Climatic Change: the state of the journal

An Editorial

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Just over two years ago, the death of our founding editor, Stephen Schneider, sent shockwaves around the global scientific community, and we keenly felt his loss in the *Climatic Change* office. At the time, the journal only recently had celebrated the publication of volume 100, and it is perhaps fitting that I return to that issue as a springboard to assess what has transpired in the interim, take stock of the current state of the journal, and contemplate its future.

The title of Steve's introductory essay is very revealing about the challenges then facing the journal: "be careful what you wish for!—what if you get it?" Truly, *Climatic Change* has been a victim of his own success. Steve had invested heavily in nurturing scholars, cultivating the field, and educating an audience. Over the years, the investment paid off handsomely. Starting with humble beginnings in 1975, taking two years to publish the first issue of four articles, the journal has grown to a world-class "journal of record for interdisciplinary analysis of climate change science and policy" (Schneider 2010) due to Steve's determination and perseverance.

A look at the rough numbers over the past decade is revealing. Between 2002 and 2007, the journal received around 200 submissions a year. That number jumped to nearly 300 in 2008 and again to 400 in 2009. We received 225 submissions in the first half of 2010 alone, before Steve passed away.

Steve had taken some steps to address the increased numbers of submissions, as he mentioned in his volume 100 essay:

1. steadily increasing the number of pages per issue,
2. allowing authors to post their articles on the internet,
3. introducing *Climatic Change Letters*, edited by Michael Oppenheimer,
4. inviting editorial assistance as a precursor to the current Deputy Editor role, and
5. adopting Editorial Manager, an online submission process.

Assuming leadership of the journal in 2009, Michael Oppenheimer and Gary Yohe recognized that the submission stream was too voluminous for any one person, even one

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as extraordinary as Steve, to manage single-handedly. Reaching out to experts and colleagues, Michael and Gary solicited help and assembled a team of Deputy Editors and Associate Deputy Editors to manage the work load. Without a doubt, the foremost reason for our progress has been the unwavering dedication of our team of editors (see any issue for a list of these).

Mike Mastrandrea has been instrumental in sustaining the journal during the initial transition and beyond. We are exceedingly grateful for the constant counsel provided by Steve's longtime Assistant Editor, Katarina Kivel, whose professionalism and grace have guided our efforts. Despite her pseudo "retirement," Katarina remains as an important consultant and source of institutional knowledge and has helped preserve the gracious culture of *Climatic Change*.

In addition to instituting an editorial team to manage the journal, Michael and Gary have implemented several changes to improve the functioning of the journal and our responsiveness to our authors:

- increasing again the number of pages from 300 to 400 pages per double issue, published monthly,
- allowing editors discretion to recommend rejection of submissions without external review, subject to Michael and Gary's approval in each case,
- closing files on manuscripts in revision that are excessively delinquent, and
- introducing a page limit.

The last measure, imposing a page limit, has been somewhat controversial, especially as it represents a marked departure from previous policy. In fact, page or word limits were anathema to Steve. "One solution I [Steve] have resisted is to absolutely restrict the length of papers as many journals do. This might lead to a better return from reviewers both to agree to review and to follow through on doing the reviews in a timely manner. The tradeoff though is that as a journal of record...we want authors to justify their conclusions and often that takes lengthy manuscripts" (Schneider 2010).

However, even at that, Steve recognized that it might become necessary to "experiment with length issues in volumes to come" (Schneider 2010). We have had to deal with this issue head on with the support of the Editorial Board. We now strongly encourage authors to take advantage of online Electronic Supplemental Material (ESM) as a key component of resolving the tension between the length restrictions and the need to provide a full account of background information, methodological details, and interesting footnotes. What has made the policy palatable is the ubiquitous access to content online, which blurs the distinction between print and electronic material.

The page limit is moderately flexible, in order to allow for editorial discretion, and perhaps to channel Steve's intent of finding a balance for succinct, yet complete, disclosure. This evolution has caused some consternation among some of our authors and editors, and we continue to assess how we can improve the application of the policy.

Although this is really a conjecture, I believe that Steve also had another motive for allowing authors unrestrained space to describe their research – to educate a multidisciplinary audience about the foundational elements in an interdisciplinary setting. I would argue that the current practice of limiting page length achieves a similar objective by a different method. By forcing the author to choose words efficiently with specific guidance to write for a "broad, interdisciplinary audience" (a favorite phrase of Steve's that we use liberally), I believe we achieve greater clarity in presenting the main ideas in a concise and accessible manner. As a co-benefit, we can publish more papers and get them out much quicker, which expands our coverage. Combined with electronic supplemental material the full message

of the author(s) is not compromised, as our readers are free to delve into the specifics at will.

In addition to these changes, we reaffirm our commitment to producing the best, truly interdisciplinary scholarship and prioritize publishing research that is global in relevance or yields insights beyond the illustrative case study.

1 Progress

Over the past two years, we gradually have reduced delays in the review and publication process. Our goal is to return a first decision within three months of submission, and we are close to achieving this objective. Our dedicated editors have delivered initial decisions on all but ten manuscripts submitted more than six months ago; none of these is still under review after more than a year. Only thirty-eight submissions are under a first review after three months, which is approximately six percent of the total number of submissions received in the previous twelve months. Nearly half of all incoming submissions receive an initial decision within 3 months (Fig. 1).

We also have achieved a reduction in the length of time from submission to acceptance, with the average days to receive a final decision dropping under 6 months, although considerable variability remains (Fig. 2).

This is no small feat, and we are exceedingly grateful to the concerted efforts of our editors and reviewers.

Fig. 1 Days elapsed to first decision averaged over 6 months (six manuscripts outstanding without an initial review). Graph prepared by Luke Wirth

Six Month Running Average of Days Elapsed Before Initial and Final Decisions on Accepted Manuscripts

Fig. 2 Days elapsed to decision for manuscripts accepted to *Climatic Change*. A final decision has been made on 92 % of all submissions through February 2012 (after February 2012, the number of submissions with a final decision drops below 80 %). Graph prepared by Luke Wirth

Through a combination of strategies listed, we have achieved a significant reduction in the time between acceptance and print publication (although the immediate online publication of manuscripts with citable DOI addresses renders this gap less consequential). To give you a sense of the progress, in October 2010, the time between acceptance and hard copy publication was 18 months. By October 2012, the delay time is 9 months, and the gap is closing.

I began this essay with thoughts of Steve, and I would like to end in memory of him as well. In the centennial essay, Steve issued a call to arms—“for authors and review editors to flourish. . .requires an interdisciplinary understanding not just of the science and policy components of content, but also an understanding of the public discourse. . .I [Steve] want to encourage potential authors with these experiences, and those with expertise in social institutions and the practice of advocacy in public policy arenas, to contribute scientific analysis of this broader context into which scientific assessment have to fit” (Schneider 2010).

Throughout his career, Steve emphasized this “scientific-public interface nexus.” In continuing the mission of the journal and honoring Steve’s legacy, we must continue to solicit and support research that bridges the “needs of policy makers and products of scientists” (2010) as emphasized by Michael Oppenheimer in his contribution to volume 100. We must do the same and more – more policy relevant research, more social science integration, more truly interdisciplinary work, and we must do so while adhering to the highest standard of scholarship and intellectual integrity.

Gary Yohe, in his contribution to volume 100, emphasized that “Integrity is our most important asset,” especially when we must trust each other in our interdisciplinary and necessarily collaborative endeavors. Integrity forms the foundation from which we inform

and influence our community, whether that is in academic and professional circles or the decision making and policy arenas. “*Climatic Change* has been a bastion of that integrity since its inception in 1977. Through the persistent and provocative leadership of Stephen Schneider, *Climatic Change* has imposed that standard time after time to support us as we work together to advance knowledge in defense of the planet and its inhabitants” (Yohe 2010).

We will continue our diligent efforts to produce a high quality, high impact journal that will serve the mission and preserve the legacy set out for us by Steve.

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