PUBLISHING ETHICS

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A perspective on the Center for Open Science (COS) preprint servers

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Abstract. Preprints, which are non-peer-reviewed documents that are typically precursors of peer-reviewed papers, or as open access archival forms of published papers (post-prints), are increasingly becoming part of the publishing open access culture. Preprints have been lauded as a rapid form of publication, but for them to be useful and reliable sources of information, they and information pertaining to them (e.g., bibliometric indicators) need to be effectively managed by the servers where they are hosted. In recent years, a number of new preprint servers have emerged. One type of preprint server is owned by publishers, while another is ownership or financial support by philanthropic organizations This paper focuses on one case of the latter type. In 2016, the Virginia, US-based, philanthropically-funded Center for Open Science (COS) launched three preprint services (engrXiv, PsyArXiv, SocArXiv) and started Open Science Framework (OSF) Preprints in 2017. The latter was used as a "template" service to attract thematically-linked communities of academics that also wished to have their own preprint servers. In June 2024, COS listed 29 preprint servers, although 14 of them have ceased publication or hosting of preprints by COS/OSF. One reason may be due to the commercialization of the COS/OSF "template" service, which charges preprint managers an annual fee based on the volume of preprints published annually. In the light of the 14 preprint servers that are no longer hosted at or by COS/OSF, this paper briefly discusses the financial sustainability and information stability of preprint servers, which mostly allow authors to publish preprints for free. Authors' preprints are usually screened by fairly superficial screening and moderation processes, and it is not unusual to find opaquely or "silently" deleted preprints from preprint servers, including those of COS/OSF. Given that this organization is a well-funded leader of the open science movement, greater transparency is required regarding its own funding, operations, and management, as well as a more frank and an open debate regarding the ethical limitations associated with preprints.

Keywords: branding, open science, peer review, philanthropy, preprint servers, unsustainable preprint market

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Критический взгляд на серверы препринтов Центра открытой науки (COS)

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Резюме. Препринты, представляющие собой научные тексты, которые не проходят процедуру рецензирования и обычно являются предварительной версией рецензируемых статей или открытой архивной формой опубликованных статей (постпринтами), все чаще становятся частью культуры открытого доступа. Препринты хвалят за скорость их публикации, но, чтобы они были полезными и надежными источниками информации, ими и информацией, относящейся к ним (например, библиометрическими показателями), необходимо эффективно управлять на серверах, где они размещены.

В последние годы появилось множество новых серверов препринтов. Одни типы серверов препринтов принадлежат издателям, другие же находятся в собственности благотворительных организаций или получают их поддержку. В данной статье рассматривается последний случай. Центр открытой науки (Center for Open Science, COS), финансируемый благотворительными организациями и базирующийся в Вирджинии, США, в 2016 г. запустил три сервиса препринтов (engrXiv, PsyArXiv, SocArXiv), а в 2017 г. – новый проект Open Science Framework (OSF) Preprints. OSF использовался в качестве сервиса «шаблонов» для привлечения тематически связанных академических сообществ, которые хотят иметь свои собственные серверы препринтов. В июне 2024 г. COS насчитывал 29 серверов препринтов, однако 14 из них прекратили публикацию или размещение препринтов через COS/OSF. Одной из причин может быть коммерциализация сервиса «шаблонов» COS/OSF, который теперь взимает ежегодную плату с менеджеров препринтов, зависящую от объема ежегодно публикуемых препринтов. В связи с тем, что 14 серверов препринтов больше не размещаются в системе COS/OSF, данная статья кратко затрагивает финансовую устойчивость и информационную стабильность тех серверов препринтов, которые позволяют авторам публиковать препринты в основном бесплатно. Препринты авторов обычно проходят поверхностную проверку и модерацию, и нередки случаи, когда препринты незаметно удаляются с серверов препринтов, включая серверы COS/OSF. Учитывая, что эта организация является хорошо финансируемым лидером движения за открытую науку, требуется бо́льшая прозрачность в отношении ее финансирования, обслуживания и управления, а также более честные и открытые дебаты по поводу этических ограничений, связанных с препринтами.

Ключевые слова: брендинг, открытая наука, рецензирование, благотворительность, серверы препринтов, неустойчивый рынок препринтов

Overview of the challenges of preprints and preprint servers in an open science culture

Preprints, as part of the open access (OA) movement, represent a form of providing information openly to peers or the public, amplifying the forms of access to knowledge, information, and science [1]. The most common use of preprints is as a precursor to submission to a peer-reviewed journal [2], as a strategy to garner feedback and critique [3], and thus serve as a way to improve the paper's methodology or content [4], or refine the message and findings, making them more relevant to the peer community or public [5; 6]. However, these noble objectives are not always the case. For example, some authors may wish merely to deposit a public version of their crude or developing ideas that, for several reasons, might never lead to publication in a peer-reviewed journal, and will thus stay permanently as a preprint. However, preprint servers claim to guarantee the permanence of information and knowledge by assigning a digital object identifier (DOI) to preprints. Therefore preprints, even if they do not get published in peer-reviewed journals, still have value as OA documents because they allow for knowledge discovery [7]. Another motivation for having a preprint, alongside the peer-reviewed version, is that it may result in greater citations and attention [8–10]. Authors might post preprints in the form of post-prints (i.e., author's versions of accepted papers), but this might be interpreted as an abusive citation or unfair publication practice that results in amplified metrics (e.g., reads, citations, copies, etc.) [11].

The adoption of preprints has been inconsistent, and there appear to be cultural sensitivities and resistance to their use or adoption, out of fear of intellectual piracy, as one example [12]. Such risks are amplified by a lack of uniformity across preprint servers, as well as heterogeneity in ethical policies, and inconsistencies in their use, interpretation, and application [13–16], with a small percentage of 36 ASAPbio-indexed preprint servers, for example, having a clear set of ethics policies [17]. As one example, most of those preprint servers, but not all, have a policy that allows the publication of opinion papers [18]. The link between preprints and peer-reviewed journals is also imperfect, and the anonymity demanded by some blind peer review models in peer-reviewed journals is incompatible with the open nature of information and authors' identifying features in preprints [19]. Perhaps, the greatest risk became apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, where preprints could serve as vessels to promote misinformation or disinformation related to health [20].

The culture of preprints has, in the author's perception, and except for the long-standing Cornell University arXiv, accompanied an blooming culture of "open science" over the past decade or so. Almost simultaneously, the some preprint servers have been supported by philanthropic funding, which may conceal conflicts of interest and engage in other opaque aspects that are contradictory to the open science movement [21; 22].

Over the years, several new preprint servers have been vying for market space to delimit and cement their preprint brands, in what was coined the "preprint wars" [23]. Seeing the reputational benefit and business advantage of having a preprint server integrated into their publishing business model, sometimes as a precursor "fishing net" for intellectual content, several publishers established their own integrated preprint servers, such as Elsevier's SSRN, Springer Nature's Research Square, SAGE's Advance, Wiley's Authorea, or MDPI's preprint.org. While much has yet to be explored about those publishers' business models, and the role preprints play in them, such analyses fall outside of the scope of this opinion paper.

Several ethical aspects mentioned briefly above are insufficiently debated by the leadership of the preprint community for obvious reasons, the most obvious of which would be that an overly frank and open debate about the limitations, weaknesses and failures of preprints would cause reputational harm to the OA and open science movements. However, as academics need to appreciate whether preprint standards, policies and brand projection are honest, fair and transparent, so this paper takes a critical look at one of the premier "clusters" of preprint servers that exist in the preprint market, namely of COS/OSF.

COS/OSF preprint servers and services

1. Brief background

Center for Open Science, COS is a Virginia (US)-based non-profit and philanthropically-funded organization that was founded in 2013 by Brian Nosek and Jeffrey Spies, who created open source code, the Open Science Framework (OSF) [24]. OSF, which was used to launch OSF Preprints, supports open science, collaboration and reproducibility efforts by COS, which is not an organization that conducts science itself but instead provides resources for science, ultimately seeking cultural reform and policy implementation [25; 26]. OSF established three preprint servers in 2016, engrXiv, PsyArXiv, and SocArXiv, and OSF Preprints began in 2017. The OSF Preprints

"template" was then marketed as a preprint-based "brand" to serve communities of diverse themes and fields of research, in a bid to expand the preprint culture as a subset of the open science movement. Expansion of the preprint "market", in the form of new preprint servers, is a strategic method to capture and collate as-yet unclaimed intellect. An example of this strategy is embodied by the decision by the American Psychological Association to formally adopt COS policies in 2017, selecting PsyArXiv as the entry portal preprint server for its globally influential journals [27]. The number of COS/OSF preprint servers reached 23 by 2019 [28], in 2021, there were 26 or 27, depending on the date, preprint services, and now there are 29 (Table 1). The preprint servers that are accepting submissions indicate an advisory board, working group or steering committee, but submission and ethics policies vary widely.

2. Almost 50% of the COS/OSF preprint servers are discontinued or not hosted by COS

Of the 29 displayed preprint servers, 14 have become dysfunctional, i.e., they have ceased to accept preprints, or have migrated, i.e., they have transferred to or are hosted at or by another preprint server, although background information is not clearly indicated on the top page where all 29 preprint servers are listed (Fig. 1), while reasons for the cessation or transfer are also not transparently provided (Table 1). Considering that the core focus of COS/OSF is "open science", as epitomized by its Transparency and Openness Promotion (TOP) guidelines [29], this lack of details about the 14 discontinued preprint servers is surprising. The information and details that are missing pertains to the reason for discontinuity or transfer, and the precise dates of those events. Some background details can be found in Table 1. An article suggested that the discontinuation of some COS/OSF preprint servers was financial unsustainability [30].

It is not clear what sort of contracts were signed between the managers of these preprint servers and COS, and if an "all free" clause was part of the initial contract. It is also not clear what were the term limits of those contracts, e.g., a stipulated number of years, or ad infinitum. In other words, it is unclear, when the managers of the 14 now-defunct preprint servers started those servers, if they were aware that COS was planning to monetize the OSF Preprints "template" service, which carries a fairly hefty price, depending on the volume of preprints submitted – not published – per year [31]. As one example, the submission of 0–100 preprints per year costs just under $US 2000, although it is unclear why clients should

pay money of zero or no preprints are published. That income is a part of the annual revenue at COS, whose revenue for FY2022 alone exceeded US$10 million, although it is not clear from the public annual tax returns (900) what the actual revenue from the OSF Preprints "template" service was between 2017 and 2022 [32]. Curiously, an academic paper was used to advertise paid COS services [7]. It is also not clear if COS knew a priori, when it started these preprint servers, that it would eventually monetize them, but did not disclose this future plan openly to clients, for example in its strategic 2022–2024 plan [25].

Authors thus need to appreciate that COS preprint servers are currently, based on Table 1 data, estimated to be about 50% reliable (if functionality can be equated with reliability) and/or sustainable.

Table 1. *The 29 Center for Open Science (COS) preprint servers that are currently (2 June 2024) indicated on its website, including those that have either become dysfunctional, ceased to be hosted by OSF/COS, or migrated to another platform**

Preprint server name (alphabetical listing)	Functional at, and currently hosted by, COS?	Submission and/or ethical guidelines on COS page (URL(s) + key points)	Notes and background
AfricaArXiv https://osf.io/preprints/africarxiv	YES	https://info.africarxiv.org/before-you-submit/	
AgriXiv https://osf.io/preprints/agrixiv	No	No moderation or ethics policies detected	No date or explanation for discontinuity; claims to have moved to CABU's preprint server, agriRxiv (https://www.cabidigitallibrary.org/journal/agrirxiv)
Arabixiv https://osf.io/preprints/arabixiv	No	No moderation or ethics policies detected	No date or explanation for discontinuity; also refers to itself as "ArabXiv"
BioHackrXiv https://osf.io/preprints/biohackrxiv	Yes	https://guide.biohackrxiv.org/	
BodoArXiv https://osf.io/preprints/bodoarxiv	Yes	https://bodoarxiv.wordpress.com/	
CoP Preprints https://osf.io/preprints/coppreprints	Yes	https://collegeofphlebology.com/cop-preprints/	
EarthArXiv https://osf.io/preprints/eartharxiv	No	https://eartharxiv.github.io/moderation.html	Now hosted by CDL: https://eartharxiv.org/
EcoEvoRxiv https://osf.io/preprints/ecoevorxiv	No	No moderation or ethics policies detected	Now hosted by CDL: https://ecoevorxiv.org/
ECSarXiv https://osf.io/preprints/ecsarxiv	Yes	https://www.electrochem.org/ecsarxiv/	
EdArXiv https://osf.io/preprints/edarxiv	Yes	No moderation or ethics policies detected	
Engrxiv https://osf.io/preprints/engrxiv	No	No moderation or ethics policies detected	Now hosted using OPS: https://engrxiv.org/
FocUS Archive https://osf.io/preprints/focusarchive	Yes	No moderation or ethics policies detected	
Frenxiv https://osf.io/preprints/frenxiv	No	No moderation or ethics policies detected	No date or explanation for discontinuity
INA-Rxiv https://osf.io/preprints/inarxiv	No	No moderation or ethics policies detected	Now RINarxiv: https://rinarxiv.lipi.go.id/lipi

End of Table 1

Preprint server name (alphabetical listing)	Functional at, and currently hosted by, COS?	Submission and/or ethical guidelines on COS page (URL(s) + key points)	Notes and background
IndiaRxiv https://osf.io/preprints/indiarxiv	No	No moderation or ethics policies detected	No date or explanation for discontinuity
Law Archive https://osf.io/preprints/lawarchive	Yes	https://library.law.yale.edu/law-archive	New (i.e., appeared in 2023–2024): compare top vs bottom in Fig. 1
LawArXiv https://osf.io/preprints/lawarxiv	No	No moderation or ethics policies detected	No date or public explanation for apparent discontinuity; Legal Scholarship Advisory Board opaquely removed (Fig. 2)
LIS Scholarship Archive https://osf.io/preprints/lissa	No	https://osf.io/preprints/lissa/submit now https://lissarchive.org/guidelines/	No date or explanation for discontinuity
MarXiv https://osf.io/preprints/marxiv	No	No moderation or ethics policies detected	No date or explanation for discontinuity
MediArXiv https://mediarxiv.org/	Yes	https://mediarxiv.com/	
MetaArXiv https://osf.io/preprints/metaarxiv	Yes	No moderation or ethics policies detected	
MindRxiv https://mindrxiv.org/	No	No moderation or ethics policies detected	No date or explanation for discontinuity
NewAddictionsX https://osf.io/preprints/newaddictionsx	Yes	No moderation or ethics policies detected	New (i.e., appeared in 2023-2024): compare top vs bottom in Fig. 1
NutriXiv https://osf.io/preprints/nutrixiv	No	No moderation or ethics policies detected	No date or explanation for discontinuity
PaleorXiv https://osf.io/preprints/paleorxiv	Yes	https://paleorxiv.github.io/submission_guidelines.html https://paleorxiv.github.io/journal_policies.html	
PsyArXiv https://osf.io/preprints/psyarxiv	No	No moderation or ethics policies detected	https://blog.psyarxiv.com/about-psyarxiv/
SocArXiv https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv	Yes	No moderation or ethics policies detected	https://socopen.org/
SportRxiv https://osf.io/preprints/sportrxiv	No	https://sportrxiv.org/index.php/server/about/submissions https://sportrxiv.org/index.php/server/mod-policy https://sportrxiv.org/index.php/server/submission-templates	No date or explanation for discontinuity. Now hosted using OPS: https://sportrxiv.org/index.php/server
Thesis Commons https://osf.io/preprints/thesiscommons	Yes	No moderation or ethics policies detected	

Note: * https://osf.io/preprints/

3. Ethics policies in COS/OSF preprint servers

At the time when a commentary was published about some of the potential risks of and discussion points about preprints [33], COS/OSF had already established at least 14 preprint servers or services [34]. Since then, despite several inconsistencies in policies related to preprint servers, as noted in the first section, they have grown in popularity [35], leading to a call for them to be treated as "ethical equals", i.e., with as much scrutiny and rigor, as peer-reviewed journals [36]. Authors who wish to post to COS preprint servers need to appreciate that while there is a claim that the published record is permanent, presumably alluding to their DOI, preprints may be subjected to withdrawals [37]. The preprint withdrawal policy has several polemic aspects that merit a separate debate.

As an example, the "silent retraction" [38] of a preprint [39] is not compatible with the open science-related openness and transparency espoused by COS/OSF, such as the claim by Pourret et al., who stated that "assignment of a digital object identifier (DOI) [is necessary] so that the paper is known and stored in the digital world" [40, p. 3]. An insightful blog post that outlined the historical beginning of a COS/OSF preprint server, paleorXiv, established by John Tennant, has vanished, but is fortunately archived[1]. That blog post, perhaps inadvertently, exposed one key objective of preprints and the open science movement, namely to displace the publishing status quo, i.e., preprints were noted as a disruptive

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[1] Cannon L. Changing the Status Quo: Jon Tennant, Communications Director at ScienceOpen. 2017. Available at: http://lifesciencenetwork.com/blogs/leah-cannon/2017/05/30/changing-the-status-quo-jon-tennant-communications-director-at-scienceopen; https://web.archive.org/web/20170606190627/http://lifesciencenetwork.com/blogs/leah-cannon/2017/05/30/changing-the-status-quo-jon-tennant-communications-director-at-scienceopen (last accessed: 2 June 2024).

Fig. 1. *Is the advertising used by COS/OSF of its 27 (top, March, 2023) and now 29 (bottom, March 2024) preprint servers misleading, in the sense that not all of them are functional or hosted by COS/OSF? COS/OSF website screenshot under "fair use" for academic use and public accountability. Screenshot dates: 13 January 2023 (top); 2 June 2024 (bottom).*

Source: https://osf.io/preprints/

Note. There is no published or openly quantitative evidence to suggest that these 29 preprint servers are market leaders, as implied by the marketing descriptor: "Leading preprint service providers use this open source infrastructure to support their communities".

technology. Although few, these examples allude to the lack of an industry-wide sustainability plan [41]. What is not clearly stated is that sustainability implies embracing consistent and equally-applied ethical publishing values and fair principles for preprints, while holding preprint servers accountable. It does not aid the preprint community to know that some security and quality verification procedures at COS may be compromised, as suggested by the discovery of documents in a PsyArXiv preprint related to the illicit use of COS to promote pirated content and to link to phishing-related websites [42].

Conclusion

The expansion of the preprint market, as a way to attract more authors to share their intellectual ideas and data early, in an "open" format, as a way to amplify the objectives of the open science movement, is taking place in a somewhat erratic manner. This is exemplified by heterogeneous ethics policies across a wide array of preprint servers, abuses of preprints and preprint servers, without explanation or accountability (i.e., within a system that employs opacity), despite the open science value systems that they supposedly espouse.
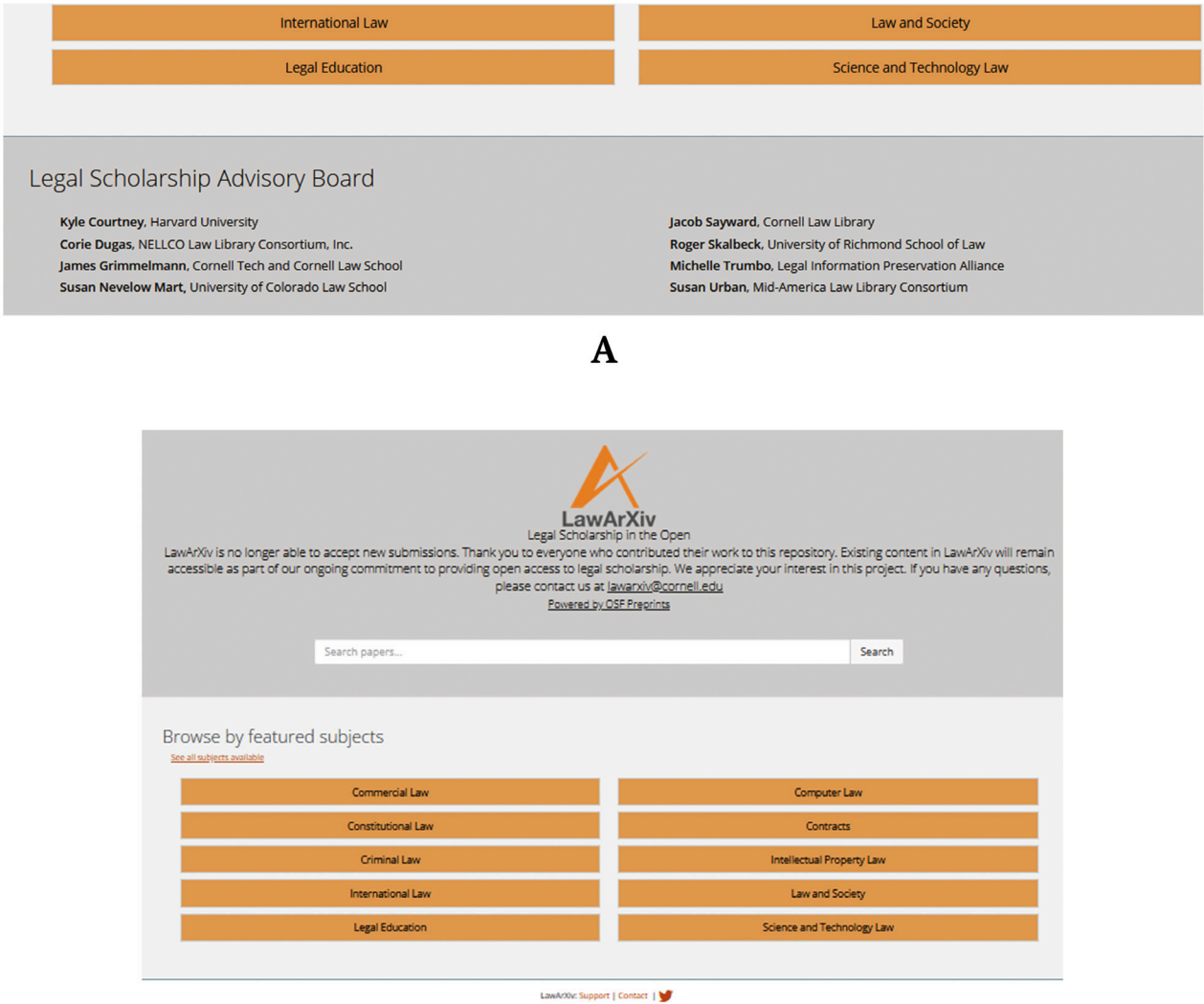

A

B

Fig. 2. Opacity regarding the history of the LawArXiv preprint server. Whereas a Legal Scholarship Advisory Board was publicly displayed in 2021, it has now been deleted. Screenshot date:
(A) 15 March 2021; *(B)* 19 December 2022 (but still identical on 2 June 2024).
COS/OSF website screenshot under "fair use" principles for academic use and public accountability
Source: https://osf.io/preprints/lawarxiv

This paper provides a short description about one important player in the history of preprints because COS/OSF has been a central preprints proponent since they became popularized in the middle of the last decade as part of the open science movement. This paper emphasizes the struggle that preprint servers face to survive, increasingly competing with new entrants, and a delicate balance between financial sustainability and the risks of monetizing preprint servers. This paper also notes inconsistencies in submission, ethics and moderation policies across the COS/OSF preprint servers (Table 1). This paper is also takes note of the mixed messaging by COS/OSF, on one hand making public calls for open science, and seeking to ensure those principles as policy, but on the other hand, displaying some opacity (or lack of transparency and explanation) regarding several issues related to its preprint servers and/or preprints published on, or hosted at, those servers.

This paper expands an essential discussion about weaknesses and opacity related to preprints and preprint servers as an academic publishing model. Much more research needs to focus attention on "silently retracted" or withdrawn preprints because this phenomenon is a negative and opaque aspect of preprints that its proponents most likely do not wish to openly discuss or emphasize. The "silent" retraction or withdrawal of COS/OSF preprints is currently being explored.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author declares no relevant conflict of interests.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

The author contributed to all parts of the study analysis, development and interpretation.

DISCLAIMER

The author has published several preprints in COS preprint servers.

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