Recommendations on Information and Communication

Journal Prices: Comments on Best Practices #8

How can mathematicians act on recommendation 8? It's not as easy as it seems. In the short-term, some actions may have unintended consequences that will actually *increase* the strain on the journals system.

If mathematicians avoid sending their papers to high-priced journals, they need to have low-priced alternatives. The immediate effect is to (slowly) increase the quality of those low-priced journals and to decrease the quality of the high-priced. Changing the relative quality of journals requires many years, and in the meantime, not much will change for libraries. Changing journals is an evolutionary process.

If referees refuse to provide their services to high-priced journals, they will pressure editors to pay attention to journal prices. This is an indirect way to change journals, but again it will take many years to effect real change.

Editorial boards can also take action. Individual editors can pressure publishers to moderate the price of their journal, but they often have little influence. If editors decide to resign over price, they should involve the entire board in the action. In rare circumstances, an editorial board can move the journal's home to a less expensive publisher (for example, Compositio recently moved; see the commentary by its editor, Gerard van der Geer, in the May 2004 issue of the NOTICES). In some cases, the entire editorial board can resign in order to found a new journal to compete with the old. (A prominent case occurred recently with the Journal of Algorithms, for which Donald Knuth initiated the action.Knuth's letter to the editorial board contains an analysis of all options open to an editorial board in such circumstances.)

Librarians and institutions need to take action as well by making careful decisions about subscriptions and in particular about bundling arrangements. (Two recent examples of institutions making such decisions areHarvard and Cornell.) Some of the actions above may complicate their job, however. While the intended effect of an editorial board's defection is to substitute a low-priced journal for a high-priced one, publishers will invariably reconstitute the editorial board, especially for a successful journal. The actual effect is therefore to create a *new* journal, which then competes with the old. Librarians may be pressured to subscribe to both, making the situation worse (at least temporarily). When journals are bundled, it may be even more difficult for librarians to make good decisions (since they may not be able to cancel individual journals in a bundle – see Best Practices item #15, Licensing and Bundling.)

Any of these actions by authors, referees, or editors will change journals slowly, over many years. In the meantime, some actions may make the situation worse.

The most important action that any mathematician can take is to stay informed, about the price, the ownership, and the quality of journals.

Information about the price of journals can be found at various places.

www.ams.org/membership/journal-survey.html

A database of journal prices for about 250 mathematics journals for 9 years.

www.mathematik.uni-bielefeld.de/~rehmann/BIB/AMS/Publisher.html

A series of tables sorted in various ways, based on the AMS database.

math.berkeley.edu/~kirby/journals.html

A survey with commentary from 1997.

www.createchange.org/

A bibliography of further references about journals pricing.

www.usq.edu.au/library/help/contact/staff/unilibrarian/readings/studies.htm

A bibliography of articles on the economics of journals.

Tracking the quality of journals is more difficult, but it is essential to make the effort.

CEIC, March 2004