

# The Stata Journal so far: Editors' report

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## Abstract.

The editor and executive editor give some thoughts on the recent past, the present, and the immediate future of the *Stata Journal*.

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## 1 From Boston to Boston

The decision to transform the *Stata Technical Bulletin* (STB) into the *Stata Journal* (SJ) was made at a breakfast meeting held just before the first North American Stata Users' Group meeting in Boston in March 2001. The thinking behind this decision was set out in some detail in the very last issue of the STB; see Newton (2001). Ever since its first publication in late 2001, the SJ has carried a brief statement of intent; a more detailed version is accessible at <http://www.stata-journal.com/types.html>.

Two years on, those editors who could make it to Boston for the second North American Stata Users' Group meeting in March also met over breakfast—in the same restaurant and almost at the same table—and we reported the progress of the SJ to the meeting as a whole. This small anniversary seems a good time to take stock briefly. Here, for the whole readership, are some notes on the recent past, the present, and the immediate future, as we see it, for the SJ.

The launch of a new journal is always a scary experience. We were clear that the STB needed a total overhaul, and we were clear about the kinds of papers we thought the SJ should carry. Yet a clear vision is of no use without authors who will write for us and subscribers who will find the journal worthwhile. However, to our relief, things seem to have fallen into place without any great difficulties. Much of the credit here is due to our publishers, Stata Corporation. Although it is a little invidious to mention individuals, let us name for you those most concerned with the journal, issue by issue: Lisa Gilmore, who oversees the production of text; Jeff Pitblado, who has responsibility for typesetting style; and Chinh Nguyen, who has also contributed, especially to the cover design. They do an outstanding job.

## 2 Past: the STB

For any of you who know none of the history, let us first explain very quickly about the STB, the precursor of this journal. The STB started publication in March 1991 and ceased in May 2001, after 61 bimonthly issues. After first publication, issues were collected in

10 annual reprint volumes. The most common kind of paper (idiosyncratically called an “insert”) explained one or more user-written Stata commands, what they did, and how to use them. The associated `.ado`, `.help`, and other files were issued on disks accompanying each issue. The successive editors (Joe Hilbe, Sean Beckett, and Joe Newton) and associate editors were all from outside the publishers, Stata Corporation (called Computing Resource Center before 1993).

If you look through the successive volumes of the STB, you will see considerable consistency in the kinds of articles being published and in the volume of material produced. In addition, as Stata developed as a language, and as Stata programmers gained in experience, the quality of the software being produced in many ways improved steadily over the lifetime of the STB. However, stability is not necessarily a sign of health. Towards the end of its life, the STB was showing symptoms of some deep-seated problems. We will single out three of those problems.

First, sales were disappointing, a strong indication that the STB was not sufficiently interesting or useful to many potential subscribers. Naturally, this was Stata Corporation’s problem rather than anybody else’s, but it helped to focus our thought on what the STB was doing and on what it should be doing.

Second, the rise of the Internet had removed much of the rationale for the STB as a rapid and efficient means of distributing user-written software (and, indeed, of extras and updates issued by Stata Corporation). With the help, especially, of Stata’s `net` command, program files could be posted, revised, and accessed on the Internet much more quickly (and cheaply) than they could through the STB. No printed journal could hope to compete with the turnaround time of the Internet.

Third, the STB was not, in any formal sense, a reviewed or refereed journal. Although successive editors did often consult associate editors about problematic submissions, there was not a routine process for external reviewing of submissions. As Stata, and the field covered by Stata applications, became larger and more complicated, maintaining the quality of what was published became much more difficult. Equally important was the issue of recognition for authors. For most authors, whether academics or other researchers, the difference between a refereed and a nonrefereed journal is vital. Only by introducing formal review of submissions could we ensure that publication in our journal had the status we believed that it deserved.

### **3 Present: the SJ**

This issue, SJ 3(2), is the seventh issue to appear, under the control of an international editorial board, including the Editor, Joe Newton, and Executive Editor, Nicholas Cox, and (from this issue) 21 Associate Editors. Cosmetically, the SJ has been redesigned and is now printed on better paper with more durable covers. One small change, in response to various requests, is that from SJ 3(1) onwards, full titles of articles are included on both the contents page and the back cover.

An obvious but crucial context for considering our journal is the growth of Stata and that of statistical sciences more generally. Official Stata, the software that can be purchased from Stata Corporation, gets bigger and bigger, not only at each release, but also between releases, and completely new features always outbalance the fraction of superseded and obsolete material. Much the same can be said for user-written material. Such growth makes it difficult for even experienced or expert Stata users to keep track of developments in official and user-written Stata contributions. For our journal, such difficulty points up the need for expository material. That is, we should be spending much of our effort explaining parts of Stata to each other, and explaining the associated aspects of statistics, data management, and graphics to each other.

The SJ continues to be a vehicle for distributing valuable new programs, but its major aim is to carry more, and more substantial, expository articles on statistics, data management, and graphics using Stata. Each submission is now reviewed. (Incidentally, we have one golden rule: we will not look at submissions of Stata program files that lack any kind of write-up. It is not, we believe, our job to look at your code to try to decide if it is worth writing up.)

What has appeared so far? Here are some data for the first six issues.

	#	min pages	max pages	mean
article	29	5	31	15.3
Help Desk	6	8	15	11.3
Speaking Stata	6	12	21	17.0
note	3	2	6	4.0
review	5	3	5	3.6
Software update	4	.1	.1	.1

The table includes data on 53 items written by 48 distinct authors, with an average of  $74/53 = 1.40$  authors per item. Remarkably, for a refereed journal, the review process for almost every submission has taken less than two months, with one- or two-week turnaround times being rather common. We feel that the submissions and final results of the review process have been of quite high quality.

## 4 Future

How will the Stata Journal develop over the next few years? As said, we rely ultimately on what people write for us. But we can give a few signals on what we welcome most:

- The SJ is, emphatically, not just another statistics journal, so material must be relevant to Stata. At the same time, the journal has already included considerable original *statistical* material. The fact that Stata is being used as a vehicle for new techniques, which are published first in the SJ, is highly gratifying, and should give our journal greater impact beyond the Stata user community.

- While our audience is Stata users, and most of those are essentially researchers, we remain very open to submissions that discuss how to teach or learn Stata, or how to use Stata in teaching and learning. (The Boston meeting in March 2003 featured several presentations in this area.)
- The *Stata Journal* will continue in its role of publicizing corrections and updates to previous programs. Many inserts in the STB were followed by a series of often brief inserts documenting revisions to the original programs. We request that program authors of Stata programs published in either the STB or the SJ publicize any such revisions through the journal. Minor changes will be announced briefly, but more importantly the program files will be accessible for download from the Stata Corporation web site, so that users have clear paths to the latest version of your Stata code.
- A new column will start soon, “Stata tips”, which will be a series of very concise notes about Stata commands, features, or tricks that you may not yet have encountered. Submissions or suggestions from readers are welcome for this column.

We are open to offers of theme issues and occasional series. Some are under negotiation and should appear in the near future.

We are happy to receive your comments at any time. Emails to [editors@stata.com](mailto:editors@stata.com) will reach us both.

## 5 References

Newton, H. J. 2001. an75: The Stata Journal begins publication fourth quarter 2001. *Stata Technical Bulletin* 61: 2–4. In *Stata Technical Bulletin Reprints*, vol. 10, 2–5. College Station, TX: Stata Press.

### About the Authors

H. Joseph Newton is Professor of Statistics and Dean of the College of Science at Texas A&M University. He was editor of the *Stata Technical Bulletin* from 1996 to 2001 and has been editor of the *Stata Journal* since its inception in 2001.

Nicholas Cox is a statistically minded geographer at the University of Durham. He contributes talks, postings, FAQs, and programs to the Stata user community. He has also co-authored twelve commands in official Stata. He was an author of several inserts in the *Stata Technical Bulletin* and is executive editor of the *Stata Journal*.