

# A Message From the Editors-in-Chief

Brandon S. Gaut  \* Claudia A. M. Russo 

Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, U.C. Irvine, 321 Steinhaus Hall, Irvine, CA 92697-2525, USA

\*Corresponding author: E-mail: [bgaut@uci.edu](mailto:bgaut@uci.edu).

Associate editor: Heather Rowe

## Welcome to Volume 42 of *Molecular Biology and Evolution*

We have been Co-Editor-in-Chiefs of *Molecular Biology and Evolution* (MBE) for 2 years now. In that time, we have learned a great deal about the science of our field, the goodwill of MBE authors, the integrity of our all-volunteer editorial board, and the ins-and-outs of the publishing process. But one thing continues to amaze us: Many, and perhaps most, members of our academic community do not understand what it means to publish in society-based journals—like MBE and our sister journal *Genome Biology and Evolution* (GBE)—compared with for-profit journals from companies like Springer Nature, Frontiers, Wiley, and Elsevier. The publishing process may be more opaque to graduate students than to faculty, but we nonetheless find a surprising proportion of experienced faculty who do not understand the difference between society-owned and for-profit journals. With that in mind, we would like to discuss this issue and briefly evaluate the health of MBE.

When you publish in an open-access journal, you are usually charged an Article Processing Charge (APC). For MBE, APCs are set by the SMBE Council with input from our publisher, Oxford University Press (OUP). For many open-access journals, APCs provide the essential funds to produce articles and pay staff. Publishing expenses are not trivial; they include the technology and labor required to produce, publicize, host, index, and archive articles. At MBE, these functions are performed by, and in partnership with, OUP. APCs at MBE are competitive with other open-access, high-impact journals, reflecting in part the missions of both SMBE and OUP as non-profit entities.

The differences between society-owned and for-profit journals come from the use of APC revenues after publishing costs are paid. At MBE, under our current agreement with OUP, most of the APC revenue goes directly to SMBE. The revenue generated by the two SMBE journals (MBE and GBE) is consequential. In 2022, for example, SMBE journals generated ~\$800,000 for the society (McCutcheon and Thorne 2024). The revenue, along with lesser income (~\$32,000) from membership fees and interest, was fully expended to run the society, its journals and its programs. Because the society is primarily run by volunteers, most of the proceeds go toward supporting the annual SMBE conference, satellite conferences, travel awards for students, and other awards and initiatives.

Importantly, *the expenditure of these funds is guided by stakeholders that belong to the SMBE community*. The impacts are real: If you or your students have attended an SMBE event, your attendance was heavily supplemented by revenue from MBE and GBE.

By contrast, what happens at a for-profit journal? APCs cover the cost of publishing in these journals, too, but any remainder is profit for the company and its shareholders. The profits can be enormous. For example, Springer Nature reported \$1.37 billion euro in revenue over the first nine months of 2024, with a profit of \$379 million euro (<https://group.springernature.com/group/media/press-releases/financialresults-9m2024/27717598>, 2024). The profit margin for academic publishers may be 30% and sometimes exceed 40%, which is higher than many other major industries (Dolan et al. 2024; Grossmann and Brembs 2021). These for-profit publishers benefit from the research grants used to pay APCs, from the scientific work that goes into an article, and even from our expertise as peer reviewers. Yet, most of the profits are lost to the research community and do not directly benefit that community.

The question for you, as an author, is where to spend research funds. Is it better to publish in journals that profit your academic community or profit *from* that community?

To be clear, we know that choosing a journal for your work is a complex decision. It depends on the topic, the scope of the work, the perceived impact, the review process, and often the career goals of scientists who will be evaluated for promotions. Both of us have published extensively in non-society-owned journals for these reasons, but we also fervently believe that society-owned journals deserve and have earned our support.

The current publishing environment is highly competitive, and it has been indelibly altered by the rise in large for-profit journals. Some statistics illustrate the scale of the shift. In 2008, Frontiers and MDPI—two for-profit publishing houses—together published ~3,000 articles. In 2017, they published 55,000 articles, and then, the total leaped to a staggering 425,000 articles in 2022 (<https://www.ce-strategy.com/the-brief/retrenchment/>, 2024). We cannot know the full effects of this unprecedented growth of for-profit journals on society-owned journals like MBE, but the impacts must be consequential.

Nonetheless, MBE is thriving. One measure of a journal's health is submissions. In 2024, MBE received a record

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number, surpassing even the post-pandemic year of 2021 and exceeding 2023 submissions by 17%. Our 2024 submissions are remarkable because they counter a trend of decreased submissions to society-based journals in evolutionary biology. Our ~17% increase from 2023 to 2024 has been fueled in part by geographic shifts. Last year, China accounted for the highest proportion of submissions among all countries, at 37%, with a year-to-year increase of 21%. Submissions also increased markedly in 2024 from the United States (+15% in 2024 over 2023), Germany (+42%), and France (+109%). However, our acceptance rates have also decreased. Some of this reduction reflects the content of submitted manuscripts; a surprising number simply do not cover topics suitable for *MBE*. We have also worked to transfer many strong papers to *GBE* when, for example, their scope might be a bit too narrow for *MBE*'s readership. In 2024, *MBE* recommended the transfer of over 500 manuscripts to *GBE*, an 18% increase over 2023. If these transferred papers are published in *GBE*, it is beneficial for the society and the authors in our community.

Two additional measures speak to the health of *MBE*. One is the usage of the journal's website, which is at an all-time high. Usage trends reflect ever-increasing engagement with the journal by the scientific community. A second is the Journal Impact Factor (JIF). The JIF was 11.0 in 2024, with a 5-year impact factor of 14.5. We are working to maintain a high JIF by seeking out impactful publications, managing and maintaining rigorous peer review, pursuing special efforts like the virtual series that commemorated the journal's 40th anniversary (Russo et al. 2024), and commissioning review papers that will provide a foundation for future work in exciting subfields.

A journal can only be healthy when it is diverse. Geographic diversity is difficult to measure, but we believe it is at an all-time high, as measured by 2024 submissions with authors from 108 countries. These included not only increased numbers of authors from China, the United States, and parts of Europe but also substantive increases from India (+56% over 2023), Chile (+100%), and Mexico (+40%), along with many other countries that have been historically underrepresented in our journal. We are actively seeking to build and maintain an editorial board that mirrors the diversity of submission sources. In 2024, we increased representation on the board from China, Australia, South America, India, and other regions while seeking gender balance.

Submissions and JIFs are important numbers, but they are just numbers. We doubt *MBE* readers bookmark the website to monitor changes in the JIF, but they do visit the website

to read about new and exciting research. We hope that you will take a moment to enjoy our newest article collection, featuring some of our editorial board's favorite manuscripts of 2024 (<https://academic.oup.com/mbef/pages/editors-favorites-of-2024>, 2025).

We began this discussion with APCs, and we would like to finish by mentioning them again. *SMBE* believes that a shortage of research funds should not prohibit the publication of good science. For that reason, *OUP* and *SMBE* offer generous APC waiver policies and various ways to decrease costs. *OUP* offers waivers to academics from low- and middle-income countries through its Developing Countries Initiative (<https://academic.oup.com/pages/purchasing/developing-countries-initiative>, 2025). Many institutions also have Read and Publish agreements with *OUP* (<https://academic.oup.com/pages/open-research/read-and-publish-agreements>, 2025), which subsidize, in full or in part, APC costs to *MBE* and *GBE*. *SMBE* also offers waivers to academics who are short of funding. These waivers require an application to the *SMBE* Council using instructions found in our Author Guidelines (<https://academic.oup.com/mbef/pages/author-guidelines>, 2024). Finally, *SMBE* offers 20% APC discounts for members. This is an incredible financial deal, because the 20% discount can be worth from ~\$500 to \$700 per publication, compared with the membership fee of just \$30 for 3 years! The APC discounts are offered as an incentive to join the *SMBE* community and to support its journals.

As always, we welcome your ideas about the journal and how it can be improved, from the content, to the layout, to the peer-review process. Feel free to contact us through the EiC email ([eic.mbe@gmail.com](mailto:eic.mbe@gmail.com)). Or, better yet, we hope to see you in person at the 2025 *SMBE* Conference in Beijing from July 20 to 24.

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