

Editor's Report for June 2001—May 2002

Simon Easteal, July 2001

There has been a slight increase in the number of manuscripts submitted to MBE this year. During the 12 months to June 2002, we received 465 manuscripts, compared with 455 for the previous 12 months and 378 for the 12 months before that. During the reporting period we published 234 articles and 2,209 pages. Our acceptance rate remains ~50%. This is higher than I would like, and I have implemented a number of measures to encourage higher standards for acceptance.

There has been a slight but steady increase in institutional subscriptions during the past few years (table 1). In May 2002 we had 536 subscriptions, 11 (~2%) more than the number of subscriptions in the same month in 2001. This increase is occurring at a time when many libraries are reducing subscriptions and in the absence of any marketing activity. It is a good indication of the high standing of the journal.

Membership numbers, which until last year had been static, have declined significantly across all categories (table 1). Of particular concern is the fact that whereas full membership has declined by ~6%, student membership is down by ~20%. Family membership numbers are now so low that I recommend that this category (which is unusual for a society such as ours) be discontinued.

Membership decline was anticipated in the last 2 years' reports as a likely response to the increased availability of online access through institutional subscriptions. The number of people accessing the journal online is growing rapidly (fig. 1). Journal access will continue to decline in importance as a reason to join or remain in the society as more libraries activate their online subscriptions. Other incentives are needed to prevent further decline in membership.

Financial incentives, such as reduced page charges, reduced registration fees for meetings, reduced book prices from our publisher, may help stem the loss of members, but something more substantial is needed if we are to continue as an active and purposeful organization. All societies like ours are facing this problem as people become more used to accessing content on the web rather than owning journal issues.

Possibilities include coordination of large international projects (a model here being HUGO), organization of technical workshops (models include the histocompatibility workshops [<http://www.ihwg.org/>], the genetic analysis workshops [<http://www.sfbr.org/gaw/welcome.html>], and the protein structure prediction competitions [<http://predictioncenter.llnl.gov/casp4/>]), and development of a web portal (e.g., MIT Press's CogNet, Sciences Signal Transduction, and Science of the Aging Knowledge Environment; CDC's HUGEnet—there are many more). There are many obvious ways in which SMBE could lead these kinds of initiatives in the area of molecular biology and evolution.

The proportions of members opting for print, on-line-only, or both print and online subscriptions have not changed greatly during the past year (table 2). Print-only subscriptions fell from 71% to 55% in 2001 and have remained at 55% in 2002. Online-only subscriptions rose from 12% to 23% in 2001 and have risen further to 26% in 2002. Subscriptions for both print and online rose from 12% to 22% in 2001 and have dropped to 18% in 2002. Overall the proportion of members receiving a print copy of the journal has declined slightly from 77% to 74%, and the proportion of members paying for online access to the journal has remained almost unchanged at 45%.

There is a slow trend toward online-only institutional subscriptions. In 2000 three libraries opted to go online-only. In 2001 five libraries had chosen online-only. So far, in 2002 15 libraries have made this decision. Electronic archives are gaining increased acceptance by librarians, and the number of libraries choosing online-only is likely to increase in future years.

Four new Associate Editors joined the journal, and three left. Outgoing were Yun-Xin Fu, Toby Kellogg, and Howard Ochman. All of them had made valuable contributions to the journal, which I greatly appreciate. Incoming were Peer Bork, Brian Golding, Nick Goldman, and Hervé Philippe.

The system of requiring authors to submit manuscripts electronically as e-mail attachments has greatly streamlined the review process. Following review, manuscripts are also 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 reduced our manuscript handling time, and it has been a valuable preliminary step in the move to a fully web-based manuscript-handling system.

We have continued to receive excellent service from HighWire Press, who host MBE-online.

Last year, due to a misunderstanding between the Editorial Office and Allen Press, some authors were underbilled for their page charges. These authors were subsequently re invoiced, and all but a small amount of the lost income has been recovered. In addition, a system of requiring authors to pay all current and past page charges before their articles are printed was implemented. It has resulted in an almost complete recovery of the page charges owed. This policy has, however, resulted in a more complex billing procedure and delays in publication, which have caused a number of authors to complain. It needs to be reviewed. A negligible number of authors have had their page charges waived.

Last year I noted that despite MBE being in very good shape, we needed to review SMBE's role as a scientific publisher. The STM publishing industry was (and still is) changing rapidly, and I expressed the view that the survival of MBE as an independently published journal with a small subscription base was not assured.

Table 1
Institutional Subscription and Membership Numbers in May, 1998–2002

	Institutional Subscriptions	Memberships
1998	473	899
1999	489	889
2000	499	901
2001	525	891
2002	536	813

Table 2
Membership Numbers for Different Subscription Models in May 2000, 2001, and 2002

Member-ship	Year	Print-Only	Both	Online-Only	Total
Full	2000	537	114	91	742
	2001	408	158	157	723
	2002	383	129	168	680
Student ...	2000	48	10	12	70
	2001	33	11	25	69
	2002	23	3	29	55
Family	2000	33	14	3	50
	2001	24	15	14	53
	2002	10	5	2	17
All	2000	618	138	106	862
	2001	465	184	196	845
	2002	416	137	199	752

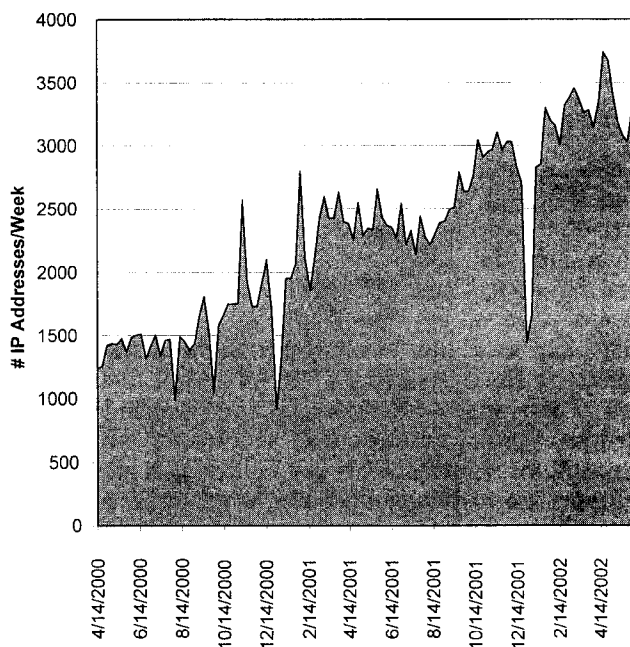


FIG. 1.—Number of IP addresses accessing the MBE web site each week since MBE went online in April 2000.

Council decided to explore alternative options for publishing the journal. Former Editor Barry Hall was appointed to the task of assisting me to obtain proposals to publish MBE. Of the publishers Barry contacted, six submitted proposals. After Barry Hall's resignation, an ad hoc committee of Council, consisting of President Mike Clegg, President-Elect Nayouki Takahata, Secretary Marcy Uyenoyama, and I, met in Honolulu, Hawaii, in early January to advance the process. After the meeting, I obtained information from a variety of sources about the publishers and aspects of some of the proposals. We narrowed the field to three, and I met with the Oxford University Press staff in April to discuss their proposal further. Subsequently, we received a draft contract from Oxford University Press, which is under consideration by Council.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the continued outstanding performance of all the Associate Editors, whose tireless work is at the heart of the success of MBE, and of my Editorial Assistant Liz Raffaele. Liz has been Editorial Assistant since I took on the job of Editor. She has carried out her tasks reliably, politely, and efficiently, and the high standards she has set in her work have made my job as Editor a great deal easier.