

# **A Courier's career**

Gordon Fraser

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# A Courier's career

Gordon Fraser (\*)

## Abstract

This article tracks the development of the CERN Courier, which began in 1959 as CERN's 'house journal' but has evolved over the years to become the international news magazine of particle physics and now enjoys a considerable international reputation. In doing so, it has exploited new publishing developments.

## Introduction

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, the CERN Courier scores highly. As the magazine of international high-energy physics, it has pioneered a new approach for a journal serving an international scientific community which has been emulated in several other areas of physics, and even beyond. In its lively new format, the Courier is pointing to fresh directions – specialist magazines edited in an academic environment but outsourced to contract publishers.

The CERN Courier has come a long way since it was originally set up as the laboratory's *house journal*. In issue No.1 in August 1959, CERN Director-General C.J. Bakker said "(the CERN Courier) is intended to help every staff member feel at home in the Organization and to maintain ... the team spirit essential to the achievement of our final aim – scientific research on an international scale".

It is a reflection of how well CERN has achieved this aim that the CERN Courier itself has moved on. As the research carried out at CERN and by CERN specialists became more international, the Courier began carrying an increasing amount of news from '*around the laboratories*'.

## Going international

At a meeting in New Orleans in 1975 which also presaged ICFA, the International Committee for Future Accelerators, 45 major laboratory directors recommended 'expanding CERN Courier coverage to give a balanced view of global activities in the high energy physics field'. Responsibility for CERN Courier news input was delegated to laboratory correspondents around the world, sending contributions to the editorial desk at CERN. Although the correspondents have changed over the years, this network remains the lifeblood of the magazine. The list of correspondents frequently includes high-ranking scientists and recognized science writers.

Since the decision to go international, the magazine's readership has increased steadily. High-energy physics

readership quickly attained near-saturation, but additional readers still clamoured for the magazine. These 'extra-curricular' readers are mainly scientists in other fields 'who wish to remain in contact with developments in basic physics without getting too involved', as one of them once put it. The magazine is picked up from self-service points in major laboratories, but is also mailed elsewhere. For details of how to get onto the mailing list, see page 3 of any issue or <http://www.cerncourier.com/subscribe.html>

Today, the magazine publishes ten issues per year in parallel English (20,000 copies) and French (6000) editions. The English edition caters for the wide international readership and is distributed everywhere. The print run of the English edition has doubled since 1981, while the print run of the French translation on the other hand remains fairly static. The French edition is followed mainly by non-physicists at CERN and in the French-speaking region which hosts the laboratory. Following the 1975 change of direction, distribution of the journal was also regionalized, with Fermilab, Rutherford-Appleton, DESY and INFN handling mailing in North America, the UK, Germany and Italy respectively. This community spirit continues, although Fermilab has sadly relinquished this task. CERN underwrites distribution in the rest of the world.

## Trends

The CERN Courier never set out to attract advertising, but CERN's involvement with major industrial suppliers soon led to the appearance of paid publicity. This increased, and by the late 1970s production costs were covered by income from this source. However, revenue began to fall off in the cost-conscious 1990s, when attracting advertising required a more aggressive approach, with professional sales staff. A regular trauma was the choice of printing contractor. CERN's financial rules are strict, and before the advent of fax and electronic communication, publishing a monthly magazine using a printer a thousand kilometres away was difficult. Proofs arrived via special courier just before lunch and had to be ready for collection a few hours later!

Just as in physics, electronic communication has fortunately also been a driving force for the Courier. The editorial desk acquired a rudimentary text editor in 1981. The first substantial correspondent's report to be received via electronic mail, from SLAC, was received in 1984. By 1990, almost all contributions were arriving in electronic form, after which pictures too followed this trend. By the late 1980s, page layout was being done at CERN by the Editors, using desktop publishing software on an Apple Macintosh, and the result sent to the printer via a modem link. In this way, working with a printer in Northern Europe was no longer an obstacle.

As resources at CERN steadily dwindled, in 1998 it was decided, after considerable administrative introspection, to outsource the publishing aspects of the magazine. The Institute of Physics Publishing in the UK, which has an extensive portfolio of specialist magazines and which played a pioneer role in the development of electronic journals, now has total responsibility for finance, pre-press and production of the CERN Courier. The English-language edition of the Courier is produced free of charge to CERN, but with CERN retaining total responsibility for editorial content. This move resulted in October 1998 in a redesigned magazine, with full colour throughout. Although the outsourcing move has freed the editorial desk from a lot of administration and pre-press responsibility, the need to produce a better-looking magazine demands more creative effort and sharper writing. The move to a contract publisher also resulted in a new website [<http://www.cerncourier.com/>], with valuable full-text search capabilities of published articles. The website is generated automatically from the material prepared for the printed issue, but in English only. The website is used by about 150 people every day, each of whom browses several pages of the magazine over a total time of about 12 minutes. It provides a full-text search of all editorials published since October 1998. A printed index exists for all issues published prior to 1992, and in addition for the years 1993, 1994 and 1995. Unfortunately, indexing became sporadic because of staff shortages. A rudimentary keyword search for some of these issues is available via <http://cern.web.cern.ch/CERN/Courier>

## Getting the material

The network of laboratory correspondents helps the Editor keep abreast of new developments. This is now complemented by an in-house News Editor role, capably handled by James Gillies, and by enthusiastic 'volunteer' correspondents covering astronomy and astrophysics (Emma Sanders) and other areas of physics (Alison Wright).

Putting quantum mechanics into words is a continual challenge. The dictionary does not include many of the concepts involved. Astronomy and astrophysics are more visual and easier to describe. Bringing out such a magazine also requires considerable editorial independence and responsibility in judging the balance and tone of the coverage, and in assessing the authenticity or suitability of news and submitted articles.

Frequently this demands making rapid decisions on '*angle*' and on the mix of information from different sources. The publication of an article in the Courier does not imply any approval of its content by CERN management, or by anyone else for that matter.

A considerable effort is made to balance – over a period of time – news and coverage coming from all over the world. However, CERN has always been and remains the most prominent of the laboratories covered, and this is frequently alleged by some readers to be a continual and flagrant bias. For a magazine called the *CERN Courier*, such slant is inevitable, and is no worse than the subjectivity of major US news magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*. Scientific accuracy and according correct credit are taken as seriously as possible given the tight working deadlines and limited resources available.

In 1981, CERN Director-General Leon Van Hove suggested setting up an Advisory Panel (now an Advisory Board). This meets regularly to discuss CERN Courier matters and its members are happy to provide valuable counsel and advice as appropriate. However, the Board does not 'vet' individual issues or articles.

## The changing scene

The style of high-energy physics has changed over the years. Thirty or so years ago, the research scene was made up of many relatively small, shorter-term experiments. This gave a regular supply of interesting physics progress, results and ideas, not all of which stood the test of time. But excitement was always in the air. In those days, it was important to monitor the research scene closely, attend meetings of experiments committees, major conferences and workshops etc. In addition, the editors used to visit major labs regularly, for example touring the major US labs at least once every two years. This has changed. As projects have become more ambitious and collaborations have grown, lead times are longer, and there are fewer experiments active. The dominance of the Standard Model has resulted in a new conservatism. Statistical fluctuations that would once have been heralded as harbingers of new physics are now kept under wraps until more data is at hand.

With the internet, progress can be monitored from afar much more easily. There is less need to travel. This has affected reporting for all print media. Where journalists once used to have to extract information aggressively by telephone, now they are helped by e-mail messages and interesting websites.

E-mail traffic has grown considerably since that first SLAC report in 1984. Just like everyone else, the CERN Courier editorial desk has lots of e-mails – sometimes too many. A lot of these are long texts requiring detailed editing and/or bulky picture files, which are difficult to handle when travelling. Servicing daily e-mail has become the single most important aspect of the job.

## Conclusion

The CERN Courier is a success, but this success has left problems in its wake. The Courier has moved away from its initial objective as a CERN house journal. However, a major organization needs a house journal and this vacuum has never been satisfactorily filled at CERN. The Courier's success can be judged by the number of readers, by its commercial viability, and by its popularity with the world's press and media, which use the magazine as a handy physics news service.

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## Reader Response

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