

Editor-in-Chief January 2024 Report

This document describes my main activities during the second half of 2023 for Systematic Biology.

I. Submissions & Decisions. I only have data until October 2023 from the Virtual Editorial Office report. We have 305 manuscripts, of which 214 are new, and 91 resubmission/revisions from the previous year. For the same month, we had 303 manuscripts in 2022. At the end of 2022, we had 405 manuscripts and we should expect a similar figure for December 2023. The decrease is noticeable when compared to 2020 (337 ms. in October 2020, 448 in total) and 2021 (376 ms. in October 2021, 490 in total), (150 fewer manuscripts), which is probably due to the decrease in impact factor.

In the June meeting, I addressed the concerns of the production office regarding the insufficient number of accepted manuscripts to fill an issue, due to the lower number of submissions in 2023. As of today, we have on the “Advance Articles” section in Oxford Academic ca. 40 papers (Advance Access or Corrected Proof). This is the equivalent of 2.5 months issues (we publish 17-18 manuscripts per issue), which I consider a healthy buffer to maintain our current trend of publishing 248 pages per issue.

II. Oxford University Press. Ayesha Saldanha serves as the Publisher for Systematic Biology. She went into maternity leave in November and was replaced by Ashley Petrylak. Ashley, like Ayesha, has been immensely helpful, consistently responsive to our needs. I have had several online meetings with her during the last three months, especially in relation to the problems we have been experiencing with the production chain, but also on matters such as improving the editorial hierarchical structure for manuscript handling. During 2023, Ayesha Saldanha and Dom Notarangelo implemented a series of measures to increase viewers interest, such as the “Why publish with Systematic Biology?” section and the “High impact collection”, highlighting a series of articles that have seen attention with Altmetric statistics (“most cited”), (“most read”), and (“most discussed” in social media); among them, several articles from 2023. It is a valuable tool for me to understand how readers perceive our articles and identify those that garnered more attention.

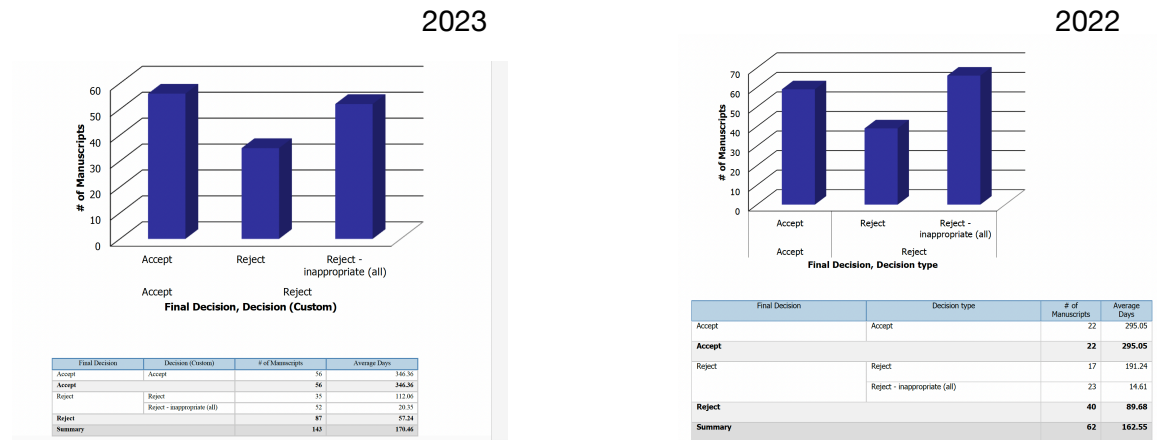
Ayesha also undertook other improvements, such as ensuring that any internal hyperlinks are bi-directional, so in-text citations have hyperlinked to the reference list, and in-text mentions of figures, tables, sections and Supplementary material have hyperlinked to the relevant figure, table or section; similarly, entries in the reference list, and figure/table captions, will also link back to the first citation in the text. This action, which I have seen implemented in other journals, is indeed a very helpful addition for readers. Also, authors are asked to provide ‘alt-text’ descriptions of their images in their submitted articles, so that blind and partially sighted readers can understand the content of published figures (in compliance with the ISO standard ‘PDF/A’). We have also made efforts to ensure that color in figures is legible by color blind readers.

III. Associate Editors. The pace of recruiting new editors has slowed down, and in 2023, I invited only two new editors. We had three AEs that resigned in the last few months, so as of January 2024, we have an editorial board composed of 51 AEs, of which 16 are women. I plan to recruit 3 new editors in the next two months (preliminary acceptance). AEs in Systematic Biology do not have fixed terms of 3-4 years, unlike in other journals; this ensures that we can always count with AEs that are the best specialists on the discipline. Each EIC “inherits” the editorial board of the previous EIC. However, I think that this may lead to “editor’s fatigue”, and, at times, results in delays in handling articles.

IV. Manuscript handling. Refer to the Publisher’s and Virtual Editorial Office report for details on how OUP handles accepted manuscripts, data on manuscript submissions, etc.

Turn-around times: The most frequently used statistic is the average time from submission to first decision. In October 2023 (I don't have yet the figures from the Virtual Editorial Office report for December 2023), turn-around times from submission to first decision was on average 72 days; in December 2022, with two editors, turn-around times from submission to first decision was on average 58 days. However, this figure is dominated by the editor-rejection rates. If we only consider decisions after full peer-review ("rejections" or "revise" decisions), the real figures are slightly more dismaying: 98 days (2023) / 79 days (2022), though I notice that when I worked for Journal of Biogeography, the average time to first decision was 67 days.

Another interesting comparison is the average time to final decision: 170 days, 346 if this decision is Accept (I count here 4 papers submitted in 2021, which the authors resubmitted in 2023). This long turn-around time between the original submission and final decision is unusual among journals, but it is likely due to the thorough, high-quality review process, which is the landmark of Systematic Biology, and which frequently implies the reanalysis of data. As a curious note, I noticed that in 2004 ("legacy" documents), numerous manuscripts published in 2004 were submitted in 2001, which means that authors are now quicker to resubmit, within 1-year of first decision (our deadline).



V. Problems with the Production company (Newgen): I already reported about this in the June 2023 report. We experienced serious delays in the production chain when in August 2022, Oxford University Press changed their typesetter company to NewGen (with whom they have worked earlier for other journals). These problems lasted from January to May 2023 and affected the first three issues of volume 72 (1-3), which were published in quick intervals between May and June. The situation improved after this date when Oxford University Press hired a new Production Assistant US, Rebecca Esquite, who was in charge of overseeing the typesetters. Issues 72(4 and 5) were published on time.

However, for the last issue 72(6), we experienced a major delay again. The printed issue was handled to me for revision at the end of December 2023 with substantial deficiencies, of which I have informed the SSB Executive Council in several emails.

As a summary:

1. Numerous errors in the printed issue such as figures printed in black and white in the online version, which should be in color (the first print proofs included almost all articles in black and white because the typesetters understood that if the authors do not pay, figures should be in BW, even though figure captions referred to colors; the second version of the print proofs last week still included three articles in BW). No hyperlinked text or references or email or weblinks.

Wrong Dryad link or not hyperlinked in the text. Missing associate editor, cover images in the middle of the article, etc.

Print proofs of the full issue arrive in my desk only 1-2 days before publication, which puts too much pressure on the EIC to review them on time (248 pages). This would not be problematic (I like to read the final papers), except that there is often a time lag (sometimes several months) between the print proofs being accepted by the authors and publication on an issue. Therefore, if I detect a problem in the full issue, it is often too late to correct it with the authors.

2. There seems to be no order in which an author's article is processed. Papers accepted in June will be published in December; papers accepted in September were published in the October issue. OUP is going to enquire about this. But this has consequences, such as Spotlight papers being processed quicker than regular papers, filling our issues with more Spotlights than optimal (1-3 per issue is the rule); complaints from authors that their articles are not published on time (sometimes PhD students with tight schedules to present their theses), one paper which was not considered for the Publishers' Awards because it was not going to be published in the nominal year, etc.

3. OUP (Ashley) confirmed that our problems are not exclusive of Systematic Biology; Evolution is also experiencing the same issues. However, somehow they seem to be worse for us. The time lag between article acceptance and print proofs should be 15 days maximum; for SystBiol, it has been typically 35 days in 2023, and for the last issue, 64 days and counting (I have not approved the final print proofs yet).

4. What is the origin of these problems is not clear to me. Understaffing in Newgen? Hiring of workers with not enough professional experience on the publishing industry? I should mention that Newgen changed the Production Officer three times during 2023; this is the person in charge of overseeing the production chain and to communicate with the EIC about all matters directly connected with issue publication. Frequently changing the representative from Newgen is a major problem because just when we've adapted to each other's working rhythms, a new person appears.

Typesetters that do not know well the authors' instructions? Too tight guidelines and no initiative on the part of typesetters? For example, right now all questions from the type setters about the production stage come directly to me (asking authors for missing figures, provide corrected figure captions, etc.); oftentimes I needed to answer "Apologies but this is not my task as EIC".

I have had several online meetings with Ashley and Rebecca these last two weeks to try to find which are the major hurdles for the typesetters, and we hope to solve this so that the next issue is published on time. I consulted with them and the SSB Exec Council about the possibility of recruiting a Manager Editor will solve these issues, someone that could actually supervise the work of the type setters and act as intermediary between them and the authors. I sometimes fall behind with the processing of manuscripts submissions, decisions, etc, and I would not have the time to dedicate to the production stage (plus I am not sure if this is my task as EIC). In other journals I have worked with (Evolution), there is a Managing Editor. However, I was explained that this position is actually similar to the one undertaken by Claudia Wellburn, our Editorial Assistant Officer, who oversees the peer-review process (writing invitation letters and reminders to editors and reviewers). We eventually came to some potential solutions for the print proof issues, which I describe in my next section.

VI. Measures adopted and Major objectives remaining.

1. I recently reduced the time-around times for several steps in the peer-review process in an effort to cut down delays (e.g, from 15 to 10 days between the AEs recommendation and decision, from 10 to 8 days to AE assignment). This puts more pressure on me but also

helps me to avoid delays, as these are highlighted in red in my EIC desk as “task overdue”. Editorial Assistant Claud Wellburn is also more “aggressive” in chasing AEs that have fallen behind; I also write personal letters. But there is much to improve...

2. **Editorial Board:** I am going to implement a system in which Associate Editor (AE) are renewed every four years. As part of the renewal process, an automatic email will be sent to the AE, asking if they are interested in continuing beyond the four-year term. The prospect of continuing is attractive for Systematic Biology, since we count with the best experts in each discipline. Moreover, where there is a shortage of expert reviewers, the AEs have the option to write their own review; in fact, the best AEs tend to produce more comprehensive reviews. This approach may help maintain the quality and thoroughness of the review process even in situations where finding external reviewers is challenging. I also assess the performance of editors, which helps me to take decisions, particularly when the renewal time for their roles is approaching. I would like to compensate the best AEs for their professionalism and time spent on these tasks. One possibility is to give them one ‘free (OA) access’ article per year in Systematic Biology as first/senior author. This is a small sign of the journal’s gratitude for giving their valuable time to provide the quality service appreciated by authors mentioned above. The editors publish the highest-citation papers in the journal and so are instrumental to maintaining its status; I want our AEs to submit their papers to Systematic Biology instead of some other OA journal (if their grant policy requires this), and a free OA article could be an incentive to encourage them. Journal of Biogeography had a similar measure implemented. Currently, our AEs are given no financial compensation, except free membership in SSB (a waiver). In Evolution, AEs had free registration at the Evolution meetings.
3. **Issues with the production chain:** I have asked to change the system so that I should have the opportunity to see the printed version shortly after print proofed by the authors, which allows me to intervene, contact the authors and quickly correct any error (e.g., non working Dryad link, color figures). With the current system, I feel hesitant to tell an author to correct a print proof that was approved months earlier. Ashley and Rebecca confirmed that this could be done, with minimal disruption to the production chain. Rebecca will set it up so that I will be able to review the article proofs prior to when they are posted online in the Advance Access section on the website. Then, when the issue is compiled by the typesetter, I will have already seen all of the articles, and it will only require from me a quick visual check of the issue before approving. Plus I will also be able to communicate with the authors when they have just finished revising their print proofs.
4. **Printed issue:** Evolution has removed the printed version of the issues, which are now published only as the online electronic version. I think the idea to get rid of the printed copies was raised in the Council when OUP informed us in mid 2023 about the rise of the APC charges, including OA publication. I view this idea favorably because it will skip the troublesome aspects of having figures printed in color and black and white, depending of the version; two versions of figure captions, etc., plus very few authors want to publish in color nowadays. I am not sure if the color charges provide revenue for the society, though (?).

Improved Editorial hierarchical structure: I have saved this measure for last. As I commented in previous Council meetings, I see as very important to take some steps to “modernize” Systematic Biology Editorial structure, with the hiring of additional senior editors to improve turn-around times because this was the main source of dissatisfaction from the authors in the OUP survey about the publication process, and because we are a “rara avis” in the publication industry. I proposed a second level of handling editors, Deputy EICs, between the EIC and the AEs, as an efficient way to improve manuscript turnover. These editors could share the work load of the EIC in times of bulk submissions. These editors would also take over the role of the EIC during holidays, sickness, attendance to meetings (for example, the

overlapping of the Evolution and the IBC Congress I commented in the last email). Ashley Petrylak, who oversees several titles in the OUP portfolio, including Evolution, gave me good advice on this (though not on salaries). She was convinced that this measure will help the Systematic Biology editorial hierarchy to get new levels of efficiency. To a certain extent, our editorial board can be considered “amateur” compared to other journals. In part, this is compensated by the excellent work of our AEs, but I believe this is not enough.

This matter was already discussed in the June and December 2023 SSB Executive meetings. After some efforts, I managed to secure the candidacies of Professor Lars Jermiin (University of Galway) and Professor Sebastian Hohna (University of Munich), who volunteer to work as Deputy EICs. However, no decision was taken concerning the salaries, and we agreed to gather more information, perhaps with the help of the Rees company. I have asked the two candidate senior editors, Lars Jermiin and Sebastian Hohna, about the proposed salary of 10k \$/year; this will imply to them that we do not intend to divide the workload equally.

Regarding the structure we finally adopt, I am convinced that we need to start taking some measures to enlarge the senior editorial team because during January I spent some time applying for a major research grant, and the pace of manuscript assignments and decisions slowed down. This will not happen if there are other Deputy EICs.

Moreover, this will allow me to take care of other business that are also interesting for the visibility and impact of the journal, such as preparing special issues (one on the application of machine learning tools in phylogenetics and another on new approaches in phylogenetic biogeography (which was the topic of the sponsored SSB symposium in the 2023 Evolution meeting). I also would like to invest more time on social media. In Journal of Biogeography, they had Social Media Editors who were in charge of highlighting exciting research in a “blog”, as well as to communicate news about the papers to readers and authors. I am not thinking on the Council approving new funds for this, but to recruit a young (early-stage) researcher associate editor, who is “savvy” in social media to handle these tasks. For example, so far, I haven’t had time to publish Tweets (X) to publicize our papers. I would also like to dedicate some time to write an Editor’s Choice section and to write letters to the Editorial Board to maintain a unified policy and consistency in handling the manuscripts.