Changing our Review Culture: Younger and Faster

Xiao-Li Meng, Harvard University, writes:
"Double Effort, Not Double Blind!" (hereafter DOUBLE, available at http://galton.uchicago.edu as Technical Report 382), an article I wrote in early 1994, contains my reaction to the then debate on double-blind refereeing for statistical journals. It also collected thoughts and experiences I had during 1991–93 as a junior author, referee, and associate editor. My view then was that the primary problem in our review process was not the lack of double-blind refereeing, but rather the excessive length of the review process. Tremendous progress has since been made, but stories about papers being reviewed for excessive periods are still being told too often — I was just waiting for one for over a year.

As authors, we agree that a change in our review culture is needed; yet most of us are guilty as reviewers, despite the fact that we are acutely aware of the importance of timely review. The reason for this is obvious, as I wrote in DOUBLE:

"When we are asked to referee or handle a paper, I believe almost every one of us has the intention to finish it as soon as possible. There is simply no (ethical) incentive to delay such a process. What happens next, however, often departs substantially from what we initially hoped. We constantly find ourselves replacing old deadlines with new ones and watching our file piles growing in an (dis)orderly fashion. An apparent reason for such an unfortunate situation is that we always find that other demands, professional and personal, request higher priority than those silent manuscripts. Sometimes, manuscripts are simply forgotten for a time when our minds are being occupied by so many other demands. I do not want get into the issue of how we should assign our priorities, as such a
complex issue often results in fruitless debate; Gleser (1986, Amer. Statist., 310-312) sheds some light on this issue. What I do want to discuss is how we can find more fellow colleagues to share the editorial work, so each of us can have more flexibility in allocating our time and energy, thus eventually helping to reduce the length of the review process."

In DOUBLE, I then proposed a "team system", aiming to combine junior researchers' time/energy with senior (associate) editors' wisdom/experience. The proposal included a "censoring" mechanism for referees' delays to ensure a 3–4 month turnaround time, and a back-up system for editors to guarantee the journal's responses on submissions within 6 months under the worst circumstances.

My current experience as Co-Editor of *Statistica Sinica* reinforces my belief that formally including more junior researchers in our editorial system is tremendously beneficial. The editorial board we appointed is twice the size of the previous board, and includes many young researchers, including assistant professors. With this number of energetic and viable associate editors, *Statistica Sinica* has been able largely to reach the goal I hoped for in DOUBLE. Currently, about 90% of submissions to *Statistica Sinica* have their first turnaround time within the four-month targeted deadline, with the longest being 203 days (excluding submissions to a theme issue on Brain Sciences, requiring a special board because of overwhelming submissions to a very young and diversified interdisciplinary field).

As a more "burned out senior" looking back at what I proposed then, it is inevitable that if I were to edit the proposal now I would likely modify the timeline somewhat, to better fit my current "senior
schedule". But this is exactly the problem my proposal tried to address! Senior researchers are overwhelmed by many duties, professional and personal, and we need help from those who have more time, energy, willingness — that is, junior researchers!

I therefore choose to retain the "freshness" and "naïvety" of my original proposal, quoted and sketched below, for the purpose of "casting a stone to attract jade", in other words, to encourage brainstorming of better and newer ideas on how to involve many more young researchers, and thereby invigorate our efforts to fundamentally change our slow review culture. ∎

Working schedule for Editorial Team
JA=Junior Assistant Editor, SA=Senior Associate Editor
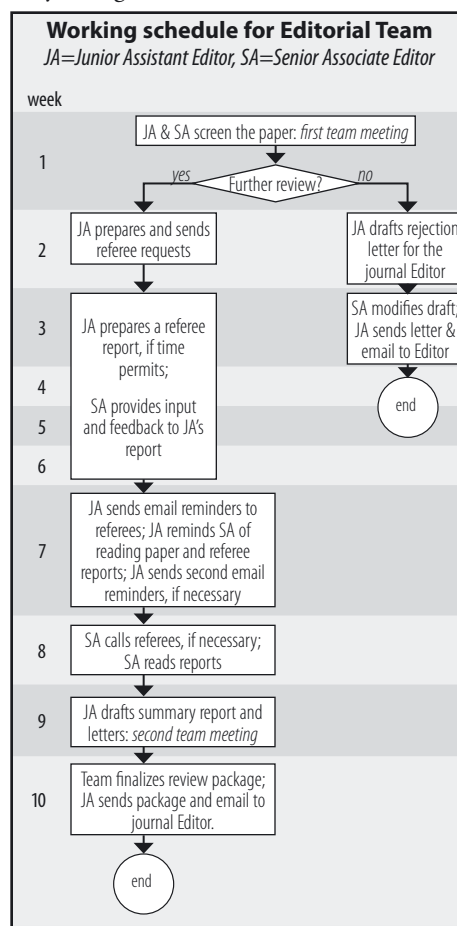
Proposal: After appointing associate editors, allow (but not require) each of them to appoint one assistant editor. Each assistant editor will work with the associate editor as a team. Assistant editors are formal members of the editorial board, and should be listed in the journals along with the associate editors and the editor(s).