Science AMA Series: Are community calls to change scientific publishing right and, if so, what is the future? We are Jason Hoyt and Peter Binfield, Co-founders of PeerJ, Ask Us Anything!

PeerJ [1] and r/Science AMAs[1]

[1]Affiliation not available

April 17, 2023

Abstract

Hello /r/Science. We are Jason Hoyt (CEO and Co-founder) and Pete Binfield (Publisher and Co-founder) of PeerJ and PeerJ Computer Science - peer-reviewed open access academic journals offering low cost, high quality publishing for researchers in the fields of life science, medicine and computer science. Ask us anything! Jason Hoyt - As Co-founder and CEO of PeerJ I believe that research needs to be openly available if we are going to solve this century's biggest challenges. I've long been an advocate of Open Access and not afraid to challenge the closed nature of the scientific publishing establishment. It is also this ethos that led me to believe that authors deserve to publish their work at a very minimal cost to make it openly available to the world. The premise when starting PeerJ was a simple one - If we can set a goal to sequence the Human Genome for $99, then why shouldn't we demand the same goal for the publication of research? At PeerJ we have built a publishing venue that serves the needs of academic authors and not the other way around! With today's technology there is no excuse for research to be hampered by slow publishing processes, high costs, or locked behind paywalls. By building our publishing platform in house, and open sourcing many of those components, we are able to significantly speed up the publishing process and add useful technology for authors on an ongoing basis. I firmly believe in transparency which is why PeerJ offers optional open peer review and article level metrics. Prior to founding PeerJ I was Chief Scientist and VP of R&D at Mendeley. I also hold a Ph.D. in Genetics from Stanford University, so I understand firsthand the challenges facing researchers. Peter Binfield - Having been a Publisher in academic publishing for over 20 years I have witnessed the growth of the internet and its transformative power for scientific research and communication. As Co-founder and Publisher of PeerJ I want to ensure this technology enables a democratized scientific publishing process and helps to make research openly available for all. I believe that publishing needs to be in service to the academic community to best facilitate the rapid and broad dissemination of research findings. It is still an unfortunate fact that for many scientists today their work is often hidden behind expensive publisher paywalls making it inaccessible, not just to those researchers who can't afford the cost of the journal subscription, but also to the rest of the world's population who may benefit from those discoveries. By making scientific research open and more shareable it in turn enables reproducibility and therefore a faster scientific discovery process. I'm proud that PeerJ is a part of making this happen. Prior to co-founding PeerJ I held senior positions at Institute of Physics, Kluwer Academic, Springer, SAGE and Public Library of Science (PLOS). At PLOS I ran PLOS ONE, and helped to develop it into the largest and one of the most innovative journals in the world. There is always more to be done but we hope our efforts at PeerJ encourage further change in the academic publishing process. We look forward to answering any questions you may have about PeerJ, open access publishing or anything else in general. Ask us anything and we'll be happy to answer. We'll start answering questions at 1pm ET (10 am PT, 5 pm UTC.) 1.14 pm PST 9/24/15: Thank you to you all for the insightful questions and debate - we are now signing off. We look forward to publishing more great science, freely available to the world!

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PEERJ R/SCIENCE

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The premise when starting PeerJ was a simple one - If we can set a goal to sequence the Human Genome for $99, then why shouldn't we demand the same goal for the publication of research? At PeerJ we have built a publishing venue that serves the needs of academic authors and not the other way around! With today's technology there is no excuse for research to be hampered by slow publishing processes, high costs, or locked behind paywalls. By building our publishing platform in house, and open sourcing many of those components, we are able to significantly speed up the publishing process and add useful technology for authors on an ongoing basis. I firmly believe in transparency which is why PeerJ offers optional open peer review and article level metrics.

Prior to founding PeerJ I was Chief Scientist and VP of R&D at Mendeley. I also hold a Ph.D. in Genetics fromStanford University, so I understand firsthand the challenges facing researchers.

Peter Binfield - Having been a Publisher in academic publishing for over 20 years I have witnessed the growth of the internet and its transformative power for scientific research and communication. As Co-founder and Publisher of PeerJ I want to ensure this technology enables a democratized scientific publishing process and helps to make research openly available for all. I believe that publishing needs to be in service to the academic community to best facilitate the rapid and broad dissemination of research findings.

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There is always more to be done but we hope our efforts at PeerJ encourage further change in the academic publishing process. We look forward to answering any questions you may have about PeerJ, open access publishing or anything else in general. Ask us anything and we'll be happy to answer. We'll start answering questions at 1pm ET (10 am PT, 5 pm UTC.)

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READ REVIEWS

WRITE A REVIEW

Thanks for doing an AMA! I have many questions.

Do you think the PeerJ model of $99/author will encourage articles with fewer authors? If so, is this a good or bad thing?

CORRESPONDENCE:

DATE RECEIVED:
September 25, 2015

DOI:
10.15200/winn.144309.96399

ARCHIVED:
September 24, 2015

CITATION:
PeerJ , r/Science , Science AMA Series: Are community calls to change scientific publishing right and, if so, what is the future? We are Jason Hoyt and Peter Binfield, Co-founders of PeerJ, Ask Us Anything!, *The Winnower* 2:e144309.96399 , 2015 , DOI: 10.15200/winn.144309.96399

Are there data yet on whether open peer review articles have, on average, more errors found post-publication or more retractions than traditionally reviewed articles? Are you consciously collecting such data or otherwise watching for "pat on the back" reviews in the absence of anonymity?

Many publishers hold that they're not really overcharging for open access - I've heard the number bandied about that publishing an article costs a journal $3000, so open access fees just about cover it. To be direct, are they lying? When PLoS and other OA publishers complete their own in-house platforms, do you believe they should be able to cut the price from many thousands to $99/author?

crabbypage
In biology the average is ~4.5 authors per article and after two years of publishing PeerJ is > 4 authors/article. So we haven't seen a bias yet, but it was definitely a concern in the beginning. Anecdotally, it does make people think twice whether to be listed as an author. Technically, there are recognized rules that have established what qualifies as an author. Too often that is getting ignored, and so in one way the PeerJ author model is a positive development.

As to the costs of publishing, a recent Nature article tried to tease out the 'true' costs (see http://www.nature.com/news/open-access-the-true-cost-of-science-publishing-1.12676). As you can see, it appears that the true costs of publishing can be quite low on a per-article basis (i.e. it does NOT cost $3000 to publish an article). However, many publishers end up with inefficient systems, which then loads costs back into the system. For example, if you have an editorial system which rejects most articles (simply to maximize your 'impact factor') then the small number of articles that are published need to bear the costs of all the articles which are rejected. And then many publishers are trying to maintain either a large revenue, or large profit margin of course...

As to open peer review improving articles - there are still (regrettably) very few journals practicing open peer review and so right now there isn't much data / research on the effects of yet. Anecdotally though, we do know that our authors value a process like PeerJ's where reviewers are encouraged to name themselves, and the reviews can be made fully public. Certainly it makes sense that fully open and transparent peer-review should improve the scholarly process.

Note: At PeerJ, where open signed reviews are optional, about 40% of reviewers choose to sign. And then authors can optional publish reviews, even if not signed. About 80% of authors choose to make their entire review history public, which has really surprised us. We thought it would be lower.

Will there also be more attention for NON-results? With that I mean: I'm trying (expecting) to find a link between X and Y. My research shows no significant relationship, therefore it's not published... While really it is an interesting result that should be published.

IamScuzzlebut
Will there also be more attention for NON-results?

At PeerJ our editorial criteria simply judges whether an article is 'scientifically sound' (see our criteria at https://peerj.com/about/editorial-criteria/). Because of this we do publish articles which report on 'negative' results and we believe that these articles are very valuable to the community (if a researcher knows someone tried something and it didnt work, then they don't need to waste time doing it again). The problem, however, is with the academic culture - at present there is no incentive for researchers to spend time writing a paper on experiments which didnt work :(

What, if any, publishing methods or procedures in use today would you deem improper or ineffective for dissemination of important discoveries?

lurklurklurkPOST
Thanks for the lead in on this one! It seems counter intuitive to attempt to disseminate important discoveries by publishing them in a paywalled journal which can only be accessed by researchers sitting in well funded institutions capable of paying the subscription price...

Hey guys, thanks for taking the time to answer questions! How effective is the peer review system from what you've seen, and do you think there are any ways we could improve it?

Muzebreak
How effective is the peer review system from what you've seen, and do you think there are any ways we could improve it?

Pete here. I look at every peer-review we receive, and every decision that is made at PeerJ.

'Peer review' is an easy target when complaining about the scholarly process. It is prone to errors; it is run by fallible or biased humans; comments are often contradictory; it can be slow and frustrating. However, the fact is that having a couple of experts look over a paper and 'vet' it to try to spot errors and suggest improvements is a very valuable thing. Almost every paper I see has been improved by the peer-review process and invariably the authors get a 'better' paper as a result. That doesnt mean that peer-review catches everything, and it certainly doesnt mean that if something is peer-reviewed then it is correct (!).

As to how to improve it - one of the most interesting experiments right now is to practice 'open peer review' (at PeerJ reviewers are encouraged to name themselves and ~40% do; and authors are able to publish the entire peer-review history alongside their article, ~80% do). We find that a lot of people really value the open peer review history. It makes it more transparent as to who is doing the review; how well it was reviewed; what were the issues raised inthe review; did the author respond to all the points etc.

Oh hai!

I'm pretty happy of your target of publishing for 99$, I'm alway super outraged by those people promoting open access for 1000 + $. As a guy in a computational field such costs are simply unbearable. Such numbers can simply kill smaller groups.

Anyway, my question is: do you think we really need open access? As a researcher I'm starting to believe that the current problem is that we have way too much information, too many papers churned out each week. Quite involuntarily the current system of few journals with high-ish rejection rates achieve the goal of reducing the number of papers that one have to read to keep up to date. (even if in a very sub-optimal way)

With pre-prints archival, open access, peerJ, plose and so on it seems like the target becomes having as many papers available to the public as possible. How would a researcher be able to navigate through the mess in such a scenario?

I am currently reading papers selected by Google scholar (an automatic algorithm owned by an (evil?) company!!) or those that I stumble upon one way or another. And I think this is sub-optimal, but I can't think of any other option.

BTW: why do some publisher, even some non-profit ones, charge that much for OA papers? I've read that plos one barely breaks even, despite the high costs!!

lucaxx85
Actually, in an era of 'information overload' we need Open Access more than ever! If all content were open access then the ability to data mine / search / discover the literature is dramatically improved. Already, no human can read or filter the literature in their field, however the machines can (if only we give them the permissions to do so).

Google Scholar has had to go out to every single subscription publisher and sign a contract with them to be allowed to index their paywalled content. If everything was openly available to all, just think of the potential for anyone to build a better google scholar in their garage.

How do you attract qualified reviewers? What sort of networking do you do to get higher profile authors/work to publish with you?

Would I be able to submit to multiple journals simultaneously, or will I be locked down to your journal for however long the review takes?

Can you store data sets and methods (particularly code) for easier replication of results?

riboch
How do you attract qualified reviewers? What sort of networking do you do to get higher profile authors/work to publish with you?

On our 'biology' journal we have approx 1,100 Academic Editors. If you scan through the list (e.g. see listings per subject area at https://peerj.com/academic-boards/subjects/peerj/) then you will notice that these are all senior and respected academics (in fact, we have 5 Nobel Laureates on the Board). It is a similar situation for our Computer Science journal (i.e. all the Editors are senior academics in their field). We were able to persuade so many senior people to join the Board because they believe in our mission (to provide high quality open access publication at a reasonable price, hence opening up the scholarly communication process to as many people as possible).

Would I be able to submit to multiple journals simultaneously, or will I be locked down to your journal for however long the review takes?

It is a general rule in the industry that you cant submit the same article to more than one journal at once. The reason being that if an article is being reviewed in more than one place, it could be wasting peoples time, and it could end up being published 'twice' etc

Can you store data sets and methods (particularly code) for easier replication of results?

Yes - we have a pretty strict rule about data sharing. We can store data ourselves (e.g. as supplemental files) or authors can deposit the data in their discipline specific repositories. See: https://peerj.com/about/policies-and-procedures/#data-materials-sharing

I recently read an article mentioning peer-review burnout. What is the feasibility of the goal of Open Access on a massive scale? Are gov't agencies stepping up to help with funding of such projects?

strangeattractors
I recently read an article mentioning peer-review burnout. What is the feasibility of the goal of Open Access on a massive scale?

Open Access in itself is not responsible for ‘peer review’ burnout. If all articles were to be published ‘open access’ instead of ‘subscription’ then the average ‘peer review burden’ to the world would not change.

On an annual basis the number of articles increases (at approx 6% per year - see this really useful ‘STM Report, pg 27 - http://www.stm-assoc.org/2015_02_20_STM_Report_2015.pdf) and so more articles need more peer review. However, the number of researchers, also increases year on year (same report)...

It is interesting though to think about how the Editorial policies of journals affects the peer-review burden. If journals peer-review articles and then reject otherwise publishable articles, simply because they are trying to publish only the ‘high impact’ articles, then those rejected articles go on to be reviewed and re-reviewed and re-reviewed multiple times until they are accepted. It is possible that this effect is one of the main reasons for peer-review fatigue these days. The PeerJ editorial model (which only reviews for scientific soundness, and if the article is sound then we publish it) actually reduces the peer-review burden, as ‘sound’ articles do not need to be repeatedly re-reviewed!

Question: What are you doing about "open access journals" that would publish any crap to get paid?

This is a totally serious question. I am very sympathetic to open access publication. As a research academic, I have donated too much of my time, effort, and expertise reviewing

manuscripts for professional journals. I have thought it was for the benefit of my field, or for my colleagues, but I can't deny that my donated time has gone to benefit for-profit publishing corporations who then keep the manuscripts behind expensive paywalls.

That upsets me, of course. And yet...

The open access journals that are doing good, honest work at publishing quality research (like PLOS ONE) are swamped by the deluge of copycats who are out for the money that authors will provide, with no control of quality. Such copycats are to journals like PLOS ONE like spam to emails, and that's from the perspective of the reader of publications (to authors they are more like those Nigerian princes, though ultimately cheaper). And if my email account is overwhelmingly more spam than actual emails, I don't bother to go through them, I just close the account.

Thus my question: Is there a spam-filter equivalent to open-access journals? Are you making one? Do you know someone who is, or has?

weaselword
There are a few community led efforts to help authors identify which journals they should be avoiding. The most recent one is Think, Check, Submit (http://thinkchecksubmit.org/)

Thanks for doing an AMA! My question is about encouraging usage of your site and other open-access platforms. A lot of times, journals (for better or worse) give the impression that their content is mainly marketed to other professionals in that field, as opposed to other professionals in that field, other scientific professionals in general, and (in some cases) the general public. How do you encourage a larger, more varied readership of your articles? Especially in view of whether or not certain populations may have the foundational knowledge necessary to understand the articles?

midasgoldentouch
Thanks for coming by!

Even before publication, we encourage our authors to distill their findings into short titles that can be used in informal settings, example Twitter. That's in addition to the (usually) long and dry jargon-filled title. We also make a lot of effort on, example, Twitter and Facebook, to promote each article in lay terms. And we talk with the press a lot to help explain research and ensure any press coverage is accurate.

Quite often we develop infographics and posters that are consumable to nearly everyone. For example, the most recent infographic was on the personal microbiome cloud.

https://twitter.com/thePeerJ/status/646288582068473856

As a doctoral student, I want my work to go into the most visible place possible as to improve my CV as much as possible prior to my forthcoming job search. Publishing in newer unproven journals is likely to be a detriment to my career prospects (at the very least it isn't going to help as much as publishing in a well known and regarded journal in my field).

It would seem new journals would need established researchers to come forth and publish in them, but well regarded established researchers don't face the same problems as others. Namely, they don't have a problem with funds for publication (in my field almost every grant has publication costs built in) and they are readily accepted into high profile journals.

Whats your plan for getting PeerJ much needed credibility?

MoreBeansAndRice
Credibility takes time of course, and so there are no shortcuts there. We've chartered a course for what we think scholarly publishing should look like in the future (i.e. transparent, open, cheaper, etc) and are doing our best to drive that forward. Already though PeerJ has had tremendous world-wide coverage and we're publishing at the rate of ~2,000 peer-reviewed articles per year now. More formally, we

received our first Impact Factor this past June. Although we've signed the DORA declaration to not misuse such metrics, it does indicate that people are reading and citing PeerJ articles. So, for still being early days, we've got a toehold on the credibility part, and now it's just a matter of maintaining high quality publishing.

What is on your software wishlist? I'm an R developer looking for a new project.

hugelkulture
Dynamic systemic reviews using available machine-readable research outputs would be cool - R could be one component of that. - JH

You talk about paywalls hampering research, but it seems to me most researchers have access to paid journals through their universities. If you're more worried about laypeople being stopped by paywalls, it seems most laypeople would do just as well or better reading a science journalist's summary of the work (or even just the researchers' summary on a lab webpage) than the original journal article.

So my question is, what problem is this solving? Is it targeting the small number of researchers not affiliated with universities and the small number of laypeople with enough expertise and interest to read the primary sources? Or is there something I'm missing? Thanks!

SubtleZebra
In addition to the other comments from redditors you may be surprised to learn that even the most well funded univerisites cannot afford access to everything they need.

One of the most wealthy universities in the world is Harvard (2011 Endowment was $31.8 billion). In April 2012 they issued this memo to staff (http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k77982&tabgroupid=icb.tabgroup143448), pointing out that they were unable to afford access to all the journals they wanted, and that the situation was becoming untenable.

So if even Harvard cant afford to provide access to their researchers, you have to wonder what the situation is at all the other institutions worldwide!

Not sure if it's on your plans, But with so much information out there, not only access is a problem but also making sense of it.

Is there like a protocol or API (not sure what the right term would be) to help standardize things and make analysis easier. Or are the tools available already good enough?

dvidsilva
Everything we publish is in machine-readable standards in microformats, metatags, json and JATS for article XML. Alf, our in-house XML guru, is involved in the JATS4R working group to make re-use even easier.

ContentMine https://github.com/ContentMine/ is working on parsing all the literature, and extracting as many facts as possible

Do you believe this will this help to encourage researchers to publish studies negative results or "failures"?

slapshot515
See this response on a similar question:
https://www.reddit.com/r/science/comments/3m6tml/science_ama_series_are_community_calls_to_change/cvcr1xj

Two questions, but first thanks for doing this. Question one, how can research outfits balance the desire for free or low cost dissemination of findings and still reward the scientists and researchers who do the research in the first place? Second question, I am a great believer in

the power of the visual image for communicating dense science to laymen, students, and casual readers. What role do you think images have in good scientific communication? Thanks gents!

ocherthulu
how can research outfits balance the desire for free or low cost dissemination of findings and still reward the scientists and researchers who do the research in the first place?

Not sure what the connection is there. The ability to freely disseminate the output of your research (as opposed to burying it behind the paywall of a journal which someone else publishes) has no bearing on the rewards system for your researchers does it?

What role do you think images have in good scientific communication?

We are a strong believer in using striking images. If you check out our homepage (http://peerj.com) you will see that we prominently feature large, attractive images and we get a lot of positive responses about how 'beautiful' our site is.

In addition, we frequently commission additional graphics and infographics for our articles. An example just from this week is: http://static.peerj.com/infographic/2015/personal-microbial-cloud/personal-microbial-cloud.pdf (for article https://peerj.com/articles/1258/)

Unfortunately scientists seem to be trained to remove all the interesting images and photos from their articles before submitting them!

What do you think of all the high profile Nature retractions that have been coming out?

Westbrook_Level
More transparency would be nice. - JH

Thanks for doing this AMA. I continue to be flabbergasted that I have hardly any access to the results of the research I (and all my fellow taxpayers) paid for. So I applaud activities like yours that aim to change this.

However, what I think is needed is to provide preprint archives such as ArxiV with 'Reddit-like' functionality of up- and down-voting. To get to quality rankings of papers, authors of strongly-upvoted papers should get higher voting power. I am sure details can be worked out to get such a system to work as an effective peer-review process.

Keen to hear your thoughts on this.

Kapede
We started PeerJ Preprints in 2012 to address this.https://peerj.com/preprints/

Commenting-wise: journals are notorious for being comment ghost towns, so it's a problem waiting to be cracked. That said, we have implemented a "Stackoverflow style" Q&A system, so that comments can be structured into feedback vs questions, and made reusable by machines and humans.

So, what are your plans regarding diversity and equality, and how are you going to promote minority-led scientific papers?

muddynotsofunny
To start, we've made it a goal to have as diverse an editorial board as possible. We're at near gender parity (50:50) on a board that is > 1,300 senior academics. Recently we started a blog series on gender balance in science. See:

- https://peerj.com/blog/post/115284878277/we-need-to-be-vigilant-to-stop-biases-occurring-solving-the-challenges-of-gender-balance-in-science-an-interview-with-professor-jonathan-eisen/
- http://peerj.com/blog/post/115284878270/we-need-to-educate-to-avoid-hidden-biases-solving-the-challenge-of-gender-balance-in-science-an-interview-with-professor-marilyn-renfree/

- http://peerj.com/blog/post/115284878180/women-scientists-are-often-still-invisible-solving-the-challenge-of-gender-equality-in-science-an-interview-with-professor-patricia-gowaty/

And we are co-sponsoring the Ada Lovelace Day this October in London (http://findingada.com/about/who-was-ada/).

You also asked about minority balance, and while our early successes have largely been on the gender front (we're a small team still), efforts are also underway to mitigate discrimination in our review process. For instance, early research has shown that profound effects can be had by simply adding a reviewer cover page that reminds each reviewer not to be biased against (sexual orientation, race, religion, gender, etc). We're very curious about the data once that becomes large enough to look at.

Will there be a PeerJ for chemistry? And how will you attract contributors?

Plutodrinker
At the moment we don't have plans for PeerJ Chemistry, however we are always looking for opportunities to address a community need of course

Most recently we launched "PeerJ Computer Science" (https://peerj.com/computer-science/) and one of the ways we attracted submissions to that journal was to recruit a highly prestigious Editorial Board. When researchers see very well known names supporting a new journal like this, they are more encouraged to submit articles of course.

Thanks for doing this AMA.. :-)

I have a question:

When will politicians have a degree of Science and/or Engineering instead of Law and/or Economics?

Aroumi
Pete here - as a Brit, I am obliged to mention that Margaret Thatcher was a chemist by training!

I live your objective and project! In Peru I met with a joint committee between several universities discussing how little research they publish in comparison to other countries. They need access to resources like this.

How politicized are grants? Does funding direct science? Is anything labeled as fringe science done so for corporate benefit maintain corporate control over a restrictive economy?

jpastore
Thank you, and we hope more affordable Open Access options will come out as a result of our venture.

The real question here is how do you reform academic promotion practices so that one's ability to make tenure, secure grants, etc is not directly tied what journals you're publishing in (reputation , impact factors, etc.)?

This is one of the major hurdles facing OA publishers.

coltranedis
Although this affects Open Access journals, because they are new and dont necessarily have the reputation of decades of publishing, it is actually an issue for the entire publishing world (subscription publishers included).

One of the most recent attempts to address this issue has been the DORA declaration (http://www.ascb.org/dora/) which has been signed by a wide range of publishers, academics, institutions etc and aims to change the culture of evaluation and reward.

Ultimately though it often feels that academia is it's own worst enemy on this one. It is widely recognized that the current system of evaluation (based on publications in specific journals) -

academics hate it. And yet the academic institutions themselves are the ones which perpetuate this way of evaluating their staff. Change needs to come from within the academic institutions...

Thinking back to Aaron Swartz, he tried to accumulate a large collection of scholarly articles from one of these large academic publishers with a hefty pay wall with the intent of making them freely available.

The crimes he was charged with did NOT specifically deal with what he was doing or his intended plans were, but rather with how he went about collecting large amounts of data superstitiously and with automated scripts in a way that prosecutors felt violated the terms of his rights to access the data.

Is Aaron Swartz's plan still possible? What's stopping people with access through these pay walls from creating a free public archive.

Lardzor
Jason here. I've written and spoken about Aaron quite a bit over the years. See:

- http://enjoythedisruption.com/post/40335753810/aaron-swartz-found-dead-but-lives-on-with-open
- http://enjoythedisruption.com/post/102346721574/download-academic-pdfs-you-might-get-punched-in
- http://enjoythedisruption.com/post/40833366989/when-stealing-isnt-stealing-the-most-disturbing

Aaron is a hero in the digital era. I hope we never forget him and the tragedy of his loss. He inspired the formation of PeerJ in 2011. We may never unlock all of history's pay-walled research, but we can strive to make it all open going forward. That's the fight we chose, and hope we can inspire others like Aaron did for us.