Many of our readers work for societies and organizations that publish journals exclusively or predominantly. Sometimes it is easy to overlook the importance of book publishing in scientific societies, and the time is right to give books their due in this column. What is obvious to some is worth stating explicitly here: The process from submission to publication of journal articles and of books and monographs is an apples–and–oranges comparison. Editing, work flow, timelines, revenue models, marketing, and distribution are all very different when the final product is a journal as opposed to a book.

In this column, I’d like to consider “a tale of two societies” with regard to books: the American Meteorological Society and the American Mathematical Society. They are both known by the same acronym; one is the AMS and the other is the “other” AMS (opinions vary good-naturedly on which is which). They are similar in that they both have robust journal and book programs. They are dramatically different in their histories and in the scales of their book programs.

The American Meteorological Society (let’s call it AMeS to avoid confusion here) has been publishing books and monographs for decades, but until 2004, it did so sporadically and took the term nonprofit to extremes; most of its titles were scientific monographs published as a service to the community, and floods of red ink were the usual result of very small sales and no marketing of any consequence. In 2004, we reached a fork in the road with regard to the program: Either phase it out gradually or make a commitment to building a serious book program that could eventually sustain itself financially and attract top-echelon authors to it. As director of publications, I threw my weight behind the latter approach and was well supported by top-level AMeS management in this decision to put my neck on the line. Everything hinged on finding the right person to lead the effort: someone who was a book professional with knowledge of and contacts in the field, who was not afraid to pick up the shards and pieces of a previously fragmented program, and who knew that he or she would have to go it alone until and unless there was measurable success that would warrant additional staff. Some people thought I was nuts to think that such a person existed and would come to work at AMeS. Since Sarah Jane Shangraw rode through the doorway on her white stallion, I have had the last laugh.

One book was waiting for Sarah Jane’s attention when she arrived in fall 2005. She used the production of that title, *Railroads and Weather*, as a means to get to know some of our vendors and to reconnect with those she had worked with in the past. She also learned what procedures AMeS had in place for acquisitions, production, marketing, and distribution. She quickly determined that each of them required improvement if the book program was to grow.

With respect to production, the journal production and editorial staff were (and are) incredibly talented, but because of a backlog of journal articles awaiting editing, they could not be spared to work full time, if temporarily, on a book. As to distribution, although we were serving our membership well, our books didn’t reach far beyond our community; our systems could not handle wholesale and retail discounts or returns, nor was available sales and inventory tracking information reliable. Acquisition was not being done actively, and marketing efforts were minimal at best.

Over the course of 3 years, Sarah Jane brought the following to bear: royalty contracts to help to attract high-quality, experienced authors; an infusion of generalist titles designed to reach a broader audience (this is also in line with our mission to educate the public); an established identity for the program—AMS Books; a multichannel marketing plan for each new title; and a dedicated group of experienced freelances who return, project after project, bringing consistency to process and design.

Those developments were undertaken from within, but what of the measures that exceeded our capacity yet were critical to
growth? Given the magnitude of resources required to take our sales and distribution to the next level, Sarah Jane suggested that a partnership was in order.

After research into other models, including the use of an outside sales force to feed customers to our own ordering department, Sarah Jane forged a relationship with the University of Chicago Press. AMeS became one of the Press's distributed clients in August 2009, a development that stands as the biggest so far in our program's evolution. The Press's services include sales, marketing, inventory management, and fulfillment. On behalf of AMeS, it will work with bookstores on their own terms; we will no longer be relying exclusively on direct sales (mostly to members). The Press also brings better sales and inventory tracking information; the data will assist in future list planning and help us plan reprints more methodically. Although the relationship is young, it is clear that the services provided by the press will expand the reach of AMS Books to horizons far beyond what AMeS could undertake on its own.

Largely because of Sarah Jane's efforts, AMS Books, although still small, is now an expanding and viable program with authors regularly contacting her to see whether they can publish with us. We still have a way to go, but sometimes I have to pinch myself when thinking about how far the program has come.

Ken Heideman
Director of Publications
with contributions from
Sarah Jane Shangraw
Books Managing Editor
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The American Mathematical Society's book program has its roots in lectures by mathematician Felix Klein; it published the first set of Colloquium Lectures in 1905. Although the book program remained small and steady for most of the century, it wasn't until the early 1990s that AMS got serious about expanding its book program. New series were created, and we collaborated with other organizations to create copublication agreements, adding more series to the list. The society's emphasis also shifted from publishing proceedings and collections to focusing more on monographs. We hired two new acquisitions editors, tripling the size of the department, and expanded our distribution efforts by contracting with overseas distributors, library wholesalers, and book dealers. We increased and diversified our marketing efforts, feeding information on our books to many outlets. As a result, the book program has expanded greatly, and we are now publishing about 100 new titles each year. We have more than 3000 titles in print, and our policy is to keep all monographs in print forever.

When I first began work at AMS in the middle 1970s, we published fewer than 15 books a year; all of them were handled in production by one employee, who also managed a flagship journal and copyedited papers for other AMS journals on the side. Now, eight production editors and six technical staff are needed to handle our book production. Customers can still purchase a book by calling our Customer Services Department, but they can also buy it through our online AMS Bookstore, through Amazon, or at their local college bookstore. Plans include expanding our distribution efforts into China and India, acquiring more textbooks, and offering e-books as an option. We have come a long way in growing a solid, respected book program. As a co-worker remarked recently, "We've gone from being a membership society publishing books on the side to becoming known as a 'real' publisher."

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So, if the American Meteorological Society book program is the Little Engine That Could, the American Mathematical Society program is the Jumbo Jet That Does. Both efforts are exciting and vital despite the enormous differences in their size and scope. What will each of these book programs look like in 10 or 20 years? We'll keep you posted. In the meantime, we'd like to know about your organization's book program. Please write to solution-corner@ametsoc.org. We hope to publish brief excerpts of selected submissions in a future Solution Corner column.