

Editorial

Evolution and revolution at *The EMBO Journal*

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On its 30th anniversary, executive editors of *The EMBO Journal* reflect on change and progress.

John Tooze. 'I find it difficult to believe that *The EMBO Journal* is 30 years old but it is, and I suppose I should not, therefore, be surprised to find my memories of its launch idiosyncratic and fading. What do I remember? First that a majority of EMBO Council of the day felt that a journal would help cement the EMBO Membership, and, if successful, it would market EMBO's name to a worldwide audience and possibly generate income.

I remember arguing that we should go to a small publisher to handle everything other than the editorial function. EMBO was in no position to run production, distribution and marketing, and I felt strongly that a small publisher would give us better service and attention than one of the giants. In the end we entered into a contract with IRL Press. It was a happy choice and *The EMBO Journal* became the leader of their stable. Eventually IRL Press was bought by Oxford University Press, which proved a worthy successor.

In the earliest years, I was often very anxious about manuscript numbers and quality. Would we get enough high-quality manuscripts to produce a journal that would add lustre to EMBO's name or would we drift into mediocrity and financial inconsequentiality? I would phone leading EMBO Members to plead with them for the papers they were sending to *Cell*, *Nature*, *Science*, or at least to give us first refusal on those that *Cell* and *Nature* had declined. A common reply was 'John we'd happily send you our best but our grad students and postdocs insist on shooting for the stars'. I suspect that remains the situation now. With time, however, the basis for worry about manuscript flow changed from too few to too many, while the quality issue remained. Handling more and more paper manuscripts cost money and time (in particular for my secretaries Mare Kriis and Jennifer Schulze-Eyßing), but we coped. There was no editorial back up in the early years until Iain agreed to share responsibility. I remember during a family holiday standing in a telephone box in a rain storm on the Isle of Skye suggesting referees based on

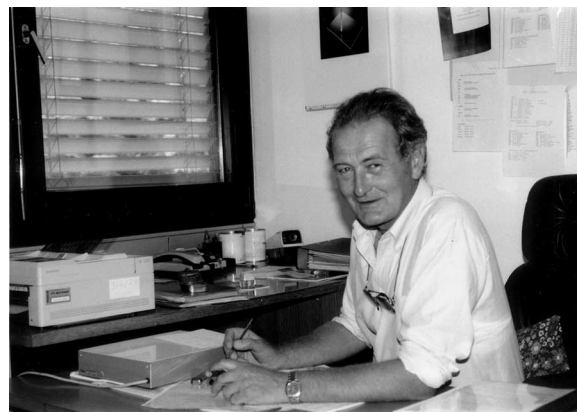
Iain Mattaj. 'When I took up the position of Editor, I'd already helped John out on a few occasions by taking over from him as a holiday replacement. As such, I'd choose referees, take straightforward decisions on acceptance, revision or rejection and leave it up to Mare and Jenny to deal with correspondence and John to deal with difficult cases on his return. At the time, John, Mare and Jenny not only took complete care of *The EMBO Journal* but also of everything else EMBO did. I was the first addition to the team and although it was very flattering to have been asked to help run such an important journal, and I enjoyed taking on the responsibility, I nevertheless initially felt

titles and authors of new manuscripts. As for money, the journal surprisingly quickly gave EMBO a useful annual return.

What else do I remember? The decision I took to invite people to send potential cover illustrations—not simply images from papers but paintings, photographs, whatever. One example was Lelio Orci's watercolour (<http://www.nature.com/emboj/journal/v20/n24/covers/index.html>).

And then there were the very many phone calls from rejected authors. After the preliminaries I would say 'Nothing you are going to tell me will change the rejection decision but I'll listen if you want me to.' Twenty minutes or so later the caller in Europe or the USA would wind down and I would repeat my initial statement and that was that. I guess the one-sided conversation was some sort of catharsis, confessional psychotherapy, since they quite often seemed relieved, less stressed at the end.

But enough of 30 years ago when everything was paper, post and courier, just slower. Today, with instantaneous electronic communication I don't envy my successors facing those daily myriads of emails.'



John Tooze

Vice President, Scientific and Facility Operations, Rockefeller University, New York; Executive Editor of *The EMBO Journal* from 1982 to 2003

very much like an outsider in a very experienced office. I don't remember ever discussing the editorial work with John for more than a couple of minutes. We were both pretty much 'sleeves up and get on with it' people. He trusted my judgement as a much-used referee and probably either saw no need for further instruction on what he considered a straightforward job or thought I was too impatient to listen to his advice.

It really was a different age. There were no targets, and although statistics on acceptance rates and impact factors were collected retrospectively there was minimal discussion of how we should act on them. The referee databases were in

our heads. I benefitted enormously in that respect from being a voracious journal reader and seminar attendee, and by being at The European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL), where seminars and meetings of all sorts were frequent and generally excellent, and I was very gratified by the willingness of referees to help both the authors and the journal. The logistics, from today's standpoint, seem antiquated. Manuscripts arrived in triplicate paper copies and we would simply choose two referees, put one copy for each in an envelope, and send them out. It was assumed referees would be willing to provide a report and the vast majority did. After about three weeks I got the first feedback on my performance. Mare slid the glass window between the cupboard-size office I was in and the main office and said, 'John says you're choosing too many American referees. We can't afford the postage.' I lost that battle but much later, with the spread of fax machines, managed to persuade the triumvirate that it was time to start asking referees if they were willing to provide a review before sending the manuscript. That increased the number of refusals but decreased the number of cases where manuscripts simply vanished and were never heard of again. Fax machines were however a mixed blessing. When I travelled to meetings I'd be met each morning by reams of fax paper with the title and abstract pages of all newly-arrived manuscripts, referee reports, author rebuttals etc. It was a premonition of how reachable we would all become when the real digital communication age arrived.

John and I were active editors, by which I mean we considered the papers and the reports and took decisions. At least for the first few years I don't remember ever consulting a referee for a second time about the same manuscript. This meant that when authors phoned to complain about the decision we could have a science-based discussion on why the paper was rejected (naturally, no-one called to complain about acceptance) and that discussion satisfied all but the most obdurate of the callers. As the editorial office got bigger over the next dozen years, and as other journals

Pernille Rørth. 'Toward the end of 2004, it was getting clear that even Iain was perhaps a mere mortal—not finding the time to run *The EMBO Journal* along with everything else at EMBL. EMBO Director Frank Gannon asked me if I would be willing to take over. I had one necessary characteristic—a general and broad interest in the areas of science touched by molecular biology. It was to be a steep learning curve and five very, very interesting years.

Iain had set up the editorial office with four full-time editors to deal with about 3000 manuscripts every year. The editorial board, populated with experts that really cared about the journal and its quality, and a deep referee database were already in place. The role of the executive editor was 'simply' to step in when needed—a role that could be interpreted in many ways. I chose to be very involved with the editors—working with them, the senior advisors and the Advisory Editorial Board on a daily basis.

One role was to help editors in conflicts with authors and reviewers. Growing up as a younger sister, I learned how to manage bullies. I was once asked whether being a bully or not related to the number of X chromosomes. The evidence does not support this—but there are other correlations best left unspecified.

transformed their editorial offices more and more into postal relays between authors and referees, I tried to instill this attitude to editorial work in the incoming editors. It is still a major principle of the current and laudable '*EMBO Transparent Editorial Process*' introduced by Hermann Bujard and Pernille Rørth when they were, respectively, Director of EMBO and Editor of *The EMBO Journal*.

Let me close with my favourite referee report from Werner Franke. The manuscript concerned the nuclear matrix, a structure whose preparation involved isolating nuclei, then bombarding them with strong detergent and high concentrations of nucleases directed against both DNA and RNA. This of course left an insoluble aggregate of proteins whose relationship with the underlying organisation of the nucleus was, to put it mildly, controversial. Franke's comments for transmission to the authors began: 'Papers on the nuclear matrix always remind me of Lenin's first lesson on how to organise a successful revolution. He insisted it was necessary to commit all the necessary cruelties in the first minutes.'



Iain Mattaj

Director General of The European Molecular Biology Laboratory;
Executive Editor of *The EMBO Journal* from 1990 to 2004

What was the most gratifying aspect of the work? Clearly the good science; also working with the thoughtful and dedicated editors. As a publishing author and a reviewer, it was not hard to empathize with all the points of view—but resolving all this to a satisfactory decision—well, that was the job. Getting the 3rd perspective—that of the editor—helps.

The journal landscape was becoming more crowded and complex. Very relevant questions were being asked about the role of society journals in a world replete with families of top-tier journals. It was important to hold on to the things that made *The EMBO Journal* a well-respected journal—including a direct involvement of active scientists in the decision-making—but also speed, efficiency and fair rules. It was equally important to help explore new directions that could move scientific publishing in a good direction—even if risky. With the help of suggestions from members of the EMBO community this led to the '*EMBO transparent editorial process*' that the journal initiated at the onset of 2009.

Although *The EMBO Journal* is 'all grown up' now at 30, it continues to have a leading role in the world of science publishing. I wish the next generation of authors, reviewers and editors a most impactful future.'



Pernille Rørth

Research Director at the Institute of Molecular and Cell Biology;
Executive Editor of *The EMBO Journal* from 2005 to 2009

Bernd Pulverer. ‘My research career started at a time when molecular biology was rapidly expanding beyond the nucleus to encompass fields such as signal transduction and the cell cycle. From the start, *The EMBO Journal* was very present in the life of a fledgling PhD student as a beacon of quality—a must-read journal. As the journal matured through its teens, John Tooze and later Iain Mattaj presided over the selection process with their encyclopedic knowledge. I well remember their formidable presence in the research community alongside the likes of Ben Lewin at *Cell* and John Maddox at *Nature*. As a young adult, the journal experienced a growth burst, leading to a more diversified editorial office. The exceptional dedication and care of the editorial staff at *The EMBO Journal* and their proximity to the scientific community cultivated under Pernille Rørth stands out to me as a defining characteristic of the adult journal.

Looking to the next 30 years, molecular biology will continue to spread to every part of biology, biotechnology and medicine. The journal will reflect this in its broadening scope and an emphasis on physiological relevance, as well as a global reach. The exchange of validated scientific information via the traditional research paper will remain at the heart of the scientific process. However, we aim to play a leading role in embracing online technologies and publication policies that will transform the paper from a static document of research achievement to a research tool containing data that can be readily accessed, reproduced and reused. Accessibility to our human readers will remain our main priority. We will continue to evolve an optimized editorial process by extending the *EMBO Transparent Editorial Process* principles



The EMBO Journal editorial team: α , Anke Sparmann; σ , Céline Carret; θ , Thomas Schwarz-Romond; κ , Karin Dumstrei; ι , Isabel Arnold; δ , David del Álamo; æ , Anne Færch Nielsen; χ , Hartmut Vodermaier; π , Bernd Pulverer.

launched by Pernille and by adopting rigorous scientific and ethical standards. The feedback and advice of the EMBO membership is crucial in continuously improving the publishing process.

We aim to do justice to EMBO’s vision for the journal in 1982 to publish papers of exceptional significance that are based on rigorous data and thoughtful analysis. I hope *The EMBO Journal* continues to look as fresh and attractive as ever in its 30s.’

Bernd Pulverer

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