

Editorial



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Impact and influence: valedictory editorial

For the past seven years, I have been the steward of the journal where some of the world's best scientists published their seminal work: Maxwell, Kelvin, Marconi, the Braggs, Ramanujan, Dirac, Raman, Crick and Watson—to name a few. As Editor-in-Chief, I have felt the weight of this tradition as a responsibility to be taken very seriously. But it has also been an agreeable responsibility; the staff at the Royal Society, and the members of the Editorial Board, have been unfailingly helpful. And I have enjoyed negotiating the challenges and contrasts that come with the job: trying to keep the quality high, dealing with authors and referees who are brilliant, conscientious, argumentative, irascible, careless, eccentric, etc.

Proceedings of the Royal Society A emphasizes quantitatively rigorous approaches to the physical sciences. The success of this method has revolutionized technology and transformed everyday life. But it might also underlie current enthusiasm for using catchwords or numbers to assess achievements that are too subtle to be captured so simplistically. The extreme of this tendency is to sum up scientific accomplishments with the single word 'impact'. This carries connotations of hardness, of a sudden and immediate force, and misrepresents the delicate and complicated ways in which a scientific publication can impinge on, infiltrate, insinuate, and otherwise influence its own and other sciences and the world outside science, over timescales that can vary from days to years to decades. For *Proceedings of the Royal Society A*, the associated number that popularly represents citations—the 'impact factor' (itself much cited)—is currently close to 2: low by comparison to those in the life sciences but respectable for physical sciences. But, as I never tire of pointing out, impact factor is a short-term measure, representing citations over two years. On the longer-term criterion of citation half-life (a rough indicator of long-lasting influence), this journal stands highest in the Royal Society's list—indeed off the ten-year scale on which this quantity is calculated.

I arrived as Editor after publishing many papers in *Proceedings of the Royal Society A*: nearly 50 (possibly more than any other author in this journal), over 40 years—though I am awkwardly aware that, as implied above, numbers do not indicate quality. One consequence of this long prior involvement has been a reluctance to change much; in common with some of my predecessors, I have been a rather conservative editor. But it is time for change. I welcome my successor, Sir Mark Welland, who comes fresh to the position and may be more willing to innovate.

Michael Berry
Editor