Editorial

Valedictory

This is the final issue of *Kybernetes* edited by the team based at the Open University (OU) in Milton Keynes, UK. We took over the journal in the spring of 2012, and the first issue under our names was published at the start of 2013 (with volume 42). The OU team has changed in that time. Dr Magnus Ramage and Dr David Chapman have edited the journal since spring 2012; Professor Chris Bissell started off the editing process with us, but pressures of work forced him to leave the journal, and Dr Patrick Wong stepped in to replace him.

We have edited 40 issues of the journal during our time as editors, of which 13 have been special issues. In that time we have received 1,302 original manuscripts and we, along with the guest editors for special issues, have accepted around 400 articles.

As well as producing these issues, perhaps our proudest single achievement is that the journal impact factor, as measured by Thomson-Reuters, has increased every single year during our time as editors. Publication in *Kybernetes* makes a real difference to our authors and their work is being read and used in other journals.

We wanted to reflect on our time as editors. Much of our work has been administrative, moving the journal into a new way of working. The previous editor had been extremely effective and had steered the journal for 25 years, but the journal had reached a point where it needed to be edited and managed in different ways.

As we took over, the journal also switched from email submissions to the use of the industry-standard ScholarOne online submission and editing system. Simultaneously, we had to build up a database of reviewers, from our own contacts, past authors and colleagues in the two main academic associations we have worked with – the World Organisation of Systems and Cybernetics (WOSC), and the American Society for Cybernetics (ASC).

We also over time modified the editorial advisory board (EAB) of the journal, working with each board member to check their continued interest in the journal and willingness to commit to its work. Partly from the EAB membership and partly beyond, we recruited five Associate Editors to help us with the considerable tasks involved in finding reviewers and managing the review process for a large journal. Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety, a classic result in cybernetics, states that the only way to properly manage a complex environment is to have sufficient variety in the control system to match the variety in the system being controlled (Ashby, 1956). Having associate editors has really helped us to match the variety in the system of submissions and reviews.

It is the variety in the papers submitted to *Kybernetes* which has been our constant theme throughout our editing of the journal, and which is simultaneously a joy and a challenge. We receive submissions from countries across the world, from authors with extremely different cultures and languages of origin. We receive submissions from academic cultures with hugely different expectations in terms of the style of the writing and what would constitute a high-quality paper. We receive submissions from authors at all stages in their academic careers, from masters students to distinguished emeritus professors. We receive submissions that only make sense through a careful reading of detailed mathematics, through empirical papers with detailed quantitative or

qualitative data analyses, to philosophical and discursive papers where the rigour and originality is purely found in the language used.

Perhaps the most distinctive and challenging form of variety, however, is a disciplinary one. *Kybernetes* has as its subtitle *The International Journal of Cybernetics, Systems and Management Sciences*. This three-fold area of cybernetics, systems and management sciences makes for a very wide field of interest. Cybernetics is at the heart of the journal, given its title – *Kybernetes* is a transliteration of the Greek *Κυβερνητης*, meaning steersman, from which Norbert Wiener (1948) took the term "cybernetics". However, cybernetics means different things to different people – to some it means an understanding of control, to other it means robotics, to others it means the heart of artificial intelligence, to others a reflexive approach to philosophy and psychology. It is a field that has influenced many disciplines. Systems theory likewise has a broad remit from the very technocratic approaches of systems engineering to the humanistic approaches of learning theory and environmental systems (Ramage and Shipp, 2009). Added to this combination is management science, which for some can encompass any kind of scientific (i.e. rigorous) approach to the study of management, while for others borders on operational research.

This set of areas for the journal means that understanding what counts as being in scope or out of scope has been very challenging at times. We have probably dissatisfied a number of submissions by ruling their article out of scope. Our grounds have never been arbitrary, but always have tried to keep an understanding of what is the core of the three-part field that the journal with which the journal is concerned.

We have also sought for breadth of readability. One of our first acts as editors was to declare that we would only allow articles for review which would communicate to the wide readership of the journal. In particular, if an article is highly mathematical, we have insisted that its purpose and methods be communicated in plain English so that it can be understood by a non-mathematical readership; likewise that if a paper is methodological, that it is genuinely making advances beyond narrow evolution of a particular methodology. In each of these cases, if a paper is applied to a real-world problem or data set (rather than just a worked example), this has made the paper much more compelling.

If we have a single message that we take from four-and-a-half years of editing the journal, it would arise from this. Cybernetics and systems are at their best when they are grounded in real-world problems, rather than arising from theoretical work. They arose as approaches because existing methods, reductionist and non-holistic, were seen not to be working on real-world problems. Today, the world needs systemic approaches more than ever. We are surrounded by environmental, political, social and economic problems which simply cannot be addressed by traditional reductionist scientific methods. Cybernetics and systems can make a real difference to such problems. We continue to strongly advocate the use of these approaches to the study and assistance of real-world problems.

We close with a series of people to thank. First, we must thank our EAB, as it has changed over the years, for giving us help and advice, for reviewing papers, and for being a centre to the journal. Next come our associate editors, whose crucial role we have mentioned above, and with special mention of Jerzy Jozefczyk who was de-facto a co-editor for a while, before the associate editor role was established. Next we must thank our guest editors, who have produced several high-quality special issues on particular themes – when we came to choose best papers from each volume, the special issues were often our first place to look. Then we must thank the staff at Emerald – our

publishers (at various times Ruth Glasspool, Wendy Alderton, Emma Bruun and Claire Jackson), our managing/content editors (Kieran Booluck, Laura Wilson and Emilie McDermott), and other administrative and support staff (Andrea Watson Lee, Virginia Chapman, Laura Jenkins and Sallie Gregson, among others). At the OU we have many people to thank, but particularly Debbie Briggs who has helped immensely with the submission process. And lastly we thank the two associations with which we have closely worked, the WOSC, and the ASC; and especially the director-general of WOSC, Raul Espejo and the president of ASC for most of our time as editors, the late Ranulph Glanville; their support has been crucial and very welcome.

However, the most important people to thank have been all the authors and reviewers of the journal. With 1,300 submissions in the past four-and-a-half years, most with more than one author, we have dealt with thousands of authors; and although not all submissions went to review, given that most needed two (sometimes more) reviewers, thousands of reviewers. We are immensely grateful to all these people, for providing a steady stream of papers and ideas, for being willing to read and comment on drafts of manuscripts, and for putting up with the delays and uncertainties that inevitably come with such a complex process.

In the nature of academic publishing, almost all these people are unpaid volunteers, only receiving intangible benefits for their contribution to the journal. We hope it has been worthwhile for them.

Finally, we wish to offer our very best wishes to the incoming editorial team of Gandolfo Dominici, Vojko Potočan, Igor Perko and Stefano Armenia. We were delighted to see their application and to hear of their plans for the journal. We know of their past work through WOSC and with this journal, and we are confident that they will make an excellent job of editing *Kybernetes*. The three of us will continue as editorial board members and will advise as asked, but the journal is in their hands now. We look forward to the innovations they will bring to the journal. The best is yet to come.

Magnus Ramage, David Chapman and Patrick Wong

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