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An Overlooked Peer? Role of the Managing Editor in Nursing Journals

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Sixteen years ago, before I became as directly involved with nursing publications as I am today, I was managing editor of a peer-reviewed scientific research journal on complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). It was challenging but profoundly interesting work, and I learned much about the field during my tenure. In addition to the standard duties of a managing editor, at the time I was given the opportunity to write by-lined reports and other news-type articles that were published in the journal on a regular basis. It was invaluable experience.

As a result of such responsibilities, I steadily grew in the role, having cut my editorial teeth several years before as a copy editor and editorial assistant. In time, when our publishing group decided to launch a new bimonthly magazine on the topic of spirituality and consciousness in the workplace, I was named interim managing editor overseeing some of the business planning and startup phases. I threw myself headlong into the enterprise, reading the relevant literature and learning the names of up-and-coming luminaries in this nascent field.

But I learned about my limits, too. I vividly recall a comment the publisher made to me one afternoon as we discussed the desired makeup of the editorial and advisory boards. "This new magazine is a good opportunity for you," she said. "You'll never be seen as a peer by the editors of the [CAM] journal, but here you may have a chance."

I nodded, uncertain how to respond, but years later much about her remark still intrigues me. Would it have been appropriate to consider myself a "peer" to either publication's editors-in-chief or boards, lacking the requisite credentials to do so? Just what is the proper role of a managing editor? What talents, skills, or abilities must he or she bring to the table to do the job adequately, let alone to do it well?

WHAT DOES A MANAGING EDITOR DO?

Anyone involved with the production and development of an academic journal—and perhaps any kind of periodical—knows the critical role played by this unsung hero. At its most basic, the managing editor's role is to offer the oversight and "management" needed to usher submitted and solicited content through various stages of production into a final, published form—print, digital, or both. Working with copy editors and graphic artists, the managing editor often ensures that appropriate layouts and styles are applied, and that the material conveys scholarly information in the clearest, most accessible way possible. They are members of interdisciplinary teams seeking the common goal of knowledge dissemination.

But there's more. Much more.

Interestingly, little has been written about the role of the managing editor, at least in professional journals, and what one finds is usually dated. Gary M. Smith, former managing editor of the American Heart Association's journal *Hypertension*, made this point as long ago as 1997 (Smith 1997). His article, "The Role of the Managing Editor: An Overview," excerpted from a longer work, is probably the best and most comprehensive piece published on the topic. Technology has changed quite a bit since then—the widespread adoption of web-based manuscript tracking systems, search taxonomies and the holy grail of SEO (search engine optimization), a more sophisticated role for digital and online publishing platforms and systems in general—but I dare say Smith was exceedingly detail oriented and thorough, having arrived in the role with a strong technical writing background.

In fact, he documented everything done in his office, "from printing mailing labels to logging the names of reviewers ... into the database," eventually creating a full-blown manual that would become the basis for his book, *The Peer Reviewed Journal: A Comprehensive Guide Through the Editorial Process*. One could do worse than Smith if looking for the ideal model of a managing editor.

Another good place to look might be the member roster of ISMTE, the International Society of Managing and Technical Editors (www.ismte.org), founded in 2008 to support the "under-served niche" of editorial office staff. Its mission is to connect "the community of professionals committed to the peer review and publication of academic and scholarly journals" (ISMTE 2013). Among ISMTE's many resources, they publish a newsletter and host an annual conference, now in its seventh year.

Managing editors often directly handle the peer review process, corresponding with authors and would-be reviewers during the submission phase and afterward. In our organization we have a capable peer-review coordinator who oversees that process, turning over accepted papers once they've been through the system. Our managing editors work directly with the peer-review coordinator and had a say in her hiring.

In larger operations, such as newspapers, the managing editor may manage staff, including hiring and firing junior editors, but that is unusual among society-based publishers, whose backbench is rarely large or stratified. Much will depend on how the individual publishing department is organized, and whether a skeleton crew means doubling up of duties—a reality in many society-based publishing operations.

FORMAL AND INFORMAL DUTIES DESCRIBED

Perhaps another way to learn about what managing editors do nowadays is to read their job descriptions. But it's even more enlightening to talk to flesh-and-blood managing editors themselves, since job descriptions rarely tell the whole story. Combine these two methods and a picture forms, with a background of buzz verbs such as *liaison*, *manage*, *supervise*, *oversee*, and *facilitate* emerging pretty clearly.

Indeed, some of the brightest, most dynamic, and most capable people I've met in publishing occupy this role, so I suspect their success and effectiveness are dictated by something other than their

meticulous nature. The best managing editors:

act as the liaison and key resource for editorial and production, becoming conduits between the editorial team and vendors, between editors-in-chief and staff, between readers and association leaders, between the publishing team and external stakeholders such as journal boards, and so on

- ensure the integrity, quality, and currency (called “continuous relevancy” by our organization) of published content
- work closely with editors-in-chief, authors, guest editors, and regular department columnists to guide the direction and “voice” of the publication
- create and oversee production calendars to track editorial copy and paid and/or in-house advertising
- advocate for the journal, serving as the senior editors’ “eyes and ears”
- keep up with the latest publishing technologies, attending conferences and networking with peers to learn more, then reporting back to staff
- maintain professional affiliations, such as memberships in scholarly publishing societies
- supervise junior editorial staff, freelance writers, contractors, and vendors, from manuscript-tracking companies to web-hosting firms
- do heavy or light copy editing, usually after a first pass by an in-house or contracted editor, then signing off on copy in the prepress page proof stage
- oversee the journal’s social media efforts, often advising marketing and advertising sales personnel as the staff-based journal content experts
- manage special projects such as supplements
- track financials and prepare a budget, at least for income and expenses related to the journal they manage
- solve problems for editors, authors, reviewers, readers, and subscribers

It’s an impressive list, but give or take this or that bullet point depending on the organization, it’s pretty much what we expect our managing editors to do.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

I surveyed a dozen managing editors from various nursing, medical, and scientific journals to hear how they describe their own work. When asked what she wanted others to know about her responsibilities, one managing editor told me: “It encompasses much more than managing editorial. It is a high level position that contributes significantly to the direction taken by the journal and decisions about manuscript acceptance and issue contents.” As a doctoral candidate in nursing, this editor was especially well positioned to contribute to her journal’s clinical content.

Whatever their background or education, managing editors consistently serve as the lynchpin between editorial leadership and frontline production, ensuring that key processes contributing to the journal’s timeliness and relevance are executed with the utmost care, quality, and attention to detail. But they can be phantoms, too, conducting their work beneath the radar, lacking by-lines or name recognition that come with high-profile gigs such as editorialist-in-chief. As one managing editor responsible for no fewer than seven journals explained, “If I am 100% successful in facilitating the production process on a journal, the work I’ve put into the process is mostly invisible.” It sounds thankless, but the managing editors with whom I spoke seem to enjoy their jobs, perhaps owing to

what Smith calls their “irregular and unpredictable workload” (Smith 1997, p 42). So it seems the work is rarely boring.

Another managing editor referred to herself as an “enforcer” of the journal’s various policies and styles. This seems especially relevant when the journal is a flagship or “official voice” of the society (not to mention the highest-ranked benefit of membership), as is the case with *AORN Journal*, published by the Association of periOperative Registered Nurses. Managing editor Kimberly Retzlaff put it this way: “[The Journal] is a centerpiece of the association and requires input from many people to make it as strong and as beneficial to our members as it can be.”

But sometimes it’s not many people. The editorial staff of *The Biological Bulletin* of the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, for example, published every other month, is composed of just three, among whom is managing editor Carol Schachinger. “Let’s just say I do everything here,” she told me, “except the substantive editing of manuscripts and the handling of subscriptions.... [M]y job is all-encompassing and varied (and therefore very interesting).”

Duties tend to blur in small offices, when the volume of submitted manuscripts is manageable, or when an editor-in-chief is especially hands on. For example, ensuring that submissions are complete and conform to guidelines is a task that could reasonably fall to an editor-in-chief, a managing editor, a peer-review administrator, or even a copy editor. (In the smallest shops, a multifaceted managing editor may have peer-review oversight and copyediting functions rolled into his or her daily duties.) Selection of reviewers could fall to the editor-in-chief, managing editor, or peer-review administrator, but in all likelihood the latter two work from a database vetted by the journal’s senior or clinical editors, so often it’s a group effort.

MANAGING EDITOR AS POLITICIAN

Tact and professionalism are absolutely essential in this role. When I became our organization’s publishing manager and interviewed for a new managing editor to replace me in my role as managing editor of our research journal, I administered a copyediting test to gauge each candidate’s acuity in working with a raw manuscript. We use AMA style for all of our journals, but I was looking and hoping more for attention to style-related issues than to expertise with the finer points of the *AMA Manual*, 10th edition. Style sheets can be taught, plus we had two contract copy editors with whom we’d worked for many years to police that sort of thing.

No, of even greater importance would be the candidate’s performance on a writing aptitude test. “Imagine you’ve received the following email from I. Rate Author, MD, PhD,” the prompt read. “The email has bypassed the copy editors and come straight to you, the managing editor.” The irate email (with names excluded to protect the innocent) was based on an actual letter we’d received from an author some years earlier, parting insult and all:

"Dear Editor:

I don’t understand many of the edits you’ve made to my manuscript. They seem excessive. I’ve written more than 11 peer-reviewed articles for various health-related publications, and have yet to

see such changes made. To begin with, you need to add commas to numbers larger than 999 (4 digits or more); they're missing in my galley. I used the pronoun "he" throughout the manuscript. Why did you change it? And why replace my use of "surgeries" with "operations"? Finally, I cannot understand why so many hyphens were eliminated from simple words such as anti-microbial and post-traumatic. These picayune changes suggest to me a foolish consistency: the hobgoblin of little minds."

The candidates were then asked to draft an email response to this author to explain—diplomatically, of course—the reason for the changes. Good rhetorical skills are a must for success in the managing editor role, since he or she will interface with some of the most prolific and influential people in the field, whether they are editors-in-chief, authors, reviewers, association leaders, or board members. It's not an understatement: managing editors are expected to be good politicians on top of everything else they do.

REINVENTING THE ROLE: THE ACTIVIST MANAGING EDITOR

My inspiration to write this article came from an experience in our office several months ago. An author had been invited to submit a piece to one of our journals that touched on the topic of religion. When that journal's managing editor saw the first draft manuscript, she noticed that some of the statements were controversial and insufficiently substantiated, and communicated her concern to the editors-in-chief.

They carefully considered the managing editor's comments and conveyed them to the author, who appreciated the constructive criticism (owing, no doubt, to the tact and professionalism with which that constructive criticism was communicated). The managing editor's background (she has a doctorate in religious studies) made her professional contribution welcome and appropriate, and she thereby became a de facto reviewer on the paper. Among her many other valuable contributions to the journal, then, the managing editor had become a peer as well, drawing on special expertise to improve content, strengthening her bond and further cementing her credibility with the editors-in-chief in the process.

What a shame if other highly talented, broadly educated managing editors don't do the same. What a waste of resources.

In fact, several of the dozen or so managing editors I surveyed had similar stories about how their backgrounds came into play in their work. Several had degrees in English or science that served them in a pinch. Others were doctorally prepared or currently in doctoral programs that were highly relevant to their journals' subject matter. One even described herself as "akin to the statistical editors we have—someone with expertise to see that the science is explained properly...."

Although I have a master's degree in literary studies, I consider myself a layperson, yet I know the managing editor role can be expansive from personal experience. When I became managing editor of our nursing research journal in the mid-2000s, I had the rare opportunity to redesign the publication, making it my goal to render the occasionally heady content more accessible to readers, many of whom are bedside nurses without advanced degrees. Working with internal and external teams on the

project, I sought to engineer such changes elegantly, conservatively, and with the utmost sensitivity to the journal's history, the desires of its editors and association leaders, and its stature among long-time members, readers, and authors.

To do so, I combed through reader surveys, studied a task force report that had been produced several years earlier, and convened department colleagues to discuss ideas for improvements. I reached out to those familiar with the journal and its history. Our team consulted with editors, authors, reviewers, and readers to learn what they wanted, and we reengineered everything from manuscript outreach (overseeing efforts to attract more case reports) to marketing and promotion. I even wrote a few press releases and spoke about the journal to select nurse audiences. Best of all, I was able to compose a "managing editor's note" and include it in the inaugural redesigned issue, tying everything up, as it were, with an introductory bow of my own choosing (Muscat 2007). Must admit it was satisfying closure.

Although I was answerable to stakeholders inside and outside the organization, at no time did I feel my efforts were viewed with anything but support and enthusiasm from my supervisor or others. And that made all the difference. Reader surveys following launch of the redesigned journal were favorable, with negative ratings about the journal's "dryness" all but disappearing and evaluations of its readability (despite the fact that manuscripts were much the same) increasing significantly. In the aftermath of the redesign, my supervisor paid me the ultimate compliment, which acted as a corrective to what I'd heard from the other publisher a decade earlier: "You've raised the bar about what we expect from a managing editor," he said, "which will affect how we gauge the role's performance from now on."

I was able to see history repeat itself when the managing editor of our peer-reviewed bedside practice journal undertook her own redesign of the publication last year, engaging with internal and external stakeholders to establish a vision, convening small focus groups from our volunteer database to elicit informed feedback, closely analyzing reader survey data to fix on new directions, working with the editor-in-chief on content improvements and the art director on design changes—all with very little direct supervision from yours truly. The collective work she oversaw so skillfully became a living testament to the "raised bar" of expectations cited by my supervisor, and we all can be proud of the finished product that resulted from her many months of hard—and smart!—labor and research.

CONCLUSION

Why trust managing editors to be peers? Because, more often than not, they're capable. A doctorally prepared managing editor for a subspecialty medical journal made this appeal, which editors-in-chief would do well to consider: "We are highly trained professionals who take a great deal of pride in advancing scholarly communication. Clinicians and researchers are extremely busy people who deserve to have smart, skilled people work with them to disseminate scholarly information.... Treat us as professionals who have skills to give editors, authors, and reviewers time to focus on their core mission of research."

An able managing editor for a nursing journal needn't be a nurse at all, though certainly such editors

exist. He or she needn't have detailed understanding of bodily systems, statistics, or clinical protocols and practices, but surely that wouldn't hurt either. What truly matters is that the managing editor be attentive: to the readership, to the journal's strengths and challenges, to the main currents in the field, including its politics. In other words, the best managing editors are critical thinkers, humble enough to understand the limits of their role yet savvy enough to overcome them.

I'll end with a metaphor. In *An Essay on Criticism* (1711), Alexander Pope famously warned that "[a] little learning is a dang'rous thing," advising that we "Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring." He refers to the Pierian Spring of Macedonia, sacred to the Muses and believed to be the source of inspiration for the arts and sciences. The best managing editors will tend to drink deep; that's just their nature. They'll learn everything they can about the journal, its operations, its finances, and its niche in the discipline. Perhaps to some extent that's only a "little learning." But whether these talented folks ever taste the Pierian spring—whether they become true peers in the larger sense—may depend on their being sufficiently challenged to do so.

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