

NATURE | NEWS

PubMed opens for comment

Research repository launches comment platform for post-publication peer review.

Sara Reardon

24 October 2013 Corrected: 25 October 2013

The informal conversations that researchers have at scientific meetings look set to move online, if a new initiative by the US National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) has its way. On 22 October, the NCBI of Bethesda, Maryland, launched the pilot phase of a programme called PubMed Commons. This will allow users to comment on published abstracts on the PubMed website, which indexes some 22 million papers.

For now, only a select group of researchers and their invited guests can use the system. But the NCBI's director David Lipman, who helped to develop the programme, says that soon any PubMed author will be allowed to comment under [PIDs](#) or her real name.

Lipman hopes that the fact that so many people already use PubMed will aid in the development of a discussion community, but admits that getting people to participate may be a challenge. Historically, even high-profile journal papers have not tended to attract a lot of comments, says Iain Hrynaszkiewicz, outreach director of Faculty of 1000 in London, which boasts a community of some 5,000 scientists who review published papers. And data from the Public Library of Science (PLoS), based in San Francisco, California, show that only about 10% of its journals' approximately 90,000 papers have comments. Only a handful boast more than one comment, despite the fact that readers have downloaded more than 230 million copies of PLoS studies.

Other large journal sites, including the preprint server arXiv, have considered and rejected the idea of hosting comments. Paul Ginsparg, a physicist at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, who founded arXiv says that they take too much work to manage and authors fear that negative comments on their papers might drive readers away. And Ginsparg doubts that allowing comments on arXiv would generate more discussion, because comment threads and blogs that link back to arXiv papers are already hosting a wealth of fruitful conversations.

Back to topic

Then there is the difficulty of making sure that comments are useful and on-topic. "If you give people a crayon and tell them to mark up the web, they're probably going to scribble," says Dan Whaley, the founder of Hypothes.is, a system now in pilot tests that allows readers to annotate articles across a number of journals and news sites. One way to weed out unhelpful or off-topic remarks is to institute a system through which commenters vote on how useful a comment or its creator is. Commons' approach to the problem is to require people to comment under their own names.

Others, like microbiologist Ferric Fang of the University of Washington in Seattle, worry that without anonymity, researchers — particularly junior scientists — might shy away from criticizing papers out of worry for their careers. That is a concern of the website PubPeer, which allows users to comment on published papers anonymously. A representative of PubPeer says that most comments are from people flagging suspicious images in papers.

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To make authors feel more comfortable, Commons co-founder Robert Tibshirani of Stanford University in California says that Commons will provide an option to comment as part of a collaboration rather than as an individual.

If nothing else, he adds, Commons could function as a sort of social living room for authors. "As a scientist, you spend so long on a paper and nobody reads it," Tibshirani says. "That's a lonely feeling; science can be a lonely job. I'd rather have ten comments of which four are negative than have none at all."

Nature doi:10.1038/nature.2013.14023

peer review

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Corrections

Corrected: This story originally quoted a source from PubPeer as saying that very few of the comments left were "long and insightful". They did not say this and the text has been amended accordingly.

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8 comments

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Sergei Jargin • 2013-11-01 09:46 AM

PubMed has been until recently "maintained with minimal staffing due to the lapse in government funding" [1]. PubMed is of paramount importance for medical professionals and researchers all over the world. Without Pubmed, evidence-based medicine will give way to scientific misconduct, placebo-treatments etc. [2]. Therefore, countries producing fossil fuels and therefore disposing of considerable funds, sometimes spent in a wasteful and unproductive manner, should permanently support PubMed. 1. PubMed.gov. US National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/> (accessed 03 October 2013) Jargin SV. Scientific misconduct or how to make the elderly pay for placebos. LAP LAMBERT Academic Publishing, Saarbrücken, 2013 <https://images.morebooks.de/fullcover/1000x700/9783659459672.jpg>



Julie Schwedock • 2013-10-29 09:16 PM

I do not think public comments on peer-reviewed articles should be anonymous. Anonymity invites trolls and general uncivil behavior. However, it is telling that so many people agree that a junior scientist might be afraid to post negative opinions on a paper for fear of his or her career being ruined. That speaks to a terrible problem our scientific community has in general. We like to think we are working in a meritocracy but often we are dealing with issues of peerage not merit.



Richard Unwin • 2013-10-28 12:09 PM

While I am ingeneral supportive of the opportunities to comment online on published papers, it is important that this process undergoes a similar scrutiny to other form of publication, there remain issues to be addressed with respect to comment filtering and anonymity - the major concern being junior researchers criticising work form more senior scientists who will be refereeing their next paper or grant application. One solution might be to make comments anonymous for a limited period, say six months, after which the author has the choice to either ascribe their name to that comment, or remove it - effectively once their comment has been 'peer reviewed' and mimicking that nature of submitting a manuscript. Also, with the advent of several other places where articles can attract commenst e.g. publisher websites, Faculty of 1000, PubPeer etc. surely it makes sense to share these comments in a common framework, whether that be PubMed collating comments from vartious sources, or these sources voluntarily submitting copies of all comments they recieve into PubMed Commons...



William Gunn • 2013-10-25 02:49 AM

This is the most significant development in post publication peer review yet. This article did a good job rounding up criticism, but the difference between Pubmed Commons and PLOS is traffic, and nowhere was the difference in traffic mentioned.



Tiny Cerebellum • 2013-10-24 08:37 PM

Feedback is important part of any research, but I really hope we would not end up with comparing who has more 'likes' on their papers.



PubPeer • 2013-10-24 09:15 PM

It's about discussing science after it's published. Not about "likes".



Jim Woodgett • 2013-10-24 08:12 PM

There *really* should be comments on this article! I do like the idea of collaborative comments but am not looking forward to battles over comment authorship order.



PubPeer • 2013-10-24 06:33 PM

We definitely never said that very few of our comments are insightful. Also, there's no point in being "long" if the

article is a fabrication.

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