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# The Journal of Brief Ideas: an intervention into the academic publishing ecosystem

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## Abstract

*In this paper, we describe a contribution to the scholarly publishing sphere in the spirit of artist intervention. The Journal of Brief Ideas (JOBI) is based on the idea of papers as microcontributions having a maximum of 200 words and one figure. JOBI is wrapped in the academic norms required for broader recognition as an incentive for authors to participate in this experiment. It has published 239 papers since launch in February 2015 and been cited in top tier journals and covered in news reports in leading journalistic publications. We present a descriptive content, citation, and commentary analysis of the journal with discussion its existing and potential influence and roles. We conclude with a brief discussion of the connection between the journal's structure and ideas in creative ideation.*

## Keywords

Journals, publishing, creativity, artist intervention

## Introduction

Norms of academic publishing and scholarly communication are regularly challenged with near identical headlines akin to “Academic publishing is broken” used repeatedly in recent years [1, 2].

The arguments typically used are economic and commercial but there are other concerns that are rarely mentioned. We discuss in this paper a project that addresses what the authors see an inherent inefficiency of scholarly communication that has arisen due to institutional and cultural incentivisation.

In particular, generating a journal article, the *sine qua non* of academic advancement and recognition, is typically a rather involved production. In some sciences, the process of having an article accepted in a leading journal such as *Nature* or *Science* can take many years from the initiation of the research through to submitting a draft article, performing additional experiments as is commonly requested by peer reviewers, and satisfying the other demands of high-status publishing. The quantum of work (the minimum publishable amount) typically reflects years

of effort. Even then, the tight page limits in those journals usually preclude significant useful information and intellectual capital from being distributed as part of the publication. Publishing in those particular journals or other high-status equivalents is often a requirement in some fields for obtaining faculty employment or promotion, which sustains that publishing model. While the (non)desirability of that situation can be argued at length, our concern here is more about the systemic intellectual inefficiency of such a process.

If a research project takes many years to come to fruition (measured by final publication of the results), the knowledge contained in that work is locked in the minds, notebooks, and laboratories of the researchers involved where it does little to contribute to the greater good of research advancement. As a result, many groups are unknowingly competing with each other doing identical work, only discovering this fact when one group beats the other to publication and rendering the second-place achiever a significantly less valuable outcome for their work. Other groups or individuals might make more rapid progress by using some of that knowledge as part of their own research. Advances based on partial results, of great value in themselves, are inaccessible to others who might use them productively.

Furthermore, many scientists report having more ideas than they can possibly pursue. Among those ideas are many of great value to the community even if they can't be pursued by the originator for one of many possible reasons such as time, priorities, funding, institutional needs, or insufficient expertise.

In this system, research ideas and small, partial, or negative results are wasted. Tailored as an intervention into this system, the *Journal of Brief Ideas* attempts to allow these “unpublishable” ideas and results to be used by the academic community in the spirit of greater effectiveness and efficiency of the research enterprise.

## About the Journal of Brief Ideas

The *Journal of Brief Ideas* (JOBI) is an agitating contribution to the research publishing ecosystem that attempts to highlight and address some of the aforementioned shortcomings as a demonstration of alternative models of publishing. The basic premise is that each paper published in the journal is limited to 200 words of text and one optional figure. Ideally, each paper would contain a single central idea that could be built upon in a chain of creative ideation. The journal is intended to supplement existing research journals while the

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interactions between JOBI and those journals accommodate conventional norms of research publishing.

JOBI publishes ideas independent of discipline, including those not typically represented in academic publishing, and intentionally encourages interdisciplinary work by not classifying contributions in a disciplinary taxonomy. Instead, it allows for free tagging of papers to allow for “not so much categorizing, as providing a means to connect items (placing hooks)” [3].

Papers published in JOBI are not formally peer reviewed prior to publication as the review overhead would negate the intent of a rapid, lightweight option for contributing to research, and reviews would likely be approximately as long as the original submission. However, the journal does include post-publication rating and commenting features. Although there is no traditional peer review, all papers are reviewed by a member of the editorial team, sometimes in consultation with relevant outside experts, to ensure that ideas aren't obviously inaccurate, already well known, lacking a well-defined point, unclear, or not presenting an attempt to further a research agenda. Papers are written as plain text in the “markdown” markup language [4] so that some formatting, linking, and citations are possible but with minimal typesetting overhead on the part of authors.

After acceptance in JOBI, papers are archived in Zenodo, an online repository hosted by CERN, the European Organisation for Nuclear Research, accessible at zenodo.org. Along with a promise of permanent archiving, Zenodo mints a Document Object Identifier for each submission. Each JOBI paper then acquires a DOI of the form 10.5281/zenodo.xxxx where the trailing characters are a unique numeric identifier. There is the possibility of JOBI adding its own DOI in addition, with explicit naming in the DOI, but that has not yet been implemented.

Submission of a paper is achieved by logging in with an ORCID account (orcid.org), which are freely available, easy to register for, and increasingly common within academia as a unique identifier. This method reduces anonymity and the associated potential spamming of the journal. It also allows users to create “collections” of papers, take once-per-user actions such as upvoting any particular idea, and provides a method for journal readers to easily see an author's other academic output.

Conceived and implemented by collaboration between an artist with a background in theoretical physics and journalism and a data scientist with a background with astrochemistry, the project exists in a liminal space between art intervention and science artefact.

### **Related work in science and the creative arts**

The idea of publishing brief research outputs is, of course, not new. In fact, it harkens back to the origins of scientific journals which were often written in “letter” format, with letters often of the order of a few hundred words. However, this style of research publication has essentially disappeared for reasons mentioned earlier.

The concept of sets of ideas that have not been fully pursued has also been re-explored more recently in the creative arts. Art curator and critic Hans Ulrich Obrist

wrote, “There are many amazing unrealized projects out there, forgotten projects, misunderstood projects, lost projects, desk-drawer projects, realizable projects, poetic-utopian dream constructs, unrealizable projects, partially realized projects, censored projects, and so on. It seems urgent to remember certain roads not taken, and—in an active and dynamic, rather than nostalgic or melancholic way—transform some of them into propositions or possibilities for the future.” [5]

One example of such a set was collected by Obrist with co-editor Guy Tortosa via a questionnaire to artists. They published more than 100 unrealised or failed art proposals and projects in a volume they claimed was a new form of collection [6]. Inspired by that volume, the art, culture, and theory publishing platform e-flux created the “Agency for Unrealised Projects”, the first major online collection of such ideas [7].

Individuals have produced their own sets of ideas that have not been taken further. One example is Cory Arcangel's “Continuous Partial Awareness” performance presented at the New Museum, New York, on November 14, 2008 [8] and the accompanying document [9]. The performance offered a large set of ideas for works that had not yet been attempted. That work has inspired similar performances such as Kyle McDonald's “Free Ideas” in which he offered ideas, explicitly placing them in the public domain [10].

### **Development process**

The conception for the project came from the first author (an artist, science journalist, and prior physicist) in 2010 in response to an observation of the aforementioned issues in academic publishing systems while reading research in creativity. Discussion of the idea of microcontributions in Nielsen inspired further development [11]. The idea was incubated and tested through informal discussions with academic researchers in a variety of fields over the next few years, with a more formal conceptual prototyping occurring with a group of interested participants at a hackathon at the Kavli Institute for Particle Astrophysics and Cosmology at Stanford University in 2013. Initial technical prototyping took place during Science Hack Day San Francisco 2013 but participants did not pursue the project further at that time. A discussion between the first and second author (a GitHub developer and astrophysicist) at Science Hack Day San Francisco 2014 propelled conceptual refinement into technical development with both authors launching JOBI as co-founders on February 1, 2015 at the website [briefideas.org](http://briefideas.org). The codebase for the journal is open-sourced via a GitHub repository at <https://github.com/openjournals/brief-ideas/>.

### **Methods**

This paper considers a descriptive analysis of the journal's place in the research publishing ecosystem. Data about the journal is retrieved from the journal's database records. As JOBI is not at this time subscribed to the Crossref Digital Object Identifier Registration Agency or similar, citation records are likely incomplete. The citation record to be discussed here is based on searches for the exact phrase “Journal of Brief Ideas” on Google Search and Google Scholar. Commentary analysis is based on those searches



of connections, it provides illustrative examples of how JOBI papers are being cited.

The searches returned 324 Google Search results and 35 Google Scholar results. Manually checking all results returned 10 examples of refereed academic literature citing JOBI. Although this is far from impressive, it is also not zero and some of the citations come from extremely highly regarded journals such as *Astrophysical Journal Letters* which had a 2017 Impact Factor of 6.634, the second highest rated astrophysics and astronomy journal behind its companion *Astrophysical Journal Supplement Series* [12].

Of those 10 examples, five appear to have no connections between the citing article and the JOBI authors, two have an overlapping author list, and three have the same author list (i.e. self-citations). Of the five unconnected works, three cite JOBI papers in the usual sense of providing background information and context [13-15], one uses information about JOBI publication as a data point in a scientometric study [16], and one cites JOBI as an example of “a fundamentally novel journal” in an editorial titled “Communicating environmental science to the general public” [17].

Given that one aim of JOBI is to provide an initial conception of an idea that might be later elaborated, the self-citations are worth exploring more. In one case, the single-author JOBI idea is used as an analysis technique in a larger multi-author study [18], one case minimally develops the JOBI idea as a poster presentation that is included in refereed conference proceedings [19], one further develops the idea in the JOBI paper as an encyclopedia entry [20], one uses the concept in the JOBI paper to build code in a refereed software repository [21], and one presents an idea for the professional development of graduate students which is then implemented in a larger study that includes graduate students as authors [22].

The most obvious conclusion to draw from analysis of this set of citations is that they show quite diverse use of JOBI publications within the research enterprise.

### Commentary analysis

Analysing the same set of 324 Google Search results above and including an additional 5 Google News results, we found nine stories in professionally edited magazines, news outlets, and news sections of scientific journals. Six of those articles are mostly reports on the existence of the journal and its aims, with interviews of the co-founders [23-28]. One is a discussion of various publications and approaches to brief communications and distillations of research [29]. One is an interview and quote from a co-founder about a research result showing a connection between title brevity and citation rates for journal articles [30]. The last is a report of a study that shows approximately two-thirds of researchers disclose their search results prior to formal publication but only 6% of researchers disclose early conceptual ideas, giving JOBI as an example of such an outlet for those ideas [31].

The coverage of the journal was generally positive and optimistic about the novelty of the project and its ability to generate interest. The news article in *Nature* said, “Researchers are buzzing about a publication that accepts

only ‘brief ideas’” reflecting significant social media interest at the time [24]. Some quoted researchers expressed reservations about whether the idea would catch on and lead to meaningful contributions although one such comment was later clarified by the researcher on social media as coming across considerably more negatively than intended. Perhaps appropriately, much more discussion of the journal occurred on Twitter although we have not processed an analysis of that data.

### Other outcomes

Possibly the most significant outcome from the existence of the journal was its explicitly-stated inspiration in the creation of *Research Notes of the American Astronomical Society*, which operates in a structurally similar manner in terms of pre-publication “sanity checks” and post-publication evaluation but with a longer limit of 1000 words and one image [32]. *Research Notes* sits alongside the American Astronomical Society’s other flagship journals such as *The Astrophysical Journal*.

JOBI is used as a case study for preparatory reading in a book of activities for teaching research methods. The “Publishing Online” activity states its purpose as, “This activity helps students to think about the issues involved in publishing their research online, including the different methods that can be used, the advantages, disadvantages, problems that could be encountered and advise for other students who are thinking about publishing online. It utilises the knowledge and experiences of digitally savvy students to get the most out of the discussion.” [33]

In keeping with the outsider status of the journal, the Mozilla Science project partnered with us to use JOBI as the repository of their Open Research Accelerator one-day “sprint session” during MozFest 2015, London [34]. Nine JOBI articles were published in a dedicated collection within the journal from that project [35]. The outcomes of this kind of “sprint session” do not usually find a permanent home and are typically discarded as ephemera of technology development meetings.

## Discussion

### Influence of the journal

The *Journal of Brief Ideas* is by no means a high-impact journal. However, as an artistic intervention and experiment at the edges of a long-established culture of publishing, it has had success in demonstrating some impact. Since its inception, JOBI has had a reasonably consistent rate of submissions, occurring almost entirely via word-of-mouth as there has been no direct publicising of the journal since the initial (and occasional subsequent) news reports. We would expect we could attract more submissions with a more active publicity effort.

One fear, mentioned by independent commenters in early responses is that the journal would be flooded with low-quality submissions. The acceptance rate of 59% indicates that there are a significant number of lower quality submissions, but we note that many of those were not rejected for reasons of lack of intellectual quality but for failing to meet the criterion of presenting an actual identifiable idea. We have not heard of any negative

comments about the quality of submissions since those initially expressed concerns. It is worth noting, however, that for a journal like this, quality has a different definition to that of many journals. It is obviously difficult to ascertain how initial ideas affect an intellectual ecosystem and that those effects might very well not be apparent in the published literature through citations, a common measure of quality of a paper.

It is pleasing to note that there are examples of ideas feeding into the mainstream publishing ecosystem, as measured by the citations we have identified. It is also welcome that the ideas have been used in a variety of ways, not only journal publications but also as inspiring methods for research and code bases.

The overall level of activity is low but after these initial responses, we are encouraged to further develop the journal to encourage more interaction with the existing academic publishing world. We plan to seek external funding to allow that development as the project has been entirely funded personally by the founders so far, which is not a sustainable model given our aims for expansion.

### **Roles of the journal**

The journal is demonstrating that it can play a variety of roles within the publishing ecosystem and we discuss those here.

The first is as a home for ideas that live at the boundaries of existing disciplines or combine ideas from different disciplines. Ideas come from a wide range of subject areas, as demonstrated by the diversity of tags used by authors. Although many ideas do fit squarely within disciplinary bounds, others sit in interstitial spaces. That anticipated situation was one motivation for not employing a disciplinary taxonomy for papers but using tags instead. That presentation format of the ideas, while potentially reducing usability in terms of discoverability of papers for those who are discipline-focused, allows the juxtaposition of a quite heterogenous blend of ideas, hopefully stimulating the serendipitous associations that form a key factor in the associative creativity famously discussed by Mednick [36].

A second, potential, role of the journal is to act as an intermediary between disparate fields. For example, O'Donnell's JOBI paper on "A first law of humanities computing" [37] appears to sit as a link between the new media concept of remediation [38] (cited by O'Donnell) and historiographic practice [15] (citing O'Donnell). Although these examples might be challenging to locate, it seems plausible that the nature of brief ideas encourages wandering between fields as they don't require a significant commitment on the reader's part to engage with highly detailed texts in a field. Further deeper exploration might be warranted but in terms of initial ideation, brevity seems to work favourably.

Another potential role of JOBI is as a locus of community. The extant example of this is its use with the Mozilla Science project mentioned previously. In that case, the ideas being generated in the sprint session are united by their ideation process more than their disciplinary content and so would not typically find a home together in a typical academic publication. Providing such a home could act as

a seed for emergent community formation. Nielsen discusses the role of microcontributions in knowledge creation [11] and Sproull highlights them as a facilitating factor in online community development [39].

Finally, the journal provides a provisional testing ground for ideas that might not be fully analysed. One example is Pickering's paper on an alternative presentation of statistical medical diagnostics [40]. After a comment on the paper from another researcher and the author's further consideration, the author added an additional comment that stated he no longer believed his initial idea was valid. Interestingly, the other researcher's comment indicated that the initial was along the lines of something they had been considering. The revelation that the idea was likely incorrect therefore provides a valuable service in the spirit of negative results, which have trouble finding places in most journals. The functions of JOBI in this case were to alert other researchers to interest in a topic, help identify others already considering the topic, provide a concrete place for revealing the topic and getting feedback, and to allow an author to easily make further arguments that invalidated the original idea as written and thereby preventing a similar error by others considering the topic.

### **Connections with creativity**

We have not yet rigorously explored how JOBI is able to play a role in creative ideation but we have already hinted at a few places where that role might be active. One approach that seems worth pursuing is to look at how JOBI might be a creative locus through the lens of Madjar and colleagues' framework of radical vs. incremental creativity. The journal seems well suited to supporting both types of creativity but in quite different ways. By presenting a low-barrier-to-entry, non-disciplinary forum for presenting ideas, JOBI could act as a "resource for creativity" and as an amelioration of risk due to the journal's existence outside the core structure of a discipline, both factors in radical creativity [41]. On the other hand, the normalising features of JOBI such as assignation of DOIs, attribution of ideas to authors, and permanent archiving, all play a role in encouraging incremental creativity [42].

### **Conclusion**

The Journal of Brief Ideas has been a successful experiment in that it is a real-world implementation of an idea that we can probe in various ways to understand its possible impact and interaction with the conventional academic publishing ecosystem, in which it was designed to intervene.

There are certainly valid criticisms to be made of the journal however they predominantly come from looking at JOBI in the framing of conventional journals, which it deliberately tries to avoid. The cultural inertia of academia means that such criticisms will not go away but given that the goal for the journal was to supplement rather than replace existing publications, these criticisms carry less weight in terms of the technical details of how the journal is structured and operated.

The journal is at an early stage of implementation and still presents itself as being in "beta" mode. The co-founders have a wish list of development for the journal but will only



be able to proceed once a source of funding (albeit minimal) is secured.

Overall, the Journal of Brief Ideas seems to be an intervention that provides an opportunity for further probing the existing state of affairs in academic publishing through active participation and interaction with that state, independent of whether the journal succeeds as measured by conventional journal metrics.

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