

Editoriali/Editorials

The privilege of editing a scientific journal

POVL MUNK-JØRGENSEN

Editor, Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica

In his invitation letter (invitation e-mail) the editor of *Epidemiologia e Psichiatria Sociale*, Professor Michele Tansella used the phrase: "...with the focus on the main problems to face in running a psychiatric journal". The present author should like to underline that he disagrees with Professor Michele Tansella in this attitude to the editor function. Running a journal is not, and should never be "focusing main problems". Instead it is a privilege, and an ongoing feast: being in the centre of the scientific community, being in contact with research centres and colleagues who have the scientific attitude to psychiatry is a tremendous experience. By running a journal, especially as an editor you are entering directly into a worldwide inspiring, progressive, academic scientific milieu with a high level of quality selection.

To the other side you get inspiration by being close to the publishing companies. As a person with more than 30 years of public health service experiences it has been as opening a door to a new world to learn from the persons I collaborate with in the publishing company. To be taught from practical collaboration in management principles, financial management, and marketing is extremely helpful for members of the public service establishment.

When the present author was recruited to the chair as editor of *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* he was given the message: *your responsibility is to give the contents of*

the Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica the highest possible scientific quality. The rest: printing, layout, circulation, dissemination, management, advertisement, you name it, will be taken care of in the publishing company. A clear, wonderful and self-evident message to get. Of course, the better the editor and the publisher communicate, understand and respect each others work, the better result for the journal.

ONE OF THE CHALLENGES TO FACE IS THE ELECTRONIC PUBLISHING

Let us look a bit deeper into this question. From an overall point of view there are two areas in which electronics are relevant in scientific publishing: To make the journal and to circulate the journal. We will start from behind.

HOW TO CIRCULATE THE JOURNAL

When I visit my younger colleagues in their offices in the Department of Psychiatric Demography, where I work, I find it conspicuous that: There are no journals on their desks, but the computer is wide open. These young colleagues are highly skilled in using this latter tool, they know about all the literature databases, where to search, where to look; they can dig up every article and any letter or comment relevant to their research at least one month before it is circulated in the hard copy versions of the journals. They just care about the topic and not about the specific journal in which the matter is published. These (younger) researchers reach their colleagues in Brisbane, Copenhagen, San Diego, Verona, Nagasaki ... faster than they get out of the chair and see the colleagues

Address for correspondence: Professor P.Munk-Jørgensen, Department of Psychiatric Demography, Institute for Basic Psychiatric Research, Aarhus Psychiatric Hospital, University Hospital, DK-8240 Risskov (Denmark).

E-mail: pmj@psykiatri.aaa.dk

Declaration of Interest: Povl Munk-Jørgensen scientific and teaching activities have during 2001 and 2002 been supported financially by various non-restricted grants from private and public sources.

in the neighbouring office. This type of readers is large electronic publishing users (Munk-Jørgensen, 2002).

Visiting the research library, I mainly meet the nurses and other members of the caring staff reading books. I also meet the middle-aged consultants screening recent issues of the hard copy journals for relevant articles that can update them in their clinical work.

One breed on the point of extinction is found in this group of middle-aged+ consultants. They have a personal subscription to one or two of the general psychiatric journals. They have been reading the journal for years, they know the profile, they can tell about the various editors' different profiles, they love the layout, the aesthetic of the layout, they love the smell when opening a new issue of *their* journal. This reader is not likely to exist in 10 years' time.

A first conclusion could be: The editor and publisher must find a way to reach a potential readership ranging from the young, very specialised scientist who wants only few specific articles from a broad variety of journals - to the reader who reads only one or maybe a few journals. The first reader wants access to the information yesterday or even better, the day before yesterday. Maybe in a few years this type of young scientists has never held a hard copy version of a journal in his/her hands. The latter reader goes through every issue of his journal, knows the journal almost as well as the editor and also cares about journal aesthetic. All kind of readers in between these two extremes is potential target groups.

HOW TO MAKE THE JOURNAL

The highest quoted Danish scientist within health sciences, Jens Frederik Refeldt, writes in his book *Fornemmelse for Forskning* (Sense of Science) (Rehfeld, 2001) that science is not science until it has been published. Publishing is part of the scientific process, publishing can make up to 50% of the process.

Editors' work is part of the scientific process. Editors belong to the scientific community. The editors have a long row of obligations, some of them mentioned in the list below (without order of priority):

- Secure the quality of the journal
- all the time be aware of what happens "out there" in the research milieus, smell what will be interesting in the future
- identifying the original papers in the incoming flow of manuscripts
- all the time be aware of the profile of the readers, tomorrow, next year, and next year, and in five years'

time and so on

- all the time be aware of the profile of the journal tomorrow, next year, in five years' time, and so on
- read the submitted manuscripts, collaborate with the authors
- collaborate with the publisher, give the publisher input about trends in the scientific milieus. Learn and understand from the publisher about the complex process of publishing, in these years with a specific focus on electronic publishing.
- collaborate with the reviewers
- always, everywhere, in any professional setting be aware of inviting the best scientists to submit to the journal, always be aware of catching-up new things happening in the scientific milieu

When talking about how to produce the journal the editor meet in principle no differences between working with electronic versions or with hard copies. Today, electronic media is a tool just as the typewriter and the postman were just a few years ago; the editor's main responsibility is to ensure the quality of the contents, the methodology of the studies, their originality, etc. It makes no difference whether submitted manuscripts are delayed in the publishing process because they are laying on the editor's desk too long in a hard copy or in the editor's computer in an electronic version. The inconvenience is the same whether the expert reviewer does not react to an assessment request for a hard copy manuscript or an electronic version of a manuscript.

However, the electronic tool is a wonderful opportunity for shortening submission, review, and publication time. But this requires great discipline of all the involved. As a parallel example, the present author has a clear recollection of the quality-deterioration that he has noticed through the last years in the (too) many e-mail communications of varying relevance he receives as to language, quality in spelling, grammar, and sad to say, the content compared to the mailed letters he received just a few years ago, not to mention the handwritten letters from long, long ago. This sloppiness must not creep into the process of producing a scientific journal alongside the electronic tools.

Finally, two points which should be mentioned: Impatience with the time from submission to publication can tempt an author to "publish" data directly on the internet. Besides impatience other factors can promote this development: An idea of free democratic access to data, disappointment with an expert reviewer's criticism and a rejection of a manuscript from a journal. The risk that these non-expert-reviewed internet-published data sneak into the reference lists of the peer reviewed jour-

nals is imminent and must in every possible way be prevented in order to avoid contamination of science.

It is important that we do not give lower priority to the content in our fascination of the instrument. A scaring parallel example is how we at the international level widely have forgotten psychiatry in our preoccupation of its organization.

A second conclusion reads: The explosive development in electronic communication and data processing is a wonderful tool which should be used with the greatest discipline of all involved, and all the time it should be remembered that it is nothing but a tool.

THE EXPERT REVIEWERS

Together with the authors and the readers the expert reviewers are without competition the most important persons in the entire publication process. Without their assistance in assessing the originality and quality, the

international health science would not be at as high a level as is the case today. As for the editor it is also the case for the reviewer that whether the manuscript is delivered by postman or electronic the reviewer's scientific skills, experiences, and judgment is the crucial point. A competent review cannot be done in less than several hours. Thousands and thousands of manuscripts are peer reviewed every day by legions of colleagues from the scientific community - and we, the authors, the readers and the editors cannot thank them warmly enough - whether we acknowledge them electronic or by help of letter and stamp.

REFERENCES

- Munk-Jørgensen P. (2002). Happy New Year 2002 (Editorial). *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* 105, 1-2.
- Rehfeld J.F. (2001). *Fornemmelse for Forskning* (Sense of science). Akademisk Forlag A/S: Viborg.