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What Constitutes a Publication under the *PhyloCode*: Discussion and Proposed Clarifications

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Abstract

Changing publication practices require clarifications about what constitutes a publication under the *PhyloCode*. If preprints are to be explicitly excluded, even when they have been peer-reviewed, the list of excluded works mentioned in Article 4.6 of the *PhyloCode* must be extended. Alternatively, if the CPN prefers to consider peer-reviewed preprints published under the *PhyloCode* (provided that the preprint server complies with Article 4.2), a note to clarify this should be added after Article 4.6. An argument is presented that this latter solution would be more advantageous for the academic community.

Key words: *International Code of Phylogenetic Nomenclature,* nomenclatural acts, peer review, phylogenetic nomenclature, preprint, publication requirements

Introduction

Current publication requirements

All codes of biological nomenclature for taxa include rules to determine the corpus of literature that is to be considered as governed under a particular code (Laurin 2023). In many cases, it is easy to determine if a work qualifies because all codes require that it be published in a permanent, inalterable form, typically in journals with an ISSN number, or in books with an ISBN number. Article 4.2 of the *PhyloCode* (Cantino and de Queiroz 2020) stipulates (emphasis added):

"Publication, under this code, is defined as the distribution of **peer-reviewed works** consisting of: (1) printed text with or without images, which, unless also published electronically, must be distributed to libraries or scientific institutions associated with libraries in at least five countries on three continents, so that the work is accessible as a permanent public record to the scientific community; and/or (2) electronic text with or without images or sound in **Portable Document Format (PDF)** in an online publication (however, not just in supplementary material; see Note 7.2.2); in both cases with an **International Standard Serial Number (ISSN)** or an **International Standard Book Number (ISBN)**."

Changing publication practices

However, as publication practices change, codes must adapt. The practice of posting preprints on web sites designed to receive large numbers of papers could be highly beneficial to accelerate communication in biology (Vale 2015; Stern and O'Shea 2019), but it started blurring the line regarding what qualifies as published because several "preprint servers", such as *bioRxiv* and *Preprints.org*, have ISSN numbers. While the biology community adopted this practice recently, physics pioneered the practice of posting preprints, starting in 1991 (Bourne *et al.* 2017). A form of preprint dissemination had been developed in the 1960s through the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and had gained significant momentum, but it was killed off by "a group of specialist journal editors" that decided to prohibit publishing papers that had been circulated as preprints, arguably because these editors feared for the prestige and status of their journals (Cobb 2017). Until very recently, preprints on these servers had not been peer-reviewed.

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They were preliminary versions of papers that were posted to make these works available earlier than the refereed, formatted versions that were eventually published in journals or books.

A later development, peer reviewing of preprints, further blurred the distinction between preprints and works that could be considered published under the *PhyloCode*. One of the original purposes of preprint servers was to collect feedback from the academic community (Inglis and Sever 2016), and some preprint discussion groups, such as the *Preprint Club,* were formed to take advantage of this possibility, both to improve the peer reviewing process (notably, by reducing the number of reviewing rounds required before a paper is published), and to provide reviewing experience for early career researchers (Richter *et al.* 2023). As described in greater detail below, some recent initiatives have developed formalized peer review of preprints into an alternative publication model.

These initiatives were spurred by the growing combined costs of accessing the scientific literature (Odlyzko 2015; Buranyi 2017) and of publishing, now commonly as open access, as well as the realization that the journal-based peer review process is not optimal; notably, reviews on which editorial decisions are based typically are not published, which results in many papers undergoing several rounds of reviews for different journals until they are finally accepted, an inefficient process that exacerbates the burden on reviewers (Lemberger and Pulverer 2019; Avissar-Whiting *et al.* 2024). It was recognized as early as 1990 that the price of scientific journal subscriptions was increasing at an unsustainable rate (Douglas 1990), and this phenomenon continues, arguably through "customer inertia" (Odlyzko 2015). Similarly, the cost of publishing in open access outlets has grown faster than inflation (Grossmann and Brembs 2021). Furthermore, current publication practices, which are dominated by large commercial publishers (Odlyzko 2015), sometimes lead to "selective reporting and questionable research practices" to facilitate publishing in prestigious journals, which exacerbates irreproducibility in science (Pennington and Heim 2022). This encourages research for sensational results, and conversely, not publishing negative results (probably a marginal problem in systematics, but extremely important in other fields), which is harmful because some experiments that yielded negative results risk being duplicated (Mercier *et al.* 2020). The existence of non-profit open-access publishers, such as *PLoS*, have mitigated some of these problems, but the publication fees remain high. Clearly, this situation is not optimal for academia, and the posting of preprints, which are freely accessible and need not contain sensational results, might further contribute to a solution.

In that context, the scientific community launched several initiatives that can shift much of the evaluation of scientific merits of drafts away from journal editors (especially those working in the service of commercial publishers) and towards the scientific community. Most of these initiatives better separate scientific evaluation from assessment of the importance of results and fit to a particular journal, which are distinct questions (Lemberger and Pulverer 2019; Avissar-Whiting *et al.* 2024). Such initiatives might favor the "emergence of unprecedented transparency in research reporting" (Avissar-Whiting 2021) and reduce the control exerted by traditional journals and commercial publishers on science, which many scientists believe is excessive (Buranyi 2017). These initiatives are too numerous for all of them to be discussed, but Avissar-Whiting *et al.* (2024) listed 18 of them, which are presented in more detail by Henriques *et al.* (2023), obviating the need to review all of them in detail here. Thus, only three of the most prominent initiatives, representing two distinct models (with or without an accept/reject decision), will be discussed here, with emphasis on the initiative that involves a binary, accept/reject decision because this resembles closely the approach routinely adopted by traditional scientific journals.

Peer reviewing of preprints, with or without recommendation

One of these initiatives, *PREreview* (2017), was founded "to bring more equity and transparency to scholarly peer review by supporting and empowering communities of researchers, particularly those at early stages of their career (ECRs) and historically excluded". Its design was influenced by a study of scientists' opinions on how to improve the reviewing and publishing experience (Hindle and Saderi 2017a). It allows scientists interested in reviewing preprints to post their reviews (to which a DOI is assigned) on *Zenodo* (Sicilia *et al.* 2017). In the process, additional authors of the review may be involved, and they get credited for their work in *ORCID* (Haak *et al.* 2012). *PREreview* also facilitates the initiation of preprint journal clubs, which play an important role in this process (Hindle and Saderi 2017b).

The similar initiative *Review Commons* (Lemberger and Pulverer 2019) was launched by EMBO (European Molecular Biology Organization) and ASAPbio (Accelerating Science and Publication in Biology) as a platform aimed at offering scientists high-quality peer review of preprints. Authors are encouraged to make the reviews and their responses publicly available as refereed preprints on bioRxiv. These preprints can subsequently be submitted

to any of the 17 journals affiliated with *Review Commons,* which include *eLife* and the *PLOS*, to mention the most relevant to systematists. The editors of these journals are committed to requiring little additional review to make decisions on such refereed preprints (Lemberger and Pulverer 2019). Of course, these preprints could also be submitted to any other journal.

The third initiative, called *PCI,* for "*Peer Community In*" (Guillemaud *et al.* 2019), has a peer review process even closer to that of a scientific journal, and for this reason, it deserves to be presented more thoroughly. This initiative, launched in January 2017 (Guillemaud *et al.* 2019; Queffelec *et al.* 2023), fosters a more transparent review process for preprints like those of *PREreview* and *Review Commons*, but it goes a step further by "recommending" those preprints that have passed a peer review process. Such a "recommendation" (as the term is used by *PCI*) is comparable to acceptance of a paper in a peer-reviewed journal. This addition is a response to the concerns expressed by some of the founders of *PCI* that simply providing reviews of preprints is insufficient because many readers may lack the expertise to decide by themselves, on the basis of reviews, if a preprint is of sufficient quality to be trusted as a primary reference on a given topic (Bourguet and Guillemaud 2024). In contrast to the goal of *PREreview* and *Review Commons,* the goal of *PCI* is not necessarily to improve successive drafts of preprints until they can be published in a journal. Instead, a "recommended" preprint is deemed to be on a par with a peer-reviewed publication and as such, it does not need to be published by a journal.

For a preprint to be recommended by *PCI*, it must initially be posted on a preprint server, such as *bioRxiv*, *Preprints.org*, *HAL*, *Zenodo*, *arXiv*, *OSF Preprints*, or *paleorXiv*, and obtain a DOI or another unique identifier. Then, the author must submit it to one of the "thematic" *PCIs* and follow the instructions to authors of that peer community. The general procedure should be similar among *PCIs*, but technical details may differ; the following example is based on *PCI Paleontology*, which I know best. Once a preprint has been submitted to a specific *PCI*, its managing board checks if it falls into the scope of that *PCI* and if it meets minimal technical requirements, notably that the paper is complete and that its data are accessible. If so, the managing board invites designated recommenders whose expertise is the closest to that preprint to handle it; authors may suggest a short list of preferred recommenders, but the managing board decides which recommenders are invited. If none of the recommenders contacted by the managing board accepts the invitation, any other recommenders of that series, who are regularly informed about the papers awaiting editorial assignment, may volunteer to handle it (but this still needs to be approved by the managing board). If no recommender has agreed to handle a submitted preprint within a given amount of time (usually 20 days), the article is automatically desk-rejected. Conversely, if a recommender accepts the assignment to evaluate a draft, that person will invite reviewers after having looked at the paper, as in a traditional peer review process. The reviews may be anonymous, but each reviewer may decide to sign his or her report; however, the author necessarily knows the identity of the recommender, just as authors normally know the identity of their handling editor, but not necessarily that of the referees. Once the recommender has received enough reports (typically, at least two), he or she sends a decision letter to the author. The recommender may reject the paper, but if he or she requests changes, the author must then revise the draft to continue the evaluation process. When the author resubmits the revised preprint, the recommender who handled the initial submission receives the revised draft, along with the author's response letter. A new evaluation round then starts, possibly involving reviewers again (which may be the original reviewers or new ones), until a decision (reject, revise, or "recommend") is made.

If the preprint is eventually "recommended", the recommender writes a short (typically, no more than two pages of text, plus references) recommendation, which explains the significance of the paper, and provides a link to the recommended preprint. The recommendation, along with the correspondence history of the draft, the reviews and the author's responses, is published on the *PCI* series web site and it receives a DOI (e.g., Asher 2019). Recommendations can be cited like any other scientific paper, and the associated review history and reviews promote transparency in the review process. Reviewers who signed their reviews thus get credit for their work. The recommended preprint remains on the preprint server, but it is then typically formatted using a template custom-made for each *PCI* series (this step is optional but my survey of recommended preprints shows that the vast majority of authors format at least the title page of their preprint, once it has been recommended), which facilitates recognition of these recommended preprints (e.g., Laurin *et al.* 2019). Note that the recommendation is tied to a specific version of the preprint; it applies neither to earlier versions, nor to possible updates that may be posted subsequently. In contrast to many journals, *PCI* has no required acceptance or rejection rate; decisions are made solely based on the scientific merits of the paper. The main drawback of this system is that if the paper is not recommended, the associated reviews are not made public (in contrast to what happens in most other preprint reviewing services), so that the evaluations by

reviewers are lost to the scientific community (except for the authors), as is the case for reviews of drafts that are rejected by traditional journals.

PCI-recommended preprints can either remain on preprint servers, or they can be published in scientific journals, including in "*PCI*-friendly journals" that consider the reviews done by *PCI*. Such journals either do not require additional peer review, or their editorial staff starts by assessing the *PCI* reviews to determine if additional evaluation is required. The parallel with the 17 journals affiliated with *Review Commons* is obvious, but to further facilitate publication of papers based on the peer-reviewed preprints, *PCI* launched the *PC Journal,* which exclusively publishes papers based on preprints that have been recommended by one of their recommenders, and for which no additional reviewing is involved. So far, 2228 preprints had been submitted to *PCI*, 6094 reviews had been performed, 1051 preprints had been recommended, and 565 papers had been published in the *PC Journal*, according to the *PCI* web site (accessed April 1, 2026). Most of the preprints recommended by *PCI* do not include nomenclatural acts, but at least two do (e.g., Razmjooei and Thibault 2022; Eleftheriadi *et al.* 2023). Although they were subsequently published in the *PC Journal*, some future recommended preprints may not be. Thus, all nomenclatural codes should stipulate if peer-reviewed preprints recommended by *PCI* (and similar preprint review services that may arise in the future) constitute publications.

PCI is supported by "117 universities and major research institutes, 13 university libraries, 34 learned societies, 30 doctoral schools, and many other institutions", according to the *PCI* web site (accessed April 1, 2026). Its largest institutional sponsors include the INRAE (Institut National de Recherche pour l'Agriculture, l'Alimentation et l'Environnement), a large research institution under the joint authority of the French ministries of research and agriculture, as well as the CNRS (Centre National de la Researche Scientifique), which finances all fields of scientific research in France. Within *PCI*, several subcommunities have been launched (21, as of November 1, 2025), in fields including archaeology (Queffelec *et al.* 2023), biomedical research (Pennington and Heim 2022; Zoccali and Mallamaci 2023), neuroscience (Mercier *et al.* 2020), and others (Mougin *et al.* 2021; Muñoz-Tamayo *et al.* 2025). Most relevant to phylogenetic nomenclature, *PCI* includes communities in evolutionary biology, microbiology, paleontology, botany, and zoology. Managing boards (currently composed of 10 scientists for *PCI Paleontology*) coordinate the evaluation of submitted preprints, which is performed by recommenders (80 for *PCI Paleontology*, but the number of members of both boards may vary among communities and through time), who act as handling editors.

The future of peer reviewing of preprints

The increasing prevalence of preprints and of peer review of the latter suggests that a clarification about what constitutes a publication for the *PhyloCode* will be increasingly important in the future. Only a small minority (less than 2%) of preprints have accompanying peer reviews, but this may change given the recent proliferation of services dedicated to preprint peer review (Avissar-Whiting *et al.* 2024). This is suggested by the recent "Recognizing Preprint Peer Review" workshop that was recently attended by "funders, institutions, preprint servers, journals, indexers, infrastructure providers, and review services" (Avissar-Whiting *et al.* 2024). Odlyzko (2015) reported that the number of preprint submissions has grown rapidly, at about 15% per year. This raises the possibility that *PCI* and eventually, other similar initiatives, may prosper in the future. Thus, the *ISPN* cannot afford to ignore this phenomenon of a growing body of peer-reviewed literature being available on preprint servers.

Ambiguity in the *PhyloCode*

The current version of the *PhyloCode* excludes some kinds of works from being considered as publications. Those works are listed in Article 4.6:

"The following do not qualify as publication: (a) dissemination of text or images solely through storage media (such as CDs, diskettes, film, microfilm, and microfiche) that require a special device to read; (b) theses and dissertations; (c) abstracts of articles, papers, posters, texts of lectures, and similar material presented at meetings, symposia, colloquia, or congresses, even if the abstract is printed in a peer-reviewed journal; (d) the placing of texts or images in collections or exhibits, for example, on labels (including specimen labels, even if printed) or information sheets; (e) the reproduction of hand-written material in facsimile, for example, by photocopy; (f) patents and patent applications; (g) newspapers and periodicals intended mainly for people who are not professional scientists, abstracting journals, trade catalogues, and seed exchange lists; (h) anonymous works. See also Article 7.3."

Article 4.6 thus does not currently exclude preprints from being considered published, provided that they meet the other requirements of Article 4. Article 7.3 similarly does not exclude preprints; it simply states:

"When a publication contains a statement to the effect that names or nomenclatural acts in it are not to be considered for nomenclatural purposes, names that it may contain are considered as not established."

Proposed Revision of the *PhyloCode*

If the Committee on Phylogenetic Nomenclature (CPN) wishes to exclude peer-reviewed preprints (as did the *ISPN* Council in an informal consultation in July 2025), I propose that the following addition (in bold below) be made to Article 4.6, after "(h) anonymous works;":

"**(i) peer-reviewed preprints that are available on preprint servers, including those that have been endorsed as having passed peer review by a scholarly organization.** See also Article 7.3."

Alternatively, the CPN might share the view, expressed by various scientists, that the role played by commercial publishers in science is not necessarily beneficial for science (Buranyi 2017) and that the scientific community would be better served by a more open and constructive peer review system with greater transparency that reflects perspectives from a more diverse sample of the community (Henriques *et al.* 2023; Avissar-Whiting *et al.* 2024), as well as a system for producing vetted publications that could be achieved at a far lower cost (Odlyzko 2015; Buranyi 2017; Avissar-Whiting 2021; Grossmann and Brembs 2021). Alternative publication models that have developed recently, such as the *PCI* initiative, might improve the reviewing process (Pennington and Heim 2022) and publication practices by better reflecting actual findings (Mercier *et al.* 2020), while at the same time reducing costs of both producing and accessing scientific literature. Thus, the CPN could decide to allow publication of nomenclatural acts in explicitly and thoroughly peer-reviewed preprints, such as those reviewed and recommended by *PCI*. In that case, no amendment of Article 4.6 would be necessary, but it would be appropriate to add the following Note:

"**Note 4.6.1: Peer-reviewed preprints clearly documented as such and that have been assessed as worthy of entering the scientific literature (through a recommendation from a peer reviewing platform or other equivalent systems) are considered published under this code, provided that they comply with Article 4.2."**

The *ISPN* has an opportunity to take the lead over the rank-based codes in acknowledging recent changes in publication practices. Whatever its choice, that choice may prove to be important in the publication practices of systematists.

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