

Publications Oversight Committee (POC)

Annual Report -- 2000

November, 1999 - November, 2000

Following last year's trend of inclement weather, the January, 2000 meeting of the APS Publications Oversight Committee (POC) was canceled because of an East Coast snow storm. Given the many important issues that the POC must address, the remaining two meetings in May and September were particularly busy and intense. Below, I summarize the POC discussion of and action on some of the major issues.

Journal pricing

We are near the end of the first year of the new multi-tier schedule for journal pricing, and the data so far look positive. As ably implemented and reported by Tom McIlrath, the multi-tier journal pricing model has been largely accepted by librarians. There is also widespread appreciation that APS journal prices are more reasonable than those of commercial publishers. Journal subscriptions have remained strong and expenses have remained below budget. Given all this good news, the POC discussion focused more on second-order, albeit important, problems including: how to use the reserve fund that the journals are generating (e.g., to pay for PROLA expenses); what on-line subscribers will retain if they cancel their subscriptions; better communication of journal pricing information to librarians, users et al.; determining sites and superuser info to allow a reasonable size/usage-based pricing scheme; approval both of next year's journal subscription prices for APS members and the proposed approach of the Treasurer (T. McIlrath) for improving the schedule for institutional pricing; and support for the Treasurer's approach to international outreach pricing. Without a doubt, journal pricing and the finances of the APS publications operation will remain top POC concerns in the future.

International issues

The POC discussed several international topics, including: the Russian journal outreach program; the need to develop equitable methods of publication cost recovery in foreign countries (mostly Asian) which have many electronic article downloads but low subscription rates; and international participation in APS/AIP virtual journals and PR Special Topics - Accelerators & Beams. In all these important areas, the POC found that Tom McIlrath, Marty Blume et al. are doing a fine job of managing the evolving and sometimes tricky situations. There will be continued attention to these matters.

Costs/benefits of the editorial/publication process

The POC spent significant time in the September meeting reviewing and discussing the costs and benefits of the APS editorial and publication process. Tom McIlrath gave a cogent presentation on this topic, assisted by Marty Blume, Charlie Muller, Stanley Brown, Bob Kelly et al. Although time-consuming, the non-statutory POC members felt this cost/benefit tutorial was essential for them to perform their oversight function properly. The APS publications operation is large and relatively complicated. Therefore, since new members join the POC every year, there will likely be a continuing need for such cost/benefit tutorials. The conclusion from the September meeting was that the editorial and publication process is run cost effectively given the

current mission and mode of operation. The only real way to save money will be to go to a system that uses fewer people (per subscription, per published article, etc.). Perhaps such savings can be achieved with the advent of new electronic tools. This goal is being pursued actively by Charlie, Bob et al. at Ridge. The POC appreciates the difficulty of the task and will continue to follow its progress closely.

Managing workflow at Ridge

The POC heard reports from Stanley Brown and others on the ongoing process at Ridge to analyze and change the workflow in the editorial office to improve efficiency, reduce costs, and improve employee morale. This task is undoubtedly daunting given that it must be accomplished without interrupting the processing of about 25,000 manuscripts per year. At the September meeting in particular, the POC expressed concerns about manuscript delays in the Ridge office. It is estimated that a typical manuscript spends several weeks at Ridge but it is only being worked on for a few hours during this period. Several POC members felt that in this era of near-instantaneous "publishing" on the web, multi-week delays at Ridge without value being added puts the APS at a competitive disadvantage - particularly for PRL - and is not serving the physics community optimally. [Of course, the largest delays in the editorial process are due to referees, a problem not easily solved!] Judy Franz suggested that Ridge staff be offered productivity bonuses to reduce the time to process manuscripts; Marty Blume asked Charlie Muller and C. Giaccone to look into this possibility. Brief articles may also be written by Walsworth and Blume for Physics Today, APS News and other appropriate publications, stating that APS wants to shorten referee response time (and thus time from submission to publication) and seeking suggestions from the community as to how this can be done. Similarly, an electronic survey may be carried out of recent authors and referees, with public posting of responses on the topic of reducing referee response time. The POC also suggested that consideration be given to increasing the financial resources allocated to re-engineering the workflow at Ridge. It may even be true that the physics community would pay more for PRL if the time to publication was significantly reduced (while maintaining the quality of the peer review process).

Status and future of PRL

A lively discussion of Physical Review Letters (PRL) was held at the September meeting. POC members voiced complaints and concerns commonly heard in the physics community about PRL's growing size, the time to publication, hot papers being lost to Science and Nature, overweighting toward condensed matter, etc. Marty Blume reminded us that for all of the complaints, PRL has 8k submissions per year, strong subscription sales, and high usage in libraries; i.e., it is clearly successful. Jack Sandweiss provided perspective on these important issues. He also outlined steps he is taking to raise standards at PRL: (i) a letter should be significant, important and interesting; (ii) referee evaluation should include a grade from 1 to 4 (referee and author should show why a letter SHOULD be published not why it should not be rejected); (iii) a new referee response form, letter to DAEs, and an editorial in PRL. Jack estimated these three steps could reduce the size of PRL by 10%. In a series of colorful motions, the POC approved the implementation of color cover thumbnails above the Table of Contents in the online PRL; endorsed the editors' plan to go forward with color covers on the print version of PRL; instructed that the feasibility of PRL reprints with color covers be investigated; and endorsed a plan to have color throughout the online Physical Review.

Reviews of journals and editors

An ongoing essential responsibility of the POC is to provide oversight and advice for reviews of journals and editors. We are entering a period when many such reviews are due to take place, so the POC heard thorough "review planning" reports from Marty Blume. These extensive plans will not be reproduced here; however, there is no doubt that the POC will remain actively involved over the next couple years in monitoring the journal and editor review process. Two other items of note are that the Phys. Rev. B review, chaired by Dan Hone, is well underway; and also, that the POC approved Irwin Oppenheim's proposal that Phys. Rev. E (which has experienced rapid growth) be split into two parts of different topical content but nearly equal volume.

Other topics

In an attempt to keep this annual report to a readable length, I have omitted many other important topics discussed this year by the POC. I merely list some here: PROLA; archiving; marketing; assisting with the APS member survey; issues regarding non-AIP publishers (Highwire Press, Beacon Press); the new virtual journals; and coordination with publication-related APS task forces (e.g., on Physical Review Focus and on Electronic Information Systems).

As chair, I want to thank the members of the POC, as well as the guests, advisors, and able staff for all the hard work approached with aplomb and good humor. We had a very busy year, made particularly challenging by the canceled January meeting and the demands of the times. Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose!

Respectfully submitted,

Ron Walsworth, Chair,
Publications Oversight Committee