

PUBLISHERS' FORUM

(Moderated by Terence J. Mahoney)

Typesetting and Markup Chores

The time of prime researchers, who tend to produce the most papers, is a very valuable commodity and too much of it is dedicated to the technical tasks of typesetting and markup. It was felt by many of those present that authors should be freed from these technical chores in order to dedicate all their time to their primary job of research.

At the moment, \LaTeX is the standard high-level markup package in astronomy. It is not simple to use and requires considerable dedication to master properly. It was pointed out by representatives from the big journals that, in fact, some authors were far too meticulous in their efforts to present a version as closely approximated to the published version as possible. This, it was felt, was purely wasted effort since \LaTeX -prepared MSS are converted by desk editors into XML and the entire text minutely copy-edited in house. It was noted, however, that many astronomers felt the need to see what the final product would look like on the page and were greatly concerned with the minutiae of mathematical typesetting. It was expected that much handier and simpler-to-use XML packages would be made available to authors in about two years' time. (However, the \LaTeX problem will probably endure for considerably longer than this for conference proceedings, where some publishers are able to keep costs low by accepting ready-to-print/put online PDF files of MSS.)

Recognition for Peer Reviewing

In its response to the European Community's *Study on the economic and technical evolution of the scientific publication markets in Europe*, the Royal Astronomical Society argued that, since scientists' time was being held more and more accountable in terms of productivity, the task of peer reviewing – an integral part of the scientific process – was being “marginalized”. It

was pointed out at the meeting that the more productive authors tended to be approached by journal editors to do peer reviewing. Was there agreement with the RAS that some form of demonstrable recognition should be awarded to researchers for their time spent in peer-reviewing articles? The general feeling was that payment would be entirely inappropriate, and that the best recompense was the knowledge that one's own articles would in turn be fairly assessed on their merits. The practice by some learned societies of publishing lists of referees was received warily on the grounds that it might make the game of guessing-the-referee too easy, thereby undermining the anonymity of the refereeing process.

Publishers also use researchers and other specialists to referee book proposals and "pay" them with complimentary copies of the published work. This was felt to be acceptable.

Archiving and Electronic-only Publishing

Market forces are driving the push towards electronic-only publishing. The big journals will soon eventually be published online only. Although certain components of current research "papers" cannot be reproduced on paper (e.g. animations and very large digital surveys), the high-level content (introduction, methodology, discussion, bibliography) is perfectly printable, so should paper copy continue to be made available for the sake of long-term archiving? How will the absence of hard copy affect long-term archiving of present-day research literature? There was clear disagreement concerning all these issues. Paper and microfilm are still, so far, the only demonstrably long-lived information storage media, but printed matter is expensive to produce, distribute and store, and filming is time-consuming and expensive. Online publishing is cheap in terms of costs of storage and distribution, but electronic storage media are notoriously short-lived, and file migration (the copying of files onto fresh storage media) does not have a guaranteed future even in the short term (and choices would need to be made concerning what was to be migrated, so information would be systematically lost). Some felt that paper storage was the safest way to preserve published articles and were therefore in favour of continuing combined print and online publication of journals. Others, however, were confident that the technical means of providing guaranteed safe electronic archiving would be devised in time to save electronic-only publications from disappearing (one suggestion being geographically distributed Iron Mountain e-archives run on a commercial basis).

The librarians pointed out the added problem that narrow bandwidth – or even the non-availability of the Internet altogether – was a serious problem in some developing countries, where researchers consequently still

needed access to the paper journals: in such circumstances, online-only publications would not be readily available to them, if at all.

Subscription vs. Author-pays: Other Models?

The Open Access movement has given rise to increasing use of the author-pays model in the publication of research articles. The traditional subscription model has forced many libraries to drop some titles as subscriptions have skyrocketed over the last decade or so. Even the learned society journals have trebled in price (reflecting a similar increase in volume of matter published in their journals). Library budgets, however, have remained fairly static over the past decade, so clearly new publishing models are needed. One way of easing the subscription crisis is to offset subscription charges with author payment for some articles; however, the number of author-pay articles in astronomy is generally too small to make much of a dent in the overall subscription fee. While publishers are generally prepared to experiment with the author-pay system, the take-up so far by authors has been minimal, and publishers still feel that the subscription model has provided good service to the community; however, there is general recognition of the difficulties faced by libraries in the face of heavy increases in subscription fees. Libraries have responded to price increases by forming consortia in the form of group subscriptions, but this can be difficult to arrange in some developing countries, where the centres might be sufficiently varied in type and low in numbers to make consortium subscription impracticable. Publishers are also experimenting with “bundles” – packages of journals in which the subscription per journal is reduced when buying the whole package; again, however, libraries experience problems with the still high cost and the disparate nature of the journals offered.

An interesting suggestion was for the learned societies to make a microcharge of a nominal, say, 5 US cents per retrieval for non-subscribers. That might yield considerable revenue from the Google community and thus help to affray publication costs to an extent.

Another question raised was how to handle e-material for interlibrary loans. Current licences do not adequately cover this problem and need to be addressed urgently by the library and publishing communities.

The Role of Libraries

It was strongly felt by all present that astronomical libraries are undervalued and understaffed. Libraries are as much a research tool as telescopes are, yet they are only funded at a fraction of the cost. The role of the library needed to be redefined in terms of combining its more traditional knowledge repository tasks with meeting the challenges of the Information

Age. The LISA conferences are a clear indication that librarians themselves are rising to the challenge but there is evidence (in the shape of pressure to reduce library space) that the community are largely unaware of what today's libraries can offer. Librarians, it was felt, needed to be far more proactive in making known to the research community the importance of libraries in the research system.

Article, Issue and Volume Format

In online-only publishing, page, issue and even volume numbers are no longer necessary since search engines can point directly at an online article stored on a publisher's website (e.g. through author names, titles or other text strings). From a publisher's point of view journal issues, then, no longer need to be compiled since articles can be published online at any time instead of the publisher having to wait until a journal issue is complete, as is currently the case for printed journals. However, a standardized referencing would be need to be agreed on a community-wide basis, and the wisdom of totally abandoning paper copy altogether (in which page numbers are essential) is still far from having been convincingly demonstrated.

Note

This summary is an expanded version of minutes of the Publishers' Forum taken by Rudi Albrecht.