No more Mr Nasty

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As my 6-year term as Chief Editor of *EMBO Reports* draws to its close, I think it's time to offer a personal reflection on what it's like to have been in what some may think of as one of the most hated positions in academic science.

I consider myself lucky that at least a handful of colleagues are still speaking both to me and to my team of professional editors in Heidelberg, who do all the work, including the composition of those difficult rejection letters. Much of their—and some of my—time is taken up politely pointing out to authors that whilst we recognize the solidity of their science and how much effort has gone into compiling the manuscript, it just isn't very interesting. Many authors rebut such arguments indignantly, and occasionally, we accept that we, or a learned member of our editorial board, did indeed miss some crucial detail. Or the authors follow up with an even more virulent critique, copied to sundry influential persons who they imagine will intervene and put the thumbscrews on us.

Manuscripts rejected after peer review often arouse similar feelings of hatred towards the editor. I have always attempted to steer a narrow channel, defending the decisions of my editorial team unless there is a clear flaw in procedure—which is hardly ever—but also expressing sympathy with the spurned author. I frequently cite my own experiences of rejection, including by in-house journals, in effect telling them it happens to us all, just get over it. But, I also point out, paraphrasing Churchill, that, whilst peer review is an absolutely terrible

system for deciding what science gets published, it's still better than all the others.

In truth, it has been an immense privilege to serve the community in this role. *EMBO Reports* has many special and intriguing facets: its blend of frontline science and societal commentary, its striking graphics and cover art, its emphasis on incisive brevity and its editorials that read more like what would nowadays be called a blog or an op-ed, rather than the corporate voice of a publisher. For the first few years, I wondered whether anyone ever read my editorials, or even vaguely understood the wackier ones. Then, I began to notice some of them posted on institute walls: even if only to serve as an impromptu dartboard.

When I took the reins, my first decision was to make no changes for at least a year. I then embarked, together with the editorial team, on cautious reforms, aiming just to sharpen the personality of the journal and make its content more accessible. My guiding principle was that changes would be modest, and their implementation incremental. My advice to my successor is nevertheless the complete opposite. It is my profound hope that he or she will steer the journal in an edgy new direction, whilst maintaining its editorial values and staunchly independent stance. As discussed in a recent editorial [1], I feel that the current system of scientific publishing is broken and that this view is widely shared in our community. The conventional journal may soon be obsolete, and perhaps the traditional scientific paper too. We do not need yet another journal following the herd

over the cliff, gradually losing relevance, credibility and any sense of adventure. Instead, we need bold initiatives, experimentation with novel formats, new types of editorial process, original channels of communication to enable the scientific community to share, discuss and evaluate data, formulate hypotheses, and construct strategies to test them.

EMBO Reports should continue to strive to be excellent and to promote excellence in an inclusive way: this is our common goal in science. Straddling the gulf between scientists and the wider society we serve is also an integral part of our mission. In many parts of the world, this gap is widening, as fundamentalist religion and narrow utilitarianism hold the natural sciences in a pincer movement. Although our journal addresses society only indirectly via the scientists we seek to empower, I believe *EMBO Reports* need to pursue this aim even more vigorously, devising more effective ways by which the scientific community can defend its position and even go on the offensive, challenging those who seek to shut us down or make us invisible and irrelevant. We have been collectively slow to embrace new media and it is time to shape up. *EMBO Reports* should be in the vanguard.

Over the past 6 years, I have learned a great deal about scientific communication. So, maybe I'll develop some of these ideas personally. But, at the very least, I hope that someone will do so.

References

1. Jacobs H (2014) *EMBO Rep* 15: 817