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## Fifteen journals to outsource peer-review decisions

By **Cathleen O'Grady** | Apr. 19, 2021, 5:10 AM

Some scholarly publishers have already outsourced operations like copy editing and printing. Now, 15 journals are outsourcing something central to science itself: the peer-review process. The journals, which include *BMJ Open Science* and *Royal Society Open Science*, say they will accept articles reviewed by a nonprofit “peer community” organization.

It's the first time that journals have guaranteed that they will accept the recommendations of another body with no further review, says Chris Chambers, a cognitive neuroscientist at Cardiff University and one of the founders of the peer-review organization, called Peer Community In Registered Reports (PCI RR). The service—which PCI RR will provide free to authors and journals—will add to the existential questions facing journals, says Jason Hoyt, CEO of *PeerJ*, an open-access family of journals that has signed up for the initiative. “What are you paying publishers to do, exactly?” he asks. For *PeerJ*, which is committed to low publishing fees, outsourcing peer review provides an opportunity to innovate, he says.

PCI RR **launches today** and is funded by approximately €5500 in donations from universities and scholarly societies for startup costs and its first year, says co-founder Corina Logan, a behavioral ecologist at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology. The organization identifies volunteer experts to review just one type of journal article: **registered reports**, which are detailed plans of experimental questions and methods, submitted for peer review before the start of a research project. If researchers follow through on the registered report's peer-reviewed plan and get results, the articles that emerge can be published at any of the 15 “PCI RR-friendly” journals, regardless of how important the results are. Authors can still take their manuscripts elsewhere, if the results are striking enough to publish in a high-impact journal, says Emily Sena, editor-in-chief of *BMJ Open Science* and a co-founder of PCI RR. Or authors can choose to publish the paper—along with PCI RR's recommendation—as a preprint, bypassing the journal system entirely, Logan says.

Sena says BMJ, the publisher of her journal, was enthusiastic—and PCI RR's criteria for research quality and transparency matched up neatly with her journal's requirements. The agreement doesn't commit the journal to publishing just anything that passes through PCI RR; it must be an appropriate topic for the journal and tick other boxes, such as having signed peer reviews. PCI RR publishes reviews but does not require reviewers to sign them.

The new venture joins a range of existing “peer communities,” such as Peer Community In Ecology

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and Peer Community In Paleontology. Those communities offer free peer review of preprints, with published reviews and letters of recommendation for papers that pass muster, as a way for researchers to signal the quality of their work—and keep it free to read—without using traditional journals or paying high open-access publishing fees. PCI RR says it will accept registered report submissions in disciplines across science, medicine, social science, and the humanities. The goal, Chambers says, is for PCI RR to become a “clearing house” for registered reports.

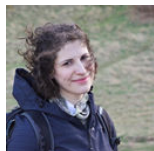
It’s a promising idea, says Lisa Rasmussen, a research ethicist at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte. Like journals, PCI RR will rely on scientists to provide volunteer labor. That could make it difficult to maintain a diverse pool of reviewers and keep workloads sustainable as the project grows, Rasmussen says. But the project has “chutzpah,” she says—and with its detailed public guidelines, publication of peer reviews, and emphasis on open data, it will help make publishing more transparent and accessible.

So far, the discipline-specific peer communities have cost about €5300 per year, with funding primarily from universities and academic societies. But PCI RR, with its cross-disciplinary focus and ambition to bring more journals on board, may become more expensive. Logan says the founders are thinking about ways to keep the project sustainable. In the long term, she says, PCI RR may need to raise funds to hire administrative staff—although the team is committed to volunteerism for the primary work of reviewing.

Hoyt says other projects have attempted to put parts of peer review outside scholarly journals, but none of them has gained much ground, possibly because of a lack of incentives for researchers to use them. He thinks PCI RR does offer enticements: In addition to providing a near guarantee of publication at a range of journals, it offers valuable feedback at the most helpful stage, research planning.

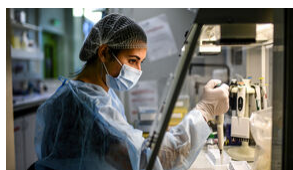
But with PCI RR performing all the steps involved in peer review, publishers will have to demonstrate their value, Hoyt says. He says publishers still operate platforms that draw readers, and they do important work to format articles so they can be aggregated by PubMed and other databases. “There’s a role for publishers still to play,” he says, “but I think they will have to start justifying the prices they charge.”

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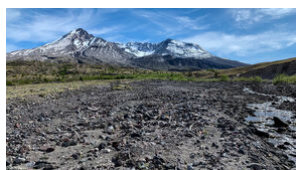


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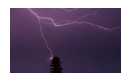
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