

# Reflections on a SIAM Presidency

Quietly each autumn, with no advertising and no robocalls, no polling and no pundits, SIAM conducts an election. That is how I was chosen as president, and at the end of this month, my two-year term will come to an end.

Meanwhile, we've all just been through the tumult of another U.S. presidential race, each one seemingly more divisive than the last. It is hard to recognize SIAM's gentle ballots and the Obama–Romney tempest as examples of the same species known as Democracy. My friends may joke about

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## FROM THE SIAM PRESIDENT

By Nick Trefethen

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my Secret Service protection and my Big Bird moment, or the King of SIAM. Mostly we just get on with business.

The biggest event of my two years has been one whose consequences are quite unclear at this stage, the “academic spring” of unrest about journal publishing. There are many strands here, some going back a long time, but the event that brought these issues to wide attention was Tim Gowers's initiation of the Elsevier boycott in January. Everybody sees that there is something odd in a world where researchers do most of the editing, refereeing, and typesetting of journal papers, and even distribution is potentially almost free thanks to the Internet, yet publishers make billions of dollars in profit by charging ever-greater fees to libraries. Something must give, and many ideas are being put forward, but this is a story that will mostly play out in the future. So far, SIAM, whose journals are fortunately among the highest ranked and most affordable, has been not much affected, but we all know changes are coming.

The founding of *SIAM/ASA Journal on Uncertainty Quantification* this year was a happy new development during my term. The upcoming extension of the option for journal authors to provide online supplementary materials to most SIAM journals will be another good step. Meanwhile, SIAM's undergraduate publication SIURO has become well established.

Readers know that a project of interest to me has been SIAM's attempt to reduce times for assessing manuscripts, our target being to cut the time from submission to acceptance, averaged over all journals, from 12.8 to 8 or 9 months. The new procedures to encourage this change have been coming into place, but it is too early to know how successful they will be.



Former SIAM president Doug Arnold (2009–10) continues to monitor issues that engaged him as president, mainly in the evolving arena of publishing. In a past-president's address in Minneapolis devoted to mathematics journals, he began by asking “Why should we care?” In answers that touched on plagiarism, journal-ranking measures, the critical role played by refereeing, and the Elsevier boycott, he discussed efforts under way to address the problems. Readers who missed the talk can access it—along with many other invited addresses given at SIAM meetings—at <http://www.siam.org/meetings/presents.php>.



In Minneapolis, at his last SIAM Annual Meeting as president, Nick Trefethen catches up with former SIAM president Mac Hyman (2003–2004). The accompanying column, the final installation in Trefethen's thought-provoking two-year run, will be missed by many. Hyman, as a member of SIAM's Committee on Science Policy (and of the newly revamped SIAM News editorial board), continues to influence SIAM directions.

The Trefethen administration saw the 100th SIAM student chapter and expansion of the student chapter program outside the U.S.—excellent! The third and fourth classes of SIAM Fellows were elected, adding to a growing list of outstanding people (google SIAM Fellows to see what I mean). SIAM began to offer its books electronically, with e-books available first in packages to institutions, then as individual titles. Attendance at conferences has grown, and next February's CS&E conference in Boston will be a record-breaker. There were worries about science funding, mixed with the knowledge that it could have been worse, and worries about mathematics education in the U.S. and abroad.

Apart from my SIAM duties, this has been a busy time for me personally as I have published two books (the *Index Cards* and *Approximation Theory and Approximation Practice*), watched the Chebfun software project begin to be known around the world, marvelled at Oxford's glamorous new mathematics building, and married Kate in a ceremony in our two colleges, Somerville and Balliol.

Here in Britain we happily remember the 1980s sitcom “Yes Minister,” about the hapless minister Hacker of the Department of Administrative Affairs, whose attempts to change the world are undone by the machinations of the civil servants supposedly employed to help him, led by the ingenious Sir Humphrey Appleby. SIAM is nothing like this. Our civil service, based in Philadelphia, is an extraordinarily dedicated group of 70 people who maintain SIAM's high standards for books, journals, conferences, and public engagement. Like Sir Humphrey, SIAM's executive director Jim Crowley is a man of exceptional ability and preternatural calm who knows his organization inside out and has seen presidents come and go; but there, thank goodness, the resemblance ends. Thank you for everything, Jim.

We are told that the two-party system is good for politics, but mercifully, it doesn't operate in applied mathematics societies. My predecessor, Doug Arnold, has been nothing but a help to me,

and it is good for all of us that he has remained engaged in some of the SIAM issues that concern him, such as plagiarism, journal rankings, and open access. (How would Barack have liked it if George W. had offered to help?) Quietly in January, I will hand over this remarkable organization with confidence to my successor, Irene Fonseca.



*On January 1, Nick Trefethen will hand over the SIAM presidency, "with confidence," to Irene Fonseca, shown here with another former SIAM president, Marty Golubitsky (2005–2006).*