

# Editorial from the New Editor in Chief

Nenad Medvidović



TAKEING over for Matt Dwyer as *TSE*'s Editor-in-Chief (EIC) is a great honor and an even greater responsibility. Matt steps down with *TSE* firmly established as the premier software engineering research journal. At the same time, several challenges remain, not the least of which is the fact that the publishing trends in software engineering currently favor conferences at the expense of journals. There are several reasons behind this. Some of them are legitimate: Regular submission cycles, relatively quick decision and feedback, and preset deadlines are appealing, and they help to maintain a vibrant, growing research community in a rapidly moving field. Other reasons are not as laudable, nor are they good for the long-term health of the community in my view: Despite the low acceptance rates of top conferences and high quality of submissions they receive, conferences inherently attract more incremental work. It is useful and important for such work to be shared on a regular basis — we all benefit from it and our field advances. It is unhealthy, however, if it results in a wholesale shift of research foci and priorities to problems that are easier to attack, for which results can be obtained more quickly and straightforwardly, and which are incremental without exception (“software engineering under the lamppost”).

Under Matt's leadership, *TSE* has taken important steps in the past couple of years to address this problem. Its streamlining of the review and publication cycle yields paper-decision timelines that, on average, are comparable to the paper-publication timelines of the top conferences. The “journal-first” effort has made publishing original results in *TSE* significantly more attractive. A large proportion of *TSE* submissions now consists of work that did not previously appear in a conference. By affording authors of such papers the opportunity to present their work at top conferences, *TSE* has combined the depth of research questions and results expected of a *TSE* paper with the visibility afforded by top-conference paper presentations.

These efforts must be continued, and expanded (presenting more papers at more conferences). At the same time, these efforts are limited in two ways. First, they are trying to leverage the strengths of conferences to entice authors to submit their best work to *TSE*, but they are not harnessing some of the inherent advantages of a flagship journal such as *TSE* to set the community's agenda. Second, these efforts still do not address the needs of a large proportion of *TSE* authors—those whose submissions are significant, sometimes fundamental, extensions of previously published work—who often still face the prospect of producing a “write-only” publication.

My goal as *TSE*'s EIC would be to continue and reinforce *TSE*'s currently successful activities, while working on addressing the above limitations. Specifically, I plan to initially explore four avenues:

- (1) formation of a standing committee of reviewers;
- (2) introduction of a *TSE* “best paper” award;
- (3) establishment of a *TSE* webinar series; and
- (4) refashioning of *TSE*'s website.

I will briefly elaborate on each initiative next.

*Reviewer Committee* – Under Matt's leadership, the *TSE* Editorial Board has been able to shorten the publication cycle significantly. I believe that it is possible to reduce it further, while enticing qualified reviewers to commit their time more formally. To this end, at the time of appointment and subsequently once per year, every Associate Editor (AE) will be asked to come up with a list of 5-7 potential reviewers, which will form a “mini-committee” in the AE's area. Once vetted and approved by the EIC and the Editorial Board, these reviewers will be invited to be a part of *TSE*'s standing “program” committee. The standing committee members will be expected to dedicate a portion of their time to reviewing a given number of papers during their tenure on the committee. This will not preclude an AE from looking for additional reviewers outside the standing committee if a submission requires it. But it will have the dual benefit of (1) having qualified reviewers “on stand-by”, therefore expediting the review cycle, and (2) having the reviewers treat *TSE* papers with the same urgency they would, e.g., an ICSE or FSE paper – and in turn getting commensurate visibility and credit for it.

*Best Papers* – I already noted that *TSE* is the premier research journal in software engineering. As such, it attracts some of the very best and most complete work in our field. Yet, unlike the papers that appear in software engineering conferences, the best papers published in *TSE* are not recognized. ACM SIGSOFT has tried to address this issue at least indirectly for the ACM journals, through the introduction of the ACM SIGSOFT Impact Paper Award. Put simply, *TSE* needs a “best

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paper” award. The idea is to give a small number of such awards annually, and for all papers (both “journal-first” and regular) published in *TSE* in a given year to qualify for the award. The exact details would be determined in discussions with the Editorial Board. The prospect of receiving such an award will hopefully serve as an added enticement for researchers to regularly submit their best work to *TSE*.

*Weekly Webinars* – A typical ICSE presentation is seen by around 100 people; a particularly interesting and timely paper may attract an audience of 200 or, in rare instances, 300. Yet ours is a huge community, numbering in the thousands. As part of my charge as current Chair of ACM SIGSOFT, I have overseen the expansion of SIGSOFT’s Webinar series. This has been a very successful way for software engineering researchers to present their work to a large audience. It is not uncommon for a SIGSOFT Webinar talk to attract 1,000 or more virtual attendees. Regularly disseminating the published work in an analogous manner is a big opportunity for *TSE*, and it will be complementary with the “journal-first” efforts. First, it will expand the audience for *TSE* papers. Second, it will expand the number of papers that can be presented this way and will include work that currently does not qualify under the “journal-first” rules. Third, and perhaps most importantly, it will keep *TSE* on everyone’s “radar screens” on a regular basis.

*Website* – The current *TSE* website is mostly a passive portal for accessing papers. This is a missed opportunity. The site needs to evolve into an active community portal where the work described in the papers can be discussed, details clarified, results extended, and data and code made available, so that a paper’s contributions can be independently confirmed and, if appropriate, refuted. Not only is this a more appropriate way of treating published results, but it also has the benefit of creating the network effect, where researchers will flock to the *TSE* site and visit it regularly because of important discussions on, both, their own work and the work on which they are relying. This effort will be in addition and complementary to the on-going efforts to increase *TSE*’s social-media presence. The recently introduced position of *TSE* Information Director will naturally include this responsibility.

Undoubtedly, these are just some of the ways in which the long-term health of *TSE* can be ensured. I am very much looking forward to continuing to work with and learn from Matt and the current Editorial Board about the journal, what has worked well, what could be improved, and how best to make it happen.

Nenad Medvidović  
*Editor-in-Chief*