Commonplace •

The “Pre” in [my] “Preprint” is for Pre- figurative

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Published on: Oct 07, 2021

DOI: 10.21428/6ffd8432.5de25622

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When you are a PhD student that just published your research, and you decided to publish it as a preprint, one of the most common questions you then get asked is “Where is it now?” At least this has been my experience. Well-meaning PIs or postdocs, colleagues, strangers, that all really enjoyed reading your research and findings but also really want to know “which journal have you submitted it to now?” It’s important for them to know, or maybe it’s just a conversation starter while queuing for the cafeteria. Who knows. Your answer of “Journal X” will be followed by an understanding nod, an approving “yep, that one is a nice one,” the sharing of a funny story about their own experience with that journal. Certainly, and generally unspoken, some sort of gauging of the value of the research. Did you send it to a journal that matches the value they thought your research had? It’s a fun game to play.

Except I have nothing to answer.

They do not warn us about this when submitting to preprint servers, this ethology of post-preprint-submission in the life sciences. Maybe it should be under the disclaimer about preprints not being certified by peer-review. “Please make sure you are sending this to a journal too, or be prepared for very awkward small talk from here on.” “Make sure you also publish it for real.” They do not warn us but there are many, many signs. It’s in the way submission guidelines are written. It’s in the way preprints are talked about.¹ It’s in the way preprints are talked about in the preprint server itself.² It’s in the many spinoffs, add-ons, “overlay services” and “integrated pipelines” that make it more and more seamless and easy to transfer your preprint to a journal. It is in the expectations of those around you. It’s in the awkwardness of you admitting that no, you did not submit it anywhere (else?).

And yes, there is always the option not to submit it to a journal. But as someone that wanted exactly that — to “not do that” — it’s certainly not the option that felt encouraged at any point of the process. In fact, it did not seem like a scenario that anyone would really want to do or could even imagine. This is even embedded in the preprint server itself. After all, it is a *preprint*. It’s what you publish before a “print,” “[b]efore formal publication in a scholarly journal”³ (or even *concomitantly* to submission to a scholarly journal).

While the word “preprint” fits very well the reality of it, the framing is important. What we centre and decentre when talking about Open Access initiatives. How we talk about things and what concepts/ images our word-choices reinforce.⁴ The framing of the preprint as the “pre” of a “print” — as if it was waiting for something else, as if it was

incomplete — crystallises a scenario where the preprint exists in its longing for something more, where the preprint is a stepping-stone to journal publication. Because that is what it is and what it was meant to be in the “journal peer-review takes too long so why not post it online first?” -kind-of-way. A pre-print precedes journal publication, it does not transcend it (at least not yet in the life sciences).

Some of us came to the world of preprint publishing from a completely different perspective. It’s not because peer-review in a journal takes too long. It is not because a funding body is asking us to meet their Open Access requirements. It is not because posting preprints increases citation metrics down the line (read: once it is published in a journal). It’s because we do not want to participate in the publishing game and in the publishing system. It’s because our only options are not options we feel comfortable with. It’s because publishing in the journals available to us means either publishing behind a paywall, or buying into an APC-based⁵ publishing system we categorically refuse to support. It is because we have no Diamond Open Access journal available (at least in the field of Developmental Biology). And it is because we joined the academic world at a time where (more) ethical alternatives to journal publishing do exist, or at least where they can be cobbled together.

So I did that: I published my research on a preprint server. Making it accessible to everyone and without having to pay my way out of paywalls. More importantly, I published my research on a preprint server *without plans to send it to a journal*. And this is what I encourage fellow PhD students to do too. I published it with no format constraints, no figure limits, no restriction on the length of my materials and method, no cut-offs to the length of my bibliography, no “STAR-methods,” no word counts. I published it — because why not? — with an anomalously long introduction that reads more like a review and that could well be a publication of its own. I published it in my voice and in my style. I published it with an open license and without transferring copyright. I published it in its most liberated form.

Well-meaning voices will remind you that without peer-review your preprint still needs to go through the “print” process. Services now exist for that too (I should here thank ReviewCommons⁶), and allow you to submit your preprint for review by experts in the field without having to submit it to a journal. So I did exactly that and got my preprint peer-reviewed. Peer-reviewed for its content and not for its fit for a journal. Peer-reviewed journal-independently. I posted the peer review comments publicly, alongside my research and with them, my answers.⁷ Answers that I wrote not only to the reviewers themselves, but to the future readers of those reviews. I wrote them conversationally, like

a three-way-dialogue, in a way that was open to possibilities and to discussion and not in a way constrained by imposed timeframes for revision and resubmission. I recommend this to my fellow PhD students too. Peer-review in a liberated and liberating form, where critical evaluation of your research are just that, critical evaluation by a peer. A contextualising opinion. Not the yes or no on whether your research should even deserve to be seen by the world.

The image shows two side-by-side screenshots. The left screenshot is a bioRxiv preprint page for the paper "In vitro endoderm emergence and self-organisation in the absence of extraembryonic tissues and embryonic architecture" by Stefano Vianello and Matthias P. Lutolf. It includes a disclaimer about COVID-19 related papers, the title, authors, DOI, and a row of social media icons. The right screenshot is the "Evaluation/discussion of this paper" interface on Review Commons, showing a note about a rebuttal, a section for replying to reviewers, and a comment from a reviewer.

bioRxiv
THE PREPRINT SERVER FOR BIOLOGY

bioRxiv posts many COVID19-related papers. A reminder: they have not been formally peer-reviewed and should not guide health-related behavior or be reported in the press as conclusive.

New Results [Follow this preprint](#)

In vitro endoderm emergence and self-organisation in the absence of extraembryonic tissues and embryonic architecture

Stefano Vianello, Matthias P. Lutolf

doi: <https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.06.07.138883>

This article is a preprint and has not been certified by peer review [what does this mean?].

0 3 0 0 1 42

Abstract Full Text Info/History Metrics Preview PDF

Evaluation/discussion of this paper

RC

Note: This rebuttal was posted by the corresponding author to *Review Commons*. Content has not been altered except for formatting.

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Reply to the reviewers

Reply to Reviewers:

Comments by Reviewer 1

For the sake of clarity, it may help to provide some table illustrating the proportion of gastruloids behaving precisely as the best example shown

We thank the reviewer for raising this point. For the expression patterns of each of the main endodermal markers analyzed, at the timepoints considered, we will provide additional context on the variability among Gastruloids. We envisage

Vianello, et al. bioRxiv preprint. To see the ReviewCommons reviews, select the green check mark under the DOI.

<https://www.biorxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.06.07.138883v3>

Published research + peer review + comments to reviewers: an entire publication life cycle done completely in the absence of journals. And still, I did not complete the last step of the pipeline, I did not click that “transfer to a journal” button. And just as it is liberating to find a path through the entire publication pipeline in this new serene and self-determined way, it still makes you feel like you used existing resources and platforms in a way they were not really meant to be used. *Preprint*. You still need the “print” part, they will tell you. At this point, though, the “why” is less clear. Transferring it for “print” meant, for my preprint and in my mind, having the same (or cut down and resized) document, just in a journal. Meant having to pay 3000CHF to not paywall something that already existed on the preprint server, thus keeping alive and

validating a publishing system that at this point even seemed redundant. Even more strongly, I did not want to transfer my preprint to a journal because I did not want to participate in a system that is universally accepted as exploitative and unequitable, and in which so often we feel coerced to participate.

You need to be able to do that. To refuse that. You need the *privilege* for it. You need to be lucky to have a PI that is understanding, or that maybe cannot understand but lets you do it anyway. Lets you publish preprints without sending it to a journal first. Lets you seek peer review through an experimental initiative that no one in the lab has tried before. Lets you still refuse to transfer to a journal even after favourable reviewers comments. Lets you experiment even though they think this will hurt your career. On your side, you need the strength to argue positions that other describe as radical and/or utopic (“a practical utopian consciousness is scandalous,” writes Avery Gordon⁸). And keep your ground. The most difficult, you need to accept looking like a fool when PIs you meet around campus, once you told them that no, your preprint “is not anywhere else now,” and that “yes, it has been peer-reviewed,” tell you that still, it needs to become “print” for your future career, success, hiring decisions.

You are engaging in self-sabotage. But it is difficult to explain that you are only sabotaging your chances of success based on their definition of it. On your side, you are in fact following a very coherent path to a career and to institutions where hiring committees do not need the research to be in a journal to value and assess it, especially if it is publicly available and peer reviewed. You’ re on a path towards a career with institutions where experimentation in alternative and ethical publishing practices is an asset. At the same time, you need the privilege of being able to withstand the eventuality that, as it was told to you, you are sabotaging yourself and success will not come.⁹ That is *a lot* of privilege. But if you have it, use it to normalise these alternative paths to publication and create the “scandal” of utopian practice. Normalise these privilege-requiring positions. Call on PIs, institutions, hiring committees to buy into prefigurative publishing practices and recognise them as what they are. If and where we can, we still need to try to suspend disbelief and be indifferent to academia’ s “affective economy,” the engineered dependence on those specific types of recognition, such as journal names and prestige, that maintain academics bound to exploitative systems.¹⁰ In fact, we need to be in-difference to it.

To live in the reality of the dream, you not only need to be different, you need to be in-difference. In-difference to the lure and pull of the sacrificial goods and promises ubiquitously on offer [...]. To be in-difference is to refuse to be intoxicated with the

deathly, to stop loving that which you claim to despise. To be in-difference is to practice freedom in preparation for collective self-governance. [...] **To be in-difference is to see as real, as reality, that many people not only resist, but also build worlds that live by better and more just and equitable rules.**^{[11](#)}

And here is where prefigurative politics and prefigurative practice come into play.^{[12](#)} ^{[13](#)} I decide to not submit to journals because I see the future as being journal-less, where research is posted and evaluated openly and through preprinting platforms. When I thus embody that future in the present despite the fact that the current system of rewards and incentives is not there *yet*, I am doing prefigurative practice, not self-sabotage. I am doing “prefigurative publishing.” And the preprint space, even though likely not intended for it, is allowing me to do it. It is the “anticipating, inhabiting, making the world you want to live in now, urgently, as if you couldn’t live otherwise, peacefully, as if you have all the time in the world.”^{[14](#)} It is what other academics are asking from their institutions and from their publishers.^{[15](#)}

In an academic world where important change will come “later,” after you “played the game a bit longer,” and from someone else, we can instead practice in our small “here and now” the future we see is coming and that we want to come. Without playing the game to change things “later.” A truly liberated and healthier academia will only come if we acknowledge and reclaim our full agency in the process and if we allow ourselves (and we are allowed) to explore and experiment within the spaces of prefigurative practice we carve to ourselves. And the more we, we PhD students and equitable science hopefuls, share (amongst ourselves and with out PIs) experiences where no, we did not “play the game” and still everything went fine, where we did what we felt was right even though “it is not what people do here,” the more we will be able to see that not only “worlds that live by better and more just and equitable rules” are possible within the academia, but that they already exist, and that we are building them ourselves, now.

The “pre” in my preprints stands for “prefigurative.” And maybe this is what I will answer next time I am standing in line for the cafeteria.

This essay was first published [on the author's Blog](#) on September 29, 2021.

Footnotes

1. “early versions of a manuscript before they’ ve gone through a complete editorially-driven peer review process” : <https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2021/09/15/revisiting-when-is-a-preprint-server-not-a-preprint-server/> [↵](#)
2. “Because this process can be lengthy, authors use the bioRxiv service to make their manuscripts available as “preprints” before completing peer review and consequent certification by a journal.” <https://www.biorxiv.org/content/what-unrefereed-preprint> [↵](#)
3. <https://www.biorxiv.org/content/what-unrefereed-preprint> [↵](#)
4. Collister, Lauren B., and Melissa H. Cantrell. “From “Patchy Endorsements” to Intentional Advocacy: Deconstructing Bias in the Language of Open Access.” *Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication* 9.1 (2021) [↵](#)
5. Article Processing Charge. See Ashley Jester’ s essay “Discomfort with Gold OA” for a contextualisation of the topic: <https://doi.org/10.21428/6ffd8432.913aef43> [↵](#)
6. <https://www.reviewcommons.org/about/> [↵](#)
7. Click the green checkbox icon just below the doi of my preprint to see what this kind of peer review looks like in practice:
<https://www.biorxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.06.07.138883v3> [↵](#)
8. Gordon, Avery F. “The Hawthorn Archive.” *The Hawthorn Archive*. Fordham University Press, 2017. [↵](#)
9. There is a big element of privilege to this. I can personally do that because, e.g. of my visa privilege [↵](#)
10. Grande, Sandy. “Refusing the university.” *Toward What Justice?*. Routledge, 2018. 47-65 [↵](#)
11. Gordon, Avery F. “The Hawthorn Archive.” *The Hawthorn Archive*. Fordham University Press, 2017. [↵](#)
12. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prefigurative_politics [↵](#)
13. Swain, Dan. “Not not but not yet: Present and future in prefigurative politics.” *Political Studies* 67.1 (2019): 47-62. And big thanks go to my friend and colleague Andrea Attardi for introducing me to the “building better worlds in the here-and-now

through ongoing experimentation” through Thompsett, Fern. “Pedagogies of resistance: Free universities and the radical re-imagination of study.” *Learning and Teaching* 10.1 (2017): 24-41. [↵](#)

14. Gordon, Avery. “Some thoughts on haunting and futurity.” *borderlands* 10.2 (2011) [↵](#)

15. Lorente, Beatriz P. “Academic knowledge production and prefigurative politics.” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 2021.267-268 (2021): 163-167 [↵](#)