

# A Report by the Editor-in-Chief for Molecular Biology and Evolution (MBE), Volume 36

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*Molecular Biology and Evolution* is a prominent and highly respected journal, owned exclusively by the *Society for Molecular Biology and Evolution* and published by the Oxford University Press. MBE provides society members an opportunity for active participation in the creation of a journal supporting our community's needs and interests.

During the 2019 calendar year, MBE received 1,208 new manuscripts and 405 revised submissions. A vast majority of MBE submissions originated in Europe (35%), North America (29%; 27% from the USA), and Asia (28%; 21% from China). Articles account for almost 87% of original submissions, followed by Letters (8%). MBE continues to publish Brief Communications (usually to communicate software and resource updates), Perspectives, and Reviews in smaller numbers, as well as Protocols by invitation.

In Volume 36, we experimented with the publication of paired "Comment and Response," in which we allowed researchers to submit a 500-word comment about a previously published MBE manuscript. We then allowed the authors of the original manuscript to provide an equivalent length response. Although, in principle, we would like to support scientific dialogue, we did find this experiment to be time-consuming, given to contention, and not likely to be particularly useful for our general readership. We are, therefore, not actively pursuing the continuation of this format, but will continue to explore ways to enable community discussion of research.

MBE's impact factor for 2019 (citations during 2019 of manuscripts published in 2017 and 2018) is 11.06. Trends in citation thus far in 2020 suggest that next year's Impact Factor will continue to be high. We feel strongly that our focus should remain on serving our research community, rather than the pursuit of singular metrics, mainly as MBE's impact factor is currently heavily influenced by a few highly cited manuscripts. Society-owned journals such as MBE face increasing competition for high-impact manuscripts from a proliferation of "Nature" and "Science"-branded journals. Our best hope for maintaining the quality and quantity of submissions to MBE will be to draw on our journal's unique strengths and reputation within our research community.

MBE's rejection rate for original submissions in 2019 was 72%, with 46% of these rejected at the editorial level, without soliciting external review. This procedure has helped us to keep the average time until the first decision to 25 days.

The average time to reach a final decision for a research article is 45 days.

At SMBE's 2019 annual meeting, we were pleased that so many members of the editorial board were able to attend the MBE Editor's Dinner. A survey of editors conducted at this event, and made available afterward to those absent, provided exciting feedback. All the respondents expressed great satisfaction with their experience serving on the editorial board. The self-reported weekly time committed to manuscript evaluation was highly variable, with most choosing to report a range that reflected week-to-week variation. Although the majority of editors reported spending 2–5 hours per week on MBE assignments, some editors reported spending up to 15 hours per week. We are grateful for the service that our editors provide to the SMBE community, and hope that the editorial office can provide support for editors that may make their tasks less time-consuming.

Over the past 5 years, MBE has made a strong effort to balance the editorial board in both gender and geography. Few of the editors surveyed at the 2019 SMBE meeting offered to retire from editorial service. However, several Associate Editors expressed interest in serving as Senior Editors, and some expressed interest in becoming Editor-in-Chief in 2022. Editors made useful suggestions for potential additions to our editorial board, allowing us to increase the board's representation from Latin America and China. We have been particularly interested in expanding representation from Chinese research institutions on our board to reflect the increasing proportion of manuscripts received from these sources. We continue our efforts to welcome a greater diversity of new editors to fulfill further the scientific and societal gaps that exist in our board.

The editorial board and office continue to seek ways to improve MBE's visibility and utility within and outside our society. MBE maintains a dedicated Press Agent, Joseph Caspermeier, who has published ten news articles highlighting MBE manuscripts in Volume 36 of MBE and regularly coordinates press coverage with online and print media. We are actively developing strategies to refine our online presence to serve and expand our audience, both in coordination with our sister-journal, *Genome Biology and Evolution* (GBE), and in conjunction with Oxford University Press.

In ongoing efforts to work more closely with GBE, MBE has experimented with changes to our editorial process that

expedite the transfer of high-quality manuscripts suitable for publication in GBE. As part of the routine manuscript evaluation, handling editors assess whether manuscripts would be potentially suitable for publication in GBE, regardless of their outcome at MBE. All manuscripts deemed potentially suitable for GBE but not chosen as a high priority for publication in MBE are automatically offered transfer to GBE in their decision letter. In 2019, MBE transferred ten articles to GBE, a number that is increasing in 2020.

In 2021, MBE will transition to open access for all manuscripts published. This means that all articles submitted after July 2020 will be published under an open-access license if accepted. With this development, we will look forward to making MBE content accessible to readers everywhere without paywalls. Although this sadly also marks the end of our print version, MBE should continue to adapt to a fully digital era while maintaining its mission of service.