

Five Years of Being a Co-Editor of Media Psychology

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I finished my job as a co-editor of Media Psychology this morning. My last paper was an “accept” – which is wonderful – and it was a manuscript co-authored by a diverse team of authors who thoughtfully and thoroughly went through three rounds of reviews. This was a coincidence, of course, but it initiated several sentimental thoughts.

I love this journal for its topics, authors, and the ideas of its founders. And I am tremendously grateful for the chance to be the first editor of this journal affiliated with a European University, a chance granted by Amy Nathanson and Francesca Dillman Carpentier, my co-editors. I feel privileged that I got to spend time with and learn from these wonderful two co-editors, supportive and hard-working editorial assistants (Johanna Schäwel and Philipp Masur), inspiring authors, prolific and thoughtful reviewers, the best editorial board and Jillian O’Hara from Taylor and Francis.

In what follows, I share some of my personal observations. It is all unsorted and not what I would consider a comprehensive overview but rather my intuitive perspective.

The Editor’s Hidden Agenda

There were some things I learned that I wished I had known as an author. I have heard people say (a) that an editor’s aim is to increase a journal’s impact no matter what, (b) that editors have some hidden and strategic agenda, and (c) that editors protect their own friends. Some of this is true, actually: (for a) With each and every paper, I strived to increase the impact of the journal by working to the best of my ability and the hardest I could to increase the quality and consequently the impact of the journal. (for b) My strategies were manifold; the three most important ones were to understand the core of each and every paper, first from the perspective of the authors, then the perspective of the field, and then my perspective; to understand and critically assess a manuscript’s theoretical contribution and methodological coherence; and to increase national diversity. I also asked each author how they might contribute to open science, but this was not a strategy or ideology, but I would rather consider it methodology. However, (for c) We do not protect our friends. But sometimes our friends protect us, for example, by helping us out on short notice or during the midnight hour by providing a review that another person had agreed to do months ago but did not submit because of illness or other difficulties. I felt that in my role as an editor, I was receiving help from friends and acquaintances instead of providing help to my close network in return.

Journals are like Houses

I often read sentences (I must admit, even in articles I have co-authored) such as “the journals decide...” or “the journals don’t want...” or “the journals should ...” But this is not how it works, nor will it foster change. Journals are like houses. They are institutional and recognized as such, but they do not do things. They cause work, but they do not accomplish anything. There are people behind each and every step that a journal takes and each and every decision that a journal makes. People do the work. If we think about increasing the quality of the review processes, open science, etc., it will first be important to think about who will be in charge of a certain step or particular work that is to be done and whether it is feasible for this particular group of people to do this amount of work. Then, to initiate change, it is also more promising to address these groups or particular people.

The Personal Connection with Reviewers and Authors

My observation is that editors read an article carefully, very often really like it, talk about it at lunch, and are sometimes sad if they have to reject work they may really like for the most part but cannot accept for some particular reason. I have experienced all of these things and have often had an emotional connection to the review process. For example, there was a reviewer who turned in their review the day after I assigned it to them and began their personal email by expressing admiration for the writing style, the contents of the manuscript, and its overall impact. I found myself hanging up this email in my office, it made my days.

A reject note and an accept note come with tons of information and inspire many emotions in authors (and editors!). It is odd that they are often one-way communications. I personally liked it when authors briefly answered and said thank you when they felt gratitude but also when they expressed that they did not agree. I have received way more “thank you” notes (ironically uncounted and deleted) than notes with respectful disagreement (n = 5 out of N = 300 rejected manuscripts, archived in case further questions should come up). I searched my older emails. Thank you notes as a reply to a reject came from all over the world. Emails in which we discussed a reject also came from all over the world, authors had h-indices between 13 and 41. My recommendation would be to get in touch with your editor if you feel you need to. Your hard work deserves communication if you do not understand a reply or decision.

99.9% of the reviewers do not want or need acknowledgment. Reviewers can check a box to say if they do. Also, as a reviewer, I personally feel no need for praise. I can get that in other places. My source is the appreciation that comes in the direct responses from authors in their response letters. I know this is quite an unpopular view, which is why I felt I wanted to share it and also to learn whether others feel the same.

Future Projects on Quality and Equality

I was a co-editor for Media Psychology (and, an associate editor for the Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication) for the last five years. I now enjoy being an author, reviewer and board-member. And, I will try to contribute by continuing my research on national and gender diversity of our journals and by serving on the ICA Publication Committee. In that sense, pls. let me know if you would be interested in exchanging ideas on how we can improve the quality, equity and equality of our journals.

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