

Editorial

JAAVSO: Past, Present, and Future

John R. Percy

Editor-in-Chief, *Journal of the AAVSO*

Department of Astronomy and Astrophysics, and Dunlap Institute for Astronomy and Astrophysics, University of Toronto, 50 St. George Street, Toronto, ON M5S 3H4, Canada; john.percy@utoronto.ca

Received November 24, 2017

JAAVSO was created in 1972 as a place “where professional and non-professional astronomers can publish papers on research of interest to the observer”—a statement which defined the intended authorship and readership. The first volumes also contained various reports, and abstracts of papers presented at AAVSO meetings. Only the latter are still published in *JAAVSO*; the reports are now published elsewhere on the AAVSO website.

JAAVSO grew steadily, in size and quality, under the long-term editorship of Dr. Charles Whitney (1929–2017). Special issues were produced, in connection with AAVSO’s European Meetings, its Centennial, and its IYA *Citizen Sky* project. Review articles appeared, and still do.

JAAVSO’s core mission is to publish papers on variable star astronomy and related topics. It exists within an ecosphere of other journals which also publish such papers. In an earlier Editorial (vol. 44, no. 2), I discussed the “wild west” aspects of journal publishing today. Most professional (technical) papers are published in the non-profit *Astronomical Journal*, *Astronomy and Astrophysics*, *Astrophysical Journal*, or *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society*. Additionally, there are a few for-profit astronomical journals, and also journals based in a few countries such as Australia, China, Japan, Russia, etc. which cater to astronomers from those countries. One of the specialties of the non-profit *Publications of the Astronomical Society of the Pacific* is stars. In addition, there are journals or newsletters published by variable star observing groups in many parts of the world, many of them in languages other than English.

There is also the *International Bulletin on Variable Stars*, originally a project of the International Astronomical Union (IAU), now published on-line, open-access by the Konkoly Observatory in Hungary. Its papers are short, and many but not all of them come from Europe. The vast majority of authors are professionals, who are writing for other professionals.

The editor of *JAAVSO* (currently me) is supported by HQ staff, especially Michael Saladyga and Elizabeth Waagen, and advised by an international Editorial Board. We report to the AAVSO Director, and Council.

AAVSO Director Stella Kafka has a special interest and several years’ experience in non-profit scientific publishing, and she has stimulated discussion of many aspects of *JAAVSO*, including how it might evolve. Here are some possibilities for thought and feedback.

More International Content: When *JAAVSO* began, it was very much North American. More recently, its international

content has increased. We have more international representation on the Editorial Board. I choose referees from around the world, as appropriate (though I do try to choose ones who have some knowledge of our authorship and readership). The fraction of papers with at least one non-North American author was 10% two decades ago, 37% one decade ago, and 48% last year. These international authors tend to be much like the North American ones: professional variable-star astronomers with long-term access to small telescopes, skilled amateurs, supervisors of research students, etc. They come primarily from Europe, Australia, and New Zealand; very few are from Asia, Africa, or Latin America. The AAVSO’s European conferences and our Directors’ travels have certainly raised our international profile.

More internationalism would enable us to have an even higher profile, internationally, and perhaps be part of indexes such as the (for-profit) Web of Science: <http://clarivate.com/products/web-of-science/> (we are already indexed on the Astrophysics Data Service: ADS). That could possibly get us more international professional authors, though the fact that we charge page charges to non-members, and very few non-American professional astronomers choose to become AAVSO members, and *JAAVSO* is only available (for the first year) to members and subscribers makes this less attractive to them.

As with other aspects of the AAVSO’s work, the name “American” may create the impression that we are a North American journal. Perhaps it’s time to re-brand as “*JAAVSO: The International Journal on Variable Stars*”!

More Education Content: Observation and/or analysis of variable stars is an excellent way for students to develop and integrate their skills in science, math, and computing. That was the idea behind AAVSO’s *Hands-On Astrophysics* project. The AAVSO website has many public resources to support student research. *JAAVSO* already publishes many papers which are based on student projects, almost all of them at the post-secondary level. Most of my own papers are, and I have recently reflected on my four decades of experience with these: <http://arxiv.org/abs/1710.04492>.

There has also been some interest, on the part of at least one group of astronomers, in finding a place to publish authentic research by “seminars” of secondary or post-secondary students. That is challenging: we require the content of *JAAVSO* papers to be both correct and significant, and not all education projects meet the second criterion. We do encourage papers

which *describe* educational projects, involving variable stars (including the sun), which are both effective and novel.

Papers on Outreach: We encourage outreach, for reasons that I described in my last Editorial (vol. 45, no. 1). If you use variable stars successfully in outreach, we would like to hear about it. For general papers on outreach, the IAU publishes a free on-line *Communicating Astronomy with the Public (CAP) Journal* with papers on all aspects of the subject.

Papers on History and Biography: The history and biography of variable star astronomy is rich and interesting, and we should continue to encourage papers in these areas, as we did, for instance, in our Centennial issue.

Papers Related to International Astronomy Development: Two decades ago, AAVSO Director Janet Mattei and I promoted the idea that variable star observation and analysis could be one way that professional and amateur astronomers and students in developing countries could undertake and publish research in astronomy. Since several members of the *JAAVSO* Editorial Board are active in astronomical development, especially through the IAU, we hope that they will continue to promote this idea.

Fast-Turnaround Papers in JAAVSO: This suggestion was recently made, and discussed by the Editorial Board. At present, I am not sure what kinds of papers would be included. Alert notices can be posted elsewhere on the AAVSO website. Professionals can publish “hot” results in journals such as *Astrophysical Journal*, or on the preprint server *astro-ph*. In principle, many *JAAVSO* papers can be formatted for publication online in a few hours, once they have been refereed and accepted for publication, and approved by AAVSO staff.

An interesting new development is *Research Notes of the American Astronomical Society*, published by the Institute of Physics, searchable on ADS, fully citable, free to publish and read, archived for perpetuity, available online within 72 hours of acceptance, and moderated prior to publication to ensure legitimacy. Response is good, so far.

Other Niches? Are there other niches that *JAAVSO* could expand into? One might be *short* reviews or updates on topics

which are directly relevant to our primary audience—the observers. These might be on new techniques for observation or analysis, or on new developments in variable star astronomy. I welcome suggestions of suitable topics.

Incremental Building on the Status Quo: We could continue to do the best possible job of attracting and publishing papers by advanced amateurs, astronomy students, and professionals whose work is relevant to AAVSO observers/members—whether those papers come from North America or elsewhere. I suspect that there are still authors around the world who would benefit from the advantages that *JAAVSO* provides. Two-thirds of our observers are from outside the USA! This returns us to our original goal: “papers on research of interest to the observer.” Whether or not we strive for more internationalism, we must not lose track of our core mission—to serve an authorship and readership which includes both professionals and amateurs.

There is one slight anomaly in *JAAVSO*, at present: the majority of recent papers deal with a relatively small number of topics: eclipsing binaries, for instance. I would like to see more papers on other fields in which AAVSO observers are active, such as cataclysmic variables, young stellar objects, and the sun, as well as on techniques of observation and analysis, and on education, history, and biography. I, the Editorial Board, and the section leaders should be more active in soliciting these.

It is for the Director and Council to decide on the purpose and funding of *JAAVSO*, but input from members and other readers is always welcome. That’s one of the main goals of this Editorial: to ask for your feedback! Please send it to: aavso@aavso.org, with “JAAVSO Feedback” in the subject line.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Drs. John Hearnshaw, Stella Kafka, Kristine Larsen, Ulisse Munari, and Michael Saladyga for their comments on a draft of this Editorial.