

Interview with Prof. Giovanni Plizzari, University of Brescia, Italy

Prof. Giovanni Plizzari, University of Brescia, Italy, officially joined RILEM in 2004. Prof. Plizzari became TAC expert in 2013; he covered that role until 2018. He was then Convener of Cluster C between 2018 and 2023. Prof. Plizzari has been a member of several RILEM Technical Committees. He became RILEM fellow in 2023. Prof. Plizzari was an Associate Editor of *Materials and Structures* from 2012 to 2018; he became Deputy Editor-in-Chief of this journal in 2018. Last year, he succeeded Prof. John Provis as **Editor-in-Chief of *Materials and Structures***. This interview is an opportunity to reflect upon the flagship journal of RILEM.



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Dr Daniela Ciano - RILEM Implementation Manager (RIM): Good morning, Giovanni! Thank you for your time today. I would suggest to start this interview from “you and RILEM”. How did your RILEM career begin?

Prof. Giovanni Plizzari (Giovanni): I had the pleasure to meet RILEM several years ago, when I was asked to be an expert in TAC. I covered 2 mandates in that role (3+2 years). Then, when I was completing the second mandate, I was asked to be Cluster C Convener. So, I started this very interesting experience, that also lasted for 5 years (3+2). When I was completing my second mandate, I was asked to be Editor-in-Chief of *Materials and Structures* and well... this is where I am now! My experience in TAC allowed me to know many details about the organisation of RILEM, and that was very useful, because *Materials and Structures* is the journal for the RILEM community. Nevertheless, our journal is open to the international scientific community working on RILEM topics.

RIM: But your RILEM experience started before you joined TAC! The RILEM database tells me that you joined the association as a member of a Technical Committee (TC) in 2004 (Editor’s note: Technical Committee [208-HFC: High performance fibre reinforced cementitious composites](#), running between 2004 and 2011).

Giovanni: Oh yes! I was already a member, of course! I contributed to several Technical Committees as a structural engineer, because although RILEM today is predominantly oriented to materials’ topics, we don’t have to forget the structural engineering side of the association. I feel happy to contribute to this area of RILEM themes, which concerns structural applications, structural engineering, etc...

RIM: As the name of the journal highlights, *Materials and Structures* covers these two areas of topics investigated by the RILEM Technical Committees. Can you please tell us something more about the scope of the journal? Is it strictly related to the activities of the RILEM TCs, or it expands to any hot and trendy topic in vogue within the civil engineering scientific community?

Giovanni: Very good question! *Materials and Structures* is an international journal for disseminating scientific information among the RILEM community; the scope of the journal is

to provide the service of dissemination of activities which are mainly done within the RILEM TCs. In the past, former Editors-in-Chief might have rejected papers whose topic were not covered by a RILEM TC for this simple reason: receiving a paper means having an Associate Editor who knows about the topic; the Associate Editor needs to know a number of reviewers for managing the paper; if all this doesn't happen, it is not easy to provide a serious review of the paper. So, basically what we are doing is to have Associate Editors who are experts in the topics of the activities developed within the RILEM technical committees. But I also think that it is a duty of the Editor-in-Chief and the management of the journal to shed some new lights on new themes in order to activate new RILEM technical committees that meet research needs, and that need advancements in the field of materials and structures. So, to answer your question: generally speaking, yes! The scope of the journal is within the RILEM TC activities, but also open to new important topics for the scientific community. For these new topics that are, as you said, trendy because they are very important, I will take care of those papers by looking directly for reviewers, with the final aim of having in the near future an expert Associate Editor in the field

RIM: Do Associate Editors need to be RILEM members?

Giovanni: By RILEM regulations, they must be RILEM members.

RIM: You have spent almost 1 year in this position. How has it been so far?

Giovanni: It is a busy job but I am having a huge help from [the management of the journal](#), and in particular from the Managing Editor and from the Deputy Editor-in-Chief (Editor's note: they are respectively Dr Luiza Miranda, Managing Editor, and Prof. Arnaud Perrot, Deputy Editor-in-Chief). We are a team working together because the work is a lot! Last year we received about 2600 papers! We have to handle these submissions in a reasonable time, which means giving an answer to the authors in a short time. Short means the time needed for checking if the paper is within the scope of *Materials and Structures*, if it respects the rules in terms of number of words, number of figures, number of tables, and if it has good quality contents, etc.. If the paper is out of scope for RILEM or not respecting the editorial rules, the authors have an answer in about one week.

RIM: To be more precise, I found these data: average number of days to reject: 29; median number of days to reject: 11.

Giovanni: 29 days includes the number of days that the Associate Editor needs after reviewing the paper to manage the paper.

RIM: This goes beyond your work.

Giovanni: The median value is more realistic because many papers, as I said, are rejected because "out of scope" or "too long" in about one week. The statistics representing the work of my team will be more realistic in 2025.

RIM: What about the acceptance time? How long does it take?

Giovanni: The acceptance of the paper requires one or two or sometimes three rounds of reviews for having a top-quality result. This takes time. But in a few months, we are usually able to accept papers, which is very good. On this regard, let me have the opportunity to spend a few words about what happens in some journals that, to attract the submitters, ask the reviewers to do the review in one week. Good reviewers are good researchers, and they are

busy people. In my opinion, by giving one-week time, the risk is that the review is not what we are expecting in the interest of the authors. It is difficult to have a top-level review done in a short time. *Materials and Structures* gives 4 weeks for a reviewer to find some hours to read the paper and review it. In my opinion this makes a difference. We want to complete the review process as quick as possible but without losing the quality of the review and respecting the work that associate editors, reviewers and all people involved in the process are dedicating to this volunteering work.

RIM: I was very surprised to see the percentage of rejection that varies between 75 to 86. Is this common in international journals to have this rejection rate?

Giovanni: No. It is only a matter of quality. Why this high percentage of rejection? First of all, we want to keep the quality as high as possible, which means that we are not happy in publishing an experimental programme or a numerical analysis. We want to provide new scientific contributions to the community. As an example, if an experimental programme, even well detailed, doesn't provide any new scientific contribution, this is not a paper suitable for *Materials and Structures*. Only papers bringing advancements in the knowledge are considered for publishing in *Materials and Structures*. Out of 2600 papers received last year, only around 240 were published. About 20% were either too long or not respecting the scope of the journal. About 10% were transferred to other journals because they were more suitable for specific topics. Finally, about 50-60% were rejected after the review process. In other words, Daniela, we look at the quality! If the scientific quality of the papers is at the level of the journal, the papers are very welcome.

RIM: Could you please describe the ideal/perfect paper that you would like to receive now as Editor-in-Chief?

Giovanni: I would like to receive papers from all over the world, from female and male authors, representing collaborations between different groups and different universities. I would like a paper that starts from the knowledge in the field before the specific research is presented, a paper that explains very well what was done for advancing in the knowledge through experimental work or numerical work, and that provides some concluding remarks that highlight these advancements in order to increase the level of knowledge of the RILEM scientific community and beyond. This is the ideal paper! It would be nice also to have comparisons with previous results to confirm or to modify some information or knowledge or assumptions. In my opinion, the very nice side of the globalisation is the globalisation of the culture, through the scientific community: I think that discussing, comparing, reading, what other researchers did somewhere else in the world and comparing results will help the reader to better understand the goodness of the scientific contribution.

RIM: Are you concerned about the use of artificial intelligence (AI)? What is your view on this matter?

Giovanni: Thank you for this question! I think that we have to use in the right way artificial intelligence. But the definition, in my opinion, of machine learning or artificial intelligence or whatever you want to call it, is that the product of this work is based on what you already know. So, for example, if you use artificial intelligence for better analysing complex data and for selecting from these data important information, artificial intelligence is very welcome. But if you need artificial intelligence for taking contents from other papers, and for composing a new paper, this is not fair. This is, by definition, opposite to the concept of new scientific

contribution. Unfortunately, we already have seen papers with overlapping content of existing papers higher than 90%, but the percentage of overlapping with every single paper is very small. This is, by definition, plagiarism, and does not provide a new scientific contribution. On this matter, let me say something about review papers. Generally speaking, they are not welcome because they summarize what is known but often they do not bring nothing new, unless it is an outstanding review paper that addresses the readers in their future research activities. Another issue on the matter of AI is about the science governing the topic, which could be chemistry, physics, mechanics, etc. We can hardly substitute these laws with an algorithm.

RIM: As an author, as a reviewer and now as an Editor-in-Chief, has anything changed in the way people write a paper in the last 30 years?

Giovanni: In my opinion, there is a big change but it is not initiated by the authors. The value of a paper is its scientific contribution, not the publication of the paper itself. The value of the paper is how many people get good ideas or better information through this paper. But nowadays, the evaluation system for the promotion of researchers looks at bibliometric indexes, at number of papers, at number of citations, which are not strictly related to the quality of the research. I always use this very stupid, but I think useful, example: if you publish one single paper which changes the world, this paper can have billions of citations but your h-index will be always 1. In other words, numbers do not always mean quality!

RIM: Does this system affect just the quality of the papers or also the quality of the review process of the paper?

Giovanni: Nowadays it happens that many researchers are more interested in writing papers instead of reviewing papers. But our publication system is very simple and it is clear to understand that there is no solution: if you write a paper, you're expecting that somebody else will review your paper. This works if you support the system by doing your duty in reviewing other papers. The paper that you submit will have at least 2 reviewers. As an example, if you submit in one year 5 papers, you are supposed to read in that year at least 10 papers because 10 other people are doing the same job for you. We have to protect the good habits, because that's the only way for making the system sustainable and supporting for a long time the dissemination of knowledge.

RIM: What would you say to an author out there considering to submit his/her work to *Materials and Structures*?

Giovanni: I would say: first check if the topic of the article is within the scope of *Materials and Structures*. If yes, please consider this journal because it is a top-level journal. It provides, as I said, a quick answer for your submission and it is a platform to have your research results known within an important international community. I should say, personally, that the paper of mine having the highest number of citations was written before I joined TAC, so I was just a RILEM member, and it was published in *Materials and Structures* (Editor's note: di Prisco, M., Plizzari, G. & Vandewalle, L. [Fibre reinforced concrete: new design perspectives](#). Mater Struct **42**, 1261–1281 (2009)).

RIM: It was the beginning of a career in RILEM! It was a sign of good luck!

Giovanni: It was, actually, because the paper concerns the structural applications of fibre reinforced concrete elements, which is one of my research topics. It raised the interest of many

readers in the world. In summary, Daniela, publishing in a top-level journal, flagship of an important community, and having the answer for your submission in a reasonable time, are all good reasons to submit a paper to *Materials and Structures*.

RIM: Thank you, Giovanni! I think you gave a very exhaustive insight of the work of an Editor-in-Chief. Thank you also for sharing many aspects and figures of *Materials and Structures* that are not always visible to everyone!

Giovanni: My pleasure!