

FPCA-II OPENING COMMENTS

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Abstract. This introductory talk reflects on history, sets up pieces of context, and puts forward a few issues to be hopefully addressed during the meeting.

1. Introduction

The first FPCA meeting took place three years ago at the Royal Academy in Brussels where it was organized in collaboration with Léo Houziaux. It had been motivated by a convergence of facts and trends in the world of publishing and more generally in the realm of astronomy professional communication. There were also comments and interrogations heard more and more frequently from within the astronomy community that could have been summarized by one question: *Where are we heading to in terms of publishing our results and communicating what we are doing?*

The Brussels FPCA-I colloquium has been historical in the sense that, for the first time in astronomy, virtually all major players in the field were gathered together and talked to each other: publishers, editors, archive managers, officers of learned societies, as well as scientists and librarians involved and/or concerned by the evolution of the professional communication processes.

2. History

Of course, this was not the first time such matters were tackled. For instance, the series of volumes entitled *Organizations and Strategies in Astronomy (OSA)* (Heck 2000-2006) included a number of chapters dealing with astronomy communication in the broad sense. There were also spe-

cific books on information handling and communication in astronomy (Heck 2000 & 2003, Heck & Madsen 2003). Quite a few FPCA-I attendees had contributed to those masterpieces. There were also dedicated meetings, such as the 1996 colloquium on *Strategies and Techniques of Information in Astronomy* (Heck & Murtagh 1996).

As to electronic publishing itself, the story had started earlier with the first international colloquium on the theme¹ held about twenty years ago in Strasbourg (Heck 1992). Other reviews on electronic publishing were produced subsequently (see e.g. Heck 1997 and chapters in the OSA series).

At FPCA-I in Brussels, many interesting issues and technicalities were discussed – then on a background of renewal of contracts between learned societies and publishers. The proceedings (Heck & Houziaux 2007²) include also the summaries of an Editor’s Forum moderated by Helmut Abt and of a Publisher’s Forum moderated by Terry Mahoney, as well as *Notes from the Meeting* by Mike A’Hearn who was then Chairman of the AAS Publications Board.

From these, I feel appropriate to echo here a point often forgotten: *There was widespread agreement, after much discussion, that the biggest “cost” of publishing is in the time of the scientists who write the papers and the time of the scientists who referee the papers. For a variety of reasons, these “costs” are never accounted for in the “cost of publishing”.* I shall come back to this later on.

3. Why another meeting?

While FPCA-I could be considered a success, I was still in the dark regarding a number of basic questions I had beforehand – and that have not been cleared up since. This is partially motivating, three years later, this second meeting, most kindly organized by Alberto Accomazzi and his team.

Let me first point out that professional communication is much broader than just publishing. Sharing of knowledge encompasses also lectures, courses, demonstrations, press conferences, for instance. Astronomy professional communication can be schematized as in Figs. 1 & 2.

The main pending issues coming to my mind are the following ones:

- Again, where are we heading to in terms of publishing? Were the business models presented at FPCA-I applied? Were they successful? It seems that the main purpose of our commercial partners is quite legitimately to make more money – while giving us still more work though. I’ll tell hereafter a little story about this.

¹The buzzword shifted from *desktop publishing* to *electronic publishing* between the time the meeting was launched and when it took place.

²Available online at http://astro.u-strasbg.fr/~heck/fpca_toc.htm

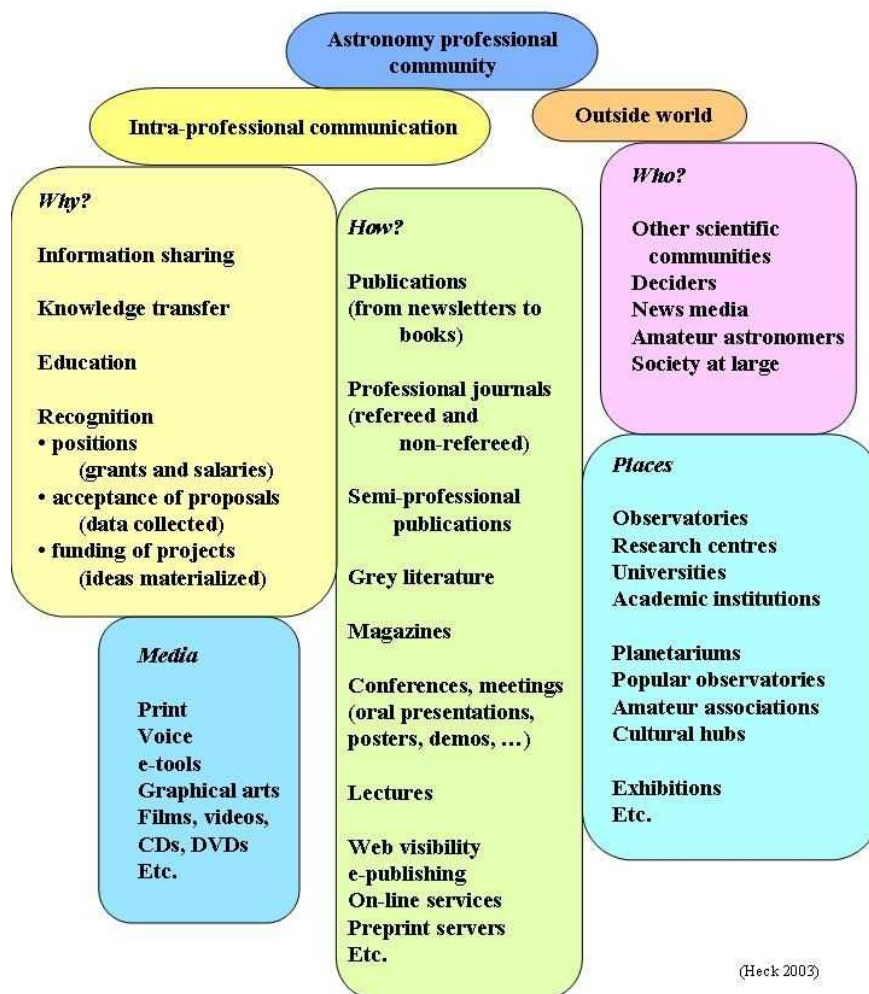


Figure 1. The astronomy-related communication process (adapted from Heck 2003b).

- Open Access models failed to convince me so far, perhaps because OA is a label used to cover quite different things. For instance, a couple of weeks ago, I was demonstrated a system boasted as OA while it was in fact an institutional bibliographical system with formatting capabilities. Openness was left to individual authors in charge of securing authorization for accessing each of their papers if they wanted to make them visible.
- At the time of FPCA-I, librarians were in an adaptive phase and we will certainly hear at this meeting what happened meanwhile.

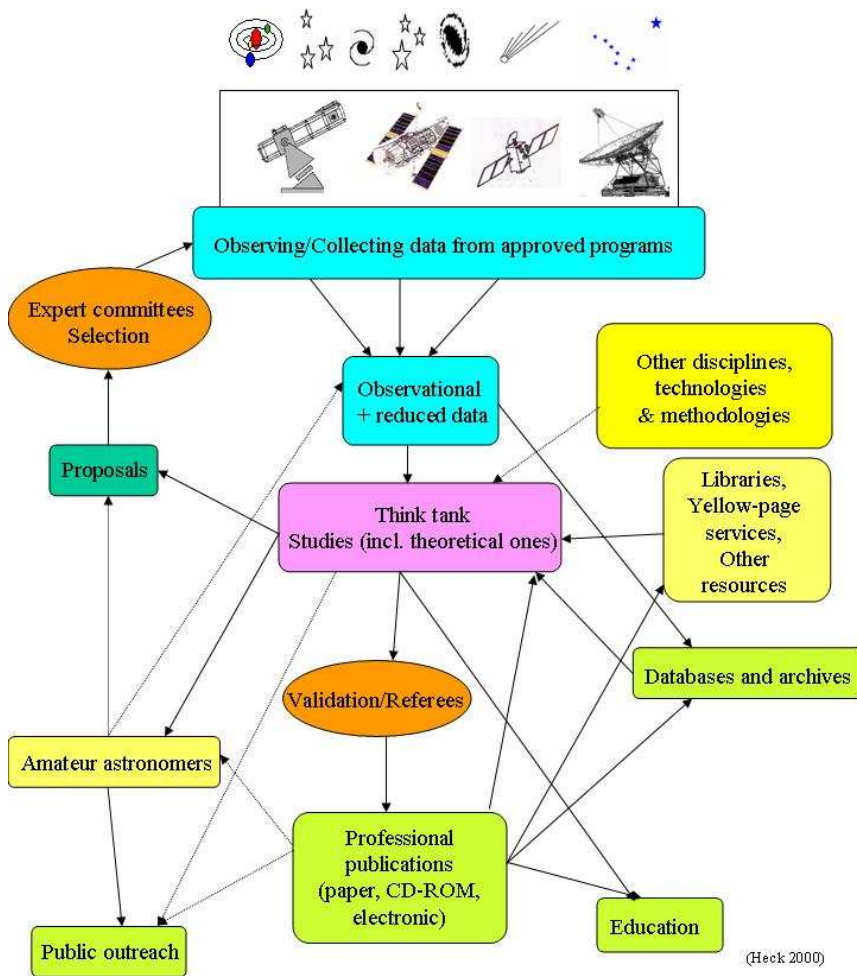


Figure 2. A schematic view of the astronomy information flow (from Heck 2000b).

- As to communication in the broad sense, was IYA2009 actually a success? Some voices claim discreetly that it came short of the expectations it raised, one of the explanations put forward being that, over the recent years, the public and the press grew weary of sensationalistic press releases about everything and nothing. Actually the concomitant Darwin Year 2009 did not fare better.

- I must confess that I have seen too many instances, including during IYA2009, where communicating astronomy with the public did not go beyond romantic gazing at the skies and extasis in front of beautiful images. This is a real issue as we have too many prospective students coming to us with a wrong idea of the day-to-day research activities. They are disappointed and leave.

Hence the need of educating students in the way research is actually carried out, and properly carried out. This is why I was very happy to see AAS President John Huchra tackling those issues in his column in the AAS Newsletters³. Please do have also a look at the AAS Statement on Professional Ethics⁴.

Ethics can still be a real issue in our scientific publications. Let me tell a recent personal experience. Earlier this year, I had a paper submitted to a journal that looked quite normal, with an editor-in-chief and co-editors covering three continents. My paper went through two referees who did their job. They were right in asking me to clarify a couple of points and, as it is often the case, I had also to answer a couple of lousy comments. But my paper was easily accepted. This implied that its integrity should have been preserved from then on, except perhaps for a bit of language cosmetics to improve my English – something quite ok with me.

When getting the proofs however, I realized that some references had been added, references to papers not really relevant to my own article. Were they authored by friends of the editor-in-chief? I don't know. In any case, I withdrew my paper since, as a matter of principle, I am not publishing in journals where such practices are taking place. So ethics can still be an issue in this 21st century, and perhaps even more so because of the flexibility and potentially easy alteration of the electronic material.

This incident led me to investigate something else. What is the situation regarding ERA archives, i.e. archives of discussions between editors, referees and authors? I run a quick survey. Not everybody answered, but I got a feedback from the main journals (Fig. 3). Obviously the situation could still be improved and systematized.

4. Alsatian maids in Paris

Since most of the talks at this meeting will be about papers in journals, let me say a few words about books – edited books or monographs.

One of my research projects dives into local history in Strasbourg. This implies decyphering old documents for which I had to follow courses of German paleography, a place where one can meet people from different

³See, e.g., *AAS Newsl.* **146** (May/June 2009) and **148** (September/October 2009).

⁴Cf. *AAS Newsl.* **151** (March/April 2010) p. 8-9.

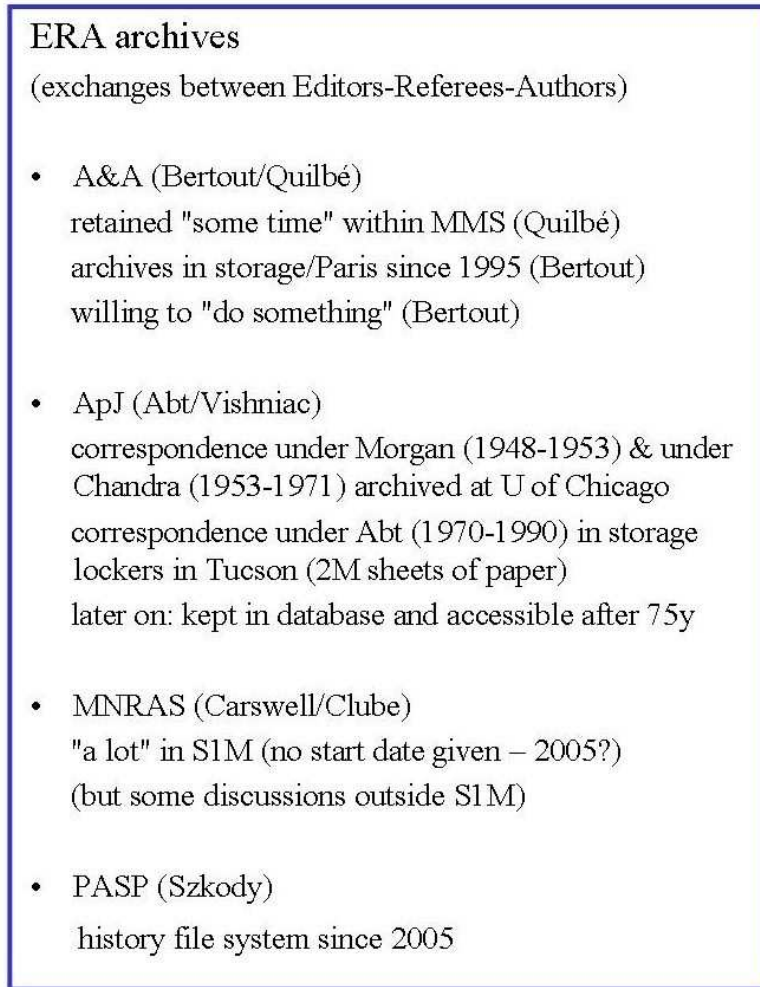


Figure 3. ERA archives (between editors, referees and authors).

backgrounds. One of these was a retired historian, Jean Haubenestel, who wrote a book telling the story of Alsatian maids in Paris (Fig. 4).

Who could be interested in the story of Alsatian maids in Paris? This is exactly what he was told by the publishers he approached and who turned him down. You might have experienced similar reactions with some of your projects. But this gentleman decided to go ahead on his own. He got a good printer-binder, advertized the book on his web site, left the usual 30-40% margin to book distributors, got things straight with the income tax office (where some 10% on earnings have to be left) and ... he is making money.



Figure 4. Alsatian maids in Paris: a very successful example of classical self-publishing. (reproduced with permission)

Just like for our specialized books in astronomy, his commercial publishers would have been quite happy to sell a few hundred copies on which he would have got peanuts in terms of royalties. Guess how much Haubenestel is selling? He is currently reaching 4000 copies and he is going to print another thousand. For a book on Alsatian maids in Paris. And there is no blue literature inside, even if the book cover is a (possibly involuntary) masterpiece of subliminal messages.

In a similar approach, I had asked one of my publishers what would be his conditions for producing a book I have currently in the making. In line with what many publishers are doing now (i.e. taking no risks and requesting a financial participation from the authors or from their institutions), he favored an electronic publication in exchange of few thousands Euros/Dollars. In the discussion, he claimed that another book of mine did not sell as much as they had hoped for, something understandable since they had run no significant advertizing campaign, considered as too expensive.

In the agreement proposed, I would have had no complimentary paper copy in my hand, nor any royalties, after handing over all my research, plus all the money requested. Remember what was said at FPCA-I about the cost of publishing being borne mainly by the scientists. So why should my work and money pay for the heavy machinery of a commercial publisher just to put my book on the web, something I can do myself?

Haubenestel's example with his Alsatian maids is something we should ponder.

5. A few final words

To conclude this, let me quote a recent comment from a contributor to the books I produced (and who has himself an extensive international experience as author, editor and translator): *Publishers are not noted for their common sense*, to which I would add that they seem frequently disconnected from the actual markets. And I could give more examples. All in all, my *Complaint of the Publishing Astronomer* (Fig. 5) remains valid today.

One might think that, perhaps because of my age, I am the one disconnected from the markets and the related phenomenology. A couple of weeks ago, I was in a train going from Aberdeen to Edinburgh in Scotland. A young lady sat in front of me, pulling out a baby Dell laptop and a book on neural networks. She was 21, German from Berlin, obviously bright, studying in Aberdeen, going for an interview in Edinburgh for a PhD position, being interested in condensed matter and other issues. To cut a long story short, at some stage, we started talking of this conference. And without me saying anything related, she said *No, electronic publications only? This would be a mistake. Paper is a support complementary to the other ones*. This is what I have been repeating myself for twenty years.

There are several other points from my introductory talk at FPCA-I (Heck 2007) that could be reminded here, such as

- the dramatic advances on brain research that will undoubtedly condition at medium term the way we communicate; our eyes-screens-hands trilogy might soon disappear;

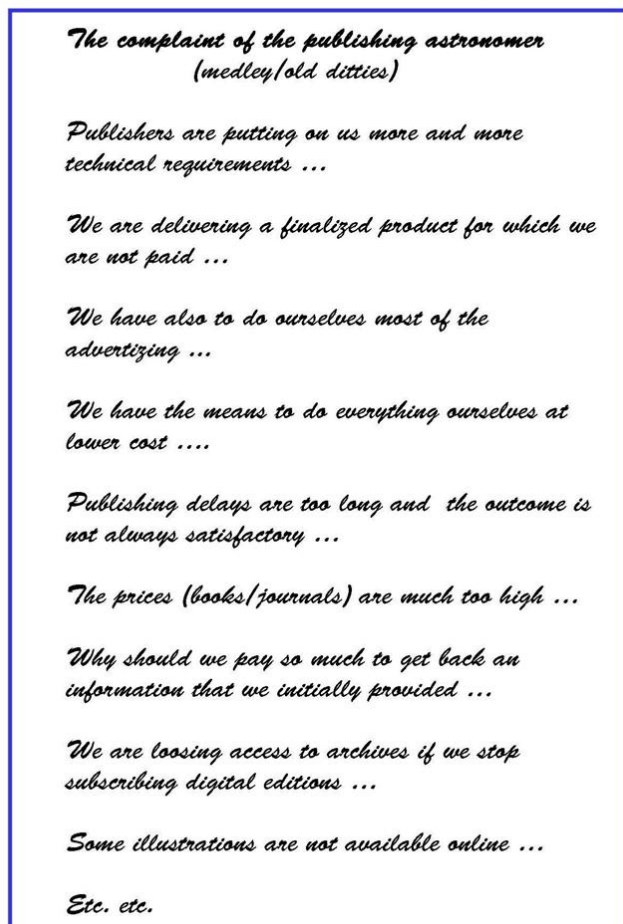


Figure 5. The Complaint of the Publishing Astronomer.

- those magnetic bombs used now in any conflict to wipe out communications and memory storage of the enemy; paper can burn, but electronic information can vanish in a flash;
- the need for evaluation measures adapted to multimedia;
- the fight against hidden plagiarism facilitated by the flexibility of electronic material.

The talks at this FPCA-II conference, starting with the keynote address by John Huchra, are reviewing the current state of the art in astronomy professional communication, as well as providing sound insights into what is expecting us in the years to come.

Acknowledgements

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