

The Time Has Come ...

Elizabeth Griffin, PDPP Chair

Dear PDPP Member and SCAN-IT Reader,

Time for what?? Time to translate all our noble words into actions.

It is now 15 years – almost a tenured research-career half-life – since IAU Resolution C13 drew attention to the “large amount of spectroscopic data ... collected on photographic plates” and recommended establishing an agreed means to archive and distribute those, plus electronically-observed, data. We accordingly created the Working Group for Spectroscopic Data Archives (SDAWG), making one of its objectives the safeguarding of historic photographic spectra. Out of that aim grew the plan to set up a spectroscopic scanning laboratory in order to digitize spectra selected according to (a) type (all coude plates), (b) object (those of known variability) and (c) demand (i.e. what astronomers want to see soon). The project as first announced to a meeting (actually of the AAVSO in Sion) in 1998 was labelled the Virtual Observatory, and its Website coined that term as its own. Within 2 years, unfortunately, others with more clout had taken up the name for themselves, so in deference to greater might we have re-named ours the Spectroscopic Virtual Observatory (SVO). But it is still a protégé of the SDAWG.

However, that is about to change. The SDAWG feels it has fulfilled its mandate to “encourage the creation and maintenance of archives of spectroscopic data” as far as it reasonably can for the present, but notices that the true barrier to more widespread and more *effective* archiving of spectra is the software needed to establish accurate pipeline reduction procedures. The SDAWG is therefore turning its attention to that scene instead – with doubtless some changes in personnel (I for one will no longer be the Chair). And it will not want to have the SVO tagging along.

Meanwhile, the PDPP was created in 2000 as a direct result of the débâcle at the Manchester GA over the successful passage of Resolution B3 on “Safeguarding the Information in Photographic Observations”. The wording of the Resolution was simple and direct: it recommended the transfer of historic observations onto modern media by digital techniques. Had the IAU Executive Committee not taken inexplicable exception to such a harmless and commonsense Resolution and tried to kill it off through a debate, most of the IAU would probably have remained unaware of what we are trying to do; but by voting *en bloc* against it and challenging the floor (which included great figures like former IAU President Jean-Claude Pecker) they were beaten at their own game and our Resolution became, for a while, one of the hottest topics in astronomy politics. Wishing to focus that energy into productive channels, I thereupon requested to form a new Task Force to enact the Resolution. Thus the PDPP came into being; it is broader than the SVO but at present has not attempted action so has therefore been somewhat complementary to it.

Now is the time to unhook the SVO from the SDAWG and hand it over to the PDPP. The PDPP has hosted discussions about plate preservation, but individual groups are tackling plate digitization too. Now is the time for the PDPP also to shoulder some responsibility about digitizing plates *and their associated logs*.

Membership of PDPP is growing. This issue of SCAN-IT contains articles by newcomers reporting on digitizing projects that are entirely their own initiative – whether from a graduate student in Virginia or Mexico or staff at an Observatory in Venezuela or Estonia, these reports are saying that people want to get archives digitized, and that they will use whatever equipment

their budgets and time-scales can support. Yet there are also many gaps; observatories in France, Japan, Australia, South Africa, the US, Canada... whose current focus is sufficiently far from historical observations are storing plates that probably never will get digitized unless by some central organization. We have identified PARI as an ideal scanning location and long-term plate repository for the US; in Europe it was agreed by the Royal Observatory of Belgium (Brussels) to seek ways of setting up a pan-European plate-storage and scanning facility there, and a pilot project has since been funded; but we are still leaving it very much to the enthusiast and the individual to get things moving. Given the nature and pressure of competition for research funding, anyone hoping to win resources to digitize material whose foreseen use can only be judged by hindsight is starting with a serious handicap. But supposing the whole of the PDPP movement, implying endorsement by all observatories concerned, were to design a suite of projects and submit applications to appropriate sources for funds, would that not be a better way to channel our energy on behalf of the astronomical community?

This is one of the matters to be debated in Prague – you will find a notice about the meeting on page XX. It is not solely a question of politics, i.e. where and when to submit a proposal, but also one of science: what sort of scanner is “best”, which of the commercial ones are above reproach and in which situations can they be used? Is it possible to clone the Harvard Scanner (see page XX)? Can more projects use the D4A Digitizer currently under construction in Brussels?

Just as urgently: can we not get those log-books digitized? No library worth its salt nowadays would countenance “only” a manual card-index or a hand-written list of holdings! Every museum has some sort of accessible and searchable catalogue of what it contains. Yet astronomers guard treasures that are not only valuable for their own (historic and cultural) sakes but have immense potential for the science that they can reveal, whether crucial timings of past stellar variability, hitherto unknown observations of (e.g.) near-earth objects or evidence of what the concentration of the earth’s ozone layer used to be at times and places where no other monitoring was carried out. These are all cast-iron reasons why we need to be able to access and share information of what has been observed, where, and when. The task of manually keying-in the log-book information is not rocket science, but a straightforward clerical job requiring just a small amount of supervision. Is it ‘too basic’ for modern astronomy to fund? If so, let’s ask Library and cultural sources to help us pay to get the job done. It would create an interesting contribution to Public Education and Outreach; a few years ago when the SVO was given coverage by local newspapers, journalists took far more interest in it than astronomers did.

Spread the word, and encourage the pooling of ideas and results. Together we can tackle this matter. If man can recover fantastically close-up digital images of the planets in the solar system, surely we can manage, between us, to generate digital images of the glass plates that we hold in our hand?