
A 30-year milestone for radio astronomy naming standards

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Congratulations to Mike Kesteven from the ATNF and Alan Bridle from the National Radio Astronomy Observatory (NRAO), who received a special award in February from the Institute of Engineering & Technology “in recognition of the 30th anniversary of the beginning of astronomical designation formatting”.

In 1977 Kesteven and Bridle published a paper giving an *Index of extragalactic radio-source catalogues* (Royal Astronomical Society of Canada, vol 71, p 21). This provided a guide to over 50 catalogues of extragalactic radio sources. At the time, around 30,000 astronomical radio sources were known. These were listed in the catalogues and other publications with a chaotic range of naming conventions that made it difficult to compare objects listed in one catalogue with those in another. For example, the source NGC 1265 was variously listed as 3C 83.1, NRAO 131, LHE 83, 4C41.06, VRO 41.03.01, OE 425 and BDFL 0315+41.

The Kesteven-Bridle paper made an important contribution to clarifying this muddle by listing

all the major known catalogues with a simple formatting scheme that summarised how the catalogues had listed their objects. They also advocated that future surveys should use a convention, proposed by the IAU in 1973, whereby sources are listed using the format HHMM±DDD to give the right ascension and declination of the source position, with an additional prefix, such as “PK” for Parkes, to indicate the survey origin.

In 1983 an entire issue of *Astronomy and Astrophysics Supplement Series* (vol 52, no 4) was dedicated to *The First Dictionary of the Nomenclature of Celestial Objects* (Solar system excluded). This acknowledged the groundwork done by Kesteven & Bridle and provided a scheme for catalogue designations that is still in use.

In the current era of “Virtual Observatories”, where astronomers have access to huge databases obtained from many institutions, it is still essential to have well-defined standards for data formatting. It is good to look back at the early stages of doing this.