Peer Community In and Peer Community Journal: A Two-Step Diamond OA Process Giving Research Communities Back Control of Publishing

Barbara Class, Denis Bourguet, Thomas Guillemaud

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Barbara Class[1], Denis Bourguet[2], Thomas Guillemaud[3*]
[1]DipSO - INRAE
[2]CBGP - INRAE, IRD, CIRAD, Institut Agro – Montferrier/Lez, France
[3] Institut Sophia Agrobiotech - INRAE, Université Côte d'Azur – Sophia Antipolis, France
*Corresponding author
Correspondence: contact@peercommunityin.org

Barbara Class ORCID: 0000-0002-2361-9821
Denis Bourguet ORCID: 0000-0002-2109-5323
Thomas Guillemaud ORCID: 0000-0003-0451-1644

Abstract

The current academic publishing system faces many well-identified issues. Not only is it slow and costly, but it is also an opaque system that produces a substantial amount of non-reproducible results. Peer Community In (PCI) is a non-profit organisation that allows research communities to organise the open and free peer-review of preprints on different thematic platforms. The authors of preprints that are recommended by these platforms can then choose to submit them to any journal or to Peer Community Journal, a diamond open access journal, which publishes any and only PCI-recommended preprints. Because PCI follows the highest standards for evaluations and openness, many institutions and journals publicly recognise PCI-recommended preprints as being of similar value to accepted journal articles. This two-step process hence decouples the evaluation of research articles from their publication, while offering a free open-access publication venue for its recommended preprints. Doing so allows researchers to reappropriate the publishing system, and the increasing number of submissions, publications, and communities shows a growing demand for such alternative publishing models. Ongoing developments aim to further increase the robustness and reproducibility of published research via increasing requirements and checks at submission and promoting the use of registered reports.

Keywords

Diamond Open Access, Publish-Review-Curate, Preprints, Journal

Introduction

The academic publishing system faces several important issues, including the fact that most research findings are not publicly accessible (Butler, 2023; Larivière et al., 2015; STM Association, 2024). There are often long lags between obtaining results and their publication (Björk, 2018; Björk & Solomon, 2013; Hanson et al., 2024) but see (Ni &

Waltman, 2024). The evaluation process often lacks transparency (Wicherts, 2016; but see Ross-Hellauer & Horbach, 2024), fails to correct all issues in articles (Aczel et al., 2025; Zheng et al., 2023), is very costly (Haustein et al., 2024), and relies on the free labour of scientists (Aczel et al., 2021). Finally, editorial boards frequently lack diversity and are dominated by a few individuals (Baccini & Re, 2025; Dada et al., 2022; Goyanes et al., 2022).

Other issues concern the quality of research publications. A substantial proportion of published findings in various fields cannot be reproduced (Baker, 2016; Bausell, 2021; Begley & Ellis, 2012; Ioannidis, 2005; Youyou et al., 2023) owing to (not exclusively) the absence of data sharing, insufficient methodological details, or questionable research practices. The published literature suffers from a positive result bias, which highlights the tendency of the current publication system to select results that appear novel or extraordinary (Bartoš et al., 2024; Nissen et al., 2016).

Proposed solutions to those issues include making preprint articles public via deposition on repositories and open archives (Ni & Waltman, 2024; Sarabipour et al., 2019), enabling the public evaluation of these preprints (Rzayeva et al., 2023), and, more recently, curating peer-reviewed preprints in collections (Stern & O'Shea, 2019). Together, these three steps form the Preprint-Review-Curate (PRC) model that is gaining momentum.

In line with the PRC model, we present an original publication model addressing some of the abovementioned issues. Peer Community In (PCI) is a two-step publication model organising the open and free evaluation and recommendation of preprints on thematic platforms and publishing these recommended preprints in a diamond open-access journal, Peer Community Journal (PCJ). PCI is a singular actor of the PRC model, providing a system by which research communities can organise their own PRC. Below, we detail the PCI system, the issues it addresses, its outcomes, and future development.

The PCI initiative

Organisation

PCI is a non-profit, non-commercial organisation founded in late 2016 under French status. It comprises several thematic PCIs and the Peer Community Journal (PCJ). The organisation is managed by and composed of researchers. Its members are the founders of PCI, its support officer, and a representative for each thematic PCI. Each thematic PCI comprises recommenders who serve as associate editors, and a managing board chosen among recommenders by a representative elected by the recommenders. The research domain covered by a thematic PCI can be a scientific discipline (e.g., PCI Ecology, PCI Microbiology) or an object-oriented subject (e.g., PCI Forest & Wood Science, PCI Infections). The managing board of each PCI deals with scientific matters, is responsible for the editorial decisions and manages correspondence between authors, reviewers and recommenders. New recommenders are proposed by current recommenders and nominated by the managing board based on their scientific expertise.

Editorial workflow

The editorial workflow can be described in three main steps (Figure 1):

1) The authors deposit their preprint and accompanying material on open-access repositories that provide permanent identifiers.

2) The authors submit their preprint (i.e., provide the link to it) to a thematic PCI via a submission platform and suggest potential recommenders and reviewers. The managing boards check the submission for appropriate scope, absence of plagiarism and absence of financial conflicts of interest. Suggested recommenders validated by the boards are then invited to handle the evaluation. A preprint not chosen by any recommender after 20 days can be desk rejected.

3) If a recommender decides to handle the evaluation, they invite reviewers to obtain at least two reviews. Like most peer-reviewed journals, the preprint will undergo one or several rounds of submission-review-decision-revision and will be accepted or rejected. In case of acceptance, the recommender writes a recommendation text explaining the study's merits. This text and all the evaluations and authors' replies are then published on the thematic PCI website and get DOIs.

One peculiarity of the PCI model lies in its flexibility at all stages of the process: i) Recommenders choose whether to handle a preprint; ii) Reviewers can opt to sign their reviews; iii) Authors of a PCI-recommended preprint can decide to submit it to any journal (PCJ, PCI-friendly journals, or other journals) later.

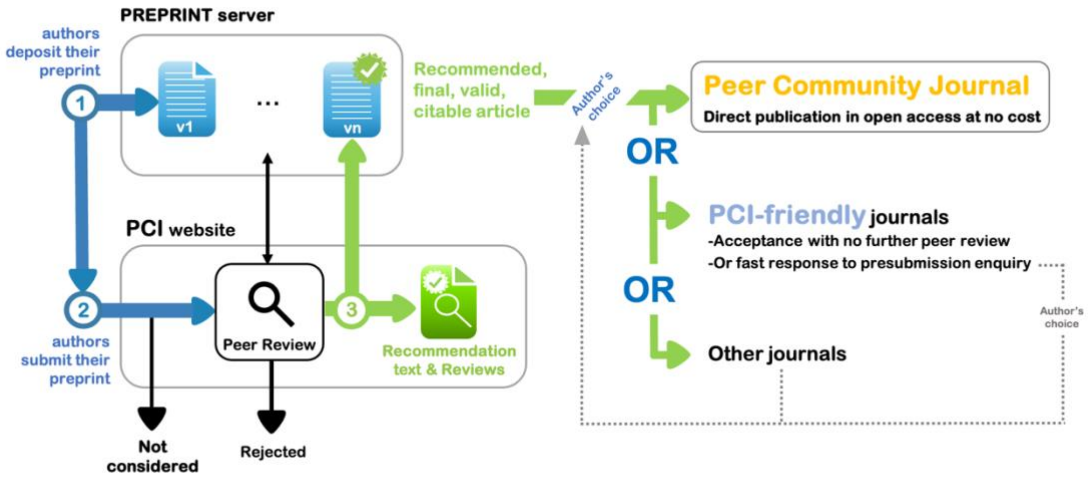

Figure 1 - Workflow of PCI.

Peer Community Journal

Authors can opt to publish their PCI-recommended preprints in PCJ (https://peercommunityjournal.org/) to obtain a version of record (VoR) of their article. PCJ only publishes articles evaluated and recommended by the thematic PCIs and therefore does not require additional peer review. Submitted preprints are pre-

formatted by authors using an openly available template, references are checked, and PCJ articles are published with a CC-BY license. Since its launch, PCJ has become the main publishing venue for PCI-recommended preprints (66% of preprints recommended in 2022 and 2023). PCJ is divided into sections, each hosting the articles recommended by a thematic PCI. The editorial board is also divided into sections, comprising the managing board of each thematic PCI. PCJ is hosted and distributed by Centre Mersenne (Université Grenoble Alpes, CNRS) and UGA édition (Université Grenoble Alpes). Below is a list of PCJ features that make it a singular publishing venue:

- Diamond open-access and non-profit: No fees are paid by authors or readers, and PCJ belongs to the PCI organisation.

- Core values: PCJ adheres to the FAIR Open Access principles (Ling OA, 2024).

- Transparency: PCJ displays a transparent editorial process (i.e., links to the recommendation page on the thematic PCI) for each article.

- Findability: PCJ articles are indexed in widely used databases such as DOAJ, Scopus, Google Scholar, or Web of Science (PCJ, 2025).

Relationships with journals

Alternatively, authors can choose to submit their PCI-recommended preprints to other journals. To date, 31% (277) of all PCI-recommended preprints have been published in journals other than PCJ.

Journals vary in how they consider the reviews and editorial decisions performed by the thematic PCIs. Some journals declare themselves as PCI-friendly and opt between two categories of commitments:

- Category 1 (21 journals): Accept the submissions without further peer review, if in their scope.

- Category 2 (67 journals): Promptly inform (5 days or a short agreed-upon period no longer than ten days) authors whether their submission is accepted, rejected or will be sent for complementary peer review.

Other journals showed an interest in the PCI evaluation process but have not committed to providing authors with a fast response. These journals are listed as publishing venues likely to reduce the delay between the recommendation of their preprint and its publication.

Lastly, journals may be considered aversive or hostile towards PCI by i) not recognising the editorial process undergone by PCI-recommended submissions; ii) systematically rejecting submissions that have been peer-reviewed and recommended by PCI.

PCI Registered Reports

The reproducibility crisis occurring in many scientific fields (e.g., Haddaway & Verhoeven, 2015; Open Science Collaboration, 2015; Schloss, 2018) has driven the emergence of novel publication processes promoting more rigorous research planning

and limiting many questionable research practices (e.g., setting hypotheses after the results are known (HARKing), p-hacking, cherry-picking).

Pre-registration involves researchers submitting their research questions and planned analyses to an independent registry before collecting data or writing their manuscript. This allows a more transparent research process (e.g., distinguishing planned and ad hoc hypotheses) and incentivises more rigorous practices.

To prevent publication bias and validate robust research plans, pre-registrations can then be evaluated via registered reports (RRs). RRs consist of a two-stage evaluation: before data is collected and after results are obtained. The first evaluation scrutinises the context, hypotheses, research questions, and methodology, and can lead to an in-principle acceptance. The second evaluation checks for compliance with the proposed methods and evidence-based conclusions (Chambers & Tzavella, 2022). Therefore, a rigorous study can be published regardless of its results, and RRs have successfully reduced positive results bias (Allen & Mehler, 2019; Lakens et al., 2024; Scheel et al., 2021).

PCI Registered Reports (PCI RR) was founded in 2021 by Chris Chambers, a central figure promoting RRs in journals(Chambers, 2013). PCI RR is customised for dealing with a 2-stage evaluation process (Zoccali & Mallamaci, 2023) and further addresses some of the current shortcomings of RRs (Chambers & Tzavella, 2022):

- PCI RR recommenders are trained and must pass an examination related to RR evaluation
- Peer reviews of stage 1 RRs can be scheduled in advance
- One recommended stage 1 RR allows the submission of several stage 2 RRs
- A taxonomy of levels of bias control to assess the eligibility of Stage 1 RRs to submission and publication in PCI RR-friendly journals.

Another particularity of PCI RR is its relationship with journals. PCI RR maintains its own list of PCI-RR-interested (8) and PCI-RR-friendly journals (37), primarily focusing on psychology and neuroscience, which are either notified of stage 1 or stage 2 recommendations, or publish stage 2-recommended articles without further peer review. Furthermore, PCI RR is now the outsourced service for evaluating RRs of journals (O'Grady, 2021) and is among the best-rated services for RR evaluation (Meghreblian, 2025).

PCI's history

PCI was founded in December 2016. The original idea - the public peer review and recommendation of preprints - comes from a discussion on creating a publicly funded journal that would be more efficient and less costly than most journals. In 2017, the first thematic PCI was established in evolutionary biology, as this was the discipline in which DB and TG worked. Creating a new thematic PCI (PCI, 2025a) is a bottom-up process. Researchers interested in founding a thematic PCI must submit a project to the PCI organisation. The PCI members discuss and vote on whether to open the proposed thematic PCI. Other thematic PCIs have since been created and amount to 21 (Figure 2).

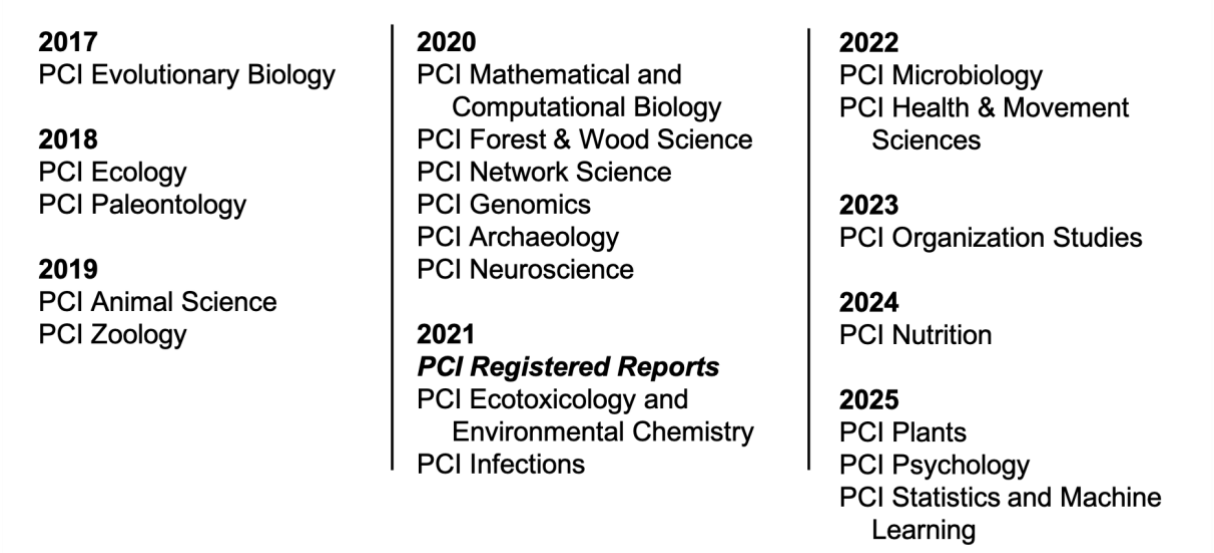

Figure 2 - Dates of the opening of the various thematic PCIs.

Before the launch of PCJ in November 2021, many authors who needed their PCI-recommended article to have a VoR and to be indexed in major databases submitted their preprints to journals and were likely to experience long processing times if additional peer review were performed and/or pay high publication fees. PCJ was therefore created to meet the expectations of these authors. Note that publishing in a journal, even in PCJ, should be a temporary solution until recommended preprints are indexed and generally recognised as having the same value as an accepted article in a peer-reviewed journal.

Finances

The complete description of PCI's finance philosophy can be found on PCI's website (PCI, 2024a). PCI's financial resources come from in-kind and monetary donations from public research organisations and universities, all publicly listed by TSOSI (https://tsosi.org/entities/0315saa81).

Funding relies on many small, recurrent contributions, with INRAE as the leading supporter (about 60% in-kind) and CNRS, FNSO, COAR, and INRAE providing half of the monetary donations. PCI minimises expenses by optimising resources, reducing costs, and relying on volunteer researchers rather than outsourcing tasks. Web development - a custom-built system (https://github.com/pci-dev/pci) adapted to PCI's workflow and allowing an expanding portfolio of thematic PCIs more conveniently than non-commercial (e.g., Open Journal Software) and ultimately cheaper than commercial (e.g., Managing Editor) alternatives- constitutes the main expense.

Given the uncertainty of open science funding in Europe, PCI has adopted a conservative strategy with financial reserves. Its model promotes efficiency and reduced costs in publishing, lowering article prices as submissions increase. Savings for institutions can then be reinvested in open science, supporting diamond open-

access publishing and expanding access to scientific knowledge while ensuring sustainability.

Development strategy of PCI and PCJ

The number of submissions across all thematic PCIs has gone from 54 in 2017 to 504 in 2024. Similarly, the number of yearly recommendations has reached 239 in 2024. These numbers vary between thematic PCIs, ranging (in 2024) from seven to 159, with a mean of 30 (median = 14). The number of articles published in PCJ has also increased since its launch.

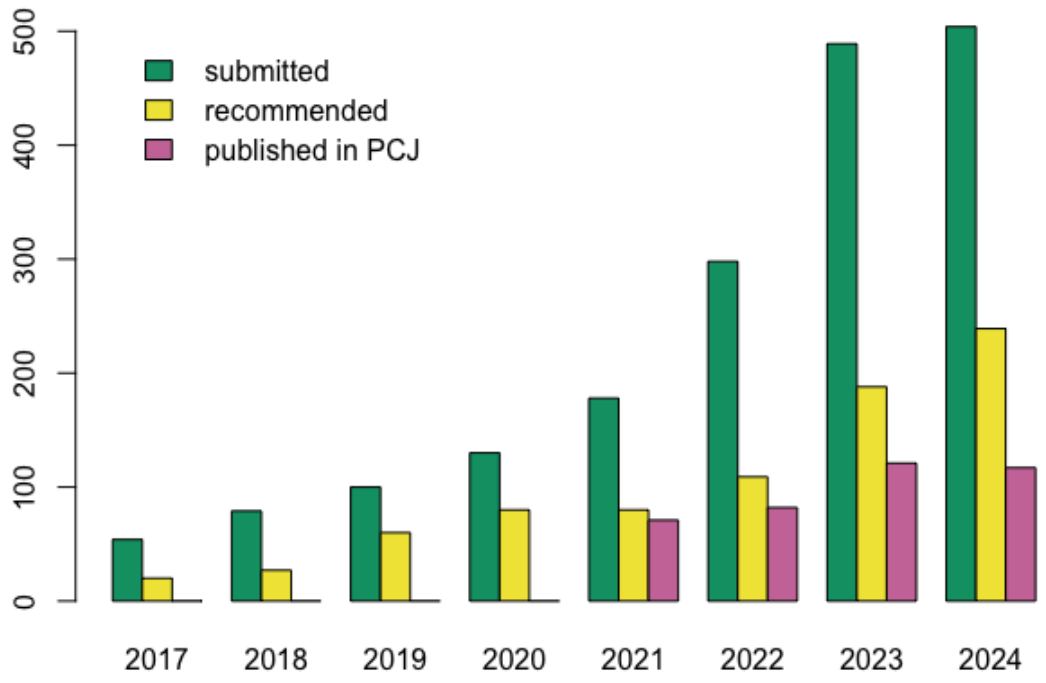

Figure 3 - Number of submissions, recommendations for all PCIs (i.e., including PCI RR Stage 1 (for the submissions) and PCI RR Stage 2 (for the recommendations)), and articles published in PCJ in a given year.

This positive trend could be explained by both intrinsic features of PCI and a strategy combining active communication and actions to remove barriers to submission:

- Unique positioning: PCI stands out among alternative publishing systems (e.g., diamond open access, preprint peer review) and has gained relative visibility despite a modest volume of submissions. As a result, it may attract authors actively seeking to engage in innovative and alternative publishing practices

- Diamond open-access model: Given that article processing charges can represent a barrier for some researchers (Shaw & Elger, 2018; UNESCO, 2021), the appeal of the diamond OA system might continue to grow. The increasing promotion and adoption of diamond open access in the academic community further enhances PCI's relevance

- Seeking institutional support (> 200 symbolic and financial supporters in 2025) and recognition of PCI-recommended preprints by doctoral schools and academic evaluation committees

- The launch of PCJ and its indexing in major scholarly databases has enabled authors to benefit from a fast, free, and well-indexed publication pathway for their PCI-recommended articles

- Since March 2022, PCI has invited researchers to sign a manifesto (PCI, 2025c), committing to submit at least one article to PCI within the next 15 months and, if recommended, to publish it in PCJ. Within a year of its launch, the manifesto gathered over 1,000 signatures from 71 countries, likely contributing to a significant rise in submissions - especially between 2022 and 2023

- Active communication efforts to promote awareness of the PCI model: including a strong presence on social media, virtual and in-person presentations at research institutions and conferences, and the organisation of a quarterly PCI webinar series (PCI, 2025b).

- Enhanced interoperability between PCI, preprint servers and repositories. PCI recommendations are notified to preprint servers (e.g., bioRxiv, medRxiv, via hypothesis.io) and open archives (e.g., HAL, Digital-CSIC via COAR-Notify), allowing them to automatically display a link to the recommendation page of the preprint. Furthermore, direct submissions can be made from bioRxiv (via B2J) to PCI Ecology and from HAL and Digital-CSIC (via COAR-Notify) to all thematic PCIs

- The PCI brand and organisational structure foster the creation of new thematic PCIs and support the development of corresponding sections in PCJ. This approach enhances disciplinary diversity and motivates researchers in currently uncovered areas to launch their own thematic PCIs

- A large number of recommenders in thematic PCIs compared to the number of editors in traditional biology journals. As of 2024, all thematic PCIs combined have reached 2,473 recommenders. Recruitment of recommenders is conducted with attention to geographic, gender, and career-stage diversity to ensure broad community representation.

Comparison with other Open Science publishing initiatives

PCI evaluates preprints, publishes reviews, and separates evaluation from publication within the Diamond open access ecosystem. It hence resembles other open science publishing models (e.g., overlay journals, eLife, F1000, Review Commons, metaROR) which implement one or several of these features. However, unlike most preprint peer-review services, PCI retains binary editorial decisions to clearly signal that a submission has been evaluated and validated by part of the scientific community

(Bourguet & Guillemaud, 2024). We note however that all these initiatives rely on peer-review, whose limitations are known (Aczel et al., 2025; Heesen & Bright, 2021; Sever, 2023). Ultimately, no single model fits all research communities when it comes to scholarly publishing and we encourage authors to explore alternative systems that meet their own needs.

How does PCI solve the issues of the current publication system?

PCI proposes a system capable of (at least partly) addressing the issues of the current publication system described in the introduction.

Inaccessible research results: PCI evaluates preprints, which are freely accessible. The authors must also deposit any accompanying material on open repositories upon submission. All the evaluated items are accessible throughout the evaluation process and after publication, regardless of the journal chosen.

Slow and repetitive evaluation: Although the duration of the evaluation process is not faster at PCI than at traditional journals, PCI can save additional peer review rounds for recommended manuscripts subsequently submitted to journals. PCI evaluations can be reused by any journal receiving the recommended manuscript. If a journal plans to send it for additional peer review, authors can withdraw it and submit it to another journal until they find one that accepts the article without further peer review.

Lack of transparency in manuscript evaluation: The entire evaluation process of recommended preprints is published by PCI under a CC-BY license. While the recommenders sign their editorial decisions and recommendations, reviewers are free to sign their reviews. However, the evaluation is not published for preprints rejected by PCI to avoid stigmatising the authors and creating a “metadata of failure” (Sever, 2023).

Costs of publication: The production costs at PCI are approximately €1,000 per article, including in-kind contributions (PCI, 2024a, 2024b). This is a third of the estimated average cost to society of publishing an article in science, technology, and medicine (PCI, 2024a). PCI covers these costs.

Lack of diversity in editorial boards: Thematic PCIs have extensive and diverse groups of recommenders. This broad base ensures diversity of perspectives and expertise during editorial decisions.

Lack of reproducibility of published results: PCI requires authors to make their data, scripts, and code public to improve reproducibility. Ethical reasons should be the only exception to not sharing that information. PCI also requires authors to justify their choice of sample size. PCI has launched in 2025 computational reproducibility checks (see below), encouraging the submission of replication studies and promoting pre-registration and RR. PCI RR is a major actor in the evaluation of RR.

PCI ongoing project and future plans

A shift in scientific culture toward reproducibility and overall research quality is needed (Hales et al., 2019; Hardwicke & Vazire, 2024; Schimmack, 2012; van ’t Veer & Giner-Sorolla, 2016). Such change can be supported by funders, employers, journals, and article evaluation platforms. PCI contributes to this change by promoting practices that raise submission quality without compromising diversity, equity, or inclusion (Whitaker

& Guest, 2020). This includes encouraging pre-registration and replication studies, offering free services (e.g., RR evaluation, reproducibility checks), and guiding researchers on community-voted new requirements (e.g., sample size justification, FAIR data and code). Below, we outline an ongoing programme and a project.

Data, code, and computational reproducibility checks: Over the past decade, journals have increasingly adopted data and code sharing mandates (Tedersoo et al., 2021). However, these alone do not ensure transparency, reusability, or reproducibility (Culina et al., 2020; Roche et al., 2022; Stodden et al., 2018). To address this issue, PCI is building teams of data and script editors across its thematic PCIs. Since 2025, the first team has verified data, scripts, and reproducibility for submissions in PCI Ecology and Evolutionary Biology (see Pick et al., 2025 for details). Few journals already have data and script editors, and even fewer perform computational reproducibility checks. These checks are usually performed after manuscript acceptance. In contrast, PCI conducts these checks upon submission, giving reviewers access to high-quality data and allowing issues to be resolved early. Recommendations require meeting all data and code standards (stages 1–6, Pick et al., 2025), though some computational checks may be limited by cost, software, or expertise. Editors' full reports are published on the recommendations' pages, and PCI may soon introduce reproducibility badges.

Collaboration between funders and PCI RR: Funding calls are usually evaluated by experts, but assessments often extend beyond science to factors like originality, impact, feasibility, and candidate notoriety. PCI could advocate for a closer collaboration between funders and PCI RR to evaluate research proposals. Candidates would submit stage 1 RR, improving project quality and ensuring sound study plans. A positive evaluation would yield an in-principle recommendation and guidance for funders. Three models are possible: (i) the funder delegates evaluation entirely to PCI RR; (ii) the funder screens projects first, then PCI RR evaluates the scientific plan; (iii) both evaluations occur in parallel, with the funder's expert acting as PCI RR recommender. Such collaboration would yield more explicit project rationales, evaluations by experts in research design, and articles accepted in principle before projects even begin.

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