

Editing around the World

Transition to on-line journal management – how we switched to Open Journal System and stopped worrying

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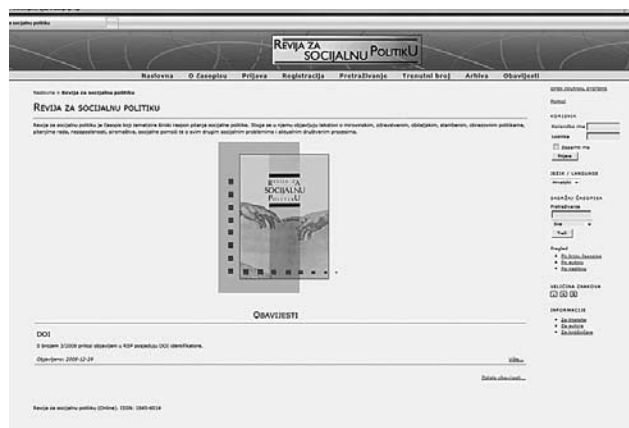
Although they are vital to scientific infrastructure and a key backdrop to research activity, academic journals are not commonly considered to be particularly innovative in the way they carry out their day-to-day business. Yet, the steady march of change has not spared journal management practices – journal editing and publishing methods first became digital for purposes of archiving, editing, workflow tracking, and correspondence, and then became integrated in journal management packages. Of course, eventually they went on-line.

Following these trends might have been a routine chore for the first and second tier international journals with decent resources and professional staffing. For journals operating on the periphery, in two languages, with modest readership and limited resources, and based on part-time editorial efforts, the latest transformation in the journal management process has been a very challenging one. Here follows the account of one such example.

Our journal *Revija za Socijalnu Politiku* (Croatian Journal of Social Policy) was established as recently as 1994, fitting the specific disciplinary niche in the region, handling about 30 peer-reviewed submissions and as many other contributions during a year. Formerly publishing only in Croatian, in 2004 we introduced the policy of accepting and publishing articles both in English and Croatian, thus attracting some international submissions and slightly increasing our reach.

In the early 2000s, the patchwork of filled-in notebooks, printouts, spreadsheets, and emails strewn around several rooms and computers in our editorial office was getting out of control, while feeling increasingly obsolete. In the end, it was the need to have our journal properly digitally published that gave us impetus to move on in late 2004. We immediately faced some substantive challenges. On the budgetary front, we had reliable but limited income and could not spend thousands of euros on commercial software or custom-made development – this would be overkill for a journal of our size. On the language side, our system of choice should have had support for multiple languages and the possibility of integrating a Croatian interface. Needless to say, the market had little to offer (or gain) in respect to our needs. Finally, we were clueless about online editorial practices.

Upon the advice of a librarian colleague, we decided to try the then-still-fledgling Open Journal System (OJS), an open source, free software offering web-based journal management and publishing under the auspices of the Public Knowledge Project (<http://pkp.sfu.ca>).¹ This resolved



our resource obstacle, providing a functional, moderately adjustable, potentially multilingual editing platform with minimal demands in terms of maintenance. Newer versions of OJS have since been released (the current version is 2.2.2), modified according to the constant feedback of a growing user base, and we have benefited by updating our installation. This kind of developer support helps us greatly without consuming any of our valuable resources. Had we developed a custom system, it would be more likely to become outcome- or maintenance-hungry. That the system is not proprietary also has benefits: there is no risk that if the publisher folds up, the entire service (and the whole electronic trail of editing) will disappear, or that data will become inaccessible if the commercial software solution is discontinued. Although OJS will most likely evolve further and eventually be discontinued or phased out, it is open source software that is now used by more than 2000 journals, so there is some kind of guarantee that the legacy will live on.

The language issue

As for the language issue, we made it harder for ourselves. Sometimes there is a rationale for a journal to accept and publish submissions both in the native language and in English. *Revija za Socijalnu Politiku* is one such journal: it strives to reach local practitioners, policymakers, and students while remaining open to international submissions and to authors who aspire to publish in English. Whereas it is trivial to adhere to such a policy within the traditional “manual” journal management process, it is challenging to update it in line with contemporary editorial software tools. The specific advantage of OJS in this respect is that it allows for all the interface, correspondence, and content to be entered and managed in multiple languages.

The first substantial obstacle is the translation of the user interface into the required language. Fortunately, OJS is already translated into several languages (currently Chinese, Croatian, Farsi, French, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Turkish, and Vietnamese) and there are convenient tools for updating translation. Second, all of the procedures, guidelines, and email templates related to the journal had to be entered in a consistent fashion in all the languages used.

But after these steps are done (once and for all), managing and submitting articles in different languages is as easy as switching the working language option. There is an additional benefit for users working in the language they are most comfortable with, regardless of the language of submission (Croatian authors can submit English language text via the Croatian interface, and the English-only speaking reviewer will not see a word of Croatian text during the review process).

Editing practices

When it comes to editing practices, it was challenging to marry the editorial workflow offered by OJS with local and disciplinary customs of academic journal management and publishing. It helps greatly if other journals in the country or the discipline use the same journal management system, so an exchange of experiences and establishment of best practice can happen. For us that was not the case, so we had to muddle through, learning from our own editorial mistakes and suboptimal solutions and gradually switching the journal management functions to OJS. Fortunately, the documentation and support offered for OJS was adequate (and has improved since).

OJS is most certainly not perfectly tuned to everyone's publishing needs and procedures, although recent versions have resolved many issues and added some functionality (at the cost of an increase in complexity). Choices and options can be adopted about the editorial workflow, roles, and publishing process, and while setting up such a system the editors will most certainly have to change at least some of their established editorial practices.

This we did. With the benefit of hindsight, this was a good thing, as we were forced to streamline our workflow, define editorial roles, and establish a firm set of rules and guidelines. Had our journal moved to digital journal management with a tailor-made system, we would most certainly have retained some of the more cumbersome practices.

In retrospect

So, what are the outcomes of this transition for our journal four years down the road? We fully embraced this system at the beginning of 2007, and since then all submissions have been entered via the web interface. There has been steady growth in the number of submissions and a diversification of the reviewer pool. The journal management system enabled our editors to work more efficiently, greatly increasing the quality and procedures of the review and editing process, with much more (double-blind where appropriate) feedback

between authors, editors, reviewers, and copyeditors. We ourselves have a far better overview of the current state of the journal, while all the users have benefited by being able to work either in English or Croatian. And our print subscription increased slightly.

Another benefit of adopting the OJS was the digitalization of the entire published archive and switch to open access for our content (this has over past five years become the norm for Croatian scientific journals). Although we believe that it has greatly benefited our journal, open access is not a choice imposed by OJS. It offers options for delayed open access, closed subscription access, or imposing a publication or submission fee for authors.

The bigger picture

On a wider scale, out of about 200 scientific journals that are published in Croatia, a few developed their own tools for managing parts of the editorial process in the early 2000s, but most were too resource-strung and isolated to adopt new practices or move to on-line publishing. Adopting and translating the OJS presented an opportunity for journal editors to gather and communicate. What started as education about on-line journal management slowly turned into mutual learning about how the editorial process is managed in various journals, and occasionally led to the exchange of good editorial practices. This might lead to less autarchic and individualistic journal editing standards across the country.

Sharing expertise helps, and about a tenth of all journals have now made some steps towards adopting OJS, whereas many others are considering it. Adoption costs are much smaller since there is a pool of experience of how to operate OJS journals in the local academic environment, and the rather large one-off costs of translation are taken care of (although the translation files are open for all to improve). Then again, there is little incentive for the small, struggling scientific journals with limited or mostly an in-house pool of submissions (often "one man editorial band" journals) to switch to on-line editing. At the other end of the scale, large journals with substantive submission inflow are rightly anxious and cautious about switching their editorial process because this is likely to cause a temporary disruption if it not thoroughly planned.

The first five years of adaptations to online journal management in *Revija za Socijalnu Politiku* do not seem like major breakthroughs in e-editing. However, as the new generations of editors become more technologically savvy, and with a seemingly unstoppable penetration of on-line procedures in every aspect of our professional and private lives, it is likely that within the next five years such editorial practices will, in most European countries and languages, be as common as sending email.

References

1. Marchitelli A, et al. OJS and OCS: upgrading journals, conferences and scholarly communication to Open Access. *European Science Editing* 34(1):7–8.