

Those who routinely look at the *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society* may have noticed a minor change or two recently. Possibly it was just a passing thought that there might be something different about the banner at the top of the journal website, but you might not be sure because it's difficult to remember what the previous version was like. A few other things have been happening behind the scenes as well, and if things have gone well you won't have been aware of them. There are also continuing discussions on how scientific publishing is likely to change in the future, and how the journal should adapt and develop. Many of you will have your own views on what might be done, and of course we would like to know what they are. To set the scene, here is an outline describing the current state of *Monthly Notices*, what has been happening, and a few preliminary considerations for the future.

Personnel changes

This year marked the end of an era for *Monthly Notices*. John Randall, who had been the editorial office manager for many years, died suddenly in January. He had done the job with quiet efficiency for so long that it was hard for some of us to see how *Monthly Notices* could possibly get along without him, but somehow it did. The staff in the editorial office did amazingly well in the months that followed, and all aspects of the journal production continued smoothly. Kim Clube took over as the editorial office manager in April, and has settled into the post as if born to it.

The other change has been less traumatic. Andy Fabian was elected as president of the RAS and so resigned his position as *Monthly Notices* editor-in-chief in May. Bob Carswell, who had been his deputy, took over the role and Andrew King became deputy editor-in-chief. Probably nobody noticed, which is exactly as it should be. Diana Worrall joined the editorial board in June to bring her scientific expertise in the area which had previously been covered by Andy.

These personnel changes do not herald any sudden changes in *Monthly Notices*. The content and style of the journal will no doubt continue to evolve as both astronomer expectations and technology do. *Monthly Notices* is one of the major services that the RAS provides for the astronomical community. For all who work to produce it – editors, office staff and publishers alike – the main goal is to continue to provide a high-quality journal, in whatever form it takes.

The current state

After 14 years in charge, Andy Fabian has left the journal in a thoroughly healthy state. In 2007 almost 2000 papers were submitted, with a growth rate averaging about 8% per year

Monthly Notices of the RAS

Bob Carswell and Kim Clube, the new team in charge of *Monthly Notices*, summarize the current state and future plans for this premier astronomy journal.

since the turn of the millennium. The impact factor remains high – the 2007 value is 5.249 (comprising the number of citations in all journals in 2007 to *Monthly Notices* articles published in 2005 and 2006, divided by the total number of *Monthly Notices* articles in those two years). This means that, by this measure, *Monthly Notices* is the seventh-ranked astronomy publication, following, among others, *Annual Reviews* and the *Astrophysical Journal*, but ahead of the *Astronomical Journal* and *Astronomy and Astrophysics*.

During 2007, access to *Monthly Notices* was available in more than 4000 institutions worldwide. Readership levels increased by 30% on the previous year and there were almost a million article downloads during 2007. There has also been significant growth in the number of libraries gaining access by means of consortia sales arrangements, while research access is provided to more than 1000 institutions in the developing world through the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP). INASP operates the Programme for the Enhancement of Research Information (PERI), which strengthens research capacities in developing countries by reinforcing local efforts to produce, disseminate and gain access to scholarly information and knowledge. Through this programme, *Monthly Notices* is available at a reduced rate to academic institutions in several developing countries.

Timescales

The time taken from submission to acceptance is something authors are interested in, especially now that almost everything is posted to arXiv on acceptance if not before. For main journal papers this has been reduced over the years from a median of about five months to three, and for letters from over 100 days to just under 50. Timescales with editors and the editorial office

generally total under three days (including weekends) each time a paper passes through. Much of this overall processing time is, however, beyond our control. Potential referees are contacted first to see if they are willing to review a paper and, while almost all respond very quickly, that is not always the case for various reasons. Referees are asked to review main journal papers within three weeks, and letters within two weeks, and many – but unfortunately not all – manage to do this. Revising papers can also take a significant amount of time, depending on what needs to be done and the priority the author attaches to the task, and of course that is included in the overall statistic.

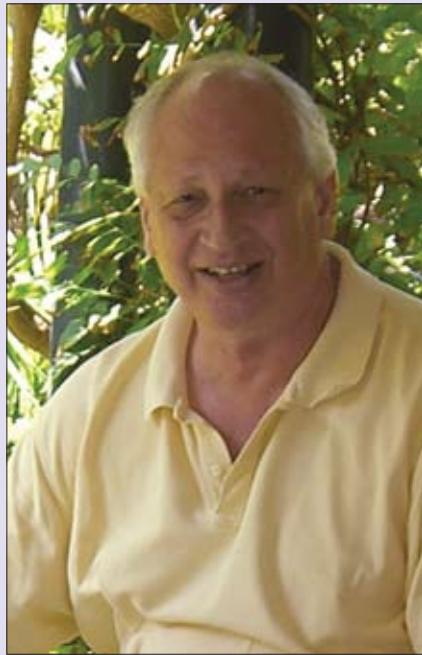
Blackwell Publishing has been the publisher for many years, and has provided the staff and expertise necessary for the production, marketing and distribution of the journal. Following the merger of Blackwell with John Wiley a little over a year ago, to form Wiley-Blackwell, *Monthly Notices* has continued to receive the same high level of support. The publisher continues to provide a rapid turnaround for the manuscripts it receives, with online publication times of about a month. Printing takes somewhat longer, of course, but even there the times are short – the printed versions now appear on average less than three months after Wiley-Blackwell receive the accepted manuscripts.

The changes readers might have noticed in the print version is that “Blackwell” has been replaced by “Wiley-Blackwell” on the spine and back cover, along with some words on the inside of the covers. For the online version the change has been a bit more noticeable, with “Wiley InterScience” recently replacing “Blackwell Synergy”, so, most visibly, the banner at the top has changed. There have also been some short-term difficulties as a result of the transfer – occasional papers effectively going offline, for example – but generally the transfer has gone pretty well. Access from SAO NASA/ADS, which is the route in for many astronomers, has been maintained.

Peer review of each paper before publication is one of the most important things *Monthly Notices* provides, and this depends completely

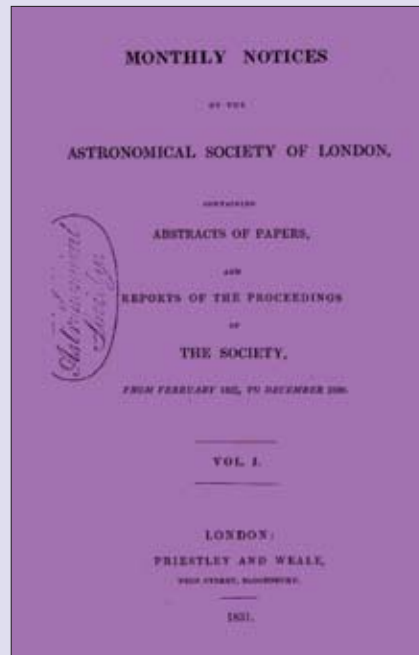
“After 14 years in charge, Andy Fabian has left the journal in a thoroughly healthy state.”

Now...



1: The new *Monthly Notices* editor-in-chief Bob Carswell in relaxed mood (before taking over the role).

...AND THEN



2: The front cover of *Monthly Notices* volume 1, 1831. It shows the original name of the society, and the distinctive colour – which has become a bit lighter in the last 177 years.

on the professionalism of the referees who are asked to look at the papers. Fortunately there is a general expectation among authors that if they want somebody to referee their papers then they should, equally, be prepared to referee somebody else's. We are grateful to the many astronomers who are prepared to referee papers carefully and expeditiously.

Of course, the editors try not to call upon individual referees too often, but sometimes it is hard to avoid doing so. As a way of saying "thank you" to those people who had been asked more than usual, and so had refereed more than three papers in 2007, the RAS invited those in the UK to Burlington House to a reception and private viewing of the 2008 Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in July.

The future

Scientific publishing is changing. While some professional astronomers still use the printed copies of journals for their research, an increasing majority prefer to access scientific papers online. Since they can normally do this through their institution's library, personal subscriptions to journals are falling rapidly. As an example, there were 48 personal subscriptions from European RAS Fellows in 2006, but this number fell to 28 for 2007. We expect this general trend to continue.

The printed copies in libraries also appear to be less heavily used, though that is based more on hearsay, and on the pristine look of the journals after a month on the display rack, than on hard evidence. Those who do open the paper

"We propose that the whole journal become online-only in about three years."

copies will also note a further change, and that is the increasing use of colour. Colour figures can increase the clarity of presentation tremendously, and with online versions being the prime access route there could be no real overhead in allowing it. Colour printing is more expensive than greyscale, however, so the publishing costs for the printed journal are higher.

This leads to an obvious question. Why print the journal, at increasing cost, when few people are opening its pages? Why indeed! *Monthly Notices Letters* has been very successful as an online-only part of the journal. The absence of a print version has not deterred people from submitting papers at all. So, following this successful trial, we propose that the whole journal become online-only in about three years.

Why wait for so long? Most of us would not notice if somebody forgot to send the journal to the printers but simply continued to provide online access. However, it is important to take some time to consider possible community reaction to this proposal, and make sure nothing important is lost in such a change. Also, there are bound to be some contractual arrangements that have to come to the end of their terms.

And would this decrease in production costs bring the journal price down? The saving is depressingly little, as it turns out. Neither black

and white printing costs, nor journal distribution costs, are high, so without other major changes the best you might save is about 10% – a margin which easily disappears within a year or so due to journal growth and inflation.

The real gain is in flexibility. Flexibility in publishing dates – not all papers have to wait until a volume is put together, as "online early" has already established. Flexibility in use of colour – colour on screen carries no overhead, while the additional costs of colour print have to be borne by somebody. And especially flexibility of content – one need not remain bound by having something that has to fit into the confines of a series of 7×10 inch pages.

The flexibility in content opens up a range of questions. In particular, what should be encouraged, or allowed? It would be great to be able to publish movies, animations, data, do-it-yourself simulations, interactive modelling, interactive data projections, and even voice-over commentaries along with the more traditional material. These possibilities, and others, raise the vexed question of formats. There are plenty of options, but there is no way of supporting them all. And an option now almost certainly won't be in 50 years time, so what do we have to do to make sure that the archive aspect of the journal is secure? *Monthly Notices* is not alone in having to consider such questions, of course, and we believe the best thing we can do is to expand the range of content along with other journals across science as a whole, using common standards. This expansion will probably be incremental, so we can learn from our mistakes as we go along without major upsets, and the starting point will almost certainly just be paperless journal papers.

Final comments

The journal now appears every 10 days, not monthly, and contains scientific papers, not notices from the Society. *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society* will almost certainly retain its inappropriate name for some time to come, however, in whatever form the journal actually takes. It is a name that is familiar worldwide as one of the primary research journals in astronomy and astrophysics.

Monthly Notices will continue to welcome submissions from any astronomers anywhere. It is published for the RAS, but is open to all astronomers whether or not they are Fellows of the society. The journal is UK-based, but not UK-oriented, with two-thirds of its content originating elsewhere. The basis for publication will remain solely scientific content that significantly advances the subject of astronomy. ●

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