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On the Value of Conference Proceedings

Upon returning from some recent travel, I found the April issue of *The Observatory* in my letterbox. In a book review¹, the question was raised as to the on-going value of printed books of conference proceedings in light of the fact that many contributions had been published in journals before the proceedings, or even before the conference. Another question was whether printed books are needed with many journals becoming on-line-only. The second question is really unrelated; also, the arguments for and against conventional printed and on-line-only versions of journals and conference proceedings are essentially the same. The third question was whether anyone still seeks them out and searches them for new work*. I know for a fact that some people still seek them out for *old* work. Most of my recent travel was to the Moriond cosmology conference², and during that conference I got a message from a colleague saying that he had recently looked up a reference from a 1981 Moriond conference, praising the fact that each contribution had a photo of the author (a tradition which still continues to this day). Sometimes something needs to be cited but there is no journal reference; for example, I've cited a conference proceeding for the source redshift of the gravitational-lens system 0218+357³.

In the old days, there were three main reasons to go to conferences: to hear about the latest results, to get an overview of work outside of one's own field, and to meet old and new friends and colleagues. Electronic communication has made the first obsolete to some extent (thus leaving more time for the other two), though not entirely. Sometimes results, especially involving strong claims, take a while to be refereed, and will appear long after the conference, perhaps even after the publication of the proceedings — or they might not appear at all if found wanting. Those are exactly the type of results which should be checked and confirmed or refuted, and the conference proceedings might be the only source one can cite, at least initially.

While it might just be possible to keep up with the literature in one's own field, it is impossible to do so in all fields. One might hear an interesting talk in a field different from one's own; the proceedings provide a starting point for looking up further references. I tend to present topics at conferences before submitting them to journals, in order to get feedback. But even if the work has appeared elsewhere before the conference, the conference proceeding is usually shorter and more digestible, and there can be value in a collection of such contributions on a common theme, especially if the proceedings are well produced (examples are reviewed in refs. 4 and 5).

Conference proceedings are also useful for historians of science. I'm writing this while reading a book^{6,7} which mentions the 1927 Solvay conference. As with the 1957 Chapel Hill conference on the role of gravitation in physics, we should be grateful that there is a written record. Even if the written record differs somewhat from what was actually said (as in Bohr's contribution to the 1927 Solvay conference), that in itself can be interesting. When I was younger it was much more common for proceedings to include the questions and answers after the talk. That is a tradition which should be revived, as perhaps even more so than the contributions themselves they indicate what people were thinking at

*"Does anyone seek them out and search them for new work anymore...." It is not clear to me whether it is the new work which is being sought out in the proceedings, or whether proceedings are being sought out in order to be cited in some other new work.

the time. Another conference proceeding I have often cited⁸ has, at the moment of writing, 89 citations according to ADS, more than most refereed-journal papers.

The Moriond conferences have the best of all worlds: a proper printed book of (relatively long) conference proceedings (distributed to the participants but also available to others), a freely available PDF of the same⁹, and the slides of the individual contributions on the web. (Alas, some other conference websites have disappeared after a few years.) The facts that there are only plenary sessions, that everyone sleeps and eats in the same hotel at the conference venue, and that there are more hours of talks in the week (six full days and a closing session on the seventh) despite a break of four hours or so each afternoon (with the opportunity for skiing) make them my favourite serial conference, and they are better organized than most high-profile one-off conferences.

Yours faithfully,
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References

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- (6) J. Baggott & J. L. Heilbron, *Quantum Drama* (Oxford University Press), 2024.
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- (8) R. Penrose, in E. J. Fenyves (ed.), *Fourteenth Texas Symposium on Relativistic Astrophysics* (New York Academy of Sciences), 1989, p. 249.
- (9) <https://moriond.in2p3.fr/previous-sessions.html>

REVIEWS

Her Space, Her Time: How Trailblazing Women Scientists Decoded the Hidden Universe, by Shohini Ghose (MIT Press), 2023. Pp. 248, 22.5 × 15 cm. Price \$29.95 (about £24) (hardbound; ISBN 978 0 262 04831 6).

Author Shohini Ghose is herself Professor of Physics and Computer Science at Wilfred Laurier University in Canada, and has been active in women-in-science issues for some time. Here she addresses seven topics in the recent history of physics, astronomy, cosmology, and such, focussing on contributions by women to our present understanding. You will find here many of the astronomers you