Director-at-Large for Publications, Report
July 2014

Activities this year include a series of interviews with researchers on their current publication habits and perceptions, and a search for a new editor of the Plant Science Bulletin (PSB), outlined below.

(1) **PSB Editor**

The search committee for a next editor of the Plant Science Bulletin (PSB) consisted of Marsh Sundberg (PSB editor), Rich Hund (AJB Production Editor), Ned Friedman (publications committee representative), and me (Sean Graham, Publications Director-at-Large). I chaired the committee.

A call for applicants for the editorial position was posted in the two issues of PSB (Fall and Winter 2013), with an initial application deadline of 15th November 2013, and a revised deadline of 1st March 2014. We received one application (Mackenzie Taylor, Creighton University Omaha), and conducted a Skype-based interview with the applicant on 20th March 2014.

The committee enthusiastically endorsed Dr Taylor to the Board. She hit the interview out of the park, and we strongly suspect that if we had had other candidates she would have risen to the top of the list. She currently has a tenure-track position at Creighton University, and her department is supportive of her possible new role, as part of her outreach/service responsibilities. She has now accepted the position.

(2) **Researcher interviews**

Pam Diggle (incoming Editor-in-Chief as of January 2015), Amy McPherson (Managing Editor), and I had a series of one-hour Skype-based interviews of botanical researchers in May 2014. Our main goal (as we prepare for the change in editorship) was to understand better how botanists think about publishing their work, their perceptions of AJB, and how and where they look for published papers relevant to their research.

We interviewed 20 researchers at various career stages and in a diversity of fields, in groups of two to three people. Each interview lasted for about an hour. The following were participants (the list was developed by Diggle, McPherson and Graham): Spencer Barrett, Will Cornwell, Michael Donoghue, George Haughn, Sean Hoban, Morgan Gostel, Marc Johnson, Elena Kramer, Jim Leebens-Mack, Chris Pires, Mark Rausher, Loren Rieseberg, Sonia Sultan, Stacey Smith, Doug Soltis, Pam Soltis, Tim Vines, Mark Westoby, Jon Wilson, and Sarah Wyatt (Scott Russell and Missy Holbrooke, agreed to participate, but were unable to do so due to scheduling conflicts).

A summary of the main findings is copied below (this summary was sent to the Board for discussion in early June).
Summary of findings to the board (interviews on publication habits of researchers, and their perceptions of AJB)

“Audience” was widely considered to be the most important factor for choosing journals to publish in. AJB is viewed as a decent and “safe” journal. It has a strong bias to contributions from North Americans, but a broader/global readership. We are not viewed as being as prestigious or as interesting/edgy as some (e.g., New Phytologist, which was referenced repeatedly). We may have a slightly old-fashioned “feel” to our articles: we need to update style/presentation of these (and include new sections, e.g., on data deposition). Note: We will be exploring an updated “look” for AJB articles during 2014, to launch in 2015. If anyone on the committee is interested in participating in this process (or can recommend graphic designers well-versed in scholarly publishing), please contact the editorial office at ajb@botany.org).

“Impact Factor” was also considered to be a critical consideration, with some mixed opinions (this factor was lurking in the background of many discussions). Senior people were more apt to pooh-pooh the use of I.F., but all acknowledged that it is a major consideration for younger scientists, because of its widespread use in hiring and funding decisions (or at least the perception of its use). Some expressed surprise that our I.F. was so low. AJB is still perceived to have high prestige (due to our association with BSA, connection to a vibrant North American community of botanists, and long publication history in North America). The ability of our “prestige” to counterbalance “low I.F.” may not persist as the publishing habits of younger generations evolve rapidly. [Note: We have ideas to improve Impact Factor, and also to support authors in accessing article-level and alternative assessment metrics. Publication committee members were encouraged to contribute to the discussion on both I.F. and altmetrics through email and at the meeting in Boise.

Other important considerations for choosing journals included speed (time to acceptance), the editorial board composition (as a marker for suitability of the paper for the journal, and whether appropriate reviewers will be selected), and especially the friendliness and professionalism of the editorial team. Associate Editors have a critical role in the journal – they interact with authors and direct the review process. There was some discussion about the need for more “decisiveness” on the AE side (e.g., fewer additional reviews), and the need to speed up handling times. Training of new Associate Editors (AEs) was identified as a significant area for consideration, as was the need for more active review of AE performance. We should also take on new AEs in areas that we want to cover better. Note: Do you have suggestions for the editorial board?

“Open Access” was viewed as nice to have, but largely the purview of rich (= Biomed) labs. PLoS and BMC (the best all-open journals) may be losing some lustre. We also discussed article-level metrics (e.g., provision of download and sharing rates would be desirable) and how to target new (or underserved) areas in botany, while retaining
traditional strengths. Special issues are an important tool for encouraging contributors in under-covered areas, but they need to be more aggressively followed through on (e.g., with subsequent matching themed or virtual special issues).

Substantial discussions took place about what other journals are doing better that we may want to emulate (or develop our own approaches to), such as the use of Tansley-style reviews, and quarterly “best paper” prizes. However, named reviews/prizes require the development of endowments... The development of “Commentary/Perspectives/Opinions”-style pieces along with special reviews, and similar topics (News and Views; minireviews; professional blogs like the “Molecular Ecologist”) was attractive to many. How do we get there from here? Note: Who in your field has particularly interesting ideas and opinions?

People told us that they find papers in many ways. However, the traditional way of doing this, by scanning print/online tables of content (ToC), was not high on many people’s lists. There was a very strong age-division in the methods used to find papers (for those under 25-30 year olds: Twitter, ResearchGate, Mendeley, etc). Other methods used included: Google, Google Scholar, Web of Science, e-ToC, good blogs, Facebook, articles being emailed by friends/colleagues.