

Editor's Report for June 2000–May 2001

Simon Easteal, July 2001

The number of manuscripts submitted to MBE is increasing substantially. During the 12 months to June 2001, we received 455 manuscripts, compared with 378 for the previous 12 months and 342 for the 12 months before that. Our acceptance rate remains ~50%. During the reporting period we published 219 articles and 2,051 pages.

There has been a steady increase in institutional subscriptions over the past few years (table 1). In May 2001 we had 525 subscriptions, 26 more than at the same time in 2000. Membership numbers, by contrast, have remained static.

The proportion of members opting for print, online-only or both print and online subscriptions has changed during the past year (table 2). Print only subscriptions are down from 71% to 55% of total subscriptions, online-only subscriptions are up from 12% to 23% and subscriptions for both print and online are up from 12% to 22%. The data suggest a decreasing demand for the print journal and an increasing demand for the online journal across all categories of membership. No similar trend is evident for institutional subscribers. In both 2000 and 2001 only three libraries opted for online only subscriptions.

MBE's success in attracting more manuscripts and the resulting increase in the number of published articles have pushed up publishing costs. The increase in subscription numbers has not been sufficient to meet this extra cost. We have had to raise both page charges and subscription rates. Rate increases have been calculated to reflect actual publication costs and should ensure the journal's financial security for the next year.

The increase in submitted manuscripts may be due to increased visibility following the launch of the online journal in April 2000. For the first six months following the launch the number of IP addresses accessing the site per week was ~1,500. This rose to ~2,500 by April 2001

A number of new Associate Editors joined the journal during the year and a few left. Outgoing were: Eleftherios Zouros, Shozo Yokoyama, and Masami Hasegawa. They all made valuable contributions to the journal for which I am enormously grateful. Incoming were Mark Ragan, Adam Eyre-Walker, Brandon Gaut, Bill Jeffery, Diethard Tautz and Ken Wolfe.

In February I attended the HighWire Publishers' meeting in Palo Alto, California. The meeting raised many issues about the present state and the future of STM publishing that are directly relevant to MBE. Following consideration of these issues we have:

1. Made our online content freely available after one year from the date of publication.
2. Initiated the establishment of an online credit card facility for membership and subscription ordering and renewal.
3. Initiated the establishment of a pay-per-view system whereby non-subscribers can access individual articles for \$5.00.
4. Initiated a complete review of our copyright arrangements, our web site content, and online institutional subscription arrangements.
5. Initiated the procedures to set up a system of publishing manuscripts online (as PDF files) ahead of print.
6. Worked with HighWire Marketing Management Services to increase the rate of activation of our online institutional subscriptions.
7. Continued to explore options for online manuscript handling.

Since March we have required authors to submit manuscripts electronically as PDF files. Following review, manuscripts must also be submitted electronically in a format suitable for input into the Allen Press production system. Despite a few problems with graphics formats the system is now working well. It has dramatically reduced our manuscript handling times, and it has been a valuable preliminary step in the move to a full web-based manuscript handling system.

All the signs are that the journal is in very good shape. We are attracting more manuscripts and publishing more articles than ever before. Subscriptions are up, handling times are down and we are implementing changes that should further improve the quality of the journal. However, the STM publishing industry is changing rapidly. SMBE is a small independent publisher with limited resources. MBE's subscription base is small and its continued survival is by no means assured.

We need to review SMBE's role as a scientific publisher. The following are some of the issues that should be considered:

1. Article databases, knowledge environments, virtual journals and peer-to-peer publishing initiatives are changing the fundamentals of STM publishing.
2. Readers are increasingly expecting free (to them) and immediate online access to journal content.
3. Readers are increasingly expecting the added functionality made possible by online publishing (links, data supplements, citation tracking, pay-per-view etc). Commercial and larger independent publishers are providing it.
4. Libraries are only now starting to activate their online subscriptions. As MBE online becomes more widely available through institutional subscriptions a decline in membership can be expected (why pay for membership when you can get the journal for free online through the library?)
5. Digital archiving systems are being developed and implemented. As confidence in digital archives increases more institutions are likely to take out online-only subscriptions. The life of the printed journal is limited.

Table 1
Institutional Subscription and Membership Numbers in
May, 1998–2001

	Institutional Subs	Memberships
1998	473	899
1999	489	889
2000	499	901
2001	525	891

6. Many libraries are now subscribing as part of consortia. Existing subscriptions with individual libraries may not be continued and new subscriptions with consortia will need to be negotiated.
7. Many small independent publishers are either being acquired by commercial publishers or aggregating (e.g., BioOne). MBE is probably one of the few remaining small and truly independent life-science journals.

Table 2
Membership Numbers for Different Subscription Models
in May 2000, 2001

	FAMILY		FULL		STUDENT		TOTAL	
	2000	2001	2000	2001	2000	2001	2000	2001
Print	33	24	537	408	48	33	618	465
Both	14	15	114	158	10	11	138	184
Online	3	14	91	157	12	25	106	196
Total	50	53	742	723	70	69	862	845

8. Commercial publishers are aggregating their content. Increasingly libraries subscribe to packages of Springer Verlag, Academic Press and Elsevier journals. Subscriptions often extend over several years, locking up library budgets and are tied to the print journals. They are marketed (particularly in the case of Elsevier's Science Direct) as integrated access solutions to large numbers of journals.