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Journal editing and the Italian Political Science Review

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A contribution to [THE PROFESSION] series

Journal Editing and the *Italian Political Science Review*

An interview with Martin J. Bull

Introduction

Martin J. Bull is Professor of Politics and Associate Dean for Research & Innovation at the University of Salford, and former Director of the European Consortium of Political Research. He is currently Editor of the *Italian Political Science Review* and the *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, as well as Founding Editor of the ECPR's political science blog-site, *The Loop*. He serves on the Editorial Boards of *South European Society and Politics*, *Modern Italy*, and *Contemporary Italian Politics*. He is former Editor of *Modern Italy* (2005-2010), *European Political Science* (2006-2013) and *Social Sciences* (2011-2018), as well as former Associate Editor of *Parliamentary Affairs* (2007-2012), and former Editorial Board member of several journals including *West European Politics* and *Politics*.

The following interview was conducted by the editor of *Italian Political Science*, **Nicolò Conti** and edited by the interviewee.

Nicolò Conti [NC]:

In your experience as editor of several scientific journals, what are the main ingredients to a success story for a journal nowadays?

Martin J. Bull It depends, of course, on what you mean by 'success story', how
[MB] you define 'success'. Readers might assume that success has to mean being in the top quartile of the Social Science Citation Index, with an Impact Factor of 'X.' But in my view that is simplistic for two reasons. First, despite the predominance of league tables for almost everything in our professional lives, journals do not simply have goals to rise in league tables. There is a very wide range of journals in any disciplinary area, and each has its own sub-disciplinary orientation, identity, specific mission, and its own 'community' of scholars to which it appeals.

Second, a journal depends on its Editors and most Editors are in that role for a fixed period. That fixed period constitutes a specific stage in the life of a journal, so it depends on how long the journal has been in existence, what identity it is developing, the state of its copy flow, what objectives the Editors set for their editorial period and so on. So, an Editor of a journal that has been in existence for a few years only will have very different goals to achieve in a fixed period than an Editor who takes over a journal that has been established for 30 years.

Having said that, I think there are, at the same time, certain ‘constants’ of which Editors should be aware if they want to (help to) make a success story of the journal they are currently editing.

First, never ‘chase’ impact factors (in the sense of considering submissions from the perspective of whether they might be good ‘citable’ papers) or high rejection rates (by pushing up your desk-reject stats for the sake of doing so). Anyone who has seen the detail on journal impact factors and what has produced them will realise that there is no science of prediction in this field. Avoid it, stick to your scientific mission. The journal’s IF is simply one of many outcomes (good or not so good) at the end of each year.

Second, avoid being influenced by papers on the basis of the particular subject area the authors are writing about, whether it’s ‘sexy’ or whether you are personally interested in it. You might get excited at receiving an article on ‘populism’ but that says nothing about its quality. At the same time, you might be missing a high quality case study on bureaucratic politics which you have overlooked because it didn’t really interest you. Besides, what is ‘sexy’ today might quickly become old hat tomorrow, and your job is not just to publish ‘in the current period’ but to leave a legacy of high quality research for political scientists of the future to consult.

Third, and more generally, avoid trying overly to ‘shape’ and ‘construct’ the identity of the journal (within its formal scope or remit) you are editing. That identity will be primarily determined by the supply of material, not what Editors anticipate might be in demand or what interests them. The very profile of an Editor/Editors/Editorial Team will and does, inevitably, influence somewhat the nature of the supply (I have witnessed that every time) but that is enough. The role of the Editors is to be open, inclusive and genuinely welcoming of all research that falls within the formal scope of the journal, not picking and choosing according to other criteria than originality and excellence.

Fourth, do everything you can to avoid unconscious bias. Although I have not yet edited a journal based on ‘triple blind’ evaluation processes, I helped launch one that is (*Political Research Exchange*) and I think all journals should be thus. ‘Triple blind’ means not just that referees do not know the author of a paper, and the author of a paper does not know who the referees are, but the Editors of the journal do not know the authors either. The Editors, therefore, make a final decision on the paper without knowing the identity or institutional affiliation of the authors. This protects the Editors from unconscious bias related to ‘seniority’, gender, institutional affiliation, country of origin and so on. I find it curious that in countries such as the UK we have long adopted anonymity for students when we are marking their work, yet when we mark our own we don’t. It is the future for all journals in my view. In its absence, the best practice is simply to avoid checking the author’s profile: focus on the submission itself. It doesn’t matter who an author is, your job is to see whether they have something interesting, original and of high quality to say.

Fifth, be thorough throughout. There are a number of stages to be followed. Is the article ‘in scope’? In other words, is it an appropriate submission for the

journal you are editing? Check the mission of the journal and what it accepts, if it is clearly not in scope, do not persist with it, but reject it on procedural grounds. Then, does the paper cross the quality threshold to be considered by referees? If not, desk-reject it; if it does, process it. When referees' reports come in, consider them in some depth against the paper itself and reach your own verdict, consulting where appropriate with your co-Editors. When not sure, do not hesitate to send revised papers back to one of the referees for further evaluation, and do not hesitate to ask authors for further (and yet further) revisions, if it is evident that the paper could, through further revision, reach the standard of being accepted for publication.

Sixth, be diligent and timely. You should 'check in' on a regular (my advice is daily) basis to your journal. There is always something to do. Authors have spent a lot of time and care in producing their work, their work deserves to be processed in a timely manner. Word gets around if authors are kept waiting interminably for decisions. If you cannot carve out the time to the necessary work, don't take it on in the first place.

Seventh, despite the importance of the criterion of excellence, be realistic about your journal and what it is trying to achieve. There is no "universal" threshold of quality assurance in the market of journals that automatically dictates whether a paper should or should not be published. That standard can be different between journals, and that standard may move marginally according to the supply of material. Whether a journal is owned by a publisher or a scholarly society, an Editor is contracted to deliver a (normally) prescribed minimal level of published material each year. Be aware of your contractual duties and the need to strike the right balance between keeping the journal on track with high quality published material.

Eighth, always remember *your* role, which is to facilitate the dissemination of relevant, original, high-quality research in a disciplinary area in which you have some expertise. It is a service to a professional community, not a chore, and certainly not a contest. Be modest about your aims and likely contribution. You are not there to change the earth, but to build further on the good work of your predecessors and leave a solid legacy for those who come after you, thus helping the journal grow.

NC: Which are the theoretical approaches/methods represented in the articles published by the *Italian Political Science Review*?

MB: It should be said, first, that we do not, in IPSR, favour any particular theoretical approaches/methods. We are open to all approaches and methods. Our main principle is that papers aspire to, or embody, a 'scientific approach' to their research and writing.

However, in terms of what is eventually published in IPSR, there are evident trends. In terms of approaches or methods, between 2015 and 2020, 52% of articles published were quantitative-inferential-statistical, 39% qualitative-descriptive-statistical and 9% theoretical.

In terms of subject area, in the same period, 38% of articles published were in the area of political institutions, 20% political behaviour, 12% International Relations, 10% public policy/administration, 7% regimes, 6% public opinion, 6% media/communication, and 1% methodology.

These, of course, are all broad categories, hiding a good deal of nuance, and I recommend readers to take a cursory glance at the journal's "First View articles" and recent issues (on the website) to get a flavour of the rich diversity of subject matter and approaches that IPSR has been publishing. And, specifically regarding methods, we are devoting a Special Issue to this very topic in 2021.

NC: How does Italian scholarship figure in the authorship of the *Italian Political Science Review* (in terms of coverage, diversity, competitiveness, etc.)?

MB: It is fair to say that Italian scholarship figures highly in the authorship of IPSR. Between 2015 and 2020, in terms of published articles, approximately 71% of authors were Italian nationality and 29% from abroad. This strong presence of Italy in the journal is reinforced if we look at the geographic area on which published articles primarily focus their content. Between 2015 and 2020, 52% of articles had Italy as their primary focus, 30% Europe/EU, 13% other areas, and 5% global. Three points should be made about this.

First, IPSR is a journal which was, until the recent past, published in Italian only, and it is owned by the Italian Political Science Association (SISP), whose members are primarily Italian. Although I don't have the figures, I suspect that the 'Italian' presence was even higher during the years of RISP (an acronym many Italian scholars still use today to refer to the journal!). SISP serves its members and one of the membership benefits is the journal. But SISP is also, I believe, in taking the decision to publish the journal in English, making it clear to members that it also regards a key benefit to be the gradual internationalisation of the journal, in keeping with the trends of internationalisation in Italian political science. Rightly so.

Indeed, second, the journal can help with that process of internationalisation by hopefully displaying, over time, an ever greater diversity in the sub-disciplinary expertise of Italian political scientists. I have written elsewhere of the '(curious) elephant in the room' in Italian political science: "the historical and continuing preponderance of research on Italian politics amongst Italian political scientists. It is the (curious) elephant in the room: visible and clearly shaping Italian political science but rarely mentioned; curious, because, for all this, Italian political science remains dissatisfied with its lack of 'relevance' to the Italian world beyond academe. The discipline's future will likely be shaped by the possibilities of whether and how this preponderance is overcome".¹

Third, we should not view this as a unique or deep-seated problem that has to be changed overnight. I suspect that analogous statistics can be found in a number of other European countries in relation to their house journals. A sudden enforced and artificial change in this situation, moreover, would be disruptive

¹ See: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/23248823.2015.1033927?journalCode=rita20>.

and damaging. And it is worth emphasising the quality of coverage that IPSR offers. Although it is not a strictly fair comparison (because IPSR is, of course, a general journal of political science), if you do a Cite-Score publication by year comparison over the past decade between IPSR and the three main English-language journals which are purely dedicated to Italian studies, IPSR rose from bottom in 2010 to top in 2019. In any case, what is important is a gradual change which carries the journal's (changing) community (of authors and readers) with it, as it shows an increasingly prominent international profile.

NC: How does, in your opinion, the logic of career progression in the Italian academia affect the decision of what to publish and where?

MB: I assume this refers to authors and not to Editors (since, as Editors, we obviously do not take into account career progression of authors in our evaluation as to whether to publish a paper). And, if so, I am certainly not the best person to answer this question as I am located in the career structure of a different national political science community.

However, from my experience of scores of communications with authors over many years of editing journals, and from serving on the panels of several of the Italian political science research assessment exercises, it is clear that Italian political scientists are undergoing very similar pressures ('to publish or perish') to political scientists in other countries.

In terms of the 'what', the trend is obviously towards research which has, or can have, demonstrable impact or relevance to the 'real world'. The publication of research can no longer be seen simply as an end itself; rather, it has to be seen as a mid-point in the process by which social scientific research influences what is done in government, politics and society.

In terms of the 'where', it is now a fact of life that where you publish can make a difference to your career. Some universities are becoming ever more prescriptive in terms of what is expected of their researchers in terms of publishing. One's freedom to choose is, unfortunately, becoming increasingly constrained. The unfortunate consequence is that it can distort the choice of academics as to where to publish their papers towards journals according to their 'ranking', as opposed to their 'appropriateness' to the subject matter.

NC: The *Italian Political Science Review* ranks in the first quartile of Scimago (for both Political Science & International Relations and Political Science and Sociology). How do you think this kind of ranking affects the authorship and readership of the journal?

MB: Yes, and this is the second year running to secure first quartile ranking. And if you drill down into the detail of the Scimago result you can see the progress of the journal over the past decade – where all the indicators are pointing in the right direction.

There are other comparative indicators that are promising too. For example, in terms of Cite Score by year (for articles published 2016-2019), IPSR has made

a steady rise since 2013 compared with some other national community political science journals.

The icing on the cake, of course, will be the journal's acceptance into the Social Science Citation Index. That will be a watershed moment which will, I suspect, have a noticeable positive impact on submissions and the general standing of the journal – because that is how the world of academe works today.

That will probably not happen on our watch, but (to return to my answer to the first question) that is not our main aim; and, in saying this, I think I can safely speak for my esteemed colleague, Filippo Tronconi, and the rest of our fantastic Editorial Team at IPSR, as well as the team at CUP. IPSR, since it transformed itself from RISP, has been on a new journey of internationalisation and growth. It is climbing a mountain, which is a slow but steady process, and in which each editorial team must play its part. Our predecessors got us to Base Camp, and our achievements are simply building on theirs. Wherever we get the journal to by the end of our tenures, we will establish Camp 1 and pass the *staffetta* to our successors to continue the climb. It is a climb in which I am very pleased and honoured to be a participant.

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