Latin America has its place
In the January/February 1998 Europhysics News [EPS Directory] I see dozens and dozens of names which compose all types of relevant committees of the EPS, but none from Latin America (or other non-European countries). In fact, during the many years I have belonged to the Society, I can not remember ever having seen in a single one of these committees any name from, say, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico etc.

I believe that others will share my opinion that this is not fair. The EPS accepts as members many people from these countries, why not seeing once in a while one of these names in a committee. We all agree minorities have rights also.

The EPS is an equal opportunity society. What about a little affirmative action? Like, for example, reserving a small percentage of seats on committees for these countries. The names could be (probably should be) voted by all members of the EPS. Or any other mechanism that would avoid this systematic injustice.

Constantino Tsallis
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Germany in its rightful place
In the editorial of Europhysics News, March/April 1998, I was slightly shocked to read: "When talking of the single currency it should be noted that the EMU would not be possible, were it not for Germany."

Such words I would expect from Theo Waigel, the German finance minister, and years ago I read in a Portuguese newspaper about his arrogance in treating Italy et al with the nice word: Theocracy. But I am for a secular united Europe, not for Theocracy. And one should obey the Maastricht treaty if one has signed it, independent of the size of the economy. No currency has by the Grace of God (or in the circle of candidates is allotted to national society members of the EPS. The author of More Awards in Europe, Jarfalla, Sweden

The matter raises very serious issues. However innocent our motives, we may all be infringing copyright legislation pretty regularly in our publications. How do we know where to draw the line, or rather where drawing the line is illegal?"
I am pleased that Claude Sébenne has initiative, and that he is willing to invite responses to his ideas. But the main idea of his proposal, in my opinion, is too restrictive. It would inevitably shift the central role in evaluation of physical achievements from European bodies to National Society Members of the EPS, thus washing away the criterion of European recognition. The proposed procedure of nomination of candidates as formulated in the article seems also to be discriminative with respect to the authors from those national physical societies which are not members of the EPS. Scientists should have the right to be nominated for the European prizes and awarded by their merits independently of the fact of whether or not they keep relations with any National Society Member of the EPS.

I am strongly convinced that European physical awards must remain strictly independent of the policy of different national societies. The European Physical Society should further sustain an unified evaluation of scientific progress, at an international level.

Jozef T. Devreese
Antwerpen, Belgium

Sébenne replies...

Many thanks for paying attention to my request for more EPS awards.

As you noticed, I mostly focussed on practical and inexpensive ways to reach trustworthy choices at the European scale. The fact is that after more than 27 years of existence the EPS has been unable to find a solution of its own: I am convinced that a large majority of EPS members favours the idea but proper procedures have to be decided and put into effect.

It is true that I have omitted to give criteria. This is simply because it all depends on the profiles which are looked for.

Profile proposals have to be made at the EPS highest levels and approved by the Council. Then the ad-hoc EPS body would manage the system. Here are some ideas of profiles among many others: the PhD thesis of the year (the 25 to 29 years old range; there could be several laureates); the emerging young professional physicist (the 30 to 40 years old range); the theoretical physics prize; the book of the year.

The discussion is open: let us see if something happens.
Claude Sébenne
Paris, France

"Szilárd's humourous view of cosmology turned grimmer one afternoon at Rockefeller University in the 1950s, during a discussion with information theorist Norbert Wiener about the origins of life. To the question, 'given many planets like Earth, would man emerge on one of them?' Szilárd answered: 'No!' Why not? Because, Szilárd said, 'God wouldn't make the same mistake twice!'"

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Waste not, want not

Allow me to pose (or propose) a few problems to the wider scientific community, they are both related to economizing resources.

• References

Different scientific journals use different rules for bibliographic citations. On the other hand, an author may often use materials relating to one of his/hers papers for the next one on a related subject. Text editors, or more powerful packages such as (La)TeX can ease and simplify this task, and the whole writing process in general; unfortunately, upon switching from one journal to another, references may have to be retyped, whether by authors, secretaries or perhaps printers. It would be highly desirable to find a general agreement about the format of references in scientific journals, or at least to reduce their number, and to produce computer programs for carrying out the conversion automatically. Ideally, it would be up to authors to write them in some consistent way, and (thinking of (La)TeX) the format conversion should be controlled by some option in the document definition.

As far as I am concerned the chore of retyping references is a good reason for not even trying to publish in certain journals.

• Conferences

The sheer cost of attending (travel, registration and accommodation) ranges from about US$ 1000 (or Ecus, or even more); on the other hand, the purchase of abstracts and proceedings may just require US$ 100 to 200 (or Ecus). In a few cases, I have contacted the organizing committee and negotiated purchase of abstracts and later proceedings (and sometimes even submission of a poster) without physically attending; this seemed to be a special concession, but I think it should become a regular procedure, explicitly mentioned in the circulars announcing the conference. I think this is even more needed for workshops and schools.

(In some cases, it also turned out that only a few percents of all the communications were of some direct or indirect interest to me). It would also be desirable to reduce the frequency of scientific conferences (say halve it).

Silvano Romano
Pavia, Italy

As far as I am concerned the chore of retyping references is a good reason for not even trying to publish in certain journals.