

EDITORIAL

Time to Decide

One of the more important attributes of a scientific journal, from my experience as an author, is the time taken to reach a decision on whether the paper will be accepted or not. The time between submission and publication is also important, especially when one is working in a rapidly expanding and competitive field where priority is critical and where the date of publication is used to assign priority rather than the date of submission, which in my view really establishes priority.

Over the past year the staff of the Editorial Office have been seeking to reduce these two times. This has involved us in making a critical analysis of the way in which we process papers to see where our procedures were introducing delays. When I took over as Editor, Margot Skipper, who had been the Editorial Assistant for several Editors, sketched out for me the pathways that a paper had to take between submission and acceptance and this flow-chart resembled a metabolic pathways chart. Our analyses showed that technical editing was the rate-limiting stage for the time between acceptance and final publication. The recruitment of an additional member of staff has effectively tackled this potential bottleneck, in fact some authors have been surprised to receive queries from the Technical Editor before they had been formally notified that their paper had been accepted. In future, technical editing will be started as soon as a paper reaches a stage when there are only minor points of detail to settle.

This brings me back to what I see as the most critical time, the interval between submission and a decision. I am particularly embarrassed to have to write a rejection letter when we have had a paper for several weeks longer than our target of six weeks. A delay may occur for what I feel are good reasons, when, for example, it seems that a scientific editor is being too severe and we have to enter into a dialogue to resolve the issue or I may think that a third opinion is required before we reject the paper. In the past we have had 'marginal' papers going backwards and forwards between author and scientific editor in an attempt to salvage the paper. I think that it is better to tell the author that the paper is not acceptable 'in its present form' with some suggestions for re-writing the paper rather than extend the time between submission and rejection. As an author I would want to be able to try a rejected paper elsewhere as quickly as possible!

We have now turned our attention to the time that a new paper spends with the scientific editor, which now appears to be a second rate-limiting stage (I will discuss the ways in which authors can reduce the rate-limiting effects for which they are responsible in a later Editorial).

I think that we have to recognize that over the past decade or so the pressures on active research scientists, which all our Editorial Board are, have increased greatly in ways that often mean that an editor or a referee cannot deal with papers as rapidly as one would like. These pressures involve working to very strict and critical deadlines in writing proposals for research funding and in the preparation of detailed progress reports to the funding body during the life of a project.

There is also a growing trend in the setting of tight milestones during the course of a project and the critical monitoring of researchers' performance over a set time period. All

these pressures reduce the time that is available for editorial or refereeing duties and at times may absorb it completely. Some funding bodies give the impression that they do not recognize the importance of the scientific work done for a journal for the scientific development and competence of a researcher if it is done at the expense of the project being funded.

While we may wish to return to the halcyon days when researchers could just get on with their research, we must recognize the facts of life that we have moved from being 'amateur gentlemen' researchers to the professionals in a tough and demanding world that often does not value scholarly research.

This changing climate has important connotations for the management of a scientific journal and I think we may well have to revise radically our procedures so that we expand, in some way, the time that our editors and referees have to conduct the important and crucial peer reviews. This is one topic which we will be discussing at the next meeting of the Editorial Board.

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