

## **Editorial – Origins, Reflections and Ending**

A few years ago I indicated that I wanted to stand down as editor but it has taken some time to arrange this and for the publishers to organise a competition for a replacement editor and team. This was achieved just around the time the pandemic struck, so the handover has been slightly slower than it might have been. From late summer 2020 all new papers have been dealt with by Professor Ulf Johansson (Lund University), the new editor. I have been responsible for those papers I had started off before that date. The final ones of these comprise most of this final issue of 2021. From the first issue of 2022 the papers and the Review will be firmly and fully in Professor Johansson's hands.

Over the last two years therefore I have been steadily handing over the reins of the Review. During the handover, I have been in regular contact with Ulf as he got to grips with the Review and the online manuscript handling system. It has been an interesting time for us, trying to do this as the pandemic rampaged and normal academic life was turned upside down. We agreed though that this final issue of 2021 would be a suitable point to formally and publicly hand over, though many people knew it was happening anyhow. We also agreed that an editorial reflecting on my (long) time as editor would be appropriate in this final issue of my tenure. In this editorial therefore, I want to reflect on the origins and story of the Review, the changes to the editorial process over this period and some personal reflections on changing academia and the academic study of retailing.

### **The Origins of the Review**

By the late 1970s, the academic study of retailing had been underway in the USA for quite a long time, but this was not so much the case in the UK. There had been research into the retail sector in the UK (most notably at the University of Manchester) but the appointment in 1983 of John Dawson as the Fraser of Allander Professor of Distributive Studies at the University of Stirling marked a change. The Institute for Retail Studies was established at the University of Stirling soon after Professor Dawson's appointment and provided an identifiable focus for retail research in the UK. This was followed throughout the 1980s by a number of other UK Universities adding retailing and retail academics to their subjects and staffing. Retailing in the UK was booming both in wider economic terms and as a focus for academic study.

Elsewhere in Europe there was a similar story with commercial distribution being studied in many countries. A series of European-based conferences, started by CESCO at Bocconi University in Milan,

and held jointly with the Institute of Retail Management, New York University between 1981 and 1987 galvanised the study of retailing across Europe. These conferences, in addition to furthering the study of the subject and promoting a coherent research agenda, also deepened contact and linkages amongst European (including British) retail scholars. The increase in the internationalisation of retailing in the 1980s, aided by the ongoing development of the Single Market in Europe and business interest and expansion in East Asia and Japan, opened up further research avenues.

As the strength of the European collective endeavour grew, so the New York link via the conferences fell away. In 1988 the Universities of Bocconi, Erasmus and Stirling established a formal research linkage “as the first step in creating a larger network for researchers in retailing” (Dawson 1988) and a solely European organised conference took place in Milan in 1989. This enhanced European-centric focus saw the concept of a formal European association in the subject strengthen. By 1990 the research network and the conference were catalysts for the formal establishment of the European Association for Education and Research in Commercial Distribution (EAERCD). This editorial is not the place for a history of this formalisation or organisation, nor the EAERCD conference sequence, which building on the CESCO initiative, continued until interrupted by the pandemic. The significant point is that this process was happening and retail research was being taken seriously. (This is also not the place for discussing the title, EAERCD and its lack of mention of retailing). During the 1980s, had retailing become a focus for study, the European conference expanded and interest in retailing and commercial distribution deepened and widened across Europe. At the same time the idea of, and need for, an academic journal in the area, took hold.

This need was identified early by Professor Dawson and he proposed launching a retail journal soon after his arrival in Stirling in 1983. There were limited existing English language journals on retailing. The main journal was the long established Journal of Retailing (JR), based in, and focused on, the United States. It had a very particular approach to retailing as a subject and the nature and methodology of retail research. In the UK a trade press journal, Retail and Distribution Management (RDM), had been increasingly accepting more academic (though with practitioner emphases) papers. There appeared to be a gap in the market for an academic journal that reflected the emerging retail research field in the UK and Europe and promoted a different approach (in terms of subject and methodology) to the US pricing/marketing focus of the Journal of Retailing.

Professor Dawson approached several publishers with the idea for the International Journal of Retailing (IJR); the title and scope reflecting this broader ambition. MCB Publishers (now Emerald)

moved quickly to respond. The journal was launched in 1986, with John Dawson as its Founding Editor, myself as Deputy Editor and with an international editorial board, drawn from retail academics in Europe, North America, Australia, the Middle East and Japan. The IJR sought to include research articles, research notes, case studies, book reviews and descriptions of retail research units across the globe, with an aim of linking an international retail scholarly community and progressing interesting, international, retail-focused research.

The editorial for the inaugural issue of the International Journal of Retailing (Dawson 1986) began by noting that despite its size and complexity, the retail sector had been largely ignored in academia. The aim of the International Journal of Retailing was to alter this. The retail system was described as comprising actors, structures, activities and functions existing within an environment. Decisions by actors produced elements of the system; these were subject to development and change over time and location. In this first editorial, change internationally and in the make-up of the retail sector were identified as issues to be researched. The hope was that the International Journal of Retailing would become 'a forum for debate on the considerable changes taking place in all areas of retailing in every country of the world' (Dawson, 1986, p5).

It soon became apparent however that MCB wanted to operate a particular model of journal publishing. This involved pressing for an ever expanding number of issues per volume and an ever increasing price to subscribers and universities. Volume 1 of the IJR had launched in 1986 with 3 issues, expanding to 4 issues in Volume 3, to allow for a theme or special issue per volume. Pressure saw this rise to 5 issues by volume 4, with MCB's desire to continue the increase. For the editorial team this was risky in terms of flow of publishable material and maintenance of quality, let alone concerns over affordability, and thus reach – acceptance of retailing as worthy of academic study was not universal at this time. These concerns were exacerbated by MCB stating that if copy (papers) were not available in time for this expanded schedule then they would insert their own sourced material. This model with its charging and constant pressure on increasing the number of issues and pricing and focus on speed over quality began to cause tensions.

MCB were not alone in thinking more could be produced in the retail field; Retail Week, the UK weekly trade magazine was founded in 1988. Pressure began to grow to move the European conference on to an annual basis and for more outlets for academic material to be available. This reflected the continuing growth of retail research and the broader economic focus on the sector. There was a clear model here, but one that required trade-offs over quality and consistency at both the conference and

the journal level. Some of this stems from a view of the aims of academia. More issues and more volumes also produced a treadmill of an editorial process and knock-on effects for refereeing and the other academic activities in which journals might be interested. It was about finding a balance; we focused on quality as the main attribute.

These tensions grew and it became clear that there was no middle ground with MCB. A parting of the ways became inevitable and duly took place in 1990 (after the completion of Volume 4 of the IJR). MCB merged the International Journal of Retailing with their purchase of a trade magazine (Retail and Distribution Management) to create the International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management (IJRDM), which remains an important part of the Emerald portfolio today. The IJRDM moved to 6 issues a volume in 1990 and to twelve by 1995.

The original vision for a retail journal developed by John Dawson, was felt however to be still valid and Routledge readily picked up the concept. Ideally the title International Journal of Retailing would have been made available to its originator (not least because it had been discontinued by MCB), but this proved not possible. To distinguish the journals, Routledge developed the new title, the International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research (IRRDCR). Whilst something of a mouthful (and thus not unlike the EAERCD) it reflected the centrality of retailing to consumers and producers/suppliers. I had been Deputy Editor under John Dawson at the International Journal of Retailing, but at the outset of the International Review, we opted for co-editorship.

The editorial for the first issue of the IRRDCR in 1990 (Dawson and Sparks 1990) did not repeat the themes from four years previous (Dawson 1986). Instead it painted a broader picture of retailing and distribution as the interface between product production and consumption. It pointed to the particular characteristics of retailing as offering a specific set of challenges for production, distribution and consumption, articulated through retail operations and management. By linking the information explosion about/and in retailing and distribution in the post-1945 era, with the growth of consumption, the editorial foreshadowed two of the key themes of the current day (technology in, and sustainability of, retailing). We also argued that the study of retailing had established its academic provenance; a more positive view than only four years before, perhaps reflecting the continuing growth of the retail sector and retail academia and the establishment of the EAERCD. We identified the purpose of the IRRDCR as providing an international and specialist forum for this retail, distribution and consumer research. The aim was to understand the processes of change, develop new ideas and report new applications and developments.

This sense of expansion and positivity also began to be felt more broadly. Professor Harry Timmermans (Eindhoven University of Technology) introduced annual conferences of his own and in 1994 a journal (The Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services - JRCS) building on the burgeoning interest in retail studies from a wide set of academic disciplines and from publishers. The study of retailing had become more widely recognised, and a range of publication outlets with differing emphases had been established.

For the first 15 years of operation with Routledge, the IRRDCR had four issues per annum (except for the launch issue of 1990-1 which had 5 (over two years) as we attempted to recover from the split with MCB). In 2006, with volume 16, the Review expanded its number of issues per annum to 5. This was to enable a Special Issue each year to be offered, mainly by covering the EAERCD conference every two years, with other conferences or Special Issues on selected themes in the intermediate years. This maintained sufficient space for a regular expanded flow of publishable material, which balanced space available and time to publication. This pattern has continued to the present day.

Over much of this 30+ years since 1990 of the IRRDCR, John Dawson and myself were co-editors, although we did tend to alternate as lead editor and alternate the editorial office between the University of Edinburgh (to where Professor Dawson had moved) and the University of Stirling, to enable space for our other academic interests, and a “rest” from the processing of material. I have thus been involved in editing a retail journal for almost all my academic career (I also edited a geography journal, *Area*, in the 1980s reflecting the origins of many UK retail academics of the time in geography). It is noteworthy that both the other two European retail journals (JRCS and IJRDM) have also had long-term editors.

I became sole editor in 2010 when John Dawson stepped down. Our editorial from the first issue of the 20<sup>th</sup> volume announcing this change also introduced a Special Issue on retailing twenty years after the launch of the IRRDCR (Dawson and Sparks 2010). The editorial looked back at the first 20 years of the IRRDCR and pointed to shifts in academic research over the period. We believed the aim of the Review had been met and we pointed to specific contributions in fostering reflection within a rigorous academic framework, a particular European-based approach to retail research which enabled qualitative and quantitative paradigms to co-exist and the role of a broader focus on retailing as developing a synthesising approach drawing on relevant theoretical concepts from across the social sciences. We concluded our look back by noting that “As editors over the last 20 years we have

attempted to encourage this plurality in the belief that it creates the possibility for new research insights into ways that retailing changes” (Dawson and Sparks 2010, p2).

The editorial also looked forward. Our look to the future considered four avenues of change that we saw as likely to be issues for retail research; retailing itself, retailing internationally, the impact of retailing and retail academia. Our discussion identified the changing scope of retailing and the entry of ‘non-retail’ firms, pointing to a shift towards a consumer focus and power. Internationalisation and development and change in specific countries provoked a reflection on either convergence or divergence as the predominant model and the need for local authenticity. Thirdly we considered the impacts of retailing, which we noted could cause tensions and which should not go uncontested. Finally, we thought that retail academics might increasingly be caught between business and governments and subject to various conflicts and pressures around their research. In retrospect perhaps the greater conflict for academics came from within academia and elements of academic management

Dawson and Sparks (2010) concluded that ‘editing journals is a thankless task on occasions, though immensely rewarding on others ...Whether as referees, authors, board members, critical friends or indeed so-called ‘journal quality assessors’ you have helped us further our desire to publish good quality research in the retail field from a distinct perspective. Despite pressures to the contrary, IRRDCR will continue to aim to be a home for high quality research from varying perspectives and approaches, with all the consequences this entails. We hope you find this valuable” (p8).

These comments reflect some of the tensions which were altering the academic landscape and on which we had already begun to comment (Dawson, Findlay and Sparks 2004, Sparks 2007). Eleven years on from this 2010 editorial, I am now stepping down as editor. In what follows I develop some reflections on this entire editorship ‘journey’.

## **Reflections**

In reflecting on this long term editorial role with IRRDCR, there are a number of potential alternative considerations. Here, I divide them into reflections on the editorial process over this period and then reflections on changing retailing research and its landscape.

### **(a) The Editorial Process**

The Review was established in the pre-internet and pre-email eras. Initially submissions (three hard copies) were received by post and all interactions with potential and actual referees were similarly by post. Referees might be invited to referee simply by letter, or by telephoning, hoping for a positive reply and then posting out the typed manuscript. Editing involved acting as a post box, before making a decision in the light of referees' and editors' comments. The potential for time delays is obvious and the limitations and cost of the postal service affected referee selection internationally, which for an international journal was a problem. The editorial office ran a filing and control system, which again was paper based and occupied several filing cabinets. The system was somewhat constrained in scope, scale, time and reliability. Once accepted, papers were selected for an issue and the issue was posted off for proof-setting. Once proofs had been set, and checked by authors, again by being posted out and returned by post, the whole issue was published. Getting papers published represented the aim and the entirety of the process. The editor helped in this and shaped both papers and issues.

It is because of the delays inherent in this process that I pushed for the Review to go to an electronic manuscript and editor system, once this became possible. Email and electronic file attachments had in the meantime improved the situation but still required a degree of manual intervention. Electronic submission and management allowed an increase in control, speed and in quality of management functions. It also opened and sped up international linkages and referees. We are all now very familiar with such systems and approach and virtually all journals now run on one of these platforms. I return to some implications of this later.

Right from the outset I was faced with a question of what type of editor I wanted to be. Fundamentally I believe there is a choice to be made between being an editor or a manager. Running an editorial office is essentially a process (as above) and there is an option to simply manage that process. My view is that that is not the role of a journal editor. I have sometimes suggested that I am an "activist" editor. By that I mean that whilst I would respect the views of referees, I would not necessarily be bound by them. Certainly I would not insist that every last referee suggestion be followed by the author to the letter through interminable iterations. Authors have to live with their name being on a published article and it is theirs, not the referees. Sometimes I felt referees were wrong or trying to shape the paper into how they would have done the work or not seeing its potential contribution. I therefore would work with authors to produce their paper as they wanted it, provided base quality considerations were met. I would also try to be supportive of interesting (in my view) ideas and papers and be encouraging to new people and thoughts, including internationally and increasingly where

English might not be the first language (something that can be addressed). I believe I succeeded more often than I failed in this. A journal editor, in my view, should shape papers and journal issues, not simply pass them through the system (or referee sausage machine as it has too often become now it can be largely automated).

The use of an electronic management system can cut across this “activism” to an extent, in that the system tends to drive activity rather than the other way round. The control, scope and management provided electronically though is a major processing benefit. There are implications however. This introduction of electronic journal management systems is one part of the metrification of academia generally and journal production and output specifically. As computerisation developed so the tracking of citations, of linkages and of editor, author, article and journal ‘performance’ became routine. The sense of system control over the publishing activity became increasingly significant and thus over the academic research and output process itself and the journals that are part of it. The system produced data which began to be used as a measure of “quality”. This latter issue has become ever more significant in recent years.

The most obvious impact of this has been on the metric-based ‘ranking’ of journals or the assessment of academic output, as in the UK’s Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and now Research Excellence Framework (REF). These originally, and still ostensibly, finance allocation systems (see Dawson, Findlay and Sparks 2004) have become managerial tools (used by governments on universities and by universities on academics). The ‘currency’ within these are outputs, measured by the ‘quality’ of an academic paper. This inherently subjective question (paper quality and later paper impact) became a supposedly objective one via the metrification of journals, papers and authors. Articles and journals could be ranked by “impact”, as in for example the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) or Scopus. Subject specialist evaluation such as the UK Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS) Academic Journal Guide (previously Journal Quality Guide) claimed to provide rankings of journal quality. Individual scholars could be assessed by their H-index in a variety of places (and ways) including Scopus and Google Scholar. This evaluation increasingly focused not on the research in the paper but on the score it produced on various ‘objective’ measures, mainly citations, which became a proxy for impact and then a proxy for quality. This is despite the fact that citation analysis was developed and intended to provide no more than a literature map and citations are not performance indicators in any real sense (Sparks 2007). These data also allow reflection on the retail output landscape (see for example Findlay and Sparks 2002, Runyan 2008, Runyan and Hyun 2009 and Ketron, Runyan and Ferris 2017), and its ‘management’ and change.



In our 2004 paper (Dawson, Findlay and Sparks 2004), my conference keynote (Sparks 2007), a follow-up in 2010 (Findlay and Sparks 2010) and in our 2010 editorial (Dawson and Sparks 2010) we had already begun to point to some of the unintended consequences of this. For journal publishers (and some journals and journal editors) a race for position in the various lists or tables of indexes had been kick started around 2000. Routledge applied to enter the IRRDCRR into the SSCI but was told it was not needed as they 'had a retailing journal'. The other European based retail journals were likewise ignored. An appeal against a low ranking in the first ABS list, saw IRRDCR downgraded despite support for a higher ranking from over 100 retailing scholars across the globe.

Dawson, Findlay and Sparks (2004) drew a number of conclusions and predictions for retail research arising from this definition of quality and ranking and the publisher and discipline gate-keeping and behaviour it permitted and encouraged. We thought that an American model of the subject and research into it would be increasingly imposed, leading to standardisation of approach, methodology and topic; there would be an increasing narrowness and similarity of topics as a consequence. The ranking of journals on such measures would we felt lead to an alteration in where retail research was published, diminishing specialisation and suborning retailing within other, longer established and more powerful disciplines, where journals ranked higher. This process has played out and to some extent accelerated, leading to the damning conclusion of a recent review about accounting and management research (there is a large literature on the pros and cons of these changes in many disciplines): "While the purpose of academic research is to obtain new knowledge and understanding, there is an increasing concern that many scholars value work based upon where it is published rather than its intrinsic value" (Brooks, Schopohl and Walker 2021, p1). This is as true for retail research as for other business and management disciplines.

The impact of this is profound. Understandably, authors and referees only want to be seen in the 'best' journals, however we define this (and it is increasingly not defined by real-world interest and impact or advancement of a subject and understanding). Manuscripts and referees could dry up if you don't meet this criteria, or are not ranked highly enough. Authors want fast turnaround so as to make sure they get their paper out as soon as possible, as speed to output has become a key driver when metrics on individual academics are used as management tools. This further impacts editors and referees. The systems make it easier when invited, to say 'no' and so the recruitment of referees becomes harder, perhaps additionally because there is no institutional "reward" or recognition in the refereeing activity (though again this is now being recorded and systematised, so may change). The

expected time shortens throughout the system as speed becomes more important than quality. Refereeing and production systems become measured in days and hours (10 days to referee or 48 hours to turn around a proof) in the race to go public. This has led to the rise of new journals who charge to publish, but guarantee output in a few days and where referees are 'paid' in zero processing charges for their next article in that journal or with that publisher in an attempt to build a self-reinforcing eco-system.

Ranking journals and thus academic performance have become standard practices. The publication performance (editor, referee, production) has also been subject to the same stresses and strains. The electronic submission systems can drive activity for editors and referees. The number of days taken to acknowledge, referee, review, decide, produce and publish are all quantifiable and are somehow often taken to represent 'quality'. Increasingly such measures are public and used by publishers as marketing collateral, and presented as badges of (dis) honour on journal websites. Academic work and journals (including the papers they contain) are reduced to a number or a series of numbers.

One of the consequences of this changing academic landscape over what gets "recognised" is that the journal article has pushed out other elements. So the original IRRDCR ambition for research notes, case studies and book reviews is no longer possible to meet. Finding academics interested in these elements has proved next to impossible in this revised landscape, where these are deemed unimportant and irrelevant to academic performance and promotion.

This focus on articles and the desire for speed of publication, enabled by the technology (in the broadest sense) has also produced a decline in the sense of, or need for, a journal issue. Papers are now accepted and published on-line as they are accepted ("early view"). The record identifier (the DOI - Digital Object Identifier) becomes the key component to identify an output. It is only later that these "early view" articles are assembled into an issue by an editor. But, who searches for, or reads, an issue of a journal any more, especially if the individual papers have already been published and all the issue comprises is an assemblage of previously available articles? The systems and the search engines have rendered the concept of the volume obsolete.

This is not a lament for the 'good old days' (they weren't, in so many ways) but a reflection on the changing processes and nature of academia generally and publication specifically. It reflects the changing value and importance placed on various components of academic activities, but is also reflective of a more automated, technological and internationally competitive world. The

expectations on us all have accelerated and expanded as a consequence. This is not unique to the IRRDCR nor to retail journals, but it does make editors think more like a manager and processor, with a bit of marketer thrown in, than before. That I do lament, as that role could easily be performed by a machine (and probably already is in some circumstances) and removes the satisfaction I got from editing a journal and working with academics and ideas.

The changes also imply that the role of the editor has become more demanding and different than before. The editor may now be becoming more of a marketer and/or cheerleader for the journal, promoting it full-time and driving publicity and citations for articles. The impact factor becomes the goal, not the ideas and the articles. This also leads to shorter terms for editors as the volume rises and the treadmill becomes more relentless. The three European retail journals are unusual in having long-term editors. Writing personally, I am not sure that this has necessarily been a good thing. I never set out to stay as editor for so long, but there never was a horde of replacements or volunteers to step in or clamouring to take over. Practices and processes get embedded whereas new blood could provide the “spark” for change. It is for others to decide if the cost of pursuing higher impact factors above all else is worth it. The IRRDCR could perhaps have benefitted from a shake-up before now, though whether it would have made a difference to the trends below is an open question.

#### **(b) Retail Research**

The objective of IRRDCR from the outset has been to seek to publish interesting research on aspects of retailing and retail change. This research could be from a variety of methodologies or discipline bases. The key was its focus on the actors in the retail system and their interaction with the environment, with time providing the change attribute and location the spatial attribute, maintaining the interest in processes. It is not for me to say the extent to which we have succeeded or not in this, though I believe we have remained pluralistic and international.

There is though a different environmental consideration to be accounted for; that of academia itself. An aspect of that change, metrification, has been discussed above. Academia though has been going through a raft of other changes, some driven by this ability to ‘measure’ and control academics, and some from wider changes. There has been an internationalisation of academia, with countries seeking to develop their own sector and to have it, and its universities, recognised on the world stage. China, India and a range of other countries (for example South Africa and Brazil) and have challenged the ‘traditional’ Anglo-American and/or European hegemony. This has had a disruptive effect, generating

national responses, placing a further focus on global and international league tables and adding pressure to the research activity, including journal outputs.

For the IRRDCR there have been a number of consequences of this, two of which are noteworthy. First, the number of submissions to the Review has continued to rise sharply. Whilst the Review occupies a middle ranking in many league tables, one might have expected a decline in submissions as the 'top' journals were chased. They though have been under similar increased volume of submission pressures, producing a waterfall effect. The source of these submissions has altered however. Rather than being an European-American journal as it was at the outset, the Review is now truly global, with academics from all continents submitting and publishing papers. Many of the authors are venturing into English language publication for the first time; reflecting another change. This increased volume of submissions is to be welcomed and embraced, as it potentially widens our understanding of retailing and retail change. From an editorial process point though, this growth has added pressures to the system. The last two years have for example seen an almost doubling of submissions to the IRRDCR.

Secondly though, there is a less positive side to this explosion of submissions, which we did predict some years ago. Many of the 'top' journals and the 'rankings' have equated rigour with quantification and quantitative methodologies. Mathematical approaches have become the tools of the day, almost whatever the research question or setting. This also changes the research topic and emphasis away from change and processes. Many authors do not have the skills to justify or carry this off and so poor papers are submitted. It is hard to shake off a view that academic curiosity is becoming limited to yet another structural equation model, using a student sample, on an ever-narrower salami-sliced topic. These have their place perhaps but copying an approach for rapidity or convenience reasons, or in the belief it is the approach that gets a paper published, not the research question, content and contribution, should not, in my view, be the aim of (retail) research. It seems though that this is the model being perpetrated in some countries, as it is seen as the model of what gets published in many journals.

We raised concerns about this in 2004 (Dawson, Findlay and Sparks 2004) and it is perhaps worth repeating our comments:

"This focus on the North American model of research knowledge raises fundamental issues concerning philosophy, methodology, techniques and topics. The philosophical approach in American retail

research is scientific and deductive. The methodology copies hard science and many best be described as pseudo-scientific. Techniques tend to be overwhelmingly quantitative and often involve abstract model building. Non real-world experiments (sometimes involving the inappropriate use of students) are common. The real world also tends to be excluded through the practice of assuming out variety, and many of the interesting aspects of retail practice are thereby ignored. The result is a similarity and narrowness in the topics researched, with a focus on snapshots rather than processes. European researchers in retailing are stimulated by a different set of beliefs, approaches and issues” (p489).

The IRRDCR has tried to maintain this variety of approaches and a concern with the real-life practicality and variety of retailing, internationally, and with this broader concern for processes in retailing and retail management. It has though become more challenging. The editorial task has become harder, sifting more and more submissions for the interesting work that has implications and a contribution beyond running a mathematical model. A consequence of this was my increasing use of desk rejection or editorial board rejection. There are a limited number of publication slots available in the IRRDCR , and so managing editorial and refereeing time becomes ever more necessary as the volume of submissions increases and the overall standard declines. In many cases such decisions were easy as the papers were obviously not up to the standard IRRDCR would require. Some such desk rejections were simply a poor ‘fit’ for the Review in subject matter terms, with authors seemingly not reading the aims, scope and instructions prior to submission. Others were conceptually lacking and/or had limited, if any contribution. This sounds brutal as an assessment but has become increasingly evident as pursuit of output becomes the goal rather than the research itself and the knowledge it generates. The increase in volume of submissions has not been a signifier of overall increased quality, nor of the need for more issues per annum. There remains though a strong core flow of good manuscripts. We know other journals have experienced much the same.

Over the last 30 years the nature of retailing has altered and this has been reflected in the topics of papers published in the Review. Some of this change was identified in our editorials discussed above. Retailing has broadened in terms of actors and actions and the locus has shifted to the consumer. Technology has exploded and new channels for retail supply have emerged. Very different companies have entered the market and locations and formats have waxed and waned. Internationalisation has been a major theme, though may be in retreat in physical terms. Consumption and sustainability in distribution and consumption – the impacts of retailing perhaps – have become themes of global interest. The most downloaded paper from IRRDCR (data since 2011) is on Fast Fashion, where there are dichotomous views about the topic; what is it/how do we do it versus the adverse impacts it

generates in production, supply and consumption. Covid-19 has also produced its own research impetus and narrative.

### **An Ending**

Throughout this shifting retail research landscape, I have endeavoured to keep the IRRDCR open for interesting research from any methodological or disciplinary standpoint. I have worked with authors to develop their papers and ideas to get them in a form for publication. I hope I have succeeded in this; a pursuit of rankings or speed of process above quality or interest or rigour has never been a consideration. As we said in our editorial from 2010 (Dawson and Sparks 2010), and I have tried to follow since, 'we will continue to aim to be a home for high quality research from varying perspectives and approaches' (p8).

Editing IRRDCR has allowed me to become aware of new perspectives on my research subject. Access to new material from its submission stage has informed and challenged my own thinking. The vast majority of authors and referees have been positive and supportive and have recognised the changing context and pressures in which journals (and academics) operate. My learning about retailing, retail research and retail academics has been enhanced by being an editor. Throughout there has been a sense of satisfaction in seeing ideas and papers through to publication and in supporting people (authors and referees) to meet their aims. I have enjoyed it, and I thank all who have been involved along the way.

This is though the time to finally say goodbye and put all that editing behind me. The new editor, Professor Ulf Johansson from Lund University will have his own ideas and shape the Review in new ways. It will be fascinating and exciting to see how this pans out and how the landscape helps or hinders this.

Bon voyage and good luck Ulf, or if Google translate works, Trevlig resa och lycka till.

Professor Leigh Sparks, University of Stirling, November 2021.

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