

Tim Gowers's blog

<http://gowers.wordpress.com/page/3/>

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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](#), 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](#) (CCSD) in collaboration with the [Institut Fourier at Grenoble University](#).

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.