Environmental Science & Technology Letters

Editorial

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# Time Travel

Once upon a time, and not so long ago, it took many months for information to travel from scientific discovery to publication. Manuscripts had to be typed, mailed (in large envelopes containing multiple copies) to the journal editor, and then sent on again in the mail to reviewers. Usually the reviewer wrote comments by hand on the manuscript and attached additional notes or summary comments. This process was then repeated, but in reverse, requiring yet more time and mailings back through the editors and back to the authors. It is easy to see why the whole process took a very long time.

Things have clearly changed. The electronic review process used by the American Chemical Society (ACS) makes the transfer of these manuscripts nearly instantaneous, so this process is now faster than ever before. The content and final presentation of an ACS publication has changed as well. Original research manuscripts for *Environmental Science & Technology* (*ES&T*) have a limit of 7000 words, but additional materials can be included as separate files (Supporting Information). In addition, ACS has converted nearly exclusively to electronic publishing, so you no longer need to wait for a printed copy of your favorite article or journal. ACS articles are posted to the journal Web site as "just accepted" often within hours after being accepted for publication. The whole process of submission through review and final decision for manuscripts submitted to *ES&T* now takes only a few weeks to months, rather than several months or more. This improvement in just a few short years has been remarkable, and it has been greatly appreciated by the authors publishing in that journal. But can we find a way to further improve the process for those special cases where even more speed is required for the review process?

Yes, but only if the process does not compromise the quality of the articles that readers expect from *ES&T*. Peer review for *ES&T* is demanding and one of the keys to the journal's success, and thankfully most reviewers do a wonderful job in providing critical and thoughtful insights into how manuscripts can be improved. But reviewing a 7000-word manuscript and Supporting Information still takes a lot of time, and we all have busy schedules. So we asked what else could be done to accelerate the process without sacrificing quality. The answer was to establish an avenue for sharing content in a letter format that is briefer than anything currently available in *ES&T*.

In the summer of 2013, *Environmental Science & Technology Letters* (*ES&T Letters*) was launched by ACS to allow faster translation of discoveries in environmental science and related technologies to final publication. Some stories can be told through crisp and concise writing, with fewer words, and by using only a few brilliant and informative figures. By setting a word limit for *ES&T Letters* to 3000 words, with 200 words per figure or table, we believed we could reduce the time needed for review, and not sacrifice quality. How have we done so far? We certainly have a great record for fast reviews. For the past six months, we have achieved an average time for submission to web for *ES&T Letters* of only 38 days. When a manuscript is submitted to *ES&T Letters*, our editorial staff immediately runs checks on the manuscript materials to see if the submission requirements are met. Next, the Associate Editors rapidly review the manuscript to judge whether it meets our requirements for scientific quality, novelty, and urgent publication. It is a fast but fair and rigorous initial review, and therefore, many submissions do not go out for external review. We rely on our editorial advisory members to help keep the process moving, as they have agreed to provide reviews frequently and on short notice. Because these manuscripts are shorter than those submitted to *ES&T*, we request our reviewers to return their comments in 7−10 days, and our reviewers have responded to this challenge!

Look over the articles in this first issue, and you will see that we have not sacrificed quality in achieving a short time for information to travel from discovery to publication. These articles demonstrate that it is possible to maintain the high standards set by *ES&T* and other ACS journals, while providing a rapid review and decision process. The topics of articles collected for our first issue are both diverse and exciting, including energy production using carbon dioxide gas emissions, unrivaled high power densities from salinity gradient energy, extracellular electron transfer by microorganisms for energy and chemical production, aerosol emissions and detection of organophosphate flame retardants in the atmosphere, new methods of chemical detection in the environment, self-healing membranes, and methods of reversing forest declines.

We thank these authors for these excellent contributions to *ES&T Letters* and the reviewers who provided the timely comments on them. We look forward to receiving many more manuscripts on other new and exciting environmental topics in the future.

**Bruce Logan,** Deputy Editor

## AUTHOR INFORMATION

### Notes

Views expressed in this editorial are those of the author and not necessarily the views of the ACS.

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