

Publisher Anthropology 101: What Editors Need to Know About Publishers and Their Culture

Moderator:

Kent Anderson

New England Journal of Medicine
Waltham, Massachusetts

Panelists:

Alison Mitchell

Nature Publishing Group
London, United Kingdom

Randolph A Nanna

Physics Today
College Park, Maryland

Mary Waltham

Mary Waltham Publishing Consultant
Princeton, New Jersey

Alex Williamson

BMJ Publishing Group
London, United Kingdom

Reporter:

Rebecca S Benner

Obstetrics & Gynecology
Washington, DC

The editorial and publishing worlds, although interconnected, are often at odds with each other. However, a respectful, cooperative interchange between these worlds is essential for maintaining a successful publication. Presenters drew on their experience as editors and publishers to categorize the two groups, analyze their motivations, provide case studies, and propose strategies for developing and maintaining good relationships.

Editors and publishers each have distinct traits and goals, which make them unique. Editors are primarily responsible for content and can be characterized as author advocates. Publishers are primarily responsible for business matters, includ-

ing maximizing revenues and controlling costs, and can be characterized as reader advocates. Publishers in the sciences often have the advantage of science or editorial background, which gives them a valuable perspective on the workings of the journal. Alison Mitchell used the analogy of “sheep in wolves’ clothing” to describe this phenomenon. That is, despite a focus on strategic planning, tactical decision-making, and marketing—the “wolflike” business of publishing—many publishers were previously immersed in an editorial culture and so were more likely to be empathetic about the motivations and needs of their client, the editor.

In fact, editors and publishers have similar goals. They both strive to maintain a prestigious and profitable journal, promote journal visibility, and satisfy the needs of their authors and readers. But despite the mutual dependence, conflict can arise when the two sides do not understand each other’s motivation. In the worse-case scenario, the two sides lack respect for each other’s professional know-how.

Alex Williamson offered case studies for the audience to consider. One described a journal with a 125% increase in submissions over 3 years. The editor believed that the journal’s acceptance rate could not fall below 25%. Because the journal’s page allotment did not change, the lag time between submission and publication became longer and led to unhappy authors, editor, and publisher. An impasse could have threatened the well-being of the journal. Instead, a compromise was reached: The publisher agreed to allow extra pages, articles were published online ahead of print, and the editor agreed to increase the rejection rate and decrease the length of papers. Both worlds—editorial and publishing—benefited from the cooperative effort.

Using market research, editors and publishers can use data, not just “hunches”, to understand each other’s perspective. Randolph A Nanna explained how this tool can be used to position the publication to the reader and in the editorial universe where it competes. Used regularly with the right questions, market research can assist the editorial office by tracking interests and helping to direct change. The editor can use market research to communicate with the “average” reader about audience interests and observations. The publisher can use market research to identify and develop audiences, create an advertising product, and increase other revenue streams, such as newsletters. The same tool benefits both groups and their unique but ultimately mutually dependent goals.

The best strategy for developing and maintaining good relationships between publishers and editors boils down to one word: communication. Mary Waltham suggested holding a monthly management meeting in which editors and publishers exchange information and plan the next few journal issues by involving key staff across all critical elements of the journal—editorial, marketing, production, and advertising (when relevant).

Few publications can survive without a strong publisher. But there would be no publication without the editor. Those codependent people must work together, and communication goes a long way toward fostering a cooperative working relationship. A metaphor proposed by Waltham captures the idea perfectly: the publisher as an orchestra conductor and the editor as the first violin. Together, they can make beautiful music. 