

# 1 **Tracking the popularity and outcomes of all bioRxiv preprints**

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## 19 Abstract

20 Researchers in the life sciences are posting their work to preprint servers at an  
21 unprecedented and increasing rate, sharing papers online before (or instead of)  
22 publication in peer-reviewed journals. Though the popularity and practical benefits of  
23 preprints are driving policy changes at journals and funding organizations, there is little  
24 bibliometric data available to measure trends in their usage. Here, we collected and  
25 analyzed data on all 37,648 preprints that were uploaded to bioRxiv.org, the largest  
26 biology-focused preprint server, in its first five years. We find that preprints on bioRxiv  
27 are being read more than ever before (1.1 million downloads in October 2018 alone)  
28 and that the rate of preprints being posted has increased to a recent high of more than  
29 2,100 per month. We also find that two-thirds of bioRxiv preprints posted in 2016 or  
30 earlier were later published in peer-reviewed journals, and that the majority of published  
31 preprints appeared in a journal less than six months after being posted. We evaluate  
32 which journals have published the most preprints, and find that preprints with more  
33 downloads are likely to be published in journals with a higher impact factor. Lastly, we  
34 developed Rxivist.org, a website for downloading and interacting programmatically with  
35 indexed metadata on bioRxiv preprints.

## 36 Introduction

37 In the 30 days of September 2018, *The Journal of Biochemistry* published eight  
38 full-length research articles. *PLOS Biology* published 19. *Genetics* published 23. *Cell*  
39 published 35. BioRxiv had posted more articles than all four—combined—by the end of  
40 September 3 (**Table S1**).

41 BioRxiv (pronounced "Bio Archive") is a preprint server, a repository to which  
42 researchers can post their papers directly to bypass the months-long turnaround time of  
43 the publishing process and share their findings with the community more quickly (Berg  
44 et al. 2016). Though the idea of preprints is far from new (Cobb 2017), researchers  
45 have become vocally frustrated about the lengthy process of distributing research  
46 through the conventional pipelines (Powell 2016), and numerous public laments have  
47 been published decrying increasingly impractical demands of journals and reviewers  
48 (e.g. Raff et al. 2008; Snyder 2013). One analysis found that review times at journals  
49 published by the Public Library of Science (PLOS) have doubled over the last decade  
50 (Hartgerink 2015); another found a two- to four-fold increase in the amount of data  
51 required for publication in top journals between 1984 and 2014 (Vale 2015). Other  
52 studies have found more complicated dynamics at play from both authors and  
53 publishers that can affect time to press (Powell 2016; Royle 2014).

54 Against this backdrop, preprints have become a steady source of the most recent  
55 research in biology, providing a valuable way to learn about exciting, relevant and high-  
56 impact findings—for free—months or years before that research will appear anywhere  
57 else, if at all (Kaiser 2017). It's a practice long familiar to physicists, who began  
58 submitting preprints to arXiv, one of the earliest preprint servers, in 1991 (Verma 2017).  
59 Researchers in fields supported by that server "have developed a habit of checking  
60 arXiv every morning to learn about the latest work in their field" (Vale and Hyman 2016),  
61 and one survey of published mathematicians found that 81 percent had posted at least  
62 one preprint to the site (Fowler 2011). In the life sciences, however, researchers  
63 approached preprints with reluctance (O'Roak 2018), even when major publishers made

64 it clear they were not opposed to the practice ("Nature respects preprint servers" 2005;  
65 Desjardins-Proulx et al. 2013). An early NIH plan for PubMed Central called "E-Biomed"  
66 included the hosting of preprints (Varmus 1999; Smaglik 1999) but was scuttled by the  
67 National Academy of Sciences, which successfully negotiated the exclusion of work that  
68 had not been peer-reviewed (Marshall 1999; Kling et al. 2003).

69 Further attempts to circulate biology preprints, such as NetPrints (Delamothe et  
70 al. 1999), Nature Precedings (Kaiser 2017), and The Lancet Electronic Research  
71 Archive (McConnell and Horton 1999), popped up (and then folded) over time ("ERA  
72 Home" 2019). The one that would catch on, bioRxiv, wasn't founded until 14 years after  
73 the fall of E-Biomed (Callaway 2013). Now, biology publishers are actively trawling  
74 preprint servers for submissions (Barsh et al. 2016; Vence 2017), and more than 100  
75 journals accept submissions directly from the bioRxiv website ("Submission Guide"  
76 2018). The National Institutes of Health announced the explicit acceptance of preprint  
77 citations in grant proposals ("Reporting Preprints and Other Interim Research Products"  
78 2017), and multiple funding opportunities from the multi-billion-dollar Chan Zuckerberg  
79 Initiative (Abutaleb 2015) require all publications to first be posted to a preprint server  
80 ("Funding Opportunities" 2018; Champieux 2018). The conventions of the biology  
81 publishing game are changing, in ways that reflect a strong influence from the  
82 expanding popularity of preprints. However, details about that ecosystem are hard to  
83 come by. We know bioRxiv is the largest of the biology-focused preprint servers: Of the  
84 eight websites indexed by PrePubMed (<http://www.prepubmed.org>), bioRxiv now  
85 consistently posts more than three times as many articles per month as the other seven  
86 combined (Anaya 2018). Sporadic updates from bioRxiv leaders show a chain of

87 record-breaking months for submission numbers (Sever 2018), and analyses have  
88 examined metrics such as total downloads (Serghiou and Ioannidis 2018) and  
89 publication rate (Schloss 2017). But long-term questions remain open: Which fields  
90 have posted the most preprints, and which collections are growing most quickly? How  
91 many times have preprints been downloaded, and which categories are most popular  
92 with readers? How many preprints are eventually published elsewhere, and in what  
93 journals? Is there a relationship between a preprint's popularity and the journal in which  
94 it later appears? Do these conclusions change over time?

95         Here, we aim to answer these questions by collecting metadata about all 37,648  
96 preprints posted to bioRxiv through November 2018. We use these data to measure the  
97 growing popularity of bioRxiv as a research repository and to help quantify trends in  
98 biology preprints that have until now been out of reach. In addition, we developed  
99 Rxivist (pronounced "Archivist"), a website, API and database (available at  
100 <https://rxivist.org> and <gopher://origin.rxivist.org>) that provide a fully featured system for  
101 interacting programmatically with the periodically indexed metadata of all preprints  
102 posted to bioRxiv.

## 103 Results

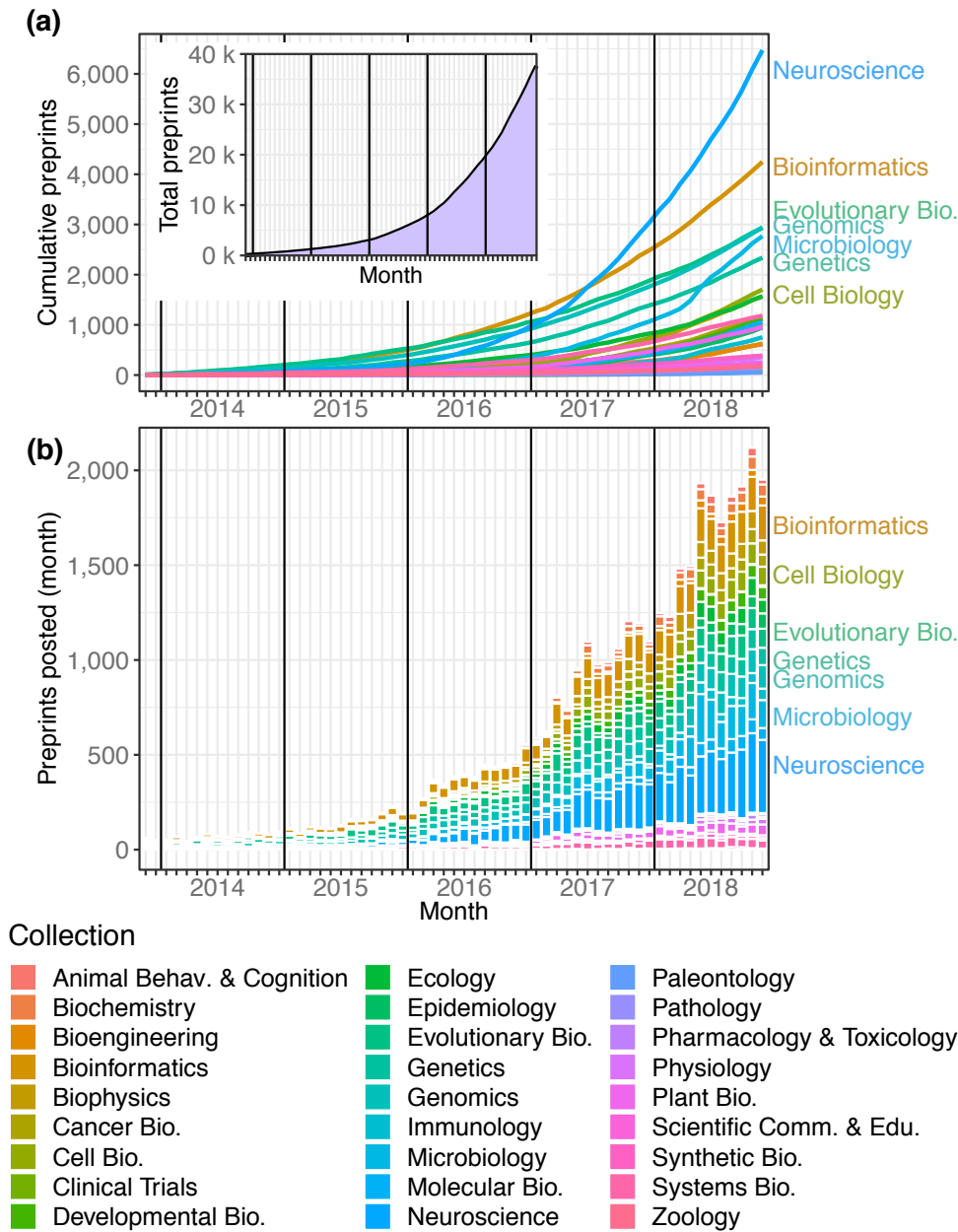
104         We developed a Python-based web crawler to visit every content page on the  
105 bioRxiv website and download basic data about each preprint across the site's 27  
106 subject-specific categories: title, authors, download statistics, submission date,  
107 category, DOI, and abstract. The bioRxiv website also provides the email address and  
108 institutional affiliation of each author, plus, if the preprint has been published, its new

109 DOI and the journal in which it appeared. For those preprints, we also used information  
110 from Crossref to determine the date of publication. We have stored these data in a  
111 PostgreSQL database; snapshots of the database are available for download, and  
112 users can access data for individual preprints and authors on the Rxivist website and  
113 API. Additionally, a repository is available online at  
114 <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2465689> that includes the database snapshot used for  
115 this manuscript, plus the data files used to create all figures. Code to regenerate all  
116 figures in this paper is included there and on GitHub  
117 (<https://github.com/blekhmanlab/rxivist/blob/master/paper/figures.md>). See Methods  
118 and Supplementary Information for a complete description.

## 119 Preprint submissions

120 The most apparent trend that can be pulled from the bioRxiv data is that the  
121 website is extraordinarily popular with authors, and becoming more so every day: There  
122 were 37,648 preprints available on bioRxiv at the end of November 2018, and more  
123 preprints were posted in the first 11 months of 2018 (18,825) than in all four previous  
124 years combined (**Figure 1a**). The number of bioRxiv preprints doubled in less than a  
125 year, and new submissions have been trending upward for five years (**Figure 1b**). The  
126 plurality of site-wide growth can be attributed to the neuroscience collection, which has  
127 had more submissions than any bioRxiv category in every month since September 2016  
128 (**Figure 1b**). In October 2018, it became the first of bioRxiv's collections to contain  
129 6,000 preprints (**Figure 1a**). The second-largest category is bioinformatics (4,249  
130 preprints), followed by evolutionary biology (2,934). October 2018 was also the first

131 month in which bioRxiv posted more than 2,000 preprints, increasing its total preprint  
 132 count by 6.3 percent (2,119) in 31 days.



133  
 134 **Figure 1.** Total preprints posted to bioRxiv over a 61-month period from  
 135 November 2013 through November 2018. **(a)** The number of preprints (y-  
 136 axis) at each month (x-axis), with each category depicted as a line in a

137 different color. **(a, inset)** The overall number of preprints on bioRxiv in  
138 each month. **(b)** The number of preprints posted (y-axis) in each month (x-  
139 axis) by category. The category color key is provided below the figure.

140 **Supplementary files:** *submissions\_per\_month.csv*,  
141 *submissions\_per\_month\_overall.csv*

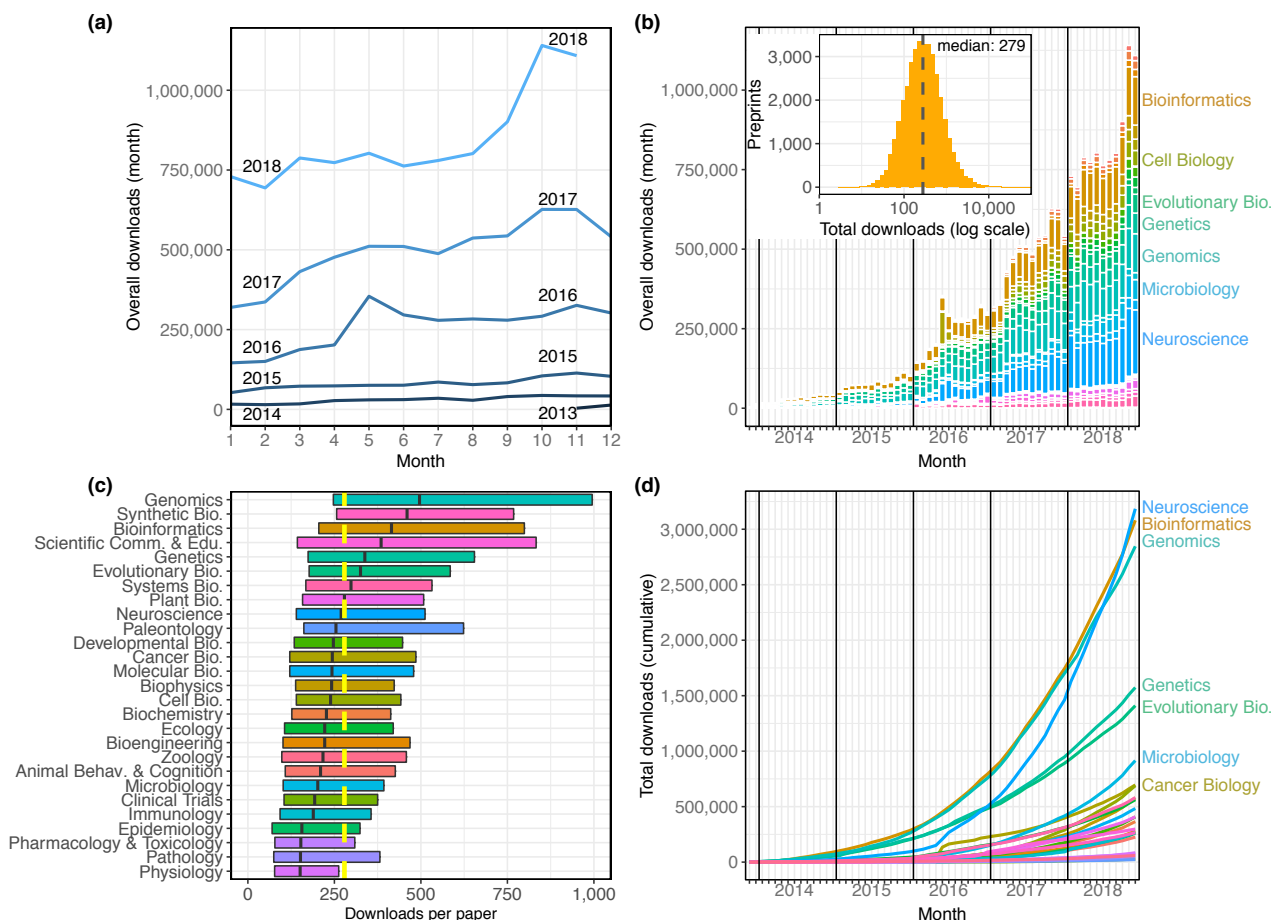
## 142 Preprint downloads

143 Considering the number of downloads for each preprint, we find that bioRxiv's  
144 popularity with readers is also increasing rapidly (**Figure 2**): The total download count in  
145 October 2018 (1,140,296) was an 82 percent increase over October 2017, which itself  
146 was a 115 percent increase over October 2016 (**Figure 2a**). bioRxiv preprints were  
147 downloaded almost 9.3 million times in the first 11 months of 2018, and in October and  
148 November 2018, bioRxiv recorded more downloads (2,248,652) than in the website's  
149 first two and a half years (**Figure 2b**). The overall median downloads per paper is 279  
150 (**Figure 2b, inset**), and the genomics category has the highest median downloads per  
151 paper, with 496 (**Figure 2c**). The neuroscience category has the most downloads  
152 overall—it overtook bioinformatics in that metric in October 2018, after bioinformatics  
153 spent nearly 4 and a half years as the most downloaded category (**Figure 2d**). In total,  
154 bioRxiv preprints were downloaded 19,699,115 times from November 2013 through  
155 November 2018, and the neuroscience category's 3,184,456 total downloads accounts  
156 for 16.2 percent of these (**Figure 2d**). However, this is driven mostly by that category's  
157 high volume of preprints: The median downloads per paper in the neuroscience



158 category is 269.5, while the median of preprints in all other categories is 281 (**Figure**  
159 **2c**).

160 We also examined traffic numbers for individual preprints relative to the date that  
161 they were posted to bioRxiv, which helped create a picture of the change in a preprint's  
162 downloads by month after it is posted (**Figure S1**): We can see that preprints typically  
163 have the most downloads in their first month, and the download count per month decays  
164 most quickly over a preprint's first year on the site. The most downloads recorded in a  
165 preprint's first month is 96,047, but the median number of downloads a preprint receives  
166 in its debut month on bioRxiv is 73. The median downloads in a preprint's second month  
167 falls to 46, and the third month median falls again, to 27. Even so, the average preprint  
168 at the end of its first year online is still being downloaded about 12 times per month, and  
169 some papers don't have a "big" month until relatively late, receiving the majority of their  
170 downloads in their sixth month or later (**Figure S2**).



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**Figure 2.** The distribution of all recorded downloads of bioRxiv preprints.

173 **(a)** The downloads recorded in each month, with each line representing a

174 different year. The lines reflect the same totals as the height of the bars in

175 Figure 2b. **(b)** A stacked bar plot of the downloads in each month: The

176 height of each bar indicates the total downloads in that month. Each

177 stacked bar shows the number of downloads in that month attributable to

178 each category; the colors of the bars are described in the legend in Figure

179 1. **(b, inset)** A histogram showing the site-wide distribution of downloads

180 per preprint, as of the end of November 2018. The median download

181 count for a single preprint is 279, marked by a dashed line. **(c)** The

182 distribution of downloads per preprint, broken down by category. Each box  
183 illustrates that category's first quartile, median, and third quartile (similar to  
184 a boxplot, but whiskers are omitted due to a long right tail in the  
185 distribution). The vertical dashed yellow line indicates the overall median  
186 downloads for all preprints. **(d)** Cumulative downloads over time of all  
187 preprints in each category. The top seven categories at the end of the plot  
188 (November 2018) are labeled using the same category color-coding as  
189 above.

190 **Supplementary files:** *downloads\_per\_category.csv*,  
191 *downloads\_per\_month\_cumulative.csv*,  
192 *downloads\_per\_month\_per\_year.csv*

## 193 Preprint authors

194 While data about the authors of individual preprints is easy to organize,  
195 associating authors between preprints is difficult due to a lack of consistent unique  
196 identifiers (see Methods). We chose to define an author as a unique name in the author  
197 list, including middle initials but disregarding letter case and punctuation. Keeping this in  
198 mind, we find that there are 170,287 individual authors with content on bioRxiv. Of  
199 these, 106,231 (62.4%) posted a preprint in 2018, including 84,339 who posted a  
200 preprint for the first time (**Table 1**), indicating that total authors increased by more than  
201 98 percent in 2018.

Year	New authors	Total authors
2013	608	608
2014	3,873	4,012
2015	7,584	8,411
2016	21,832	24,699
2017	52,051	61,239
2018	84,339	106,231

202 **Table 1.** Unique authors posting preprints in each year. "New authors"  
203 counts authors posting preprints in that year that had never posted before;  
204 "Total authors" includes researchers who may have already been counted  
205 in a previous year, but are also listed as an author on a preprint posted in  
206 that year. Data for table pulled directly from database. An SQL query to  
207 generate these numbers is provided in the Methods section.

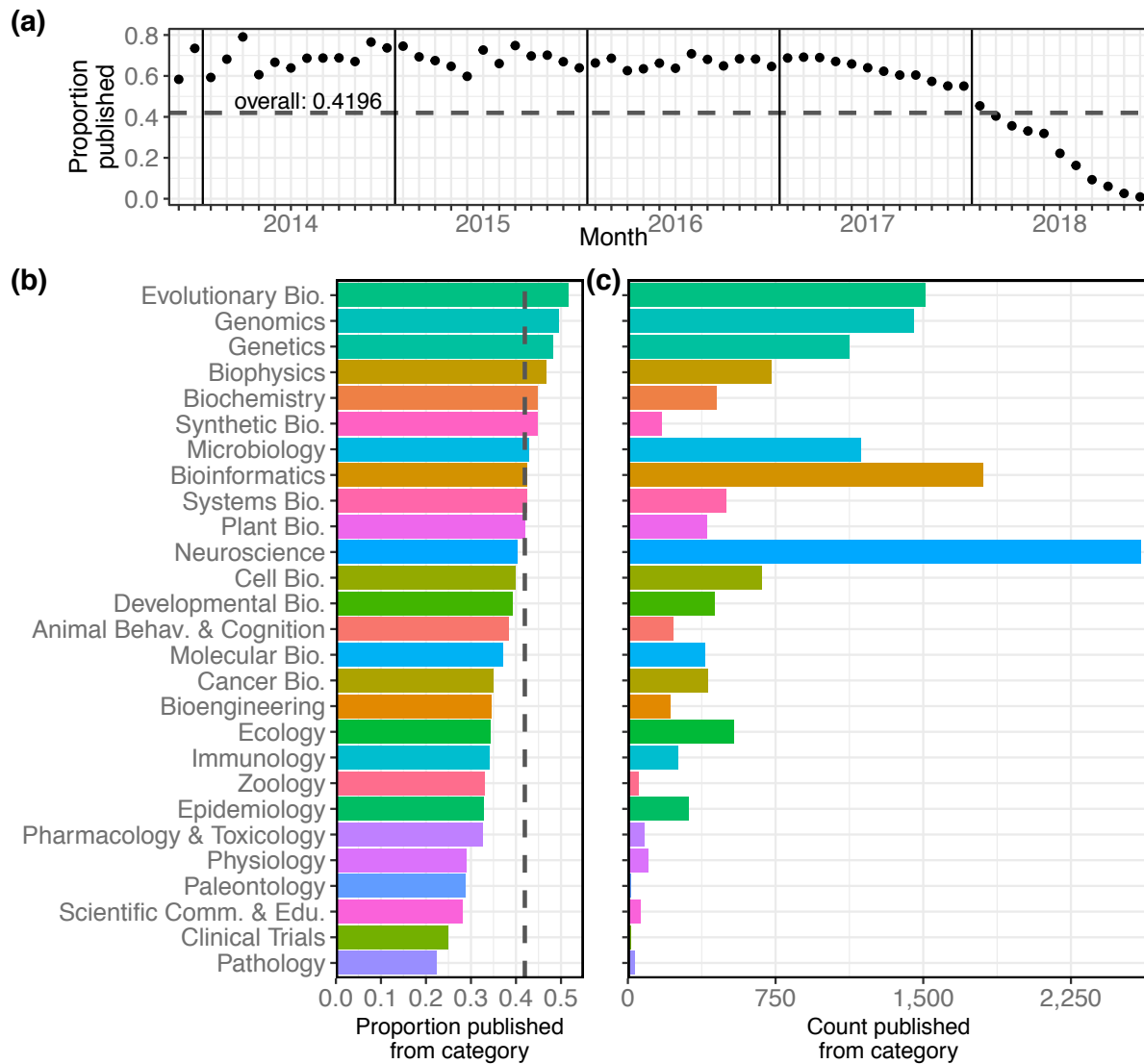
208 Even though 129,419 authors (76.0%) are associated with only a single preprint,  
209 the mean preprints per author is 1.52 because of a skewed rate of contributions also  
210 found in conventional publishing (Rørstad and Aksnes 2015): 10 percent of authors  
211 account for 72.8 percent of all preprints, and the most prolific researcher on bioRxiv,  
212 George Davey Smith, is listed on 97 preprints across seven categories (**Table S2**).  
213 1,473 authors list their most recent affiliation as Stanford University, the most  
214 represented institution on bioRxiv (**Table S3**). Though the majority of the top 100  
215 universities (by author count) are based in the United States, five of the top 11 are from

216 Great Britain. These results rely on data provided by authors, however, and is  
217 confounded by varying levels of specificity: While 530 authors report their affiliation as  
218 "Harvard University," for example, there are 528 different institutions that include the  
219 phrase "Harvard," and the four preprints from the "Wyss Institute for Biologically  
220 Inspired Engineering at Harvard University" don't count toward the "Harvard University"  
221 total.

## 222 Publication outcomes

223 In addition to monthly download statistics, bioRxiv also records whether a  
224 preprint has been published elsewhere, and in what journal. In total, 15,797 bioRxiv  
225 preprints have been published, or 42.0 percent of all preprints on the site (**Figure 3a**).  
226 Proportionally, evolutionary biology preprints have the highest publication rate of the  
227 bioRxiv categories: 51.5 percent of all bioRxiv evolutionary biology preprints have been  
228 published in a journal (**Figure 3b**). Examining the raw number of publications per  
229 category, neuroscience again comes out on top, with 2,608 preprints in that category  
230 published elsewhere (**Figure 3c**). When comparing the publication rates of preprints  
231 posted in each month we see that more recent preprints are published at a rate close to  
232 zero, followed by an increase in the rate of publication every month for about 12–18  
233 months (**Figure 3a**). A similar dynamic was observed in a study of preprints posted to  
234 arXiv: After recording lower rates in the most recent time periods, Larivière et al. (2014)  
235 found publication rates of arXiv preprints leveled out at about 73 percent. Of bioRxiv  
236 preprints posted between 2013 and the end of 2016, 67.0 percent have been published;

237 if 2017 papers are included, that number falls to 64.0 percent. Of preprints posted in  
 238 2018, only 20.0 percent have been printed elsewhere (**Figure 3a**).

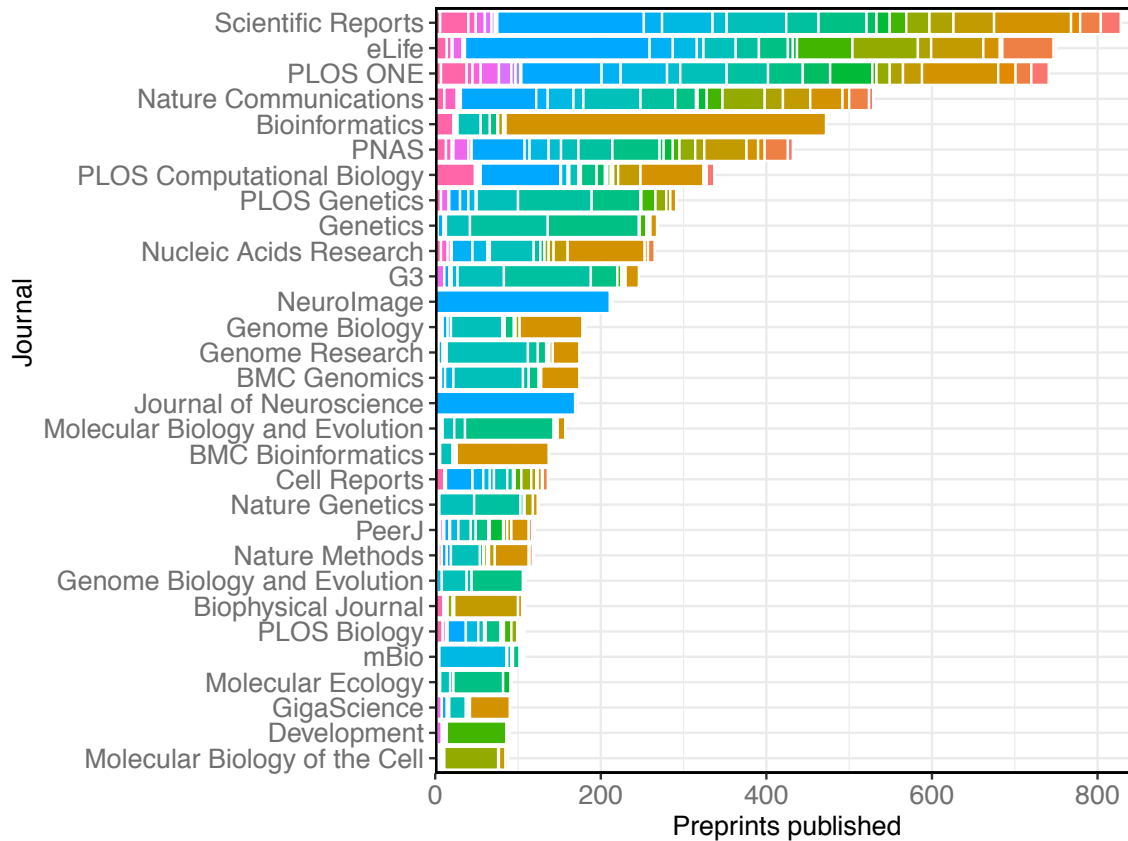


239  
 240 **Figure 3.** Characteristics of the bioRxiv preprints published in journals,  
 241 across the 27 subject collections. **(a)** The proportion of preprints that have  
 242 been published (y-axis), broken down by the month in which the preprint  
 243 was first posted (x-axis). **(b)** The proportion of preprints in each category  
 244 that have been published elsewhere. The dashed line marks the overall  
 245 proportion of bioRxiv preprints that have been published and is at the

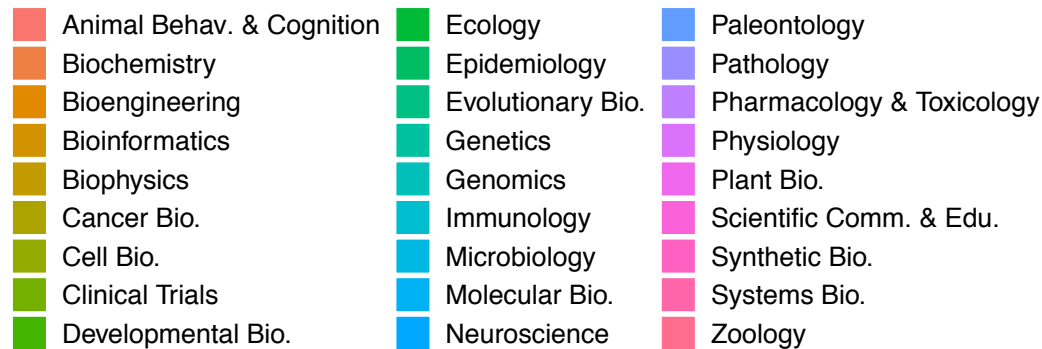
246 same position as the dashed line in panel 3a. **(c)** The number of preprints  
247 in each category that have been published in a journal.

248 **Supplementary files:** *publication\_rate\_month.csv*,  
249 *publications\_per\_category.csv*

250 Overall, 15,797 bioRxiv preprints have appeared in 1,531 different journals  
251 **(Figure 4)**. *Scientific Reports* has published the most, with 828 papers, followed by  
252 *eLife* and *PLOS ONE* with 750 and 741 papers, respectively. Some journals have  
253 accepted a broad range of preprints, though none have hit all 27 of bioRxiv's  
254 categories—*PLOS ONE* has published the most diverse category list, with 26. (It has  
255 yet to publish a preprint from the clinical trials collection, bioRxiv's second-smallest.)  
256 Other journals are much more specialized, though in expected ways: Of the 172 bioRxiv  
257 preprints published by *The Journal of Neuroscience*, 169 were in neuroscience, and 3  
258 were from animal behavior and cognition. Similarly, *NeuroImage* has published 211  
259 neuroscience papers, 2 in bioinformatics, and 1 in bioengineering.



Collection



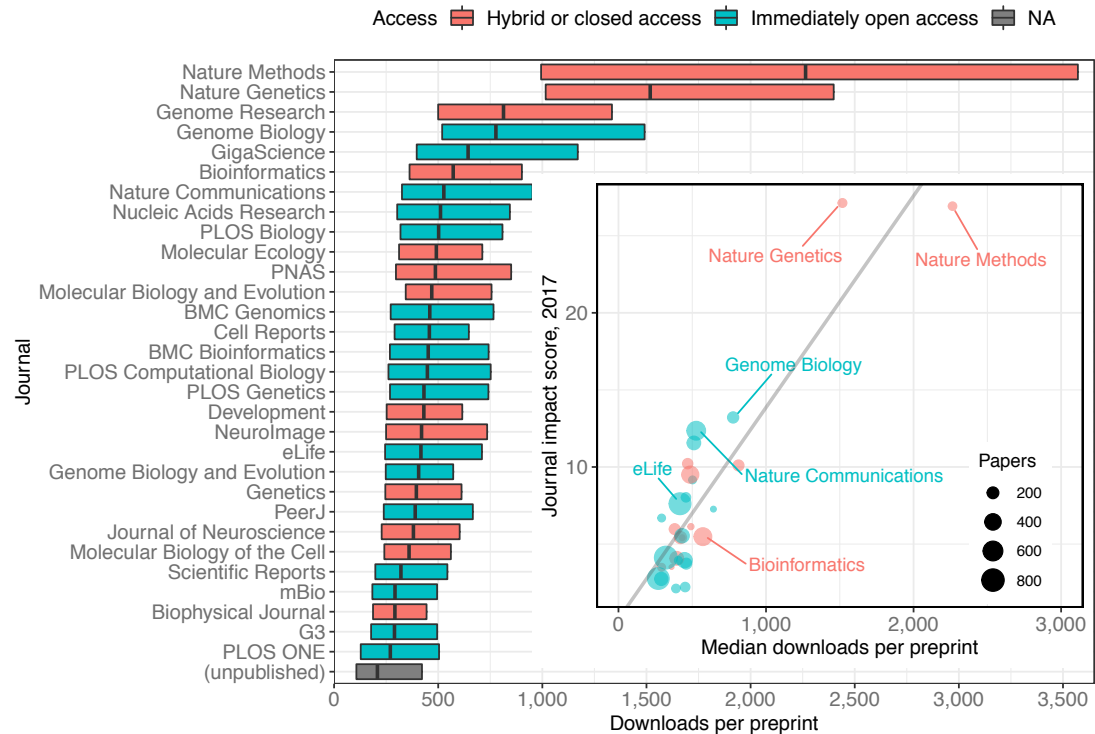
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261 **Figure 4.** A stacked bar graph showing the 30 journals that have  
 262 published the most preprints. The bars indicate the number of preprints  
 263 published by each journal, broken down by the bioRxiv categories to  
 264 which the preprints were originally posted.

265 **Supplementary file:** *publications\_per\_journal\_categorical.csv*



266           When evaluating the downloads of preprints published in individual journals  
267 **(Figure 5)**, there is a significant positive correlation (Kendall's tau=0.5862, p=1.364e-  
268 06) between the median downloads per paper and journal impact factor: In general,  
269 journals with higher impact scores ("Journal Citation Reports Science Edition" 2018)  
270 publish preprints that have more downloads. For example, *Nature Methods* (2017  
271 impact score 26.919) has published 119 bioRxiv preprints; the median download count  
272 of these preprints is 2,266. By comparison, *PLOS ONE* (2017 impact score 2.766) has  
273 published 719 preprints with a median download count of 279 **(Figure 5)**. However, we  
274 did not evaluate *when* these downloads occurred, relative to a preprint's publication:  
275 While it looks like accruing more downloads makes it more likely that a preprint will  
276 appear in a higher impact journal, it is also possible that appearance in particular  
277 journals drives bioRxiv downloads after publication.



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**Figure 5.** A modified box plot (without whiskers) illustrating the median downloads of all bioRxiv preprints published in a journal. Each box illustrates the journal's first quartile, median, and third quartile, as in Figure 2c. Colors correspond to journal access policy as described in the legend. **(inset)** A scatterplot in which each point represents an academic journal, showing the relationship between median downloads of the bioRxiv preprints published in the journal (x-axis) against its most recent impact score (y-axis). The size of each point is scaled to reflect the total number of bioRxiv preprints published by that journal. The regression line in this plot was calculated using the "lm" function in the R "stats" package, but all reported statistics use the Kendall rank correlation coefficient, which does not make as many assumptions about normality or homoscedasticity.

**Supplementary files:** *downloads\_journal.csv*, *impact\_scores.csv*

292 If journals are driving post-publication downloads on bioRxiv, however, their  
293 efforts are curiously consistent: Preprints that have been published elsewhere have  
294 almost twice as many downloads as preprints that have not (**Table 2**; Mann–Whitney  $U$   
295 test,  $p < 2.2e-16$ ). Site-wide, the median number of downloads per preprint is 208,  
296 among papers that have not been published. For preprints that *have* been published,  
297 the median download count is 394 (Mann–Whitney  $U$  test,  $p < 2.2e-16$ ). When preprints  
298 published in 2018 are excluded from this calculation, the difference between published  
299 and unpublished preprints shrinks, but is still significant (**Table 2**; Mann–Whitney  $U$  test,  
300  $p < 2.2e-16$ ). Though preprints posted in 2018 received more downloads *in* 2018 than  
301 preprints posted in previous years did (**Figure S3**), it appears they have not yet had  
302 time to accumulate as many downloads as papers from previous years (**Figure S4**).

Posted	Published	Unpublished
2017 and earlier	465	414
Through 2018	394	208

303 **Table 2.** A comparison of the median downloads per preprint for bioRxiv  
304 preprints that have been published elsewhere to those that have not. See  
305 Methods section for description of tests used.

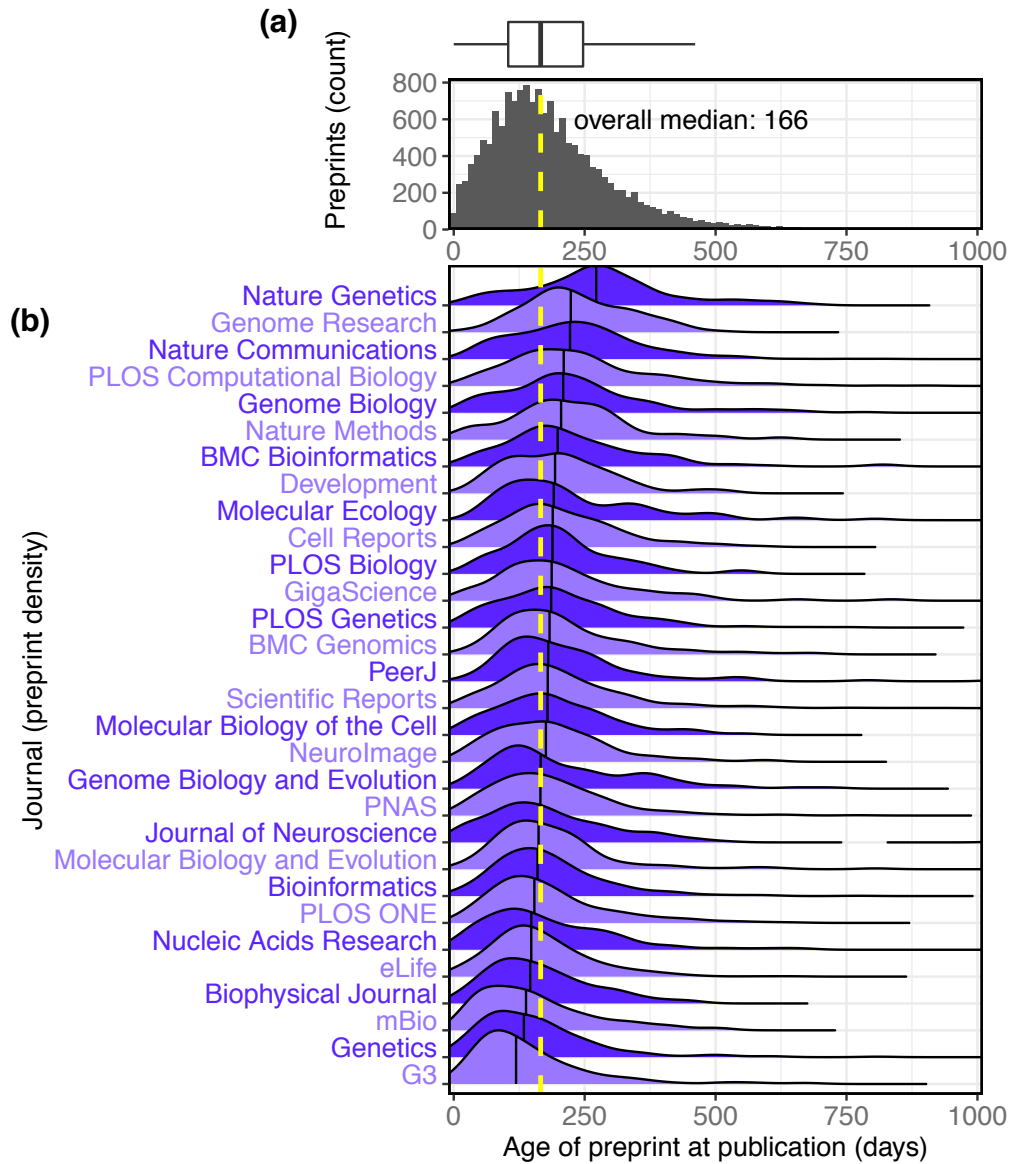
306 **Supplementary file:** *downloads\_publication\_status.csv*

307 We also retrieved the publication date for all published preprints using the  
308 Crossref "Metadata Delivery" API (Crossref 2018). This, combined with the bioRxiv  
309 data, gives us a comprehensive picture of the interval between the date a preprint is first  
310 posted to bioRxiv and the date it is published by a journal: These data show the median

311 interval is 166 days, or about 5.5 months. 75 percent of preprints are published within  
312 247 days of appearing on bioRxiv, and 90 percent are published within 346 days  
313 (**Figure 6a**). The median interval we found at the end of November 2018 (166 days) is a  
314 23.9 percent increase over the 134-day median interval reported by bioRxiv in mid-2016  
315 (Inglis and Sever 2016).

316 We also used these data to further examine patterns in the properties of preprints  
317 appearing in individual journals: The journal publishing preprints with the highest  
318 median age is *Nature Genetics*, whose median interval between bioRxiv posting and  
319 publication is 272 days (**Figure 6b**), a significant difference from every journal except  
320 *Genome Research* (Kruskal–Wallis rank sum test,  $p < 2.2e-16$ ; Dunn’s test  $q < 0.05$   
321 comparing *Nature Genetics* to all other journals except *Genome Research*, after  
322 Benjamini–Hochberg correction). Among the 30 journals publishing the most bioRxiv  
323 preprints, the journal with the most rapid transition from bioRxiv to publication is *G3*,  
324 whose median, 119 days, is significantly different from all journals except *Genetics*,  
325 *mBio*, and *The Biophysical Journal* (**Figure 5**).

326 It is important to note that this metric does not directly evaluate the production  
327 processes at individual journals. Authors submit preprints to bioRxiv at different points in  
328 the publication process and may work with multiple journals before publication, so  
329 individual data points capture a variety of experiences: For example, 122 preprints were  
330 published within a week of being posted to bioRxiv, and the longest period between  
331 preprint and publication is 3 years, 7 months and 2 days, for a preprint that was posted  
332 in March 2015 and not published until October 2018 (**Figure 6a**).



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**Figure 6.** The interval between the date a preprint is posted to bioRxiv and the date it is first published elsewhere. **(a)** A histogram showing the distribution of publication intervals—the x axis indicates the time between preprint posting and journal publication; the y axis indicates how many preprints fall within the limits of each bin. The yellow line indicates the median; the same data is also visualized using a boxplot above the histogram. **(b)** The publication intervals of preprints, broken down by the

341 journal in which each appeared. The journals in this list are the 30 journals  
342 that have published the most total bioRxiv preprints; the plot for each  
343 journal indicates the density distribution of the preprints published by that  
344 journal, excluding any papers that were posted to bioRxiv after publication.  
345 Portions of the distributions beyond 1,000 days are not displayed.  
346 **Supplementary files:** *publication\_time\_by\_year.csv*,  
347 *publication\_interval\_journals.csv*, *journal\_interval\_dunnstest.csv*

## 348 Discussion

349 Biology preprints have a large and growing presence in scientific communication,  
350 and now we have detailed data to measure and quantify this process. The ability to  
351 better characterize the preprint ecosystem can inform decision-making at multiple  
352 levels: For authors, particularly those looking for feedback from the community, our  
353 results show bioRxiv preprints are being downloaded more than 1 million times per  
354 month, and that an average paper can receive hundreds of downloads in its first few  
355 months online (**Figure S1**), particularly in genomics, synthetic biology, and  
356 bioinformatics (**Figure 2a**). Serghiou and Ioannidis (2018) evaluated download metrics  
357 for bioRxiv preprints through 2016 and found an almost identical median for downloads  
358 in a preprint's first month; we have expanded this to include more detailed longitudinal  
359 traffic metrics for the entire bioRxiv collection (**Figure 2b**). We also quantify which  
360 journals have most enthusiastically embraced the publication of biology preprints  
361 (**Figure 5**) and begin to evaluate the characteristics of preprints published by individual  
362 journals (**Figure 6**). A 2016 project measured which journals had published the most

363 bioRxiv preprints (Schmid 2016); despite a six-fold increase in the number of published  
364 preprints since then, 23 of the top 30 journals found in their results are also in the top 30  
365 journals we found.

366 For readers, we show that more than 2,000 new papers are being posted every  
367 month, making bioRxiv an increasingly vital source of information for those seeking to  
368 stay on top of the most recent research in their fields. This tracks closely with a widely  
369 referenced summary of submissions to preprint servers ("Monthly Statistics for October  
370 2018" 2018) generated monthly by PrePubMed (<http://www.prepubmed.org>), and  
371 expands on submission data collected by researchers using custom web scrapers of  
372 their own (Stuart 2016, 2017; Holdgraf 2016). Preprint usage in neuroscience is  
373 expanding exceptionally quickly (**Figure 1a**), and collections including bioinformatics,  
374 evolutionary biology, and microbiology are growing at a rapid pace (**Figure 1d**). There is  
375 also enough data to provide some evidence against the perception that research in  
376 preprint is less rigorous than papers appearing in journals ("Methods, preprints and  
377 papers" 2017; Vale 2015). In short, the majority of bioRxiv preprints *do* appear in  
378 journals eventually, and potentially with very few differences: A 2016 analysis of  
379 published preprints that had first been posted to arXiv.org found that "the vast majority  
380 of final published papers are largely indistinguishable from their pre-print versions"  
381 (Klein et al. 2016).

382 For preprints that are eventually published, we found the median lag time  
383 between posting to bioRxiv and publication in a journal is 166 days (**Figure 6a**), and  
384 that 75 percent of preprints are published after 247 days on bioRxiv—more than 8  
385 months. While this number may seem surprisingly short to researchers, it also provides

386 a lengthy head start to readers looking for the most up-to-date research. The distribution  
387 of time to publication is similar to the results from Larivière et al. (2014) showing  
388 preprints on arXiv were most frequently published within a year of being posted there,  
389 and to a later study examining bioRxiv preprints that found "the probability of publication  
390 in the peer-reviewed literature was 48% within 12 months" (Serghiou and Ioannidis  
391 2018). Another study published in spring 2017 found that 33.6 percent of preprints from  
392 2015 and earlier had been published (Schloss 2017); our data through November 2018  
393 show that 68.2 percent of preprints from 2015 and earlier have been published. Multiple  
394 studies have examined the interval between submission and publication at individual  
395 journals (e.g. Himmelstein 2016a; Royle 2015; Powell 2016), but the incorporation of  
396 information about preprints is not as common. We believe this is the first time granular  
397 publication rates and timeline statistics have been reported for bioRxiv.

398 More broadly, our data provide a new level of detail. BioRxiv has been the chief  
399 facilitator in a paradigmatic shift in biology publishing, and there are still many questions  
400 to be answered: What factors may impact the interval between when a preprint is  
401 posted to bioRxiv and when it is published elsewhere? Does a paper's presence on  
402 bioRxiv have any relationship to its eventual citation count once it is published in a  
403 journal, as has been found with arXiv (e.g. Feldman et al. 2018; Wang et al. 2018;  
404 Schwarz and Kennicutt 2004)? What can we learn from "altmetrics" as they relate to  
405 preprints, and is there value in measuring a preprint's impact using methods rooted in  
406 online interactions rather than citation count (Haustein 2018)? One study, published  
407 before bioRxiv launched, found a significant association between Twitter mentions of  
408 published papers and their citation count (Thelwall et al. 2013)—have preprints changed



409 this dynamic?

410           Researchers have used existing resources and custom scripts to answer  
411 questions like these. Himmelstein (2016b) found that only 17.8 percent of bioRxiv  
412 papers had an "open license," for example, and another study examined the  
413 relationship between Facebook "likes" of preprints and "traditional impact indicators"  
414 such as citation count, but found no correlation for papers on bioRxiv (Ringelhan et al.  
415 2015). Since most bioRxiv data is not programmatically accessible, many of these  
416 studies had to begin by scraping data from the bioRxiv website itself. There have been  
417 stated plans to change transition to a new, open-source system (Callaway 2017), but  
418 the database and API developed here (<https://rxivist.org>) bring bioRxiv data one step  
419 closer to parity with the programmatic interface available for arXiv ("arXiv API" 2018).  
420 The Rxivist API allows users to request the details of any preprint or author on the  
421 bioRxiv website, and the database snapshots enable bulk querying of preprints using  
422 SQL, C, and several other languages ("Procedural Languages" 2019) at a level of  
423 complexity currently unavailable using the standard bioRxiv web interface. Using these  
424 resources, researchers can now perform detailed and robust bibliometric analysis of the  
425 website with the largest collection of preprints in biology, the one that, beginning in  
426 September 2018, held more biology preprints than all other major preprint servers  
427 combined (Anaya 2018).

428           In addition to our analysis here focused on big picture trends related to bioRxiv,  
429 the Rxivist website provides many additional features that may interest preprint readers.  
430 Its primary feature is sorting and filtering preprints based by download count or  
431 mentions on Twitter, to help users find preprints in particular categories that are being

432 discussed either in the short term (Twitter) or over the span of months (downloads).  
433 Several other sites have attempted to use social interaction data to "rank" preprints,  
434 though none incorporate bioRxiv download metrics. The "Assert" web application  
435 (<https://assert.pub>) ranks preprints from multiple repositories based on data from Twitter  
436 and GitHub. The "PromisingPreprints" Twitter bot (<https://twitter.com/PromPreprint>)  
437 accomplishes a similar goal, posting links to bioRxiv preprints that receive an  
438 exceptionally high social media attention score ("How Is the Altmetric Attention Score  
439 Calculated?" 2018) from Altmetric (<https://www.altmetric.com>) in their first week on  
440 bioRxiv (De Coster 2017). Arxiv Sanity Preserver (<http://www.arxiv-sanity.com>) provides  
441 rankings of arXiv.org preprints based on Twitter activity, though its implementation of  
442 this scoring (Karpathy 2018) is more opinionated than that of Rxivist. Other websites  
443 perform similar curation, but based on user interactions within the sites themselves:  
444 SciRate (<https://scirate.com>), Paperkast (<https://paperkast.com>) and upvote.pub allow  
445 users to vote on articles that should receive more attention (van der Silk et al. 2018;  
446 Özturan 2018), though upvote.pub is no longer online ("Frontpage" 2018). By  
447 comparison, Rxivist doesn't rely on user interaction—by pulling "popularity" metrics from  
448 Twitter and bioRxiv, we aim to decouple the quality of our data from the popularity of the  
449 website itself.

450 In summary, our approach provides multiple perspectives on trends in biology  
451 preprints: (1) the Rxivist.org website, where readers can prioritize preprints and  
452 generate reading lists tailored to specific topics, (2) a dataset that can provide a  
453 foundation for developers and bibliometric researchers to build new tools, websites, and  
454 studies that can further improve the ways we interact with preprints, and (3) an analysis

455 that brings together a comprehensive summary of trends in bioRxiv preprints and an  
456 examination of the crossover points between preprints and conventional publishing.

## 457 Methods

### 458 Data availability

459 There are multiple web links to resources related to this project:

- 460 ● The Rxivist application is available on the web at <https://rxivist.org> and via  
461 Gopher at [gopher://origin.rxivist.org](https://origin.rxivist.org)
- 462 ● The source for the web crawler and API is available at  
463 <https://github.com/blekhmanlab/rxivist>
- 464 ● The source for the Rxivist website is available at  
465 [https://github.com/blekhmanlab/rxivist\\_web](https://github.com/blekhmanlab/rxivist_web)
- 466 ● Data files used to generate the figures in this manuscript are available on Zenodo  
467 at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2465689>, as is a snapshot of the database  
468 used to create the files.

### 469 The Rxivist website

470 We attempted to put the Rxivist data to good use in a relatively straightforward  
471 web application. Its main offering is a ranked list of all bioRxiv preprints that can be  
472 filtered by areas of interest. The rankings are based on two available metrics: either the  
473 count of PDF downloads, as reported by bioRxiv, or the number of Twitter messages  
474 linking to that preprint, as reported by Crossref (<https://crossref.org>). Users can also

475 specify a timeframe for the search—for example, one could request the most  
476 downloaded preprints in microbiology over the last two months, or view the preprints  
477 with the most Twitter activity since yesterday across all categories. Each preprint and  
478 each author is given a separate profile page, populated only by Rxivist data available  
479 from the API. These include rankings across multiple categories, plus a visualization of  
480 where the download totals for each preprint (and author) fall in the overall distribution  
481 across all 37,000 preprints and 170,000 authors.

## 482 The Rxivist API and dataset

483 The full data described in this paper is available through Rxivist.org, a website  
484 developed for this purpose. BioRxiv data is available from Rxivist in two formats: (1)  
485 SQL "database dumps" are currently pulled and published weekly on zenodo.org. (See  
486 Supplementary Information for a description of the schema.) These convert the entire  
487 Rxivist database into binary files that can be loaded by the free and open-source  
488 PostgreSQL database management system to provide a local copy of all collected data  
489 on every article and author on bioRxiv.org. (2) We also provide an API (application  
490 programming interface) from which users can request information in JSON format about  
491 individual preprints and authors, or search for preprints based on similar criteria  
492 available on the Rxivist website. Complete documentation is available at  
493 <https://www.rxivist.org/docs> .

494 While the analysis presented here deals mostly with overall trends on bioRxiv,  
495 the primary entity of the Rxivist API is the individual research preprint, for which we  
496 have a straightforward collection of metadata: title, abstract, DOI (digital object

497 identifier), the name of any journal that has also published the preprint (and its new  
498 DOI), and which collection the preprint was submitted to. We also collected monthly  
499 traffic information for each preprint, as reported by bioRxiv. We use the PDF download  
500 statistics to generate rankings for each preprint, both site-wide and for each collection,  
501 over multiple timeframes (all-time, year to date, etc.). In the API and its underlying  
502 database schema, "authors" exist separately from "preprints" because an author can be  
503 associated with multiple preprints. They are recorded with three main pieces of data:  
504 name, institutional affiliation and a unique identifier issued by ORCID. Like preprints,  
505 authors are ranked based on the cumulative downloads of all their preprints, and  
506 separately based on downloads within individual bioRxiv collections. Emails are  
507 collected for each researcher, but are not necessarily unique (See below).

## 508 Data acquisition

509 **Web crawler design.** To collect information on all bioRxiv preprints, we  
510 developed an application that pulled preprint data directly from the bioRxiv website. The  
511 primary issue with managing this data is keeping it up to date: Rxivist aims to essentially  
512 maintain an accurate copy of a subset of bioRxiv's production database, which means  
513 routinely running a web crawler against the website to find any new or updated content  
514 as it is posted. We have tried to find a balance between timely updates and observing  
515 courteous web crawler behavior; currently, each preprint is re-crawled once every two to  
516 three weeks to refresh its download metrics and publication status. The web crawler  
517 itself uses Python 3 and requires two primary modules for interacting with external  
518 services: Requests-HTML (Reitz 2018) is used for fetching individual web pages and

519 pulling out the relevant data, and the psychopg2 module (Di Gregorio et al. 2018) is used  
520 to communicate with the PostgreSQL database that stores all of the Rxivist data  
521 (PostgreSQL Global Development Group 2017). PostgreSQL was selected over other  
522 similar database management systems because of its native support for text search,  
523 which, in our implementation, enables users to search for preprints based on the  
524 contents of their titles, abstracts and author list. The API, spider and web application are  
525 all hosted within separate Docker containers (Docker Inc. 2018), a decision we made to  
526 simplify the logistics required for others to deploy the components on their own: Docker  
527 is the only dependency, so most workstations and servers should be able to run any of  
528 the components.

529 New preprints are recorded by parsing the section of the bioRxiv website that  
530 lists all preprints in reverse-chronological order: At this point, a preprint's title, URL and  
531 DOI are recorded. The bioRxiv webpage for each preprint is then crawled to obtain  
532 details only available there: the abstract, the date the preprint was first posted, and  
533 monthly download statistics are pulled from here, as well as information about the  
534 preprint's authors—name, email address and institution. These authors are then  
535 compared against the list of those already indexed by Rxivist, and any unrecognized  
536 authors have profiles created in the database.

537 **Consolidation of author identities.** Authors are most reliably identified across  
538 multiple papers using the bioRxiv feature that allows authors to specify an identifier  
539 provided by ORCID (<https://orcid.org>), a nonprofit that provides a voluntary system to  
540 create unique identification numbers for individuals. These ORCID ("Open Researcher  
541 and Contributor ID") numbers are intended to serve approximately the same role for

542 authors that DOI numbers do for papers (Haak 2012), providing a way to identify  
543 individuals whose other information may change over time. 29,559 bioRxiv authors, or  
544 17.4 percent, have an associated ORCID. If an individual included in a preprint's list of  
545 authors doesn't have an ORCID already recorded in the database, authors are  
546 consolidated if they have an identical name to an existing Rxivist author.

547         There are certainly authors who are duplicated within the Rxivist database, an  
548 issue arising mostly from the common complaint of unreliable source data. 68.4 percent  
549 of indexed authors have at least one email address associated with them, for example,  
550 including 7,085 (4.40 percent) authors with more than one. However, of the 118,490  
551 email addresses in the Rxivist database, 6,517 (5.50 percent) are duplicates that are  
552 associated with more than one author. Some of these are because real-life authors  
553 occasionally appear under multiple names, but other duplicates are caused by  
554 uploaders to bioRxiv using the same email address for multiple authors on the same  
555 preprint, making it far more difficult to use email addresses as unique identifiers. There  
556 are also cases like one from 2017, in which 16 of the 17 authors of a preprint were listed  
557 with the email address "test@test.com."

558         Inconsistent naming patterns cause another chronic issue that is harder to detect  
559 and account for. For example, at one point thousands of duplicate authors were indexed  
560 in the Rxivist database with various versions of the same name—including a full middle  
561 name, or a middle initial, or a middle initial with a period, and so on—which would all  
562 have been recorded as separate people if they did not all share an ORCID, to say  
563 nothing of authors who occasionally skip specifying a middle initial altogether.  
564 Accommodations could be made to account for inconsistencies such as these (using

565 institutional affiliation or email address as clues, for example), but these methods also  
566 have the potential to increase the opposite problem of incorrectly combining different  
567 authors with similar names who intentionally introduce slight modifications such as a  
568 middle initial to help differentiate themselves. One allowance was made to normalize  
569 author names: When the web crawler searches for name matches in the database,  
570 periods are now ignored in string matches, so "John Q. Public" would be a match with  
571 "John Q Public." The other naming problem we encountered was of the opposite  
572 variety: multiple authors with identical names (and no ORCID). For example, the Rxivist  
573 profile for author "Wei Wang" is associated with 40 preprints and 21 different email  
574 addresses but is certainly the conglomeration of multiple researchers. A study of more  
575 than 30,000 Norwegian researchers found that when using full names rather than  
576 initials, the rate of name collisions was 1.4 percent (Aksnes 2008).

577 **Retrieval of publication date information.** Publication dates were pulled from  
578 the Crossref Metadata Delivery API (Crossref 2018) using the publication DOI numbers  
579 provided by bioRxiv. Dates were found for all but 31 (0.2%) of the 15,797 published  
580 bioRxiv preprints. Because journals measure "publication date" in different ways,  
581 several metrics were used. If a "published—online" date was available from Crossref  
582 with a day, month and year, then that was recorded. If not, "published—print" was used,  
583 and the Crossref "created" date was the final option evaluated. Requests for which we  
584 received a 404 response were assigned a publication date of 1 Jan 1900, to prevent  
585 further attempts to fetch a date for those entries. These results were filtered out of the  
586 analysis. There was no practical way to validate the nearly 16,000 values retrieved, but  
587 anecdotal evaluation reveals some inconsistencies: For example, the preprint with the



588 longest interval before publication (1,371 days) has a publication date reported by  
589 Crossref of 1 Jul 2018, when it appeared in *IEEE/ACM Transactions on Computational*  
590 *Biology and Bioinformatics* 15(4). However, the IEEE website lists a date of 15 Dec  
591 2015, two and a half years earlier, as that paper's "publication date," which they define  
592 as "the very first instance of public dissemination of content." Since every publisher is  
593 free to make their own unique distinctions, these data are difficult to compare at a  
594 granular level.

595       **Calculation of download rankings.** The web crawler's "ranking" step orders  
596 preprints and authors based on download count in two populations (overall and by  
597 bioRxiv category) and over several periods: all-time, year-to-date, and since the  
598 beginning of the previous month. The last metric was chosen over a "month-to-date"  
599 ranking to avoid ordering papers based on the very limited traffic data available in the  
600 first days of each month—in addition to a short lag in the time bioRxiv takes to report  
601 downloads, an individual preprint's download metrics may only be updated in the Rxivist  
602 database once every two or three weeks, so metrics for a single month will be biased in  
603 favor of those that happen to have been crawled most recently. This effect is not  
604 eliminated in longer windows, but is diminished. The step recording the rankings takes a  
605 more unusual approach to loading the data: Because each article ranking step could  
606 require more than 37,000 "insert" or "update" statements, and each author ranking  
607 requires more than 170,000 of the same, these modifications are instead written to a  
608 text file on the application server and loaded by running an instance of the Postgres  
609 command-line client "psql," which can use the more efficient "copy" command, a change  
610 that reduced the ranking process from several hours to less than one minute.

## 611 Data preparation

612           Several steps were taken to organize the data that was used for this paper. First,  
613 the production data being used for the Rxivist API was copied to a separate "schema"—  
614 a PostgreSQL term for a named set of tables. This was identical to the full database, but  
615 had a specifically circumscribed set of preprints. Once this was copied, the table  
616 containing the associations between authors and each of their papers ("article\_authors")  
617 was pruned to remove references to any articles that were posted after 30 Nov 2018,  
618 and any articles that were not associated with a bioRxiv collection. For unknown  
619 reasons, 10 preprints (0.03%) could not be associated with a bioRxiv collection;  
620 because the bioRxiv profile page for each paper does not specify which collection it  
621 belongs to, these papers were ignored. Once these associations were removed, any  
622 articles meeting those criteria were removed from the "articles" table. References to  
623 these articles were also removed from the table containing monthly bioRxiv download  
624 metrics for each paper ("article\_traffic"). We also removed all entries from the  
625 "article\_traffic" table that recorded downloads after November 2018. Next, the table  
626 containing author email addresses ("author\_emails") was pruned to remove emails  
627 associated with any author that had zero preprints in the new set of papers; those  
628 authors were then removed from the "authors" table.

629           Before evaluating data from the table linking published preprints to journals and  
630 their post-publication DOI ("article\_publications"), journal names were consolidated to  
631 avoid under-counting journals with spelling inconsistencies. First, capitalization was  
632 stripped from all journal titles, and inconsistent articles ("The Journal of..." vs. "Journal  
633 of..."; "and" vs. "&" and so on) were removed. Then, the list of journals was reviewed by

634 hand to remove duplication more difficult to capture automatically: "PNAS" and  
635 "Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences," for example. Misspellings were  
636 rare, but one publication in "integrative biology" did appear. See *figures.md* in the  
637 project's [GitHub](https://github.com/blekhmanlab/rxivist) repository  
638 (<https://github.com/blekhmanlab/rxivist/blob/master/paper/figures.md>) for a full list of  
639 corrections made to journal titles. We also evaluated preprints for publication in  
640 "predatory journals," organizations that use irresponsibly low academic standards to  
641 bolster income from publication fees (Xia et al. 2015). A search for 1,345 journals based  
642 on the list compiled by Stop Predatory Journals (<https://predatoryjournals.com>) showed  
643 that bioRxiv lists zero papers appearing in those publications ("List of Predatory  
644 Journals" 2018).

## 645 Data analysis

646 **Reproduction of figures.** Two files are needed to recreate the figures in this  
647 manuscript: a compressed database backup containing a snapshot of the data used in  
648 this analysis, and a file called *figures.md* storing the SQL queries and R code necessary  
649 to organize the data and draw the figures. The PostgreSQL documentation for restoring  
650 database dumps should provide the necessary steps to "inflate" the database snapshot,  
651 and each figure and table is listed in *figures.md* with the queries to generate comma-  
652 separated values files that provide the data underlying each figure. (Those who wish to  
653 skip the database reconstruction step will find CSVs for each figure provided along with  
654 these other files.) Once the data for each figure is pulled into files, executing the

655 accompanying R code should create figures containing the exact data as displayed  
656 here.

657 **Tallying institutional authors and preprints.** When reporting the counts of  
658 bioRxiv authors associated with individual universities, there are several important  
659 caveats: First, these counts only include the most recently observed institution for an  
660 author on bioRxiv: If someone submits 15 preprints at Stanford, then moves to the  
661 University of Iowa and posts another preprint afterward, that author will be associated  
662 with the University of Iowa, which will receive all 16 preprints in the inventory. Second,  
663 this count is also confounded by inconsistencies in the way authors report their  
664 affiliations: For example, "Northwestern University," which has 396 preprints, is counted  
665 separately from "Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine," which has 76.  
666 Overlaps such as these were not filtered, though commas in institution names were  
667 omitted when grouping preprints together.

668 **Evaluation of publication rates.** Data referenced in this manuscript is limited to  
669 preprints posted through the end of November 2018. However, determining which  
670 preprints had been published in journals by the end of November required refreshing  
671 the entries for all 37,000 preprints *after* the month ended. Consequently, it's possible  
672 that papers published after the end of November (but not after the first weeks of  
673 December) are included in the publication statistics.

674 **Calculation of publication intervals.** There are 15,797 distinct preprints with an  
675 associated date of publication in a journal, a corpus too large to allow detailed manual  
676 validation across hundreds of journal websites. Consequently, these dates are only as  
677 accurate as the data collected by Crossref from the publishers. We attempted to use the

678 earliest publication date, but researchers have found that some publishers may be  
679 intentionally manipulating dates associated with publication timelines (Royle 2015),  
680 particularly the gap between online and print publication, which can inflate journal  
681 impact factor (Tort et al. 2012). Intentional or not, these gaps may be inflating the time  
682 to press measurements of some preprints and journals in our analysis. In addition, there  
683 are 66 preprints (0.42 percent) that have a publication date that falls before the date it  
684 was posted to bioRxiv; these were excluded from analyses of publication interval.

685 **Counting authors with middle initials.** To obtain the comparatively large  
686 counts of authors using one or two middle initials, results from a SQL query were used  
687 without any curation. For the counts of authors with three or four middle initials, the  
688 results of the database call were reviewed by hand to remove "author" names that look  
689 like initials, but are actually the name of consortia ("International IBD Genetics  
690 Consortium") or authors who provided non-initialized names using all capital letters.

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## 700 Competing interests

701 The authors declare no competing interests.

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