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Nature Precedings: Back to the Source

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Nature Publishing Group is launching Nature Precedings, a new free online service which will enable researchers to share, discuss and cite their early findings prior to publication.

Important details: Nature's new service is intended to complement traditional peer-reviewed journals, and to allow researchers to make informal communications such as conference papers or presentations more widely available and enabling them to be formally cited. The Precedings site will offer community features such as tagging, rating and RSS feeds which will allow users to request and comment on material. Nature has said that it will "lightly moderate" contributions, and that the site will be a "relatively informal channel for scientists to disseminate information, especially recent experimental results and emerging conclusions."

The site will host a wide range of research documents, including preprints, unpublished manuscripts, white papers, technical papers, supplementary findings, posters and presentations. Every document will be allocated a DOI to allow citation, but will not be formally peer-reviewed and will be archived under a Creative Commons license.

Implications: Open Source software advocate Eric S Raymond once posited Linus' law as "given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow". In science, the same philosophy suggests that the more widely available methodology and results are for public evaluation, the more rapidly errors and omissions will be discovered. The traditional peer review model, in comparison, is theoretically less effective in discovering errors because of the limited number of eyeballs.

This is what will appeal to users of Nature Precedings – it will allow researchers to gather feedback from their community and to focus their ideas before they submit papers for formal publication. This isn't a new idea – a widely-used physics preprint server, ArXiv, was established in 1991 – but the recent boom in Web 2.0 activity means scientific interactivity has never been so likely to succeed.

The informal intent of the resource is very similar to Elsevier's recent Topic Pages initiative (see Scirus Announces Topic Pages: Bringing Formal and Informal Together, EPS Insights, 15 June 2007). But there is a greater focus in NPG's announcement on the purpose of informal communication being for better science and eventual formal publication. This may simply be a case of NPG marketing its site better than Elsevier, but there's no reason why Topic Pages couldn't provide the same role for publishing scientists.

The real test of both companies will be in their ability to push-manage their communities to ensure users contribute regularly and positively. The greatest danger is apathy. In 2000, following Arxiv's success, ChemWeb.com launched its Chemistry Preprint Server (CPS), which subsequently closed in 2004 because of a lack of submissions.

Success for Nature would be twofold. Firstly, it's good PR: Nature Precedings will be seen as championing the openness of research, and improving the quality of scientific publication. But it's also good publishing sense: Nature will presumably be in a prime position to formally publish everything that grows out of the early-stage material.