

EDITORS' FORUM

(Moderated by Helmut A. Abt)

Open Literature

The primary open locations for unpublished papers are Astro-Ph and conference proceedings. Copyeditors are instructed to quiz the authors as to whether the corresponding papers are currently in print in the standard literature because journal articles are more reliable, more complete and up-to-date, and easier to find. However, as the pace of research gradually accelerates, we can expect more references to preprints.

There was unanimous agreement that the current practice of refereeing should be retained in all of our journals.

The disease called “the least publishable unit” has not infected the astronomical literature. Papers containing a small amount of observations without discussion are no longer accepted for publication.

Censoring

In the past there have been cases where important papers were not accepted because they ran against prevailing thinking or against the opinions of a particular referee. There was unanimous agreement that this was quite often the result of a personality conflict. Editors can avoid censoring by seeking arbitration. As astronomy has become more collaborative, the individual researchers are pressured to accept alternative interpretations. The editors' policy should be: if a paper cannot be shown to be wrong, it should be published. The example of parts of H. Arp's papers was cited.

There was agreement that papers coming from “rogue nations” should be judged only on scientific criteria. Politics should be kept away from scientific publication.

Referees

Some editors had the practice of selecting the most critical referees in order to eliminate the most errors but at the expensive of eliminating controversial papers. It seems preferable to select neutral experts for controversial papers. They may be difficult to find; some scientists cannot be objective. There have been cases of referees delaying papers in order to publish theirs first; editors should be alert for such cases. The editor has the right of discretion because the referee's reports are advisory only. The editor has the right, and should exercise it, to shift to another referee if the reviewing delay is too long or he/she suspects bias. The editor may disagree with a recommendation and/or consult a further referee for arbitration.

Fundamental Edition

It was decided earlier in the conference that the electronic (on-line) edition is fundamental for accuracy relative to the printed edition.

Later Corrections

Should journals allow the addition to the on-line versions of later corrections, which would be dated? This may not be necessary if errata are automatically added to papers found in searches. It was felt that errata that involve scientific content should be refereed. While it is attractive to keep papers up-to-date, we are reluctant to make substantial changes to papers because we want the stability of the published literature.

Criticisms

How should they be handled? Some journals allow comments by others (usually referees) at the ends of papers and some have a letters section that allows critical comments. Or should there be an on-line forum (a blog) that allows criticisms? The latter has been tried but not found to be good. Many criticisms involve applications that violate the authors' assumptions. There was not much enthusiasm for making the publication of criticisms easier.

Language Problems

Are some authors too verbose? That seldom happens in astronomy. How should we handle papers written in poor English? Editors usually ask authors of such papers to seek the help of a native English speaker. That may be expensive in actual money or favors that need be returned. Should there be some sort of community service for this problem? But is this problem not

part of our cooperative system in which we help other authors in exchange for the help we get for our papers?

Papers with Many Authors

Is the growing numbers of authors per paper a problem, particularly if the authors and affiliations occupy several pages? This is a direct consequence of the fact that the research methodology is getting more complex and requires more specialists, who need to be recognized. Multiple authorships are currently not a problem, but we questioned whether authorships are the best way to provide recognition. We feel that in general an author should understand most of the scientific content of a paper and be able to defend it. Apparently it is felt that giving credit in the acknowledgements section is not adequate recognition.

Composition by Authors

Are we asking authors to spend too much time in composing papers by asking for submission in specific languages and specific page layouts? Should such work not that be done by people better qualified and less well paid? With the chronic shortage of funds in scientific organizations there is often a temptation to opt for cheaper publication by asking authors for "camera ready copy", but that is a short-sighted approach.

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