, I am surprised by the fact that the best argument against comments that people here were able to find is by conflating comments in epijournals with comments in blogs.

I cannot imagine who would like to have comments in epijournals (or any other OA model) of the same quality as those on the average blog.

Therefore my impression is that much of the discussion here is just an example of a straw-man fallacy.

It is enough to look around and see that there are models who could inspire us.

I have proposed in several comments and posts like [this one](#) or [the other](#) to consider comments in OA journals on the par with the talk pages of Wikipedia, and peer-reviews as wiki pages.

Others have proposed the mathoverflow or reddit as models. Any of those proposals are stellar compared to comments in blogs.

Besides, I doubt very much that there is a majority against comments and I believe that Mike Taylor is only more vocal than others and for this he deserves some congratulations (and some respect, as a fellow scientist).

**Straw-man argument against comments in epijournals « chorasimilarity Says:**

January 29, 2013 at 8:36 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] is a comment which awaits moderation (for some time) at Gowers “Good guys” post, therefore I post it here. Here is it, with some links [...]

**Vote! Pro or con having comments in future OA journals? « chorasimilarity Says:**

January 29, 2013 at 8:58 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] the discussion about this subject at Gowers “Good guys” post. See also the tag comments in epijournals at this [...]

**Open-Access Mathematics Journals « Random Walks Says:**

January 30, 2013 at 4:03 am | [Reply](#)

[...] of the Field Medal (often referred to as the “Nobel Prize of mathematics”). He has a blog post that explains the idea of these “overlay journals” in more [...]

**chorasimilarity Says:**

January 30, 2013 at 11:29 am | [Reply](#)

The following article, appeared in dec 2012, discusses about open peer-review: [What Do Journals Do? – Voluntary Public Goods and the Doomsday of Commercial Science Publishing](#) by Stefan Winter. Cite from page 5:

“Taken together, the part that journals play in the production process of science is rather unimportant. The value added by the conventional reviewer process is limited to the contribution of typically two reviewers. It is not reasonable to assume that this procedure gives all the guidance that is possible. An open access science network can offer much better opportunities for the scientific community to take part in the production of results.”

**Jessica B Says:**

January 31, 2013 at 9:07 pm | [Reply](#)

Apologies if this is repeating something someone else has said.

Without wishing to give any opinion on whether there should or shouldn't be comment pages, I don't currently understand why comment pages should be associated with a journal (unless it has something to do with responsibility for moderation). To me it seems more natural to link comment pages to an Arxiv article, so that unpublished papers also have space for comments, and to reduce duplication. On a basic level, no new technology would be needed for that; an author could choose to insert into the metadata a link to a blog page they have set up (which might only be a blank post with space for comments). It isn't a perfect solution, but perhaps it would be an option in the short term, and allow people to test ideas on how best to moderate such pages?

**Mathematicians Aim to Launch a Series of Open-Access E-Journals | My Blog Says:**

February 4, 2013 at 8:27 am | [Reply](#)

[...] journals that will host their peer-reviewed articles on the preprint server arXiv. The project was publicly revealed yesterday in a blog post by Tim Gowers, a Fields Medal winner and mathematician at the University of [...]

**I buoni e i cattivi dell'editoria scientifica | SudTv Network Says:**

February 8, 2013 at 1:39 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] costi effettivi, e non confrontabili con i prezzi degli abbonamenti tradizionali. Lo stesso Gowers, che ha reso noto il lancio di Episciences Project sul suo blog, sarà nel comitato editoriale di una delle riviste [...]

**Mathematicians Aim to Launch a Series of Open-Access E-Journals | e-Math for Africa Says:**

February 13, 2013 at 9:24 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] Tim Gowers blog post can be read at <http://gowers.wordpress.com/2013/01/16/why-ive-also-joined-the-good-guys/> [...]

**Episciences-Math, let's talk about this « chorasimilarity Says:**

February 17, 2013 at 8:49 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] is the project announced in the “Good guys” post by Gowers. Many mathematicians are looking forward to see the [...]



[February 18, 2013 at 5:09 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] Le Centre pour la Communication Scientifique Directe has developed a new platform to encourage the development of epijournals, “open access electronic journals taking their contents from preprints deposited in open archives such as arXiv or HAL, that have not been published elsewhere.” The project will be launched during the first half of 2013 with Episciences-Math, with the CCSD working with the Institut Fourier in Grenoble, France. Tim Gowers, of Elsevier boycott fame, will be taking part in the project as indicated on his blog. [...]

**Free this Book: Open Access Humanities for the MOOCs | Tim McCormick Says:**

[February 25, 2013 at 8:02 am](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] et al (2004), and currently being implemented in the much-publicized case of Timothy Gowers' Episciences mathematics [...]

**☆ New models for academic publishing | Mostly physics Says:**

[February 25, 2013 at 10:29 am](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] Another interesting development is the concept of arXiv overlay journals: [...]

**Nilima Nigam Says:**

[March 4, 2013 at 4:48 am](#) | [Reply](#)

I'm supportive of, and excited about, the possibility of open-access journals in the spirit of the EpiProject. However, this issue of mandatory comment pages on articles is a deterrent to me, for many of the reasons expressed excellently above.

For what it's worth, I think the conflation of these two important ideas – publishing in the EpiSciences mode, and having comment pages be mandatory – is unproductive. I imagine it's going to take a lot of work to set up the Epijournals and make them a success, without taking on the added complication of convincing people of the merits of commentary on articles.

I'd advocate starting these journals \*without\* comment pages, or with author-opt-in comment pages. I'd hope there would be aggressive moderation, if comments were indeed enabled. Having a large number of mathematician-hours spent on moderation of comments seems like rather a waste.

**Mike Taylor Says:**

[March 4, 2013 at 7:50 am](#)

“For what it's worth, I think the conflation of these two important ideas – publishing in the EpiSciences mode, and having comment pages be mandatory – is unproductive.”

Although I am very much pro-comment, I strongly agree that conflating this issue with that of overlay journals is not a good way to go.

(I'll save my thought on comments for another time, because for the moment I just want to get behind the notion of separating out these two distinct issues. I'd hate it if people who, rightly or wrongly, dislike comments to feel they have to object to overlay journals for that reason.)

**CIBER Newsletter » Blog Archive » Letture - EPISCIENCE: la comunità dei matematici per l'OA Says:**

[March 8, 2013 at 11:07 am](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] aperto gratuite. Queste riviste, che seguiranno il modello degli overlay journals, sono state annunciate da Tim Gowers (il promotore di Boycott Elsevier) sul suo [...]

**Mathematicians aim to take publishers out of publishing | openingscience.org Says:**

[April 5, 2013 at 2:55 pm](#) | [Reply](#)

[...] journals that will host their peer-reviewed articles on the preprint server arXiv. The project

Why I've also joined the good guys | Gowers's W... <http://gowers.wordpress.com/2013/01/16/why-iv...>  
was publicly revealed yesterday in a blog post by Tim Gowers, a Fields Medal winner and mathematician at the University of [...]

**New models for academic publishing | Mostly physics Says:**

April 6, 2013 at 12:58 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] Another interesting development is the concept of arXiv overlay journals: [...]

**Peter Kepp Says:**

April 8, 2013 at 8:15 pm | [Reply](#)

I did my own by having so much trouble with the journals.

All of you may be right in arguing about the problem with the press.

But I have to say something fundamental. And I did it on mathe-neu.de

Sorry, so far only in German (could be expanded to English soon).

You are invited to discuss about that. Please leave a mail.

Peter

**An Exercise in Irrelevance » Blog Archive » Overlays over arXiv Says:**

April 10, 2013 at 4:01 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] has been said about overlay journals (<http://gowers.wordpress.com/2013/01/16/why-ive-also-joined-the-good-guys/>). The idea is simple; the journal essentially becomes a selector, a channel, with the paper itself [...]

**First papers in Forum of Mathematics Pi and Sigma | The Aperiodical Says:**

May 24, 2013 at 1:30 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] Is it right to expect modern access mechanisms to go hand-in-hand with modern publishing systems? Have I been spoiled by PLoS ONE's mastery of both? Given that both papers are also available on the arXiv (Scholze; Popa & Schnell) for free, what's the point in Forum of Mathematics if the presentation isn't better? If the only service they're providing is peer review, they might as well be an arXiv overlay journal. [...]

**The Selected Papers Network (Part 2) | Azimuth Says:**

June 14, 2013 at 6:49 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] Such journals, called overlay journals, are already being contemplated—see for example Tim Gowers' post. But they should work better in the ecosystem created by a selected papers [...]

**Academic publishing as (ruinous) competition: Is there a way out? | 33 Bits of Entropy Says:**

July 15, 2013 at 4:13 pm | [Reply](#)

[...] [4] During my talk I incorrectly cited the URL for this infrastructure as selectedpapers.net. That is a somewhat related but different project. It is actually the Episciences project. [...]

**Mike Taylor Says:**

December 16, 2013 at 4:48 pm | [Reply](#)

"Apparently, the plan is for the whole thing to start this April."

Andrew Miller just pointed out in [a comment at the Scholarly Kitchen](#) that April came and went some time ago. Do you have a revised ETA?

**gowers Says:**

December 16, 2013 at 11:51 pm

I did have one but that passed too. I'm not sure what the reason is for the delay but will pass on any information when I get it. The episciences website doesn't give any clues.

December 17, 2013 at 7:46 am

Thanks. I also emailed episciences directly; if I get an informative reply from them, I'll post the substance of it here. I'm really keen that this should get off the ground, not just for the benefit of your maths journals but more generally because I think overlay journals are an important idea which really needs to get off the ground now.

**Inetbib's Bet on Open Access and Open Science | TIB | BlogTIB | Blog Says:**

March 31, 2014 at 5:04 pm | Reply

[...] Journals, die nach dem Episciences-Modell von Timothy Gowers arbeiten – d.h. Artikel aus arXiv werden unentgeltlich begutachtet und als [...]

**4:7 für Open Access und Open Science: Der Halbzeit-Stand des Inetbib Wettspiels | TIB | BlogTIB | Blog Says:**

May 19, 2014 at 12:43 pm | Reply

[...] Journals, die nach dem Episciences-Modell von Timothy Gowers arbeiten, haben jeweils mehrere Artikel zu verzeichnen. Ergebnis: [...]

**Scientific journals as an overlay | Adventures in Signal Processing and Open Science Says:**

June 4, 2014 at 11:13 pm | Reply

[...] servers. I think I first came across this idea when I read about the Episciences project on Timothy Gowers' blog. Their idea is to base journals (so-called epijournals) on papers submitted to preprint servers [...]

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