

What Is a Flagship Publication?

Communications of the ACM was launched in January 1958, with Alan J. Perlis as Editor-in-Chief. The first issue included articles such as “Tables for Automatic

Computation” and “A Programmed Binary Counter for the IBM Type 650 Calculator.” The new publication was declared by the Editor-in-Chief to “provide space not elsewhere available for publishing worthwhile, but possibly fragmentary, developments in the use and understanding of computers, e.g., descriptions of computer programs, computer-inspired techniques in numerical analysis, and educational efforts, to name a few.” In spite of this modest initial goal, over the years, *Communications*, known also as *CACM*, became known as the “flagship magazine of the ACM.” The magazine has gone through many changes over the past 55 years; see the January 2008 issue for a retrospective.

Communications was not, however, ACM’s first publication. The *Journal of the ACM*, known also as *JACM*, was launched in January 1954, with Franz L. Alt as Editor-in-Chief and featured articles such as “The IBM 701 Speed-coding System,” by John W. Backus. Over the years, *JACM* became known as the “flagship journal of the ACM.” In July 2003, celebrating *JACM*’s 50th volume, then Editor-in-Chief Prabhakar Raghavan wrote the journal “is charged with the mission of archiving the very best research in computer science.”

By 2010, however, Editor-in-Chief Victor Vianu realized that *JACM*’s aspiration of “archiving the very best research in computer science” has become very difficult to achieve. Starting with the launch of *Transactions on Mathematical Software* in 1975, ACM has developed a col-

lection of close to 40 Transactions. While *JACM* was still a highly prestigious journal, its scope was mostly theoretical. The flourishing of the Transactions, which publish close to 1,000 articles per year, made it difficult to bridge the gap between the broad aspiration of *JACM* and its actual narrower scope. To address this gap ACM launched in the spring of 2011 a Task Force, co-chaired by us, to study and make recommendations on the appropriate mission and direction for *JACM*.

The Task Force concluded that *JACM*’s aspiration of archiving computer science’s best research is no longer a realistic aspiration. ACM has many outstanding journals that are the best in their field. It is unlikely, for example, that graphics researchers will submit their best papers to *JACM* rather than to *ACM Transactions on Graphics*. Nevertheless, *JACM* can still have high aspirations. The Task Force recommended for *JACM* to “provide coverage of the most significant work on principles of computer science, broadly construed.” (For details, see the revised mission statement at <http://jacm.acm.org/>.) The Task Force also recommended concrete steps for broadening the scope and expanding the volume of articles published in *JACM*.

The “flagship” issue was also addressed by the Task Force. A flagship is defined as the lead ship in a fleet of vessels, typically the first, largest, fastest, most heavily armed, or best known. The Task Force concluded that ACM has a sole flagship publication,

Communications, which is, indeed, the best known and most widely distributed publication of ACM. The flagship metaphor suggests an image of a fleet led by a flag officer. In the Task Force’s opinion, however, ACM’s portfolio of journals and magazines (see <http://dl.acm.org/>) is not quite a “fleet.” In fact, while ACM has an impressive collection of high-quality journals and magazines, the portfolio fails to be more than the sum of its parts. For example, one needs to simply visit the home pages of a few ACM publications; there is no indication that the individual journals are part of a cohesive portfolio. The Task Force recommended that ACM undertake to build and develop a cohesive portfolio of publications, rather than a loose collection, starting with a uniform design of journal home pages.

The flagship and fleet metaphors also suggest that it is not enough for *Communications* to be a high-quality monthly magazine. It also must be the publication that ties together ACM’s publication portfolio and adds value to the portfolio as a whole. Currently, *Communications*’ Research Highlights section features articles selected from (mostly) ACM research conferences, but there is no real connection between *Communications* and other ACM journals and magazines. The flagship is not leading the fleet! Discussions on how to tie the flagship better to the fleet are currently under way. We welcome your views on this matter.

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