

# Notices

of the American Mathematical Society

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## Editorial

# Copyright Policies

Copyright policies are back in the news. Some see copyright transfer as the villain in the publishing business; others see it as the savior. A group of twelve people, writing in the September 4 issue of *Science*, which is published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, has floated a novel proposal: "Federal agencies that fund research should recommend (or even require) as a condition of funding that the copyrights of articles or other works describing research that has been supported by those agencies remain with the author." The author would license publication while retaining copyright.

*Science* responded immediately with an editorial in the same issue, saying, "Copyright transfer is critical to the process of communicating scientific information accurately." The editorial went on to cite the extensive editing process that articles undergo, as well as the benefit to the author of the wide distribution of an article, concluding, "This degree of investment in the scientific publication process requires the assignment of copyright. This allows the society publisher to provide stewardship over the paper, to protect it from misuse by those who would otherwise be free to plagiarize or alter it, and to expand the distribution of information products for the benefit of the society. ...*Science* holds the copyright of its authors because of our belief that we materially improve and protect the product we create together."

Caltech's provost weighed in with his own idea, printed in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* for September 22. The *Chronicle* summarizes the proposal this way: "Journal publishers would be informed that they could publish articles by Caltech researchers only if the authors and the university retained copyrights to the material." Having the university own all copyrights is indeed a bold new idea.

The importance of transfer of copyright varies with circumstances and with the views of the publisher. AMS policy allows authors the choice of retaining or transferring copyright of articles or books to be published by the AMS, and the AMS has developed a standard "Consent to Publish and Copyright Agreement" to implement this policy. Authors must sign a statement that permits the AMS to publish, and they are given the option of transferring the copyright to the AMS as well. For the AMS research journals, the AMS policy recognizes that the important thing is that articles be copyrighted, not necessarily that the AMS hold the copyright. In part, copyright protects an investment that is paid for by the subscribers of a journal, and there are relatively few subscribers to research journals.

Special circumstances apply to the *Notices*. For one thing, the subscription base for the *Notices* is the entire membership of the AMS. The *Notices* is already freely available on the Internet, where anyone with access to the Internet may see any back issue of the *Notices* from 1995 on for free, may download its articles, and may even make a printed copy of the exact *Notices* pages. We may safely assume that most people who would stop paying dues if only they could see the *Notices* articles for free have already done so. In other words, the subscription base to the *Notices* is not really affected by considerations of copyright.

In the case of the *Notices*, the decision whether to transfer copyright is primarily one of convenience, affecting things like who gets to write letters of permission for reprinting. Convenience can be a more complicated matter than it may sound, and the AMS encourages authors to transfer copyright to the AMS to avoid certain pitfalls, such as making it impractical to have one's collected works published posthumously.

The *Notices* is somewhat different from the research journals, because some of its articles are published jointly with journals in other countries, or are modified versions of longer articles published in less widely available sources, or are translated from journals from other countries. For this reason, the *Notices* has developed its own "Consent to Publish and Copyright Agreement" that takes these special circumstances into account.

The main thing for the *Notices* is to encourage wide circulation of its articles and, in so doing, to help advance mathematics as much as it can. Whether the AMS or authors hold copyrights does not seem to affect this activity.

—Anthony W. Knapp