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Online publishing

Scholarly mathematical communication at a crossroads

Met de komst van de elektronische media hebben wetenschappers veel meer mogelijkheden gekregen om hun werk in de buitenwereld te verspreiden. Het 'math arXiv', is een site waar fysici, wiskundigen en informatici artikelen kunnen plaatsen. Het uiteindelijke doel van de site is het verspreiden, het permanent bewaren en het volledig vrij beschikbaar maken van alle nieuwe onderzoeksliteratuur. Greg Kuperberg, professor aan de wiskundefaculteit van de Universiteit van California, Davis, is beheerder van de afdeling wiskunde van de site.

I agree with the decision to change the name of this series in *Nieuw Archief voor Wiskunde* from *Serials crisis* to *Online publishing*. I do not think that scholarly mathematical communication is plagued by a crisis, but rather that it is at a crossroads. Computers and the Internet in general, and tools such as TeX, MathSciNet, and the math arXiv in particular, have enormously improved mathematical communication. The question is whether, through leadership, we will greatly extend these gains, or, through complacency, we will only see marginal improvements. In my opinion, the math arXiv is a good foundation for further progress.

Like Krzysztof Apt [1], I certainly think that the mathematical research literature should be freely available. But although subscription prices are out of control, they are only one of several major shortcomings of the traditional journal system. The real impetus for change is that the old system is slow and disorganized. All of the reform to date was first adopted by non-paying researchers at privileged universities and institutes. So saving money is ultimately only an important afterthought of the enterprise.

I especially agree with Apt that the key to progress is volunteer work and public funds; they are what I mean by leadership. But it is not so easy to use these resources properly. We won't succeed by simply moving the journal system from the private sector to the public sector, and otherwise keeping it intact. (So I partly agree with Michiel Kolman's skepticism on this point [3].) In this essay I will discuss three topics in the hope of informing future decision-making: The current state of the mathematical literature, the math arXiv, and a proposal to reform peer review.

The status quo

Let us start with an idealization of the traditional system of scholarly communication. Mathematicians write uncertified, temporary preprints. They submit them to journals, which edit them, bless them with peer review, and then distribute them. In fact this system was created more by circumstance than by design, and it has always been supplemented by other venues of research literature such as letters, books, and lecture notes. Also, Zentralblatt and Math Reviews have long organized an otherwise hopelessly disorganized array of journals.

Electronic communication changed this picture in two important ways. First, it made the informal preprint layer of the literature vastly more efficient. Second, and more importantly, it created enormous new pressure to further organize the literature and accelerated a trend towards giantism. As useful as Math Reviews and Zentralblatt are on paper, they are far more useful on-line. The publishers are also agglomerating: Elsevier (which now owns Academic Press) and Springer both have large on-line libraries of mathematics papers that other publishers may never be

able to match. The preprint trend and the giantism trend together also led to the arXiv, which I will describe in more detail below.

But first I would like to comment on the specter of giantism. Naturally most people don't like monopolies. But working mathematicians want a universal digital library of mathematics, and there is no clear way to sustain two of them. The same forces that propel the software producer Microsoft, the internet provider America Online, and the internet bookshop Amazon.com are at play in this market. So the question is not whether there should be a centralized archive of the mathematical literature, but who should control it. I believe that a proprietary monopoly would be grossly against our interests, even if it were owned by a non-profit professional society. But with proper oversight, a non-proprietary archive could remain useful and free.

One interesting precedent for such an archive is CTAN, the Comprehensive TeX Archive Network. All TeX users, including commercial publishers, depend either directly or indirectly on CTAN.

The arXiv

The arXiv was created in 1991 by Paul Ginsparg as an e-mail and ftp-based (file transfer protocol-based) service in high-energy physics; it moved to the Web in 1993 [6]. Now maintained at Cornell, it was originally called hep-th, and it was for several years also called the Los Alamos archives and the xxx e-print archive. It does not claim copyright to its articles, and all access is free. It has some public oversight in that it has advisory committees in each of its disciplines, and is partly supported by the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF). (I have heard publishing companies criticize the public 'subsidy' of the arXiv.

For the record, NSF award #0132355 is only \$320,000 per year. This is a negligible fraction of the tax dollars that are spent on math and physics journals.)

Authors usually submit articles to the arXiv directly, before submitting them to journals. The arXiv distributes new submissions across the web and blesses them as permanent at the end of each weekday. Submissions may be revised, but all versions of each article are numbered and old versions cannot be revoked. The arXiv is described in an article by Allyn Jackson [2]. Readers who want to know more should also browse it on the web. One convenient means for doing so is the Front for the Mathematics ArXiv [7] (figure 1).

The arXiv now has about 180,000 articles in physics, 20,000 in mathematics, and near-

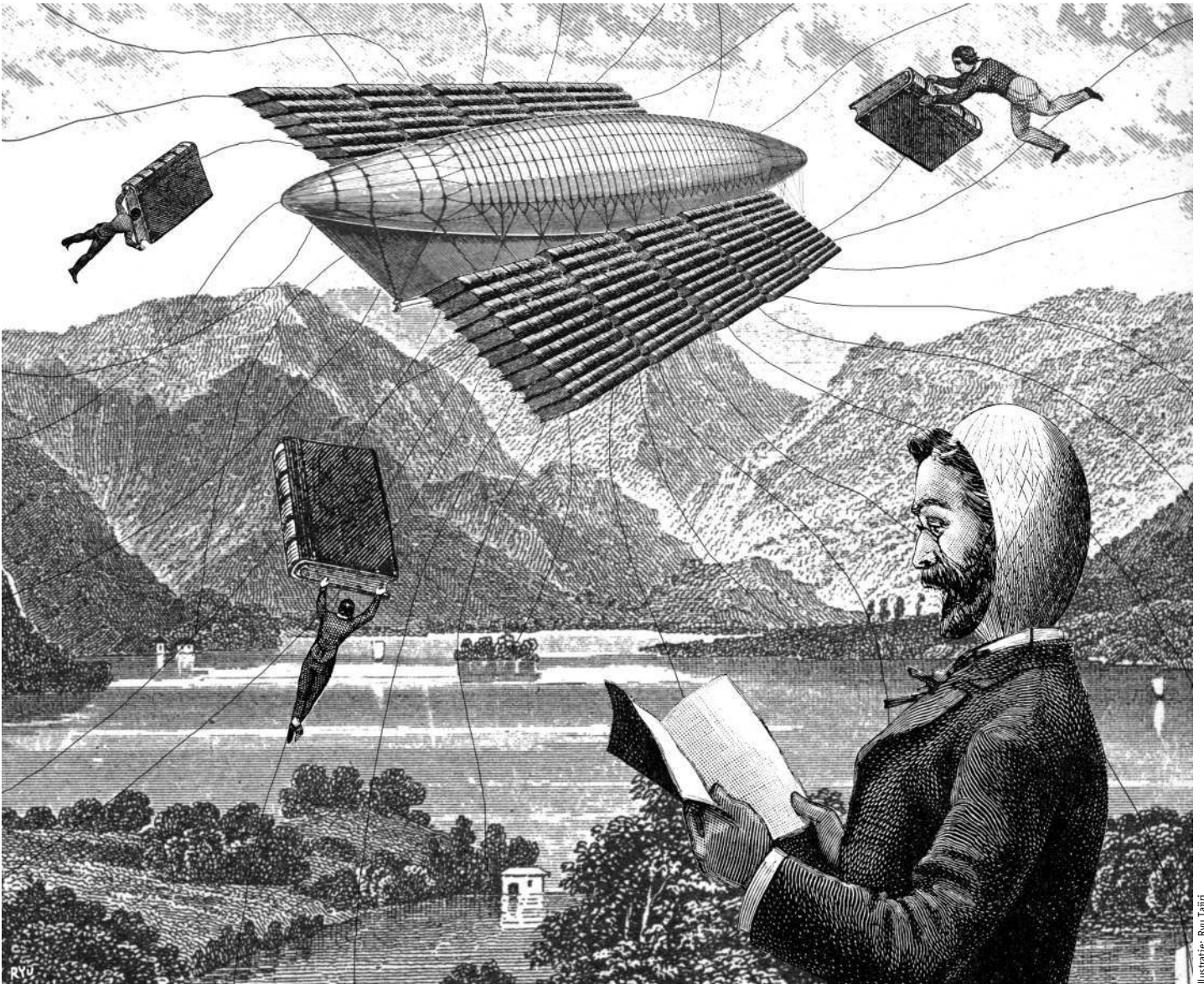
ly 3,000 in computer science. In many areas of physics, it is already a universal library for the current literature. Many people hope that it will become just as important in mathematics. The success of the math arXiv to date is encouraging, but it will take many years for it to become universal. As the home page of the Front indicates, it is much more popular in some areas of mathematics (algebraic geometry, quantum algebra, geometric topology) than in others (applied mathematics, number theory). Finding ways to improve or further popularize the arXiv will help us reach the ultimate goal sooner.

Significantly, the arXiv upsets the traditional dichotomy between unpublished preprints and refereed publications. Since arXiv articles are both permanent and widely distributed, authors and readers take them

just as seriously as journal papers. (That is why arXiv documents are called articles, or e-prints, and not preprints.) For example, one of the most important papers in quantum algebra is a still-unpublished arXiv article by Maxim Kontsevich [4].

A few journals are also arXiv overlays, which means that they submit their published papers to the arXiv by proxy. One of the most successful overlay journals is *Geometry and Topology* [8]. Here again the distinction between preprints and publications blurs, since readers generally do not keep track of authors' versus journals' versions of papers.

Nonetheless the arXiv does not completely displace journals. They are no longer needed to typeset, distribute, or archive the mathematical literature, but they still perform the crucial function of peer review. This is why



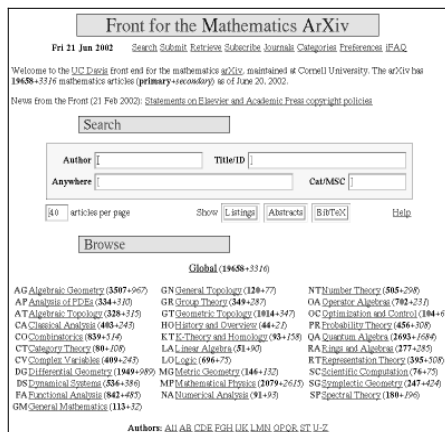


Figure 1

almost all arXiv articles are still submitted to journals or conference proceedings. Overlay journals also illustrate this point: While journal status does not distinctly affect the text of an arXiv article, the fact that an article has been accepted by a journal does still matter to readers, and even more to authors.

Serious peer review probably cannot fit directly into the arXiv. The arXiv is lightly moderated to screen out miscued and misclassified submissions (which is why submissions are not announced immediately), but this is a superficial effort compared to refereeing papers, or to reviewing them for Math Reviews or Zentralblatt. Rather, in heavily arXived areas of research, journals are a *de facto* second layer of the permanent literature, with the arXiv as the first layer. (Hence the term ‘overlay’.)

Peer review

In the idealized journal system, the diligent referee first checks the main results of a submitted paper. If they are correct, the referee and the editor then consider whether the results meet the journal’s standard. In practice the system is far from ideal. Referees have very little accountability (although some do an admirable job anyway). Many papers are accepted on the basis of name recognition or out of guilt — just because the referees sat on them for too long. Authors need not take no for an answer, because they can scout for journals that will publish them. Journal edi-

tors should serve as a second line of defense, but in practice they are only slightly more accountable than referees. (Again, some do an admirable job anyway.) In the end, readers do not know who refereed any given paper or why it was accepted. Because papers can only be published once, the system reduces peer review to simple binary approval.

In my opinion, Math Reviews and Zentralblatt are inherently more useful forms of peer review, because the reviews are not anonymous. Their publishers do not agree with me; by their own rules, reviewers are not required to fully referee papers. But some do so anyway. Many mathematicians know of notoriously mistaken papers that were inexplicably published. The community is often angry with the referees of such papers, but anonymity protects them from the readers rather than the authors.

Typically the Math Review sets the record straight. My favorite such case is the celebrated review by Gábor Fejes Tóth of Wu-Yi Hsiang’s inadequate proof of the Kepler sphere-packing conjecture [5]. Even in the usual case when both authors and referees do a good job, Math Reviews obviously inform readers more than any referee reports could, since the latter are confidential.

In the presence of the arXiv, it is relatively easy to reform journals so that they function much more like Math Reviews. If a journal is purely an arXiv overlay, then it need not take possession of its papers. So why should it wait for authors to submit to it? It could instead allow anyone to nominate (‘submit’) any arXiv article for review, whether or not it has been published elsewhere. Let us call such a review service an ‘open journal’. If an open journal reduces selection to its utilitarian minimum, it should add some other value for readers to take it seriously. It is therefore natural for open journals referees to write public, non-anonymous reports as Math Reviews does. (But reviewers who are not interested in a submission can reject it privately and anonymously.)

The open journal experiment has been tried before, both in connection with the arXiv

and elsewhere. For example Quick Reviews [9] is a review service in quantum computation maintained by Daniel Gottesman; it is mostly but not exclusively arXiv-based. But existing experiments lack a crucial feature: They are not designed to substitute for journal names in the author’s list of publications. For this purpose an open journal should do three things. It should retain the trappings of a traditional journal, such as an editorial board, an on-line masthead, and a bibliographic citation style. It should also keep the author informed of the status of papers under review. And it should prod editors and reviewers to attend to submissions, as traditional journals do.

While many readers presume that referees check the results of papers, in practice editors would scare away their referees if they actually demanded this. This inconsistency is only tenable because refereeing is anonymous. My best idea to address the problem is to have the reviewers check one of three options:

1. I have checked the main results.
2. I do not doubt the main results.
3. I doubt the main results.

Some reviews might need to be co-signed to support option 1. Presumably option 3 would be rarely used.

It remains to be seen whether the open journal model will succeed. Or one might ask, who will pay people to do all of the work? I see two reasons to be cautiously optimistic. First, as we already know, publishers pay the mathematicians who manage, edit, and referee traditional journals very little or not at all. Most of the paid work for a traditional journal is for typesetting and distribution. Most of the incentive for the mathematicians involved is in credit for professional service. In principle this incentive could also sustain open journals. Second, I think that once the arXiv is sufficiently established in mathematics, journals will naturally evolve towards the open model. But I hope that, through leadership, we can arrive at the future earlier. ☞

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