

Committee on Publications Oversight Committee Annual Report -- 1999

November 1999

Although the Publications Oversight Committee (POC) had already held its customary three meetings for the year in January, May and September, its business was not concluded until it met again on November first in response to a request from the Executive Board, to reconsider issues having to do with journal pricing. As might be inferred from this situation, journal pricing has been the dominant issue considered by the POC in the past year. We are on the threshold of some major changes, and given the importance of publications in the overall structure of the APS, it is vital to make use of all possible sources of input: from the operating officers, from the members of the POC, from the library community, and from the Executive Board. The urgency of this issue has been due principally to two factors: the continuing decline in non-member print subscriptions, and the increasing availability of data showing the extent of electronic use of the APS journals. At our September meeting, Tom McIlrath presented a pricing scheme based on two components: a base price to be charged to all non-member subscribers, and a usage-based online surcharge (UBOS) to be determined by institutional electronic use. With such a differential pricing scheme, one can deal more fairly with our smaller institutional subscribers, who until now have been paying the same rate for use that is often a tiny fraction of that of the large research institutions. It is hoped that this will lead in time to a reduced rate of subscription cancellation among the smaller institutions. Furthermore, by leading the way in charging for electronic use, the APS will be preparing itself for the inevitable changes in pricing policy as the community shifts increasingly from print to electronic access of its journals. The POC voted to endorse the general idea of such a scheme, without specifically focussing in on a particular pricing formula. When this was presented to the Executive Board at its September 25th meeting, the question was raised whether it might not be better to base the online surcharge not on electronic usage, but rather on the number of users at a given institution. This issue was considered sufficiently important by the Executive Board that the POC was directed to meet again to weigh these alternatives, and to produce a recommendation. In the meantime, the treasurer was asked to sample opinion in the library community to gauge its reaction; the results of the survey were incorporated into the deliberations of the POC on November 1.

At its November 1 meeting, the POC considered and endorsed a modified plan to go into effect in calendar 2001 that makes use of the Carnegie classification scheme to determine the electronic surcharge that will be levied on American academic institutions. This insures that charges to individual institutions will not fluctuate year by year depending on usage, thereby providing libraries with a more stable pricing environment and eliminating the temptation to discourage usage to avoid extra charges. The specific proposal (whose details may have to undergo further modification) is that Research 1 and 2 institutions will be charged the highest rate, doctoral 1 and 2 institutions will be charged the next highest rate, and everyone else will pay the base rate. Foreign institutions and non-academic American institutions will still have to rely on usage statistics and other data to determine their surcharge category. The committee also voted to recommend increasing the member electronic subscription price from the current \$25 to \$35, both because it was felt that the \$25 price is inherently too low, and also to respond to concerns

of the library community that the increased charges for electronic access be shared with the members. The input from the library community was based on a meeting with several Washington, DC area librarians held on October 7, and reported on to the POC by associate publisher Barbara Hicks.

On other fronts, the POC has heard reports at each of its meetings from the editor in chief and the members of his senior management team (Charlie Muller, Bob Kelly and Stanley Brown) concerning progress in the operation of the journals. This is particularly important both to insure that the Physical Review and PRL and RMP maintain their status as the leading physics journals in the world, and also because cost control is, together with journal pricing, an essential element in the continued financial viability of the publishing enterprise. In particular, the POC accepted the report of the review committee on Physical Review E (chaired by Steve Berry). The report was generally favorable, and noted that Phys. Rev. E, as the newest of the five sections of Physical Review, is still growing rapidly, and is serving a diverse set of research disciplines. No major changes are planned. The POC was also informed of the establishment of a review committee for Physical Review B. In addition, there will be a committee to look into Physical Review Focus (an online weekly report produced by David Ehrenstein, aimed at a general physics audience, focussing on a particular article that has appeared that week in PRL). PR Focus is generally regarded as very successful and capable of significant expansion. The POC also heard from editor-in-chief Marty Blume about imminent plans to establish a mirror site for the Los Alamos e-print archive at Brookhaven, under the aegis of the APS. This is a significant first step in what is regarded as an evolving relationship between the Los Alamos archive, under the direction of its founder Paul Ginsparg, and the APS journals, and it should position the APS well as scientific publishing becomes increasingly dominated by its electronic component. Marty deserves a lot of credit for pursuing this liaison vigorously, and for making sure that the APS is keeping up (and indeed often leading the way) with the breakneck pace of innovation in electronic publishing. All of the APS journals are now on line, and most of them have introduced or are introducing e-first publishing, whereby individual articles are posted on line well in advance of their appearance in print, and the primary reference is to the electronic version (using a referencing code invented by Erick Weinberg, the editor of Phys. Rev. D).

Another key component of the APS publishing effort is PROLA, the Physical Review Online Archive. At this point all of Physical Review is available online back to 1985, and progress is being made on phase 2, to push this back to 1970 (when the current A, B, C, D divisions were instituted) and to put all of PRL and RMP online. The hoped-for completion date for this is sometime in the summer of 2000. At its November meeting, the POC heard of recent progress in receiving bids to accomplish phase 2, and passed a motion urging the completion of this task as quickly as possible. PROLA has the potential to be one of the most valuable assets that the APS can offer, and it is an area where the APS is clearly way ahead of its publishing competitors, thanks to the efforts of Bob Kelly, Mark Doyle and Arthur Smith and the rest of the PROLA development team. Ultimately, the entire Physical Review should be available online, back to its inception in 1893. (In fact the first volume, from 1893-94, is already available, so as Marty likes to say it is just a matter of filling in some gaps).

The POC has also passed a number of other resolutions, among them one endorsing the idea of virtual journals (which would cull articles in a given field from various real journals, not

necessarily all published by the APS, and would make this information available to subscribers), and another resolution calling for saving money by ceasing production of CDs as a way of preserving volumes of the journals, since there seems to be no market for them.

At each of its meetings, the POC has heard progress reports from Charlie Muller on "re-engineering the editorial process", whose ultimate goal is to make the editorial process completely electronic: manuscripts will be submitted electronically, handled electronically by the editors and referees, and then passed along electronically to the publishers, with paper being an available but unnecessary option. Only in this way can one hope to trim editorial costs, while at the same time easing the burden on the staff at Ridge, whose workload has increased inexorably as the journals continue to expand (even as the number of subscriptions shrinks). We have been impressed by the complexity of this task, which is compounded by the fact that each of the journals operates in its own idiosyncratic way, and serves its own community with its own specific needs and practices. Clearly this is an item that will and should be on the POC agenda for the foreseeable future.

As chair, I would like to thank the members of the committee, as well as our guests, advisors and staff, for their many contributions in what has turned out to be an exceptionally busy year. Of particular note was our meeting in College Park on September 16-17, which featured an evening session on the 16th, followed by a full day on the 17th, and then, after a dinner break, another evening session as the finale, all of this conducted while hurricane Floyd was making his way up the east coast. Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night...

Respectfully submitted,

Alan Chodos, Chair,
Publications Oversight Committee