

My Life as an Editor – Matko Marušić



How and why did you become a journal editor?

In 1991, when Croatia became free, I started the journal with a romantic idea of “influencing the culture of a troubled nation”. (Before free elections this would have been unthinkable.) I envisioned that a national journal in English that would serve as “doors and windows

between Croatia and the world”: doors – to open the way for international criteria into Croatia; windows – for the world to see that we were not a savage Balkan tribe but an ancient European culture with good science. It happened that I started the journal almost simultaneously with the start of war in Croatia. The separation of Croatia from former Yugoslavia resulted in military intervention and a five-year long war. Besides publishing on the medical aspect of the war (military medicine, public health, and human rights aspects), we contributed to peace-building efforts and post-war reconciliation. This proved that the editor is not only an executive producer of a journal but can be significant in social, cultural, and political life.

What did you love about your job, and what did you dislike?

I am a southerner, and like and dislike things intensively. In such an intensity I liked the fact that my position enabled me to teach my authors, to help them publish; the authors want to publish, which gives the editor an opportunity to help them acquire skills in research methodology, data presentation, collaboration, responsible conduct of research, and other important things. Equally intensively I hated all kinds of interventions to publish papers that were not worth publishing. Although I was experienced in living in an undemocratic society, I was surprised by the multitude and intensity of such events. The more the journal became important and respected, the more such pressures grew. I have never yielded, and the issue finally exploded into an ugly scandal that has lasted for seven years and still is not over. Both the good and bad aspects proved to be abundant, and the 18 years of my work added to the intensity of my emotional life.

What was the happiest moment in your career as the editor?

When Richard Horton, the editor of *The Lancet*, came to visit, and I took him to my home town of Split, which I adore, and where I grew up at the bottom of society. So, my lifelong dream was to contribute to Split’s transformation into a European-level Mediterranean beauty. Dr Horton delivered a fantastic lecture, “The seven mortal sins of publishing” to a packed audience. For years afterwards, colleagues congratulated and thanked me; I saw this as a

clear sign that a small event could have enormous impact on scientific culture.

What was the most difficult editorial decision you have had to make?

I resigned from the (unpaid) job I adored. It was extremely ugly, painful, and sad. I did it under a terrible danger that the journal would be overtaken by the people who wanted to misuse editorial freedom and everything we achieved during the last 20 years. We were on the verge of defeat and I thought that my resignation might help ease the pressure because I suspected that much of the aggression was aimed at me personally. The pressure did not cease – but we saved the journal. I miss my beloved journal, and I will never make peace with that feeling.

What important changes have you seen in the world of editing during the course of your career?

Electronic publishing. It took me some time to start appreciating it, because I focused on reading. However, the key to e-publishing is not reading but finding information. The advancement in that respect is fascinating and extremely useful.

What makes you happy or sad about the progress in the publishing industry?

Our journal is able to follow modern publishing trends, which makes me happy. Myself, I lag behind, which makes me sad. However, I turn this into humour, because my younger collaborators enjoy seeing the boss lagging behind them in technology. So, I aggravate my problems, make them incautious, and wait for them in the areas where I am stronger. Older people are stronger in the ability to make hard decisions, to stand pressure, to think strategically. My successors still sometimes turn to me for advice; I charge them with the obligation to teach me, for example in using “Dropbox”. Lots of fun.

Do you have any advice for young editors?

Two points. First, do not stop thinking of what is the true niche (purpose) of your journal. Science is much wider, much more versatile, than it looks at first glance. So, a smart editor can find the niche for his or her journal by watching the journal’s position in the “science versatility spectrum”. In other words, do not compete with the bigger and better in mainstream science; find where you are special, interesting, and internationally important.

Second, never, ever, get tempted to be influenced in your decisions by anything except science. Only perfect honesty, and honest objectivity, makes a good journal. Once you start “trading” and making deals, there is no return. There are no deals in editorial work.