

# Presenting the ESO Story: One Hundred and Fifty Messengers

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Since 1974, *The ESO Messenger* has been one of ESO's primary communication channels to the outside world in particular. It has provided a window not only onto the organisation, its projects and people, but also onto the research carried out by ESO's ever-growing user community. Last but not least, today it constitutes a fascinating historical source, documenting the life and evolution of ESO over the last 38 years.

"With this issue, we launch *The ESO Messenger* in its orbit and wish it a fruitful mission." Such were the opening remarks by ESO Director General Adriaan Blaauw, when the first six-page issue of ESO's new in-house magazine appeared in May 1974. The new publication was supposed to serve two purposes: a) "to promote the participation of ESO staff in what goes on in the Organisation, especially at places of duty other than our own"; and b) "to give the world outside some impression of what happens inside ESO.

At the time, the need for internal communication had become pronounced. In 1974, ESO had ongoing operations at four sites: the Headquarters in Hamburg; the CERN premises which housed the ESO Telescope Project Division; Santiago de Chile with its administrative and technical staff; and, of course, the La Silla Observatory with its growing number of telescopes. Two decades before the worldwide web came into being and e-mails became the standard communication tool, maintaining proper communication and ensuring that staff was duly informed and motivated was an immense task, even if the ESO staff complement was much smaller than today.

The new magazine therefore reflected a very real need, contributing to the coherence of the organisation at a time when it was thinly spread and struggling under the burden of completing the 3.6-metre telescope project. Reaching out beyond the ESO staff was equally important. With

four telescopes in operation (including the 40-centimetre Grand Prism Objectif), in addition to two national telescopes, ESO had an active user community. During that year, 178 observing runs were carried out with the ESO telescopes. Furthermore, 14 runs were undertaken under ESO time with the national telescopes. Perhaps more importantly, the user community was preparing itself and eagerly looking forward to the advent of the 3.6-metre telescope.

*The Messenger* was not the first publication by ESO. Aside from the Annual Reports, ESO had published the *ESO Bulletin*, the first issue appearing in November 1966 and the last, No. 12, published in June 1975. The *Bulletin's* intended readership were astronomers and decision makers, but despite this, it had been a more modest undertaking than *The Messenger* as regards size and frequency, and it clearly covered a much more restricted range of topics in the area of science and technology. The presentation style of the *Bulletin* was formal, rather different from the more relaxed ways of the new magazine. However, as *The Messenger* changed its character, the *ESO Bulletin* became redundant and the articles that would have appeared in this publication were now published in the new magazine.

## Finding its feet

The first issue of *The Messenger*, edited by Francis Walsh, was rather small, with just six pages. Written in English, selected texts were also reproduced in Spanish, mainly for the benefit of the local staff in Chile. The print run was 1100 copies (Kjär, 2000), printed in letter-press, as was the custom of those days. Even with six pages, the magazine included a wide range of "stories" from the "preparation of a conference on Research Programmes for the New Large Telescopes", progress reports regarding the 3.6-metre telescope project, the ESO Sky Survey, etc. to a short article about the ESO Christmas party, held in the [Santiago] Guesthouse garden. The writing style and the choice of topics were reminiscent of a newspaper — or a newsletter, which was precisely its intended role. To ensure adequate cover-

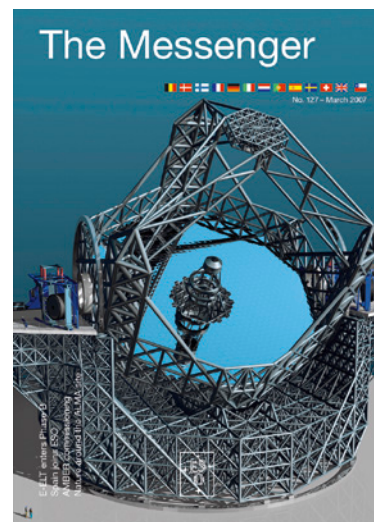
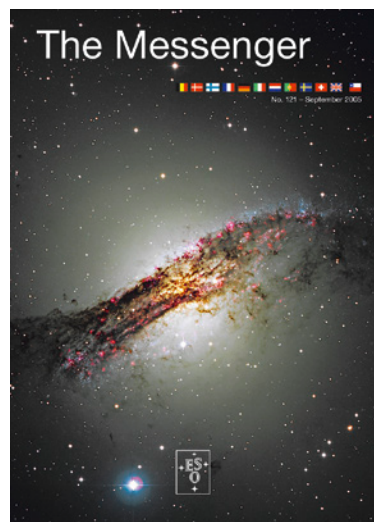
age, the editor was assisted by "local correspondents" in Geneva and Santiago. Interestingly, astronomy was absent, at least as a science. This would soon change.

With the publication of issue No. 4, astronomy entered the pages of *The Messenger*. Intended to appear on a quarterly basis, this issue was published in March 1976, after an interruption of one year. In the meantime, the editorship had passed to Richard West. In 1975 a new Director General (DG), Lodewijk Woltjer, had taken over from Blaauw. Woltjer was intent on strengthening the scientific aspects of ESO including building up a group of active scientists at ESO. The editorial changes that may have seemed to begin rather subtly with issue No. 4 fitted well within the overall direction of ESO under the new DG. West was based in Geneva and thus embedded in the growing technical and scientific environment, rather than in the ESO administration, still based in Hamburg. As early as the following issue, astronomy had become the dominant topic, clearly demonstrated by the fact that for the first time, the cover page contained an astronomical picture of the globular cluster NGC 1851. The issue also featured articles by astronomers describing their research. This was originally meant to motivate the non-astronomical staff at ESO.

Newsletter-style reporting continued, especially regarding the 3.6-metre telescope, which was rapidly approaching first light, but elaborate descriptions of staff barbecues, presentations of staff representatives and the like disappeared. Even so, the editor tried to balance the scientific or technical articles with light and easy-to-read stories of general interest. In the early years, *The Messenger* even published letters to the editor, such as the following in the December 1979 issue, allegedly from a certain "H.D.": "Since *The Messenger* is evolving in the direction of serious journals, one should consider the problem of quoting articles in lists of references. The other day I found the reference: 'ESO Mess' — which is perhaps not the best compliment to the otherwise fine organisation...."



Figure 1. The changing face of *The Messenger* – from a modest black and white version to the current appearance.



A particularly amusing article, written by the editor and also published in December 1979, discussed the transformation of observing, from the classical style with the astronomer glued to the eyepiece, patiently guiding his telescope for an hour or more, to the modern automated (as it was described) mode of observation. Reading this dark-humoured preview of the times to come is strongly recommended, perhaps especially for young astronomers.

The editor also allowed space for the occasional cartoon, in most cases provided by gifted ESO staff, but also from professionals. Perhaps most famous of the first category was the cartoon of the overcrowded La Silla Observatory,

created by Karen Humby (No. 12); an example of the latter was a drawing by the iconic Danish cartoonist Robert Storm Petersen, published in issue No. 47. With police officers crowding an observatory dome, the text explains that “the police now collaborate with the astronomers to determine the exact time when bicycle lights must be lit”.

The change of editor was also visible in other ways. From issue No. 4, the banner on the cover, designed by Bernard Dumoulin and featuring a stylised map of Europe and South America transposed on a starry sky, was printed in colour. Since colour printing was expensive, this was the only use of colour and, modesty prevailing, the header used one colour

only. Unsurprisingly, it was blue, intended to match the official colour of the organisation (although it never really did).

In terms of preparing the publication, West formed a strong partnership with Kurt Kjär, who as technical editor oversaw the layout, typesetting and general interaction with the printers as well as the distribution. Kjär remained as technical editor until his retirement in 2003 (the last issue on his watch was No. 111). West’s influence on the magazine was also visible when it came to its size, occasionally reaching 40 pages during his first term. (In 1980, West was succeeded as editor by Philippe Véron, only to return again between 1986 and 1993 after finishing his term as IAU Secretary General). The

growth in the number of pages reflected the increase in activities at ESO and within the scientific community. It is therefore not surprising that *The Messenger* would also continue to grow, reaching a peak of 88 pages in December 1992.

### History, current affairs and preview of the future

Among the many pages, thousands by today, it is difficult to pinpoint articles of particular importance, but it is hard to overlook the series of papers that appeared in Nos. 15 and 16 (December 1978 and March 1979) under the common heading “Ten nights at the VLT”. Here prominent astronomers offered their views and expectations as regards Europe’s next generation telescope, the Very Large Telescope (VLT), at the time barely more than a dream. This was a year after the seminal ESO conference at CERN about the large telescopes of the future, which in many ways started the thinking about the VLT. This shows a different aspect of *The Messenger* that gradually began to evolve – beyond newspaper-style reporting and educational articles about astronomical research to the use of the magazine as a strategic communication tool, supporting the overall future goals of the organisation. This is visible again in the use of colour printing, until December 1982 restricted to the banner on the cover page. In the December 1982 issue, which celebrated the 20th anniversary of ESO, *The Messenger* featured the first tri-colour composite images based on ESO Schmidt plates as well as early CCD images in colour.

One year later, in December 1983 (No. 34), the cover page had a large picture with an artist’s impression of the VLT, created by Jean Leclercqz. The particular picture bears relatively little resemblance to the VLT as we know it today, but it stirred the imagination of the readers, following the crucial meeting in Cargèse, in which the project began to take shape with the support and enthusiasm of the astronomical community. The same issue carried an article by Daniel Enard and Jean-Pierre Swings about the project.

Perhaps an article of similar importance to the VLT “dreams” of the 1970s was the

article in March 1998 by the Director General of the time, Riccardo Giacconi, entitled “The Role of ESO in European Astronomy”, in which he laid down the rationale for the organisation within the European astronomical landscape, setting the course for future projects. But the use of *The Messenger* as a strategic communication tool was perhaps most clearly enunciated in No. 100, published in June 2000, which fittingly presented the 100-metre Overwhelmingly Large Telescope (OWL) conceptual study to the audience of readers and helped to prepare the ground for the coming ELT generation of telescopes. On the cover page of the anniversary issue, just above the OWL paper, the editor presented *The Messenger* as “one channel of ESO’s multimedia approach to providing information about its activities and achievements”.

This shift in approach did not mean that *The Messenger* no longer maintained its mixture of articles, including institutional developments, new instruments and current observation programmes. It was sometimes even used for fast presentation of new research results, although without a peer-review system it never aspired to become a formal scientific journal. One strength of *The Messenger* was the short production time. An example of this was a 16-page section with early ESO observations of SN 1987A, appearing only three weeks after its discovery in February 1987.

*The Messenger* also gave space to retrospective articles. Best known, perhaps, is the series of articles written by Adriaan Blaauw and published in 1990–91 about ESO’s early history, which he defined as the period between 1953 and 1975. These articles were subsequently compiled into a book that has become the reference historical description of ESO during that epoch (Blaauw, 1991). But others provided informative articles and brief notes about ESO’s history as well, such as Daniel Enard’s “The VLT – genesis of a project” in issue No. 50, Woltjer’s article on the “Discovery of Paranal” (No. 64), Alan Moorwood’s article on the evolution of infrared instrumentation at ESO over 30 years, appearing in the same issue as Hans Dekker’s paper on optical spectrographs (No. 136),

Gero Rupprecht’s summary of 20 years of FORS operations (No. 140), and indeed many others.

Since the early days, *The Messenger* had brought articles about new telescopes and instruments, and it could be said that these articles stand out as the strongest contemporary asset of the publication. This is hardly a coincidence. The strong engineering tradition is one of the hallmarks of ESO and undoubtedly a key source behind its success.

In September 1993, Marie-Hélène Ulrich took over as editor of *The Messenger*. The change of editorship brought a tightening of the editorial policies, with an introduction of fixed sections on Telescopes and Instrumentation, Reports from Observers and Other Astronomical News and finally, Announcements. This change enforced the move towards a publication for technically or scientifically oriented readers. The more rigid approach, manifested in the new format, was maintained by Ulrich’s successor, Peter Shaver, who assumed the task in June 2002. At the time, opening up *The Messenger* to cover non-ESO related astronomical news was considered, but in the end, *The Messenger* continued on the path it had followed so far – as an in-house publication appealing to a broad external readership. This readership was sizeable. From the original print run of little more than a thousand copies, in the 1980–90s the circulation grew to 3–5000, with an estimated readership clearly exceeding that number since it included many institute and public libraries.

### Changing appearance

Looking back, the editorial changes can largely be seen as adjustments to the early concept, although compared to the first issues there is little resemblance between then and now. This also applies to the graphical appearance, even though for almost 30 years, practically no visible changes occurred. On the technical side much had happened. Thus, from issue No. 6, offset printing was used and from issue No. 79 (March 1995), desktop publishing was introduced. By March 2003, however, the new technical editor, Henri Boffin, had given the magazine a

face-lift. The first change was the introduction of full-size cover pictures (i.e. with no text other than a caption). A year later, the traditional banner at the top of the cover disappeared, seeing instead the introduction of the row of flags of ESO's member states.

When Boffin moved to other tasks at ESO in March 2005, Jutta Boxheimer replaced him as technical editor. Boxheimer brought with her the skills of a very successful, professional graphic designer with additional solid experience in scientific publishing. She naturally played a central role in developing the new ESO "corporate design" which encompassed everything from letterheads and business cards to the ESO website – and, of course, *The Messenger*. From then on, ESO's communication efforts, including the graphical design, were seen as a whole, establishing *The Messenger* in its present look and feel and supporting its image of a mature, up-to-date, serious scientific publication with high quality content.

The current external circulation, of 4100 copies, is testimony to the continued interest that readers take in ESO and its activities. In the recent years, *The Messenger* has also been accessible online and so even new readers have

access to past issues, from the very first issue until today. In that sense, one of the two aims for the magazine when it was launched 38 years ago – to provide a window onto ESO for the outside world – has undoubtedly been reached. The other aim, to support internal communication (although it was phrased slightly differently) can be said to have been reached as well, inasmuch as the publication contains a wealth of information about what goes on at ESO at the technical level. Providing space for the members of the science faculty to present themselves has added an important human dimension, too. Nonetheless, the relaxed newsletter, as it was originally conceived, has disappeared. So has the Spanish summary, which was discontinued in March 1988, although two articles, in much abbreviated versions, appeared slightly later. The last one, with the title, "Mi Visita a La Silla", fittingly described a visit to the observatory by André Muller, the ESO Superintendent in Chile of the early years. This article was published in December 1988.

*The Messenger* has over the years served several purposes: as a tool for internal communication as well as providing information to the user community at large and other interested parties, such as many amateur astronomers. Perhaps

unwittingly, however, it has fulfilled an additional role as a highly valuable source of information about ESO's history and, to the extent that it mirrors at least some main developments and trends in the general history of European astronomy, it remains an incredibly rich treasure to explore and to enjoy. Happy Anniversary, *Messenger!*

#### Acknowledgements

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	Editors	Technical Editors
1974–1975	Francis Walsh	Kurt Kjär
1976–1980	Richard West	Kurt Kjär
1980–1986	Philippe Véron	Kurt Kjär
1986–1993	Richard West	Kurt Kjär
1993–2002	Marie-Hélène Ulrich	Kurt Kjär
2002–2006	Peter Shaver	Kurt Kjär Henri Boffin (from 2003) Jutta Boxheimer (from 2005)
2007–	Jeremy Walsh	Jutta Boxheimer

#### References

- Blaauw, A. 1991, *ESO's Early History – The European Southern Observatory from Concept to Reality*. ESO, Garching, Germany  
 Kjär, K. 2000, *The Messenger*, 100, 53



A colour image of the nearby barred spiral galaxy NGC 4945, in the Centaurus A group of galaxies, obtained with the 1.5-metre Danish telescope at La Silla. Images in three filters (*B*-, *V*- and *R*-bands) were combined and emphasise the dust clouds and H II regions of the disc. In the centre of the galaxy there is a heavily obscured Seyfert 2 active galactic nucleus. More details can be found in Picture of the Week 15 February 2010.

Credit: ESO/IDA/Danish 1.5 m/R. Gendler and C. Thöne