

# Notices

of the American Mathematical Society

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## Editorial

### Public Awareness

In recent years the mathematical community has become increasingly concerned about public awareness of mathematics. Among the tangible expressions of this concern is the establishment by the AMS of a small public relations effort that includes mailings of occasional press releases and a Web site aimed at the general public and science journalists. Another indication is the organization of a conference, held last October by the Mathematical Sciences Research Institute (MSRI), which brought mathematicians together with science editors and reporters.

At the MSRI conference, entitled "Mathematics and the Media", one of the participants claimed that the present time is a "golden age" for popularizations of mathematics. There is indeed some evidence for this claim. For example, in looking at the print media in the past couple of years, one finds that a large number of well-received popular books on mathematics have appeared. Many of these are found in the "Book List", a newly established *Notices* feature, and some have been reviewed in the *Notices*. The quintessential example is Simon Singh's book *Fermat's Enigma*, which told the dramatic story of Andrew Wiles's proof of the famous conjecture and which became an international bestseller. Singh has recently written about mathematics for the *New York Times* and some British newspapers. He joins an increasing number of prominent reporters whose specialties include mathematics. Among these are Barry Cipra, Dana Mackenzie, and Gary Taubes at *Science* magazine; K. C. Cole at the *Los Angeles Times*; Brian Hayes at *American Scientist*; Gina Kolata at the *New York Times*; and Ivars Peterson at *Science News*.

In fact, the MSRI conference made it clear that science journalists are very interested in writing about mathematics. The problem is that most of them simply do not hear about mathematics stories. NASA projects and the Hubble Space Telescope routinely land on the front pages of newspapers, partly because there is something inherently fascinating about space exploration, but also because NASA and the Hubble Telescope have public relations machines that feed stories and information to the press.

The AMS is, in small steps, establishing a public relations effort to help reporters find out about stories in mathematics. The AMS Web site "What's New in Mathematics" ([www.ams.org/new-in-math/](http://www.ams.org/new-in-math/)) has a special section devoted to this effort. Another section of the site, called "Math Digest", tracks mathematics coverage in magazines and newspapers. In addition, the Society sends out to a database of science reporters occasional press releases about mathematical developments. Most of these are linked to *Notices* articles and are accompanied by advance copies of the articles. Some of these press releases have generated coverage. Examples include the many articles about the "Beal Conjecture" (see *Notices*, December 1997) and the articles in *Science* and in *Science News* on the use of fractals in modeling Internet traffic (*Notices*, September 1998).

One problem with the existing coverage of mathematics is that it often focuses on developments that happen to be easily explainable rather than on the advances that mathematicians consider to be truly important. For example, the work for which Borchers, Gowers, Kontsevich, and McMullen received Fields Medals was done in the five to ten years before they received this honor last August, and yet none of their work had been written up in the popular press before they received their medals. The difficulty of inspiring coverage of the truly significant advances in the field derives partly from reporters' lack of mathematical background and partly from mathematicians' lack of experience in explaining in nontechnical terms just what these advances are about.

During the MSRI conference, Sharon Begley, science editor for *Newsweek*, posed an intriguing question: What do mathematicians expect to get out of press coverage of their field? Increased research funding? Fame and glory? A society better informed about mathematics? Answering this fundamental question may be the first step in developing strategies for raising public awareness of mathematics.

—Allyn Jackson