Editorial

Becoming the Preferred Publisher

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It's hard for me to believe, but it's been almost 20 years since my first journal paper appeared (in *JACM*, as it happens). Since then, I've had enough journal publications to qualify me as a veteran of the publication process (that is, what happens after the paper is accepted). My experiences has been, to put it politely, mixed. All too often, I've had papers that I had carefully prepared in $\text{\LaTeX}$ come back completely mangled.

In my previous editorial ("An Authors' Bill of Rights and Responsibilities", *JACM* 47:5, 2000), I discussed how ACM is working on become more author friendly. That goal has become the cornerstone of ACM's strategic vision for 2001–2004. Indeed, the first sentence of the abstract of the strategic statement says:

The vision underlying the strategic plan discussed here is simple:

Ensure that ACM becomes the preferred publisher for computer science.

The Bill of Rights that I discussed in my previous editorial is intended to lay out the principles that ACM will follow to ensure this. (It has been expanded to a document entitled "Rights and Responsibilities in ACM Publishing", available at <http://www.acm.org/pubs/rights.html>, which covers not only authors' rights, but also those of readers, reviewers, editors, libraries, and institutional subscribers.) I am very pleased to report that ACM has now taken what I view as one of the most important steps to becoming the preferred publisher for computer science, at least as far as authors are concerned. Starting with this issue, *JACM* (and five other ACM journals whose author communities tend to be heavy users of $\text{\LaTeX}$) will take authors' $\text{\LaTeX}$ input and convert it directly to PDF, provided that the $\text{\LaTeX}$ is prepared using the *JACM* style file. The PDF version will appear in both the journal itself and the ACM Digital Library. This production path this will almost certainly reduce the errors introduced by the process of preparing a paper for publication significantly. Moreover, since authors will be using the same style file to prepare their papers as *JACM* uses to publish them, papers can be prepared keeping in mind the final publication layout. This should save work for both ACM and authors.

I have been arguing in favor of this production path ever since I became editor-in-chief of *JACM*. Needless to say, I am extremely pleased to see it finally in effect. Readers will notice that one of my own papers ("Plausibility measures and default reasoning") is in this issue of *JACM*. The paper was actually accepted before I became editor-in-chief, and has been first on the publication queue for over four years. I have been holding it back in the hope of being able to avoid having to proofread a galley prepared by the old production process.

While I view this as an important step to increasing author satisfaction, there is certainly more that ACM (and other publishers!) can do. However, publishers are by and large blissfully unaware of authors' concerns or do not view them as significant. (If that were not the case, I suspect we would see more journals using $\text{\LaTeX}$ source and sending authors marked-up galleys, both of which ACM is now

doing.) We cannot just blame publishers for these problems though. If we want to see things change, we must make sure that our concerns are heard. As far as ACM is concerned, now is a particularly good time to do this, given ACM's commitment to becoming the preferred publisher. I encourage you all to take advantage of this commitment.

Turning to other matters, I'd like to announce some changes to the editorial board (somewhat belatedly in some cases):

- Martín Abadi took over from John Mitchell about a year ago as area editor for Logic in Computer Science.
- Hector Garcia-Molina stepped down as area editor for Database Systems, Networks, and Digital Libraries, and Mihalis Yannakakis stepped down as area editor for "Database Theory". I took the opportunity to reorganize the editorial board slightly, by combining Database Systems and Database Theory into one area called, surprisingly enough, Database Theory and Systems, edited by Victor Vianu. Networking is now a separate area, edited by Nick Maxemchuk. There is no longer a separate area for Digital Libraries. Our few submissions in that area typically end up fitting easily into other areas. That may change again, if the situation warrants.
- Guy Blelloch is stepping down as area editor of Parallel Computing and Architecture; the new area editor is Phil Gibbons.

I'd like to thank John, Hector, and Guy for all their efforts, and to welcome Martín, Victor, Nick, and Phil to the board.

I conclude with my annual summary of time to publication. Of the 132 papers that were active when I took over (in May 1997), all have been dealt with. Of the 100 papers submitted between May 1997 and May 1998, only one is still in the system. It is in the authors' hands, and has been accepted pending minor revision by the author. (See my previous editorials for the numbers of acceptances and rejections.) Of the 95 papers submitted between May 1998 and May 1999, 32 have been accepted, 55 have been rejected, 2 were withdrawn, and 2 are with authors, and 4 are with reviewers. Of the 56 rejected papers, the median time to rejection was 5 months (up from 4 months for the 1997-98 papers). Of the 32 accepted papers, the median time to acceptance was 15 months (down from 16 months from 1997-98). Unfortunately, these medians are hiding some high numbers. There were 6 papers that were ultimately rejected, but spent over a year in the system (with a maximum time of 19 months); there were 7 papers that were ultimately accepted that spent two years or more in the system (with a maximum of 25 months). Recall, however, that in the case of accepted papers, this time includes time spent in authors' hands making revisions. Finally, of the 80 papers submitted between May 1999 and May 2000, 13 have been accepted, 43 have been rejected, 1 was withdrawn, 8 are with authors, and 15 are with reviewers.

These numbers also seem to indicate a decline in the number of submissions, but I am not sure if there really is such a trend (as opposed to a one-year blip). For example, between May 2000 and May 2001 there were 91 submissions. It is also possible that a few papers that should have been counted for 1998-99 were counted for 1997-98 or 1999-2000 instead.

Although the data do show that things have improved somewhat, I have not been as successful as I would like in bringing down these numbers. Interestingly, as

Glenn Ellison's data shows (see "Evolving Standards for Academic Publishing: A q-r Theory" and "The Slowdown of the Economics Publishing Process", both available at <http://web.mit.edu/gellison/www/papers.html>), the length of the review process seems to have increased significantly over the past 25 years in all disciplines, in many cases more than doubling. Actually, it is stated in "Evolving Standards for Academic Publishing" that the mean time from the original submission to submission of the final paper in 1999 for accepted *JACM* papers is 21 months. This number is obtained from a random sample of the papers that actually appeared in *JACM* in 1999. The actual mean is slightly higher (23 months), but is thrown off by several papers that had been in the system for very long time (over eight years, in one case) and were finally published. Not surprisingly, the median is significantly lower than the mean: 17 months. Moreover, the median for papers that were submitted after I became editor in chief in May, 1997, is 11 months. Of course, the latter group of papers represents a biased sample for 1999, since there is clearly an upper bound on how long a paper could have been in the system if it appeared in 1999 and was submitted after I became editor-in-chief. Nevertheless, I believe that this data does indicate significant progress. I welcome suggestions for further improvement.

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