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## Articles and Statements

### Comment Moderation and Freedom of Speech at PubPeer: Challenges and Issues

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#### Abstract

PubPeer (<https://www.pubpeer.com/>) is currently very likely the most visible and coordinated post-publication peer review site for academics and scientists, even more than PubMed Commons, which has now become obsolete because it allows for anonymous comments and critiques. In order for this site to continue to gain the trust and respect of scientists, it needs to display complete transparency and open communication with the public. Little is known about the founders and the management of this organization, California-based The PubPeer Foundation, although two of its founders, Boris Barbour and Brandon Stell, work at French research institutes. It is believed that in November of 2016, The PubPeer Foundation received US\$ 412,800 in funding from the Laura and John Arnold Foundation. However, the public would not have been able to glean this information from looking at the “About us” page, even after PubPeer upgraded to version 2.0 on June 15, 2017. This large financial donation is linked to John Arnold’s “war on bad science”. Opacity regarding these facts, compounded by comment removal querying this funding and why it had not been publicized at that time, and how this funding is currently being used, underscores trust in PubPeer, its founders, and its funders. It is unclear who precisely is the comment moderator at PubPeer, and comments come and go, are edited and erased, at the will of the anonymous moderator. If PubPeer hid basic information from the public for almost 7 months, continues to show signs of content (i.e., comment) manipulation and infringement of commentator freedom of speech by impeding the publication of comments, then what moral voice does PubPeer have to request the transparent participation of scientists, editors, and publishers on its site?

**Keywords:** Boris Barbour, Brandon Stell, cancer, crisis in science, Laura and John Arnold Foundation, opacity vs transparency, post-publication peer review, psychology, PubMed Commons.

#### Highlights

- PubPeer is a post-publication peer review site.
- The PubPeer Foundation received US\$ 412,800 from the Laura and John Arnold Foundation.
- Comments (i.e., public records) continue to be manipulated and deleted at PubPeer.
- The precise comment moderator(s) at PubPeer is/are unknown.
- Commentator freedom of speech is limited at PubPeer.

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## “Crisis” in science publishing, increasing scrutiny, and post-publication peer review

One definition for science’s apparent current crisis is “the inability to detect errors/fraud, lack of transparency, lack of reliability, potential for bias, potential for unethical practices, lack of objectivity, inconsistencies amongst reviewers, lack of recognition and motivation of reviewers” (Das, 2016). Post-publication peer review (PPPR) may be a realistic solution to resolving some of science publishing’s ills (Wichert, 2017; Brembs, 2018), but its use and implementation requires the coordinated use by all of publishing’s stakeholders (e.g., authors, editors, publishers, funders) (Teixeira da Silva et al., 2017). Peer reviewers and editors are the key gate-keepers who are expected to maintaining quality control of the published literature (Teixeira da Silva, 2017a), but perverted incentives, including increasing reliance on metrics to quantify “quality” (Teixeira da Silva, Bernès, 2018), has led to the considerable corrosion and abuse of the biomedical literature, although the extent to which this has taken place is currently difficult to quantify. PPPR has presented itself as one of the most powerful means to correct errors in the literature, although the level of correction that is required is still unclear, and still relies heavily on editorial independence (Teixeira da Silva, 2016a). If publishing were to function perfectly, then all errors would be corrected, but this is not always possible, for multiple reasons. Extreme errors that invalidate results, duplications, or misconduct are often subject to retractions, and these most often cast a poor light on authors, editors, journals and the publishers involved (Teixeira da Silva, 2016b). Given this negative stigma attached to retractions (Teixeira da Silva, Al-Khatib, 2019), there is still a wide range of responsiveness to PPPR, even by those journals and publishers that claim to follow the strictest forms of publishing ethics, namely the publishing industry’s Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

In recent times, some journals have experienced their very first retraction, which may represent a highly improbable or unexpected event, i.e., a “black swan” publishing event (Teixeira da Silva, 2015a). Such low levels of corrections or retractions in such journals may also indicate that their published literature might not yet have been subjected to rigorous PPPR, or that the editors and publisher might be resisting its review or correction, to avoid reputational damage. In such cases, editors may be violating their basic responsibilities towards the integrity of the published record (Teixeira da Silva, Dobránszki, 2018). Many journals and publishers are coming under increased scrutiny by its authorship, readership, concerned editors, or members of the public. In one such case, *Molecular and Cellular Biology*<sup>\*</sup>, the journal and publisher (American Society for Microbiology) decided to complete a thorough PPPR of the figures in published papers in a certain window of time to ascertain the extent of problematic papers<sup>†</sup> after a spate of papers had been highlighted on the PPPR whistle-blowing site, PubPeer<sup>‡</sup>.

PubPeer used to have a journal-by-journal classification<sup>§</sup> which was scrapped when it upgraded to the beta version 2.0<sup>\*\*</sup> on June 15, 2017. That classification system was useful to identify “black swan” journals and to identify journals that potentially had a too-good-to-be-true publication record as well as those that had a history of problematic papers. Although no public explanation was provided by PubPeer, the elusive Peer O, which is/are presumably the PubPeer moderator(s), did offer some insight into why the “Topics”<sup>††</sup> page was scrapped, stating “In the near future we will make them easier to find but we do not plan to provide a mechanism that would allow users to create new ones. Although we agree that some were very useful, the topics that you discovered on the old site were a small fraction of the total number that were created; the overall majority were a violation of PubPeer rules or comments about a specific publication and were a moderation nightmare. However, if in the future you have an idea for a thread on PubPeer that you think would be useful for everyone please send us an email.” The topics page allowed for peers to opine on specific issues, but the anonymous platform failed to prevent abuses, i.e., comment

\* <http://mcb.asm.org/content/37/11/e00199-17.full>

† <http://www.the-scientist.com/?articles.view/articleNo/49642/title/Journal-Cleans-Up-Image-Archives/>

‡ <https://www.pubpeer.com/>

§ <https://web.archive.org/web/20170210135854/https://www.pubpeer.com/journals/>

\*\* <https://www.pubpeer.com/publications/pubpeer2>

†† <https://web.archive.org/web/20150319025106/https://pubpeer.com/topics>

moderation failed to some extent at PubPeer. As a consequence, important topics that allow academics to be aware of challenges in biomedical publishing ethics, such as the continued inability to hold some COPE member journals, editors and publishers accountable for what appears to be a vastly corroded (i.e., poorly academically vetted) literature\*, compounded by opaque, unaccountable and unresponsive PubPeer management, made such topics fade from public view.

PubPeer has always been surrounded by controversy because it allows both registered and anonymous commentators to critique the literature or academics. Unlike PubMed Commons, which only used to allow registered commentators to add comments that were subjected to strict moderation overseen by Hilda Bastian, prior to the sudden closure of PubMed Commons in mid-February 2018 (Teixeira da Silva, 2018a), one of the concerns about PubPeer is that its moderators may be biased, inconsistent and cannot be held accountable, as indicated above for Peer o, whose identity remains unknown. The argument here is that a PPPR site must display the highest possible levels of honesty, trust, respect, transparency, and accountability to be considered a true journal club (Teixeira da Silva et al., 2017). From early in 2017, a number of journal clubs had begun to emerge and register formally at PubMed Commons<sup>†</sup>. As equally as PubPeer was hiding the identity of its moderators, so too was PubMed Commons hiding the identity of its team<sup>‡</sup>. This opacity displayed by PubPeer and PubMed Commons may, in fact, be a way to conceal possible conflicts of interest (COIs), given the amount of interaction that takes place between PubPeer and Retraction Watch, a popular blog, as exemplified by its call to coercion (Teixeira da Silva, 2017b) or its potentially bad advice to scientists (Teixeira da Silva, 2017c), and between Hilda Bastian and these organizations. Hidden relationships between PubPeer and Retraction Watch have already been documented (Teixeira da Silva, 2017d) while the inter-mingling between these science watchdogs and COPE raises concerns about the neutral or bias-free nature of any of these parties (Teixeira da Silva, 2019a). This paper presents additional evidence that shows hidden facts regarding the financial support of PubPeer and suppression of comments. These issues underscore the overall trust that the academic community may have on this site and its possible objectives.

### **PubPeer funding, possible hidden conflicts of interest, and suppressed freedom of speech**

In September of 2015, PubPeer revealed its founders (Couzin-Frankel, 2015): Brandon Stell, an American brain physiologist at Paris Descartes University in Paris<sup>§</sup>, Boris Barbour<sup>\*\*</sup>, Director of the Cerebellum Group at IBENS-ENS (CNRS) at PSL Research University, also in Paris, and Gabor Brasnjo, a patent attorney. In a bid to obtain financing, Stell created The PubPeer Foundation in California as a “nonprofit public benefit corporation with 501(c)(3) nonprofit status”<sup>††</sup>, thus having to reveal his identity that he had kept secret for several years while he ran PubPeer as an “underground” organization. Stell is the President of this organization while Barbour is the treasurer, thus overseeing finances. On or near November 8, 2016, The PubPeer Foundation received US\$ 412,800 in funding from the Laura and John Arnold Foundation (LJAF) for general operations from 2016-2019 (Fig. 1B)<sup>\*\*</sup>, as part of a wider “war on bad science”<sup>§§</sup>. Almost seven months later, this information had still not appeared on the PubPeer “About” page (Fig. 1A), reflecting serious concerns about the transparency of this organization and/or its leadership (Teixeira da Silva, 2018b). With the launch of the beta version, PubPeer 2.0, in mid-June of 2017, a tiny acknowledgement was made to this fact (Fig. 1C), but even so, the link to the correct funding page on the LJAF site was not linked, and the precise date when that funding was received was not indicated.

This aspect alone should have raised alarm bells and red flags among academics. When a whistle-blowing website that claims to be an online journal club and that specializes in criticism of

\* <https://www.pubpeer.com/publications/2E91E8916236A6EE03F372E64FBBAF>

† <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedcommons/journal-clubs/about/>

‡ <https://pubmedcommonsblog.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/author/pubmedcommonsblog/>

§ [http://www.biomedicale.parisdescartes.fr/physiocer/?page\\_id=2983](http://www.biomedicale.parisdescartes.fr/physiocer/?page_id=2983)

\*\* <http://www.ibens.ens.fr/spip.php?rubrique32&lang=en>

†† <https://www.pubpeer.com/about>

\*\* <https://www.arnoldfoundation.org/grants/> (listed under Research Integrity)

§§ <https://www.wired.com/2017/01/john-arnold-waging-war-on-bad-science>

the biomedical literature by profiling scientists, editors, journals and publishers, often by masked individuals with an unknown, undisclosed or possibly biased agenda that may or may not be academic, but then fails to disclose this information to the public (i.e., lack of openness, full disclosure, transparency), and then expects such values from its commentators, then this may be a cause for concern. Concerned with this opacity regarding funding, I added a comment as an anonymous commentator to a PubPeer page in December of 2016 where my posted comment could be recorded, requesting why this important information had not been released to the public\*. My comment was not approved, nor published (Fig. 1D). This indicates that PubPeer was not, at that time, operating in a fully honest, open, transparent, or accountable manner, at least not to the public. By hiding this aspect of financing from the public for over 7 months, and by employing unfair and excessive comment moderation that undermines basic principles of freedom of speech, even if – or especially if – they are queries or opinions that are critical of PubPeer, trust in PubPeer may become eroded.

**A** PubPeer > About

The PubPeer Foundation is a California-registered nonprofit public benefit corporation with 501(c)(3) nonprofit status in the United States. The overarching goal of the Foundation is to help improve the quality of scientific research by enabling innovative approaches for community interaction. Our initial focus will be on maintaining and developing the PubPeer online platform for post-publication peer review.

The bylaws of the newly created Foundation aim to establish PubPeer.com as a service run for the benefit of its readers and commenters, who create all of its content. We feel that a nonprofit organization constitutes the ideal framework through which to pursue these goals. We are also taking this opportunity to formalize the responsibilities of directors, officers, agents, and subcontractors of the Foundation. First and foremost, they should always act to preserve and defend the anonymity of users of Foundation sites. In addition, they must not comment on Foundation sites except through official channels (such as the blog, the twitter account or as moderators), and they must avoid real and apparent conflicts of interest.

The inaugural Board of the Foundation consists of the three founders of PubPeer.com and two associates, respectively: Brandon Stiel (President), George Smith, Richard Smith, Boris Barbour (Treasurer) and Gabor Brasnjo (Secretary).

We wish to thank all of the expert commenters of PubPeer.com, who are responsible for the success of the site. We also thank and are extremely grateful to our pro bono legal representatives (Nicholas Jollymore of Jollymore Law and Alex Abdo, Daniel Korobkin and Samia Hossain of the ACLU) for defending our site and the community's right to comment freely under the law.

For anything related to the Foundation or PubPeer.com, please continue to contact us through the site (contact@pubpeer.com) and not via any professional or personal channels you may discover.

**B** The PubPeer Foundation 2016 - 2019 \$412,800  
To provide general operating support.

**C** PubPeer 2.0  
PubPeer Blog - 44 Comments

#1 Peer 0 commented 6 days ago

We are proud to announce the new version of PubPeer, developed with the generous financial support of the Laura and John Arnold Foundation.

**D** Anonymous on December 15, 2016 at 8:16 PM said:  
Your comment is awaiting moderation.  
Why has PubPeer not indicated that it received US\$ 412,800 from the Laura and John Arnold Foundation for 2016-2019?  
<http://www.arnoldfoundation.org/grants/>

**E** Boris Barbour  
January 17, 2017 at 22:45  
This ridiculous court ruling must be swiftly overturned. Let the truth be free.  
Boris Barbour  
Director of Research  
CNRS, Ecole Normale Supérieure  
Paris, France

**F** Melanoplus Littoralis commented a few seconds ago  
Awaiting Moderation  
I have noticed, since the launch of version 2.0, many comments being removed (presumably "moderated"). Can PubPeer indicate exactly who is Peer 0, and if Peer 0 is the single moderator. If not, who precisely serves as the moderator for all incoming PubPeer comments, or are there multiple moderators? What standards or policies exist for comment moderators and where can these policies be found on the PubPeer page? One could argue that the PubPeer moderators serve a function not unlike editors of an editor board, yet while specific editors may be held accountable for journal content, at PubPeer, there is simply an elusive "contact@pubpeer.com" and no specific individual can be held accountable for content that one day exists on a thread, but the next may be gone. Transparency and accountability are two core issues as PubPeer moves forward, even more so now that it has received sizable funding, and users and the public deserve to know the answers to these issues. Otherwise PubPeer will invoke its own crisis of trust in the post-publication peer review movement.

**G** Sorbus Subcuneata commented a few seconds ago  
Awaiting Moderation  
#139  
"one would hope that a website that is supposed to promote transparency and open discussion would at a minimum be transparent about its moderation policies"  
#140  
"What is certain is that non-transparent, apparently biased moderation is unacceptable"  
In the spirit of this openness and transparency challenged by Lydia Maniatis, two questions:  
1. Who precisely is/are the PubPeer moderator(s)?  
2. What qualifications do the PubPeer moderator(s) have to moderate such a diversity of topics and fields of study?

**H** Sorbus Subcuneata commented a few seconds ago  
Awaiting Moderation  
Who is the de facto author of this document?

Exploring publication ethics in the arts, humanities, and social sciences: A COPE study 2019  
COPE Council with support from Routledge (part of the Taylor & Francis Group) and Shift Learning (2019) - 0 Comments  
doi: 10.24018/cope.2019.4.1

Write Preview  
Leave a comment  
Attach files by dragging & dropping, selecting them, or pasting from the clipboard.  
Comment must be at least 15 characters.  
Styling with Markdown is supported

**Fig. 1.** Evidence of hidden financial conflict of interest by PubPeer (A), confirmation that US\$ 412,800 in funding was received from the Laura and John Arnold Foundation (B). Only on June 15, 2017, an estimated 7 months after receiving this funding, did PubPeer make a short acknowledgement, but failing to indicate any specific details such as how funding was being used and when funding had been received (C). A query related to this funding was deliberately suppressed (D). Boris Barbour is a passionate defender of freedom of speech, transparency and

\* <http://blog.pubpeer.com/?p=190#comment-427> (comment not visible because not approved)

sharing information, as was displayed on January 17, 2017, in his defense of Leonid Schneider, a science watchdog, accused of libel in two German courts (E). A comment made on June 20, 2017, on PubPeer beta version 2.0 regarding the identity of the PubPeer moderator and moderation rules was not approved for publication (F), nor was a similar comment made anonymously on September 12, 2019, approved (G). A simple query regarding the precise identity of the authors of a COPE statement was also not approved. In essence, the lack of comment approval reflects the suppression of freedom of speech and displays communication opacity. All screenshots used from publicly visible sites under the fair-use agreement for PPPR (Teixeira da Silva, 2015b).

The issue of freedom of speech and first amendment rights in the US was clearly exemplified in a court case brought against PubPeer and its anonymous commentators by Fazlul Sarkar (Teixeira da Silva, 2018c). PubPeer's Barbour clearly valued open speech, having been given ample opportunity to openly express his discontent at PubMed Commons in response to criticisms of PubPeer by a plant physiologist, Prof. Michael Blatt\*. Barbour appears to be an avid defender of freedom of speech, coming to the defense of another science watchdog, Leonid Schneider (Fig. 1E)<sup>†</sup>, who describes himself on Twitter as a "certified Troll with slanderous website"<sup>‡</sup>, and who had the freedom to accuse a high-ranking ethics journal of being "predatory" (Teixeira da Silva, 2019b), making this suppression of freedom of speech at PubPeer worrisome, and somewhat hypocritical. This apparent double standard employed by PubPeer and/or its management was confirmed on June 20, 2017, when I posed a question at PubPeer regarding the identity of the moderator (Peer O), a question that was not approved for publication (Fig. 1F). In response to public criticisms made by Lydia M. Maniatis regarding PubPeer's moderation and commenting policies<sup>§</sup>, I added an anonymous comment on September 12, 2019, that requested that the identity of the PubPeer moderator(s), and also to explain their qualifications to be able to moderate such a wide range of topics that are critiqued on their blog. That comment was also never published (Fig. 1G). Furthermore, a short query requesting the precise identity of the authors of a COPE Council statement was not published (Fig. 1H)\*\*. These suppressed comments cement the notion that freedom of speech is being suppressed to some extent by PubPeer and that this site and its moderator(s) are employing censorship of comments that may be perceived to be critical of PubPeer, or their possible allies.

### **Implications of PubPeer opacity, inadequate comment moderation, and suppression of freedom of speech**

In June of 2018, a reporter in France's Le Monde characterized PubPeer's mode of moderation as imperfect<sup>††</sup>. The apparent double-standard being practiced by PubPeer with respect to freedom of speech and fair and moderated commenting coupled with public shaming and humiliation (Teixeira da Silva, 2018d) should be of great concern to academics, especially those who are profiled on this website. Exposure of this topic reveals that many unanswered questions remain: How many comments are being approved, or not, by commentators? When, and under what circumstances, are comments deleted? Why are comments deleted if they are initially approved? When are comments manipulated? Who precisely moderates comments, anonymous and registered? What criteria are being applied during comment moderation? Is there a formal process to challenge comments, or to request their removal? Comment-related concerns, including the ease with which PubPeer is able to manipulate and erase them, equivalent to erasing public records, calls into question who precisely owns comments on that whistle-blowing website, i.e., if comments can be copyrighted (Teixeira da Silva, 2018e). Is there a board of moderators, similar to an academic journal's editorial board, to self-regulate PubPeer? Can the public hold PubPeer

\* <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/myncbi/boris.barbour.1/comments/>

† <https://forbetterscience.com/2017/01/17/open-letter-in-support-of-my-investigation-of-trachea-transplants-in-germany-by-rafael-cantera/comment-3529>

‡ <https://twitter.com/schneiderleonid>

§ <https://pubpeer.com/publications/pubpeer2#139>; <https://pubpeer.com/publications/pubpeer2#140>

\*\* <https://pubpeer.com/publications/BE3D071504F6F7F2D797B2009F5CB9>

†† <https://twitter.com/Gjpvnant/status/1004017602031767553>

accountable? PubPeer, like other science watchdogs (Teixeira da Silva, 2016c), is purportedly claiming to be working for the good of science to resolve some of its replication and trust problems through PPPR. Yet, as evidenced to some extent in this paper, important information regarding the financing of PubPeer had been temporarily hidden from the public, and queries regarding this failure to disclose detailed information were suppressed. Valid queries related to comment moderation were also suppressed. The scientific community needs to reflect on whether it can trust the critique of published academia's integrity in the hands of PubPeer, where it is currently not possible to hold the "moderator" fully responsible, where apparent contrasting standards are practiced, and where there is evidence of a lack of openness and transparency, and suppressed freedom of speech. PubPeer's Barbour espouses such principles in public, as evidenced by claims, from May 28-31, 2017, where he was a keynote speaker of the "Transparency and Accountability" section of the 5<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Research Integrity, noting that transparency lies at the heart of PubPeer\*. The current focus of PPPR by the LJAF at PubPeer appears to be on cancer research†, coordinated with or organized by the Open Science Framework‡, and psychology.

### Conflicts of interest

The author's work has been profiled by PubPeer and by its "partner" organization, also funded by the LJAF, Retraction Watch. The author has used PubPeer, both as a signed, registered commentator, and anonymously. The author has written several papers and commentaries related to PubPeer, Retraction Watch, Leonid Schneider, and COPE, in a bid to better understand the role of these watchdogs in science ethics and integrity. The author declares no other apparent conflicts of interest related to this topic.

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\* <http://wcri2017.org/program/keynote-speakers>; <http://wcri2017.org/program/plenary-sessions>

† <https://www.pubpeer.com/search?q=cancer>

‡ <https://osf.io/e81xl/wiki/home/>

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