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Amateur and professional astronomers in associations

ANDRÉ HECK

What is an astronomer? This question can receive quite different answers. Our personal (and rather large) understanding of an astronomer is that of a person contributing to a better understanding of the Universe and consequently to a better comprehension of the place and role of man in it.

Astronomy has penetrated the general public remarkably well with an extensive network of associations and organizations of «aficionados» all over the world. Some of them are well equipped for observing and occasionally become involved with professional research. The deep human need to understand the universe has also led organizations and governments to set up public observatories and planetariums that fulfill academic requirements as well as public educational and cultural interests.

The distinction between professional and amateur astronomers is generally made nowadays on the basis that the former ones are making a living out of their astronomy-related activities, being paid by some official organisation, carrying out some research or participating to some project linked to the advancement of knowledge. Amateur astronomers are themselves classified in two categories: the active and the armchair amateur astronomers. While the latter ones have generally a passive interest in astronomy (reading magazines, attending lectures, and so on), the former ones carry out some observing, often with their own instruments, and such activities can be useful to professional astronomy.

It would be a mistake to ignore that some professional astronomers are strongly resenting the possibility of being mixed with amateur astronomers, especially in associations (the other categories of organizations do not present any problem in this respect). While some professional associations are strictly excluding amateur astronomers (prospective members must have adequate degrees and be proposed by peers), other societies are more or less open to qualified amateurs.

To complicate things, even if they wanted so, most associations and societies would be unable to produce figures on their respective professional and amateur membership, simply because they do not hold the data. The attached table gives a few examples from a quick survey carried out by e-mail. In line with the

previous comment, the listed figures should be taken with caution and as *bona fide* indications of magnitude. Probably few professional astronomers know that amateur astronomers outnumber professional ones in an association so active and so important for professional astronomy as the RAS.

The *Astronomical Society of the Pacific* (ASP) has «only» about 25% of professional astronomers, while it produces a top-quality professional journal and impressive series of professional books and proceedings. Now it is also the official publisher of the *International Astronomical Union* (IAU), the corporate body of professional astronomers world-wide.

Remember also that, in many instances, professional astronomers supervise so-called amateur societies, that they are frequently involved in planetar-

iums and in public observatories, and that they work often in or with publishing and software producing companies. Keep also in mind that some amateur organizations are deeply involved in activities useful to professional astronomy (especially via observing, but also through education and popularization). The spectrum of quality is very broad of course, but it is a continuous one from the very low level up to the very advanced one. And to be honest, we should also appreciate that, in some universities, astronomy is of a level that would be considered as a good amateur one in other places.

In conclusion, apart from a few clear cases of exclusively professional societies and a pleiad of small clubs of «aficionados», the vast majority of associations are mixtures of amateurs and professionals, the ratio of which is simply unknown.

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A few examples

Society (*)	Membership (**)	Comment (***)	Source
AAS	5600	a couple of dozen amateurs	Milkey (1999)
AAVSO	1100	9% are professionals	Mattei (1999)
AG	800	about 2% are amateurs	Schielicke (1999)
ASA	305	less than 1% are amateurs	Duldig (1999)
ASJ	2800	about 2000 amateurs	Ohishi (1999)
ASP	7000	about 25% are professionals	Havlen (1999)
CASCA	360	no amateur	Demers (1999)
EAS	1500	less than 10% are amateurs	Palous (1999)
IAU	8500	minute population of amateurs	Andersen (1999)
RAS	2800(+)	about 55% could be amateurs	Wiltshire (1999)
SAB	460	no amateur	Gregorio-Hetem (1999)
SAF	2500	less than 5% are professionals	Ferlet (1999)
SAG	3370	about 2% are professionals	Kernen (2000)
SF2A	520	less than 10 amateurs	Thévenin (1999)
SGAA	140	less than 2% are amateurs	Buser (1999)

(*) The acronyms expand as follows:

AAS	= American Astronomical Society (USA)
AAVSO	= American Association of Variable Star Observers (USA)
AG	= Astronomische Gesellschaft (Germany)
ASA	= Astronomical Society of Australia
ASJ	= Astronomical Society of Japan
ASP	= Astronomical Society of the Pacific (USA)
CASCA	= Canadian Astronomical Society - Société canadienne d'Astronomie (Canada)
EAS	= European Astronomical Society
IAU	= International Astronomical Union
RAS	= Royal Astronomical Society (UK)
SAB	= Sociedade Astronômica Brasileira (Brazil)
SAF	= Société astronomique de France
SAG	= Schweizerische Astronomische Gesellschaft
SF2A	= Société française d'Astronomie et d'Astrophysique (France)
SGAA	= Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Astrophysik und Astronomie (Switzerland)

(**) As recorded in *StarWorlds* (<http://vizier.u-strasbg.fr/starworlds.html>).

(***) Courtesy the society's official mentioned in the last column.

(+) Includes about 250 geophysicists (Wiltshire, 1999).