

Every document is born "grey". Some documents can become "open"

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Abstract

As we all know, "grey" doesn't often mean "closed"; maybe sometimes it can mean just hard to find. If its sources are open and there are the conditions, the whole document could become an open access one. An example among all is the case of the pre-prints.

When you archive a pre-print in a repository you allow the free, open and "grey" pre-print become Open Access to everyone. If the immediately archived "grey" pre-print is open access it can accelerate global knowledge and research advancement.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic is making us rethink the way we communicate, search, research and inform; there are some cases of publishers which immediately publish some COVID-19 related articles pre-print; other, instead, are making soon available the accepted manuscript (post-print).

Let us concentrate on pre-prints, closer to "grey" literature.

An immediate and open pre-print could accelerate research in some fields and could let researchers (and us) know on time if there is a deadlock or not. Some publishers are following this way.

By the way, some pre-prints will never become a published article; in any case knowing those pre-prints let people know why that way is an unpassable one or if some other ways to improve research could be passable.

So, "grey" sometimes could become open to improve and accelerate research, especially in this uncommon period.

Article

In this article we deal with about preprints. Preprints are a key to let Grey Literature become Open Access in some cases that will be shown.

Being preprints related to scholarly publications, aim of the article is to show the importance of preprints by using the direct words and phrases of some scholarly publications related to preprints topics; especially in a pandemic period where the massive use of preprints accelerated Covid-19 researches and knowledge.

In the Grey Literature “grey” could mean hard to find. By the way, if its sources are open and there are the right conditions, the whole document could become an Open Access one as it could happen in some cases regarding preprints. A preprint archived in a repository allows Open Access and it can accelerate global knowledge and research advancement.

In scholarly publications there are some important differences regarding the “state” of an article:

- **Preprint:** *it is a version of a scholarly or scientific paper that precedes formal peer review and publication in a peer-reviewed scholarly or scientific journal.*
- **Post-print (Accepted manuscript):** *Final version of a manuscript after formal peer-review. It contains all revisions made during the peer-review process.*
- **Version of Record (VOR):** *the final typeset and edited **version** of the journal article that has been made available declaring the article “published”.*

The recent COVID-19 pandemic is making persons rethink the way they communicate, search, research and inform. There are some cases of publishers which immediately publish some COVID-19 related articles preprints. Other, instead, are making soon available the accepted manuscripts (post-print). The case of preprints is closer to Grey Literature for the nature itself of a preprint, which usually is not a published version. The point is if unpublished documents could become Open Access if there are the conditions; in this manner they could become more and more known to the public. The cited phrase “*if there are the conditions*” recalls the Commissioner Carlos Moedas’ approach to research data: “as open as possible, as closed as necessary”. It is a good point to explain the phrase “*if there are the conditions*”.

An immediate and open preprint could accelerate research in some fields and could let researchers (and us) know on time if there is a deadlock or not; and some publishers are following this way opening some related preprints servers.

By the way, there are some differences among repositories, preprints repositories, and preprints servers; especially if they are related to some publishers.

It could become a philosophical matter because the unpublished preprints could be related to their peer reviewed published version if they are inside a publisher's server.

Moreover, some preprints remain in the state of preprints never becoming a published article. They may be important too. Not only for the research; they are also important because they let to know some research deadlocks to follow other possible ways of research investigations.

For these reasons, from a philosophical point of view, preprints could be related to the freedom of research; and it is important to continue to have some preprints repositories which are not directly related to some publishers.

By the way, from a philosophical point of view, making known the unknown is a process related to more and more transparency. It could be the way to let grey literature be more known: through transparency; preprints repositories could be a way.

From scholarly publications we learnt three important things:

- *The "grey" preprint becomes "white" when people let it to be Open Access in a repository.*
- *The "grey" changed in "white" preprint is useful in the research process.*
- *Some published articles are witnesses of this.*

The supporting articles

We can find these three points in some articles where we can learn some important concepts¹:

¹ Perry K., Graf C., Pepe A., «**Preprints, Publishing, and a Pandemic: Your Questions Answered**». Link: <https://www.wiley.com/network/archive/preprints-publishing-and-a-pandemic-your-questions-answered>

- *«Preprints accelerate the dissemination of research and serve as vehicles for discussion—key to advancing scientific knowledge».*
- *«They provide many benefits for researchers and are rapidly becoming more widely integrated into the scholarly publishing ecosystem».*
- *«Preprints will continue to complement traditional journal publishing, adding speed, openness, and faster feedback for researchers».*

In scholarly publications preprints are related to the lack of any kind of review. The rapid spread of preprints let people think again on the review process and on the existence itself of the review in general in scholarly publications; and not only on particular cases. To use the phrases in a related article²:

“Certainly, there was a time when peer review before publication was the only system that made sense. A time when scientific journals were printed and mailed, and when it was essential to do all the intellectual work in advance so that the final product on the library shelves was as accurate as possible. Today, however, all that has changed. We publish online with ease and have all the necessary tools to manage academic journals online as well. There is no longer any reason to give just two or three experts, often cloaked in anonymity, the full power to give legitimacy to an academic paper. There is no more reason to seize scientific knowledge from the public for months, while it makes its way in an antiquated editorial path. The time has come to build a scientific review system for the Internet age by embracing preprints as the new standard in academic publishing”.

² Banks M., **«A Lesson of the Pandemic: All Prints Should Be Preprints»**. Link: <https://www.roars.it/online/una-lezione-dalla-pandemia-i-preprint-come-nuovo-standard-delle-pubblicazioni-scientifiche/?fbclid=IwAR2h9IX46NEt9GxdSy3N1SzEEr0xuX5Apv0MIPJKE8XtSEkF4QkBhuRnBHo>

On the other hands we know that «*with this speed come errors. Notably, there have been several high-profile retractions involving coronavirus- and COVID-19-related studies in both preprint servers and peer-reviewed journals*³».

Into another article some possible solutions regarding the correct use of preprints are shown and we can deduct as follow⁴:

- Only preprints are not enough.
- If you do not make data and methods public, you risk damage.
- Let's summarize: some pre-prints will never become a published article.
- In any case, knowing those pre-prints, let people know why that way is an unpassable one or if some other ways to improve research could be passable.
- So, when "grey" becomes open, it improves and accelerates research, especially in this uncommon period.

Preprints are related to the chance of Open Access when they are archived in a repository.

A related conference

During a recent conference, “*Open Access, preprints and research impact*⁵”, in his talk “*Preprints and scholarly communications: Adoption, practices, drivers and barriers*” based upon his own researches, the keynote speaker Stephen Pinfield stated:

- Defining “preprints” is still controversial and not well understood in many communities.
- Preprints are seen as having major potential benefits.

³ Johns Hopkins University’s clinicians and researchers during the conference «**Preprints and Peer Review in a Pandemic**». Link: <https://www.jhsph.edu/events/2020/preprints-peer-review-in-a-pandemic/>

⁴ Besançon L., Peiffer-Smadja N., Segalas C., Jiang H., Masuzzo P., Smout C., Billy E., Deforet M., Leyrat C. Link: «**Open Science Saves Lives: Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic**»: https://www.biorxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.08.13.249847v2.full?fbclid=IwAR30pz6leDK3bw4x05yG7LtAGJzJSzPeAs7dkE0pcEipJeQJO_cB-EDp8DY

⁵ At the moment of this article, no slides were available for the public.

- Preprints are widely seen to have significant possible drawbacks.
- There are different possible operating models of preprints servers.
- Many infrastructural components are in place but still need work.
- Different actors and communities are at different stages of innovation adoption.
- Preprints future is still unclear but possible scenarios are emerging.

Conclusions

As we already know, preprints are related to scholarly publications; for these reasons this article used the direct words and phrases of some scholarly publications related on preprints.

Preprints are not the final version of the article presented to the public and are closer to Grey Literature.

By the way, archiving in a repository is the way to let Grey Literature to become open; *“if there are the conditions”*, of course.

Preprints belong to Grey Literature for definition; the act of archiving something in a repository belongs to the Open Access world if the document is archived as open to everyone.

The use, as well as the spread, of preprints is still controversial and it is related to the lack of a peer review.

By the way, preprints are becoming more and more Open Access and grey literature too; that means more transparency and less “unknown” documents; in any cases thanks to preprints open repositories.

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