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A Good Word for Realities

Last week I discussed the delusions that provide incentives for successful publishing and editing. Now it is time to consider the realities of the system that was inaugurated in January to speed the process of reviewing manuscripts at *Science*. It is too soon to make a final evaluation, but the preliminary signs give reason for optimism.

The Board of Reviewing Editors has been extremely diligent. With few exceptions they have returned manuscripts within 48 hours of receiving them and that has meant that more than half the manuscripts are returned to authors in about 2 weeks. Because members of this board (they are listed on the masthead) are asked to judge the interest, not the detailed methodology, of a paper, they can evaluate papers in a broad area surrounding their immediate expertise. (It is in a subsequent in-depth review that the data will be examined in detail.)

For an interdisciplinary journal like *Science*, even a 35-member board cannot cover all areas. When the subject is completely outside the expertise of any reviewing editor, the editorial staff of *Science* consults individuals in the appropriate field for an ad hoc opinion. A few authors have been concerned that a manuscript on computer systems might be reviewed by a geologist; that has not occurred. Therefore, no author should be deterred by the absence of a familiar name on the masthead. If there are repeated needs for ad hoc opinions, new reviewing board members will be added in the appropriate areas.

After the initial screening of manuscripts, papers that received high rankings for interest from the reviewing board are sent to in-depth review and those with lower rankings are returned to the authors. In addition to the rankings, we must also consider factors such as the need to balance subject matter so that the journal is truly interdisciplinary.

Since about 60 percent of the manuscripts are returned to authors promptly, and this releases more people to concentrate on the second stage of the reviewing process, we expect that the in-depth review can be speeded up. Our goal is to publish manuscripts within 3 to 4 months. The slow step here is the in-depth review. Referees, being at the forefront of their fields, are usually busy; we respect the time dilemma but urge them on through telephoned entreaties of unbelievable pathos and urgency. We note, however, that some of the delay in publishing is frequently caused by authors who fail to complete revisions in an expeditious manner. Although occasionally there will be reason to accelerate publication of a particular manuscript, in general we plan to publish all manuscripts in the order received. A modus operandi in which an Olympian editor (obviously all wise) feels free to revise publication schedules at will has some appeal, but routine publication with all deliberate speed seems fairer.

In evaluating the reviewing process, we have developed several additional procedures that may be of interest to authors. If two manuscripts are received within 2 weeks of each other on essentially the same subject, both will go out to in-depth review and, whenever possible, be published back to back. Manuscripts on the same subject that arrive much later will be returned promptly without review so that the authors may submit them elsewhere.

One might say, "So far so good." Those may also have been the words of the man who jumped off the Empire State Building as he fell past the 46th floor. We shall keep working on the system until a soft landing is assured.

—DANIEL E. KOSHLAND, JR.