

## Scientific Editing in Bosnia and Herzegovina: a personal journey

Izet Masic

President of the Academy of Medical Sciences, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina; Editor-in-Chief, *Medicinski Arhiv*, *Acta Informatica Medica*, *Materia Socio Medica*; imasic@lol.ba



The most encouraging aspects of being an editor are respect and honour, which can be achieved by devoted and highly professional or qualified work. Qualification in scientific editing is a life-long achievement and a result of the struggle for objectivity and clarity of publications. On the road towards qualification, an editor might find many supportive friends and “foes”. The latter is inevitable when a journal editor reaches a certain level of proficiency and becomes more selective about what is published.

During my lifetime, editorial work has been an inseparable part of my professional activities on many occasions. Surprisingly for most, I learned how to edit in elementary school, then improved my editorial skills after high school, back in the early 1970s. I was involved in editing a school newspaper in grammar and high school, and, as a result, became one of the state's leading experts on standards of writing in the Bosnian language.

In every young person's life there comes a moment when he/she must make a crucial decision. For me it was the choice of undergraduate studies at Sarajevo University. Despite my parents' advice to choose only one course, I was thinking about studying medicine, political sciences and journalism, without giving up writing, my “true love”. In the end, I opted for medicine and writing. As a student, I paid much attention to rare and unique medical cases, trying to produce case reports. Luckily, I was given a chance to edit a newsletter for students in 1974. It was a popular and highly informative journal *Voice of medics* (Glas medicinara) founded by my beloved University tutors back in 1961. Many similar editions are still published by other medical faculties of the former Yugoslavia: *Medicinar* (Zagreb), *Medicinski podmladak* (Belgrade), *Medicinski razgledi* (Ljubljana), *Naučni podmladak* (Nis), etc.

Publication of the student medical journal suffered interruptions, but despite all difficulties, I “revived” it several times. Unfortunately, it is no longer published, and perhaps awaits fresh enthusiasts with an understanding of its importance to students, future physicians, researchers and academics. Notably, most medical educators from Sarajevo and other parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina published something in this newsletter, which became a starting point for their later academic career. Undoubtedly, all these authors feel bound to the first, and possibly key publications of their lives.

Later on, being passionate about editorial work and having a certain amount of experience, I founded a new journal, *Acta medica et stomatologica studentorum Iugoslavica*, for 15 medical and dental faculties of the former Yugoslavia. The journal was successful for a long while, and continued to be published for four years after my term as editor. It was highly reputed among students and academic professionals all over Yugoslavia.

Upon graduation from the Medical faculty in 1978, I was offered a post as editor of *Materia Socio Medica Iugoslavica*. I was responsible for editing this highly prestigious European journal, from paper submission to sending issues to print. I am still editing this journal along with two other scientific journals, now as chief editor.

Editing has inspired me over the past decades and given me the knowledge and skills for running scientific journals, indexing them, and providing a forum for science communication. Some of the obstacles to successful science editing have been discussed in my previous publications<sup>1-4</sup>.

As a rule, most successful editors are those born to become editors. Only a gifted, multi-talented person with a good knowledge of science and advanced linguistic skills will succeed and survive in the highly competitive field of scientific writing, editing and indexing. An editor must have the motivation to persist and a clear vision of where his/her journal is heading. Everything should be done to maintain and improve the quality of articles in the interest of the global scientific community; to ensure reliance on strong evidence and scientific facts, not fiction, and to improve the visibility and impact of publications. In my opinion, based on my decades-long experience, the quality and longevity of a journal result from the proper selection of editorial team members who will support their colleagues and authors in an unbiased way. Luckily, I've been surrounded by well-trained and motivated associates over the past 20 years.

The efforts of an editor should be encouraged and supported by proper funding. Lack of funding ended the publication of numerous journals in Bosnia and Herzegovina. For the same reason, many motivated and skilled editors who started new journals were frustrated and forced to give up after just a few issues.

For most local journals, the quality of the peer review and availability of highly skilled referees have been a major problem for decades. It has been an uphill struggle for most editors to find unbiased experts, both local and international, who are willing to accept responsibility and stand behind the quality of journal articles. Local reviewers, as well as editors from the small scientific community, have always faced the dilemma of being objective and criticizing poor papers, or “harming” their friends and making “enemies”. In a small country, local authors and reviewers easily recognize each other, even when their identity is hidden. For our journals, most locally submitted articles are in Bosnian, Croatian or Serbian, which means that we cannot use reviewers from outside the country owing to the language barrier. Local submissions in English are still not up to a high standard, which also makes it difficult to use international reviewers.

A separate and significant issue is the qualification of local editors. Most editors have improved their knowledge and skills through trial and error; a few have joined international professional associations such as the World Association of

Medical Editors (WAME) and the European Association of Science Editors (EASE). Networking among local scientific editors is gradually increasing but there is still a lack of scientific and academic collaboration with colleagues from the mainstream science countries. More educational programs are needed for both novice and senior science editors.

I have been editing three indexed journals out of the 14 medical journals published in my country<sup>5</sup>, namely *Medicinski arhiv/Medical Archives* (founded in 1947), *Materia Socio Medica* (founded in 1978) and *Acta Informatica Medica* (founded in 1993). Based on my experience, an article quality evaluation scale was developed and this template is now available on the website of AvicenaPublisher. Reviewers of these three journals are asked to assess submissions using the scale which includes the following five components:

1. Scientific merit of a submission
2. International importance and potential impact
3. Originality of methodology and results
4. Technical quality
5. Quality of language

A major achievement was the adoption of an electronic editorial management system, which has been used to coordinate the submission, peer review and editing of these three journals. However, some other local journals still do not use such a system, putting the journal production at a disadvantage.

Unfortunately, most authors do not follow the instructions for authors and available guidelines, such as the recently published EASE guidelines for authors and translators<sup>6</sup>. As a result, nearly 40% of the submissions are rejected. The remaining 60% of the submissions are accepted. A large proportion of these (40%) undergo extensive technical and linguistic editing by the editor and a few of his associates.

I am confident that most of the problems mentioned can be overcome by devoted editorial work. Here I would like to remind the readers that we did not give up editing in Sarajevo even during the 1479 days of the siege in the 1990s. At that time, we were working in darkness, without electricity, water, gas or a food supply. Printing materials were scarce and expensive (A4 size paper package of 500 sheets was 25 Euros) but we managed to survive, to continue publishing *Medical Archives*, and even to launch *Acta Informatica Medica*, known as “the Sarajevo war miracles”. But more about that on some other occasion...

### References

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