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## Overlay Journals: Overlooked or Emergent? (Paper)

### **Abstract or Résumé:**

Overlay journals are not a new concept but have been experiencing a recent resurgence because of the increase in the number of preprint servers and the increase in the number of preprints on coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) related topics. This study examines overlay journals at various stages of maturity for unique characteristics, including whether the authors submitted their article to the journal and whether the reviews of the article are published by the overlay journal. Whether they are considered overlooked or emergent, overlay journals are becoming an important contribution to scholarly communication.

### **1. Introduction**

The term overlay journal was coined in 1996 by Paul Ginsparg, who developed the arXiv preprint server in 1991 (Brown 2010). An overlay journal is “[a]n open-access journal that takes submissions from the preprints deposited at an archive...and subjects them to peer review.” (Suber 2004). A traditional journal serves five functions: registration, certification, awareness, archiving, rewarding (Casella & Calvi 2010). A repository or preprint server performs all but one of these five functions – certification or peer review. An overlay journal performs the certification function. Combining the overlay journal and the preprint server addresses all five functions of a traditional journal.

Overlay journals were evaluated by addressing several key questions. Which preprint servers do overlay journals use? What licencing agreements facilitate the overlay journal? How does the preprint get considered by the overlay journal? Is peer review for the overlay journal similar to a traditional journal?

This paper aligns with the CAIS 2021 conference because it explores overlay journals, which can be considered overlooked since being created in the late 1990s and, at the same time, emergent to address an overwhelming number of preprints on the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19).

### **2. Methods**

Library and Information Science (LIS) Source (LISS) and LIS Abstracts (LISA) searches for “overlay journal” OR “overlay journals” returned 12 unique English language articles, and their bibliographies were screened. The same search terms were used in Google thereby including

grey literature. For the first 10 pages of Google results, titles were screened. Purposive sampling was used in Google for software platforms and Google Scholar for one overlay journal title.

As a result of the proposed questions regarding overlay journals, 11 categories were created to analyze overlay journals' structure. The categories include "journal title," "year established as overlay," "first volume as overlay," "preprint server," "licence," "preprint identified by journal," "peer review," "software platform," "publisher," "support," and "associated fees." "Preprint identified by journal" indicates whether the author submits or the journal selects the articles. "Peer review" was populated with information regarding the reviewer's identity, recorded as either "identified" or "blinded," and the review's visibility, recorded as either "public" or "private." "Support" includes funding or administrative support information. Overlay journals were included if sufficient information was available, either from the journal's website or additional sources.

In addition to evaluating the overlay journal, the preprint server on which the journal overlays was analyzed. The number of preprints per year was investigated for three preprint servers: arXiv [1], bioRxiv [2], medRxiv [3]. For 2020, the number of COVID-19-related preprints [4] was compared to the total number of preprints. All analyses were performed in January 2021.

### 3. Results

The first overlay journals appeared in 1997 and overlaid on arXiv (Table 1). The arXiv preprint server launched in 1991 (Figure 1). With 300 preprints in 1991, arXiv had over 200,000 preprints deposited in 2020. BioRxiv started with only 70 preprints in 2013 and had 40,000 preprints deposited in 2020. Despite only launching in 2019 with 700 preprints, medRxiv had 14,000 preprints deposited in 2020 (Figure 1). For the year 2020, COVID-19 preprints represented 1% of the total number of preprints in arXiv, 6% in bioRxiv, and 61% in medRxiv (Figure 2).

*Table 1: Overlay Journal Characteristics*

Journal Title	Year Established as overlay	First Volume as overlay	Preprint Server	Licence	Preprint identified by journal	Peer Review	Software Platform	Publisher	Support	Associated Fees
Fundamenta Informaticae [5]	2021 (switch to overlay)	–	arXiv CoRR		Author submitted		Episciences	IOS Press		Not stated
Rapid Reviews: COVID19 (RR:C19) [6]	2020	– 2020 Reviews published; no Manuscripts published	medRxiv, bioRxiv, PsyArXiv, SSRN, other repositories (not listed)	CC BY 4.0 - Reviews	Journal selected  COVID-Scholar	Identified/ Public  Review has DOI	PubPub from Knowledge Futures Group (MIT)	MIT Press	Patrick J. McGovern Foundation	Not stated
eLife [7]	2020 (switch to overlay)  2021 first overlay volume to be published	–	bioRxiv, medRxiv	CC BY 4.0	Author submitted	Identified/ Public		eLife Sciences Publications, Ltd.	Howard Hughes Medical Institute, the Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation, the Max Planck Society, Wellcome	US\$2500 author-paid publication fee

Journal of Theoretical, Computational and Applied Mechanics (JTCAM) [8]	2020	–	arXiv, HAL	CC BY	Author submitted	Blinded/ Private; Identified/ Private	Episciences		Mecatmat, CCSD, INRIA, Loomio Cooperative Limited	None for author
Ars Inveniendi Analytica [9]	2020	–	arXiv	CC BY 4.0	Author submitted	Blinded/ Private	Scholastica			None for author; US\$10 per article**
Mathematical Neuroscience and Applications (MNA) [10]	2020	–	arXiv, HAL	CC BY 4.0	Author submitted	Blinded/ Private	Episciences			None for author
ST-Open [11]	2020	2020	University of Split repository, DABAR, other Croatian university repositories	CC BY 4.0	Author submitted; Journal selected	Blinded/ Private; Identified/ Private	OJS/PKP	University of Split		None for author
Machine Learning for Biomedical Imaging (MELBA) Journal [12]	2020	2020	arXiv	CC licencing	Author submitted	Blinded/ Private	Scholastica			Not stated; US\$10 per article**
Épjournal de Didactique et Epistémologie des Mathématiques pour l'Enseignement Supérieur (EpiDEMES) [13]	2019	–	arXiv, HAL	CC BY - SA	Author submitted	Blinded/ Private	Episciences		CCSD	None for author
Advances in Combinatorics [14]	2019	2019	arXiv	CC BY	Author submitted	Blinded/ Private	Scholastica	Alliance of Diamond Open Access Journals	Queen's University Library	None for author; US\$10 per article**
Journal of Nonsmooth Analysis and Optimization (JNSAO) [15]	2019	2020	arXiv, HAL	CC licencing	Author submitted	Blinded/ Private	Episciences	JNSAO Editorial Board		None for author
JMIRx Med [16]	2019	2020	medRxiv	CC BY - articles and reviews; CC0 - images	Author submitted; Journal selected	Identified/ Public Review has DOI		JMIR		None for author
JMIRx Bio [17]	2019	–	bioRxiv	CC BY - articles and reviews; CC0 - images	Author submitted; Journal selected	Identified/ Public Review has DOI		JMIR		None for author

JMIRx Psy [17]	2019	–	PsyArXiv	CC BY - articles and reviews; CC0 - images	Author submitted; Journal selected	Identified/ Public Review has DOI		JMIR		None for author
Neurons, Behavior, Data analysis and Theory (NBDT) [18]	2018	2018	arXiv	CC BY	Author submitted	Blinded/ Private; Blinded/ Public	Scholastica	The neurons, behavior, data analysis and theory collective		None for author; US\$10 per article**
biOverlay [19]	2018 2020 closed	2018	not listed	CC BY - reviews	Journal selected	Blinded/ Public; Identified/ Public			Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation	
The Idealis* [20]	2017 2019 [21] closed	2017			Journal selected		WordPress; Press-Forward			
Quantum [22]	2017	2017	arXiv	CC BY 4.0	Author submitted	Blinded/ Private	Scholastica			Author paid publication fees: regular €450, discounted €100, or waived €0; Quantum pays US\$10 per article**
Épjournal de Géométrie Algébrique (Epiga) [23]	2016	2017	arXiv, HAL	CC BY - SA	Author submitted	Blinded/ Private	Episciences		CCSD	None for author
Discrete Analysis [24]	2016	2016	arXiv	CC BY	Author submitted	Blinded/ Private	Scholastica	Alliance of Diamond Open Access Journals	Cambridge University and Stanhill Foundation	None for author; US\$10 per article**
The Open Journal of Astrophysics [25]	2016	2016	arXiv	CC BY	Author submitted	Blinded/ Private	Scholastica	Maynooth Academic Publishing	Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation	None for author; US\$10 per article**
Journal of Interdisciplinary Methodologies and Issues in Science (JIMIS) [26]	2016	2016	arXiv, HAL	CC licencing	Author submitted	Blinded/ Private	Episciences		UMR ESPACE 7300 (CNRS, Université d'Avignon et des Pays de Vaucluse), CCSD, (S)FR Agorantic	Not stated
Hardy-Ramanujan Journal [27]	2014 (switch to overlay)	2015	arXiv, HAL	CC licencing	Author submitted	Blinded/ Private	Episciences			Not stated
Discrete Mathematics & Theoretical Computer Science (DMTCS) [28]	2014 *** (switch to overlay)	2015	arXiv, HAL	CC BY 4.0	Author submitted	Blinded/ Private	Episciences	Discrete Mathematics and Theoretical Computer Science (DMTCS)	Inria	None for author
Journal of Data Mining and Digital Humanities (JDMDH) [29]	2014	2014	arXiv, HAL, CWI, PRODINRA	CC BY 4.0	Author submitted	Blinded/ Private	Episciences		INRA, Inria, CNRS	None for author

(JIPS) Journal d'Interaction Homme Machines [30]	2008	2010	arXiv, HAL, CWI	CC BY 2.0	Author submitted	Blinded/Private	Episciences as of 2014***	Franco-phone Association for Human-Computer Interaction (AFIHM)		None for author
Symmetry, Integrability and Geometry: Methods and Applications (SIGMA) [31]	2005	2005	arXiv	CC BY - SA	Author submitted	Blinded/Private			Foundation Compositio Mathematica, University Library of Radboud University Nijmegen, Sociedad Mexicana de Fisica, University Libraries of the Delft University of Technology and Uppsala University	None for author
Logical Methods in Computer Science (LMCS) [32]	2004	2005	arXiv CoRR	CC licencing	Author submitted	Blinded/Private	Episciences as of 2014***	Logical Methods in Computer Science e.V.		None for author
African Journal of Research in Computer Science and Applied Mathematics (ARIMA) Journal [33]	2002	2002	HAL	CC licencing	Author submitted	Blinded/Private	Episciences as of 2014***			Not stated
Geometry and Topology (G&T) [34]	1997 2012**** no longer overlay	1997 1997-2007 on arXiv	arXiv	1997-2005 copyright Geometry & Topology Publica- tions 2006-2007 no copyright statement	Author submitted	Blinded/ Private				
Journal of High Energy Physics (JHEP) [35]	1997 2012**** no longer overlay	1997	arXiv	1997-2002 no copyright statement 2002-2006 copyright SISSA / ISAS 2007-2009 copyright SISSA	Author submitted	Blinded/ Private	developed by SISSA	2002-2009 Institute of Physics (IOP) Publishing		

\*Overlay no longer functioning and the website cannot be accessed. Information is from (Troia 2017).

\*\* (Conover 2016; Ball 2015)

\*\*\* (Berthaud et al. 2014)

\*\*\*\* (Priem & Hemminger 2012)

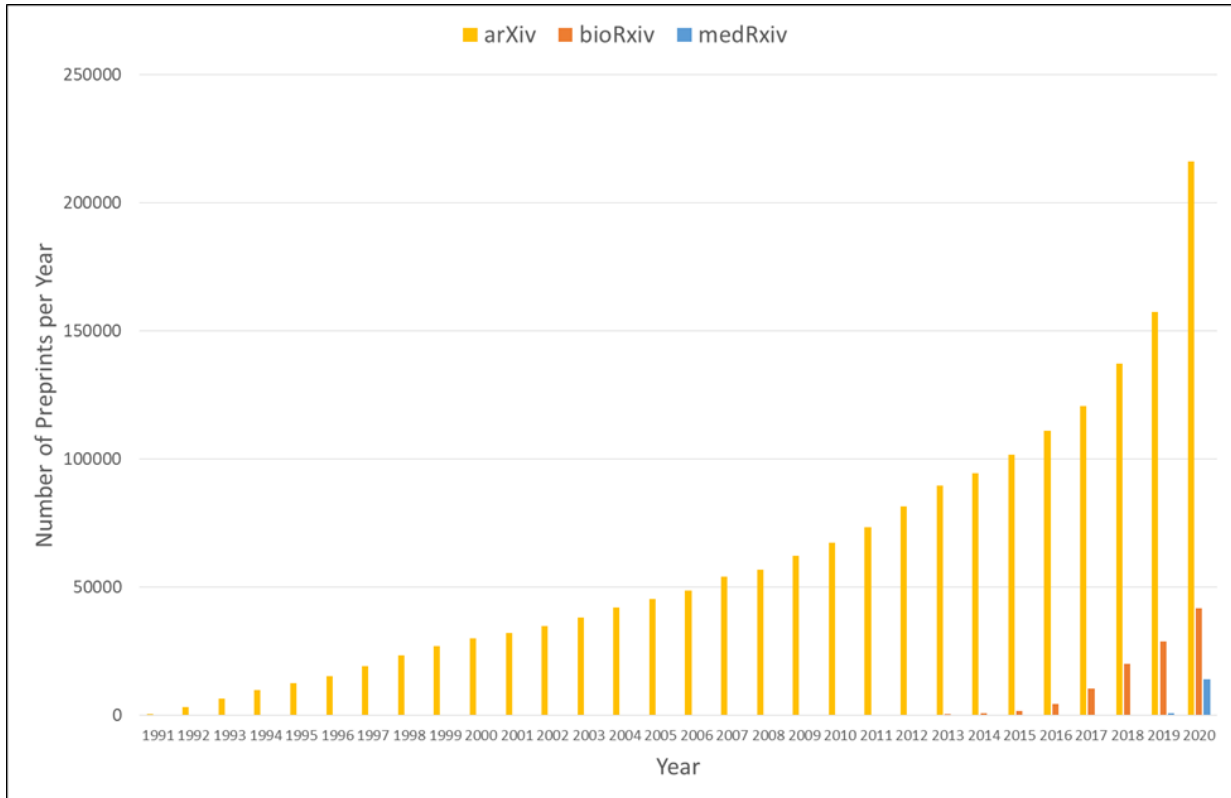


Figure 1: Number of Preprints per Year in arXiv (1991-); bioRxiv (2013-); medRxiv (2019-)

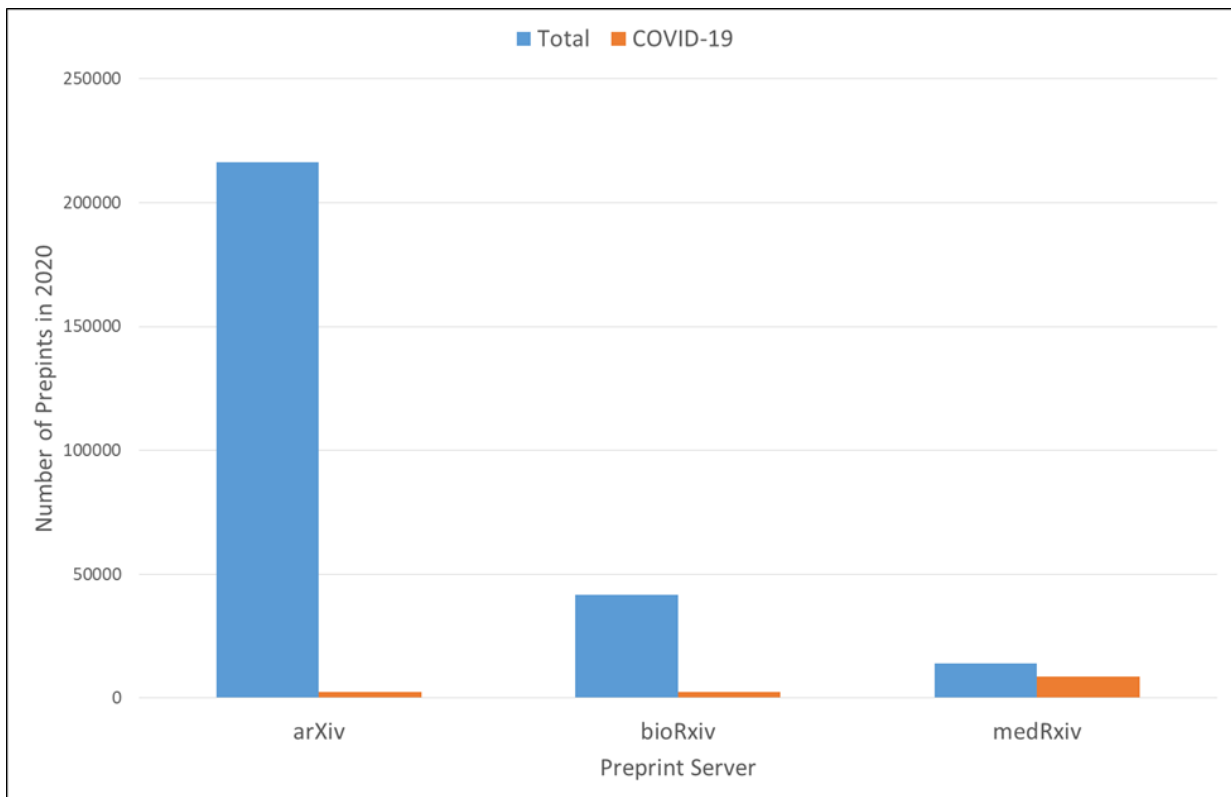


Figure 2: Total and COVID-19 Preprints in 2020 in arXiv (1%); bioRxiv (6%); medRxiv (61%)

Thirty-one overlay journals with sufficient information were identified (Table 1). Twenty-two published at least one volume of the overlay journal, and nine were established but have not published their first volume of journal articles as an overlay journal (Table 1). Of the 22 published overlay journals, four are no longer overlays. Priem & Henninger (2012) report that *Geometry and Topology (G&T)* and *Journal of High Energy (JHEP)*, both established in 1997, have ceased to be overlay journals. *The Idealis*, a LIS overlay journal, spanned from 2017 (Troia, 2017) to 2019 [21]. Unfortunately, the website for *The Idealis* has been suspended [20]. Additionally, *biOverlay* was designed as an “experiment with the goal of testing detailed, portable comments for preprints” (Greene 2020) and spanned from 2018-2020. Established in 2020, *RR:C19* has published peer reviews but has not published a formal manuscript volume yet. While *eLife* started in 2012, it is in the process of switching to an overlay between December 2020 and July 2021 (Eisen et al. 2020). Likewise, two of the 23 published overlay journals switched to an overlay from a traditional publishing model (Table 1). Berthaud (2014) reports that *Discrete Mathematics & Theoretical Computer Science (DMTCS)* was in the process of switching to an overlay using Episciences software.

Twenty-two of 31 overlays use arXiv as a preprint server (Table 1). After 2019, four overlays use medRxiv and/or bioRxiv (Figure 1). Some journals use one server: PsyArXiv or Hyper Articles en Ligne (HAL). *ST-Open* uses Croatian repositories as its purpose is to promote Croatian students’ research visibility and quality (Marusic et al. 2019).

Where licencing and copyright information was given, most of the overlays required Creative Commons (CC) licencing of some sort, usually as determined by the preprint server (Table 1). The first set of CC licences were available in 2002 (Creative Commons n.d.). Two overlays started in 1997. *G&T* copyrighted the arXiv version using Geometry and Topology Publications from 1997-2005 and provided no copyright statement from 2006-2007. *JHEP* provided no copyright statement from 1997-2002, copyright SISSA/ISAS (Scuola Internazionale Superiore di Studi Avanzati/International School for Advanced Studies) from 2002-2006, and copyright SISSA from 2007-2009.

Twenty-eight of 31 overlays include author submitted content; however, seven overlays seek out preprints. *ST-Open* uses a hybrid method in which authors can submit preprints or editors can select, solicit, or recommend preprints to the overlay journal. JMIRx overlays use acquisition and review editors with the option for authors to self-nominate. *RR:C19* identifies preprints for review using COVIDScholar (University of California, Berkeley n.d.).

Twenty-three overlays use a blinded and private peer review process. Starting in 2018, *RR:C19*, JMIRx overlays, *eLife*, and *biOverlay* provide identified and public peer reviews. *RR:C19* and *JMIRx Med* publish peer reviews with a digital object identifier (DOI). *Journal of Theoretical, Computational and Applied Mechanics (JTCAM)* provides the option for blinded or identified private reviews. *Neurons, Behavior, Data analysis and Theory (NBDT)* reviews are public or private, blinded reviews.

Episciences (starting in 2014) and Scholastica (starting in 2016) are the dominant software platforms (Table 1). Thirteen overlays use Episcience, a free software (Episciences, n.d.), and

seven overlays use Scholastica. Some overlays have custom-developed software, such as PubPub from Knowledge Futures Group for *RR:C19*. Other options include Open Journal System by Public Knowledge Project and WordPress with PressForward.

The least consistent details regarding overlay journals are publisher, support and fees (Table 1). Sixteen overlays listed a publisher, while 15 overlays did not. In some cases, the publisher is a discipline-specific association. While 19 overlays do not charge authors, *eLife* charges US\$2500 and Quantum charges €450, which can be discounted or waived. However, costs are associated with the production of overlay journals. Scholastica charges the journal US\$10 per published article (Conover 2016; Ball 2015). As such, a wide variety of funding models exist, with donors, institutions (government organizations, libraries, and universities), and foundations covering fees. For example, Queen's University Library covers *Advances in Combinatorics*' costs while also offering administrative support (Queen's Gazette, 2018).

#### 4. Discussion

Overlay journals can be divided into two groups: historically conventional, overlooked journals and new, emergent journals. Conventional overlay journals use arXiv, include articles submitted by authors via preprint servers, and provide blinded and private peer review. Recently, emergent overlay journals use bioRxiv or medRxiv, include articles found by the journal on preprint servers, and provide identified and public peer review.

The motivation for overlay journals has been directly or indirectly attributed to costs of traditional journals (Neumann 2010; Ball 2015; Conover 2016) or directly related to the volume of preprints in the current pandemic (Free 2020) (Figure 2). Overlay journals provide certification to an otherwise uncertified work, ensuring the accuracy of information in a timely fashion. Some journals switched from overlay to traditional because they were not self-sustaining, even with donations of time and funds (Neumann 2010; Fosmire 2013). The effect of newer software platforms on long-term sustainability is yet to be determined. Overlay journals are a relatively inexpensive way to certify and publish material.

From an information literacy perspective, information professionals and researchers need to be aware of potentially unintended consequences. One concern is that, as journals select preprints, different versions of the same preprint could appear in multiple journals (Vines 2019; Lab 2020). How can an author prevent their work from an “unauthorized” journal reviewing it without the author's “consent?” How is it decided who gets the first pick for an article? However, one could also argue that a researcher implicitly gives up the ability to gatekeep access to his/her article when posting a preprint on an archive.

With organizations, such as the Confederation of Open Access Repositories (COAR), arguing for overlays as the “model of the future” (COAR n.d.), it is important to be aware of the consequences of overlays, their emerging trends, and the opportunities for improved scholarly communication. Overlay journals allow community and collegial feedback, and collaboration across disciplines at a reasonable price (currently). For example, mathematics and physics have created an atmosphere of collegial sharing and critique using preprints and current research (Berthaud 2014, 275; Herman 2020, 218). Similarly, *NBDT* selects works based on whether the



editor would consider running a preprint as a “journal club paper for their own lab” (NBDT collective n.d.). Herman (2020) also argues that “there is an increasing scope for a number of new overlay journals to be developed, tailored for different research communities” (218).

In concluding, the use of overlay journals has implications, certainly for scholarly communications, but also for researchers and library and information professionals. Overlay journals, as a means of scholarly communication, have served to further highlight the importance of and continued need for peer review as overlay journals have become a way to meet the fast-paced and quickly evolving information needs of individuals today, especially during a global pandemic. For researchers, overlay journals can potentially provide increased discoverability earlier in the journal publication process; however, this increased discoverability and openness could have potential consequences if authors are looking to publish in different journals but a journal-selected overlay has already reviewed or “claimed” the preprint. Overlay journals can also potentially offer researchers a way to meet grant funder open access requirements and, in doing so, also provide a cost effective publishing option. For library and information professionals, overlay journals, in adding the certification to otherwise uncertified preprints, are a helpful way to evaluate the authority and legitimacy of rapidly developing information. As well, overlay journals are an avenue for identifying timely, relevant, and sought after information to support the information needs of information seekers in a time of growing information. Ultimately, whether overlooked or emergent, overlay journals appear to be here to stay.

#### URL List:

1. arXiv advanced search: <https://arxiv.org/search/advanced>
2. bioRxiv advanced search: <https://www.biorxiv.org/search>
3. medRxiv advanced search: <https://www.medrxiv.org/search>
4. Covid-19 preprint search: <https://icite.od.nih.gov/covid19/search/>
5. *Fundamenta Informaticae*: <https://fi.episciences.org/>
6. *RR:C19*: <https://rapidreviewscovid19.mitpress.mit.edu/>
7. *eLife*: <https://elifesciences.org/>
8. *JTCAM*: <https://jtcam.episciences.org/>
9. *Ars Inveniendi Analytica*: <https://ars-inveniendi-analytica.com/>
10. *MNA*: <https://mna.episciences.org/>
11. *ST-Open*: <http://st-open.unist.hr/index.php/st-open>
12. *MELBA*: <https://www.melba-journal.org/>
13. *epiDEMES*: <https://epidemes.episciences.org/>
14. *Advances in Combinatorics*: <https://www.advancesincombinatorics.com/>
15. *JNSAO*: <https://jnsao.episciences.org/>
16. *JMIRx Med*: <https://xmed.jmir.org/>
17. *JMIRx*: <https://support.jmir.org/hc/en-us/articles/360034752692>
18. *NBDT*: <https://nbdtscholasticahq.com/>
19. *biOverlay*: <https://www.biooverlay.org/>
20. *The Idealis*: [www.theidealis.org](http://www.theidealis.org)

21. Google Scholar “The Idealis” search: [https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as\\_sdt=0,5&q="The+Idealis"](https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0,5&q=)
22. *Quantum*: <https://quantum-journal.org/>
23. *Epiga*: <https://epiga.episciences.org/page/a-propos>
24. *Discrete Analysis*: <https://discreteanalysisjournal.com/>
25. *The Open Journal of Astrophysics*: <https://astro.theoj.org/>
26. *JIMIS*: <https://jimis.episciences.org/>
27. *Hardy Ramanujan Journal*: <https://hrj.episciences.org/>
28. *DTMCS*: <https://dmtcs.episciences.org/>
29. *JDMDH*: <https://jdmdh.episciences.org/>
30. *JIPS*: <https://jips.episciences.org/>
31. *SIGMA*: <https://www.emis.de/journals/SIGMA/>
32. *LMCS*: <https://lmcs.episciences.org/>
33. *ARIMA*: <https://arima.episciences.org/>
34. *G&T*: <https://msp.org/gt/about/journal/about.html>
35. *JHEP*: <https://jhep.sissa.it/jhep/index.jsp>

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