

CORRESPONDENCE

To the Editors of 'The Observatory'

Organizations and Strategies in Astronomy

As a contributor to the series *Organizations and Strategies in Astronomy (OSA)*, in which this *Magazine* was reviewed¹, you will certainly be interested to hear that those *OSA* volumes have recently been distinguished by the prestigious Stroobant Prize of the Belgian Royal Academy. The international jury recognized the appropriateness of pioneering new astronomy-related fields, such as organizational, strategic, and sociological issues².

The range of subjects tackled in the seven volumes published so far (some 150 review chapters) has been quite broad: characteristics and strategies of astronomy-related organizations (globally and specifically, nationally and internationally), with a planetary sample including even Antarctica; recruitment and promotion policies; economy of activities; evaluation processes (proposals, individuals, institutions, *etc.*); policies for professional publications; bibliometric studies; evolving sociology of scheduling and coordinated observing; communication, and its diverse facets; series of astronomy-related conferences; interactions with other communities and society at large; and a long list of matters covering the astronomy-related life and context, in the spirit of sharing specific expertise and lessons learned. Rather than being devoted to the publication of hard-science results, the *OSA* volumes describe how astronomy research lives: how it is planned, funded, and organized, how it interacts with other disciplines and the

rest of the world, how it communicates, *etc.* They went much beyond what some call “scientometrics”, generally reduced in practice to bibliometrics³.

Thus the *OSA* series has been a unique medium for scientists and non-scientists (sometimes from outside astronomy) to tell of their experience and to elaborate on non-purely-scientific matters — often of fundamental importance for the efficient conduct of our activities. As the initiator and catalyzer of the series, it has been a privilege for me to interact with the various contributors. They have also done their best to write in a way that is understandable to readers not necessarily hyper-specialized in astronomy while providing specific detailed information on their expertise and sometimes quite enlightening ‘lessons learned’ sections.

The independent readers (‘referees’) must also be praised as they ensured prompt and constructive reading of the contributions. Their task was essentially to get the best out of chapters solicited from authors who did not always realize the extent of their own expertise, especially in the context of an unusual series in astronomy such as the *OSA* volumes. Some of them had to be encouraged to go as deep as possible. Remarkably, very few contributions — to be counted on the fingers of one hand — had to be turned down, mainly because their authors did not comprehend the purpose and level of the *OSA* series, or, in only one specific case, because the author refused, with an unrelated argument, to compromise with the reasonable requirements from an independent referee seconded by the editor.

Each of the *OSA* volumes offers an updated bibliographical list of papers (from 1990 onwards) on socio-astronomy and on the interactions of the astronomy community with society at large. Authors in the field were encouraged to submit for inclusion the contributions they believe relevant. As illustrated by a histogram included in *OSA* 6’s Editorial, the global number of astronomy-related papers on organizational, strategic, and socio-dynamical issues is growing more than steadily, reflecting increased interest. Years ago, the term ‘sociology’ carried a negative connotation in hard-science circles where only bibliometric counts were barely accepted. As exemplified by the above diversification, the overall approach has now evolved and matured. The *OSA* volumes have contributed to this and the distinction of the Stroobant Prize should be reflected on all contributors.

Yours faithfully,

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References

- (1) D. J. Stickland, in A. Heck (ed.), *Organizations and Strategies in Astronomy*, Vol. 4 (Kluwer, Dordrecht), 2003, p. 205.
- (2) <http://vizier.u-strasbg.fr/~heck/osabooks.htm>
- (3) A. Schubert, in A. Heck (ed.), *Organizations and Strategies in Astronomy*, Vol. 2 (Kluwer, Dordrecht), 2001, p. 179.