

Interview with Maisha Miles, Managing Editor

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As *mBio*'s managing editor, Maisha Miles is the backbone of the journal's editorial office. Maisha not only oversees day-to-day operations and manages the peer-review process and editorial staff but also functions as the editor-in-chief's "right hand," developing and implementing content strategy, upholding editorial policy, and creating and maintaining productive relationships with authors, reviewers, and editors.

Maisha earned a liberal arts degree at Virginia Tech, with concentrations in English, communications, and Black studies. She loved to read and write poetry and short stories and aspired to a career in magazine publishing in New York City. After graduation, reality hit and Maisha faced student loan obligations that brought her home to Washington, DC, searching for a job she hoped with some publishing aspect that she could translate into a long-term career. So how did she end up at the helm of a successful open-access journal? I had the opportunity to speak with Maisha about her career path, the highs and lows she has encountered, and her advice for success.

DC: How did your career path lead you to where you are today?

MM: I found a position as a receptionist at a radiation protection company that published manuals but quickly found that what editing work was available would not become a part of my responsibilities. I began searching for an editing job and applied to a copy editor position at the American Geophysical Union (AGU). AGU didn't think I was qualified for the editor job but offered me a publications secretary position, which I accepted. This was my first exposure to scientific publishing; I had no idea this industry existed. I wasn't a science major and didn't really read journals. My role was primarily administrative: data entry, collecting copyright forms, etc.

When an assistant copyediting training position opened up, I was able to get "editor" in my title, but it still wasn't quite what I wanted to do. During my time at AGU, I realized that a lot went into publishing manuscripts. AGU was moving into online publishing and electronic copyediting, and I was asked to train copy editors on editing in Word. I became involved in meetings about online processes and systems. I found that I was more interested in these than the actual copyediting. I really took to the "how" of publishing.



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I also created a manual for the copy editors I trained. This reinforced my interest in how things are done and where the connections lie.

Eventually I became a senior copy editor for *G-Cubed*, AGU's first successful online-only journal. This role was a little different from the traditional senior copy editor role in that I communicated with the editor on production-related concerns as well. Regardless, after a little over 8 years, I knew that my upward mobility was limited at AGU and, if I wanted more challenges, I'd need to move on.

I interviewed for an assistant managing editor position at the Society for Neuroscience (SfN) that was a bit of a reach, since I didn't have any peer-review experience. However, because I was working on a number of forward-thinking projects at AGU and could demonstrate that I was a quick learner, the managing editor gave me a shot. My position at SfN solidified my desire to learn more about systems and processes: how things work, why they work, how things connect.

I gained well-rounded knowledge in my 5+ years at SfN, including dealing with an editorial board, experience working on a high-impact journal, understanding what's important to authors, reviewers, and readers, and so forth. These skills prepared me for

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my current role at American Society for Microbiology (ASM), where I was brought on board as the managing editor specifically for *mBio*'s launch in 2009.

DC: What's a typical day like for you?

MM: When I came on board, the heavy focus was the launch of *mBio*. Once it was up and running, my role became about managing the journal. At first, it was just me and an assistant managing editor for *mBio*, although ASM has a larger journals program which provided a support team. In the very beginning, I was pushing manuscripts through submission, reviewing proofs, etc.

But as volume increased and pressures increased, I knew I had to step out of the day-to-day role. Now I see myself as a real partner with the editor-in-chief, helping him realize his vision of the journal and what is important to him and the scientists, in keeping with the vision of the society. I keep an eye on where things are, but I do not handle day-to-day tasks. I rely a lot on reporting, and I make sure *mBio* is in line with what other ASM journals are doing.

DC: What are the top three things you enjoy about your job?

MM: First, system and process improvements. I like figuring out how I can make things happen more efficiently and effectively.

Second, reports. This all ties into improvement; reports are the evaluation component. Data show what needs improvement.

And finally, working with my fabulous two-person team, sharing information with them—it's very exciting.

DC: What are the most challenging aspects?

MM: ASM already had established processes and procedures when I came in, but I knew *mBio* was going to be something different. I had to put my head down and charge forward in questioning established policies, asking what the priorities are, and why we are doing certain things in certain ways. I had to ensure priorities like rapid time to publication were top of mind. I had to find my voice and speak up for the journal. I always had the support of my director and the EIC, but I really had to prove myself to myself.

DC: What has been the biggest surprise to you about your career?

MM: I don't see as many people of color in the industry as I would have hoped. When I started, I could count the number of African Americans on one hand at most industry meetings. I've seen some growth in diversity

but not as much as I'd like. It always helps to see people who look like you to know there is a place for you.

DC: What particular skills are critical to be successful in your role?

MM: Soft skills. For example, understanding the language of your boss or your director: What's important to them? What pressures are they facing? What are their priorities? How can you help support them?

I'm also growing more interested in the association at large and how it works. To that end, I studied for (and passed!) the Certified Association Executive (CAE) exam, which tests a person's preparedness to be an executive director. I learned about how associations are run, how they are governed, how they are marketed. The online exam-preparation class I took was essentially a boot camp in association management. It's important to understand your role in the larger society and your organization's goals. This helps you realize the value of your role to the society, how it fits into the mission, and what the members need and want.

And attending the CSE meeting was crucial, along with other industry meetings. CSE was the perfect gateway to get a sense of fundamentals and foundations and to understand scholarly publishing as a whole. Absorbing information, reading, and continually learning by following up on things you don't know or understand are critical skills.

DC: What are the biggest changes you've seen in the industry since you started?

MM: Definitely an increased focus on technology, understanding data, and how technologies talk to each other (e.g., that what comes in during submission can impact everything down the line, to what an author eventually sees in PubMed), and understanding how all of this can be used to advance the science.

DC: Do you have any predictions for the future?

MM: I don't know! There's so much talk of open data, preprints, and peer review no longer being centralized with a publisher. How will this impact the publisher's role and the work we do?

DC: When you were a kid, could you have imagined yourself doing this job?

MM: No, not at all! I hardly connected research and publishing. When people ask what I do, it sounds impressive—I often get a "WOW!" Then I go on to explain what I actually do and that the role we play is

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so critical to the researcher. But it's an industry that is largely invisible to the public.

DC: If you had to give one piece of advice to someone who's interested in working as a managing editor or in the scholarly publishing industry, what would it be?

MM: Take advantage of any opportunity you get. If you're interested in peer review but what is available is a production position, take the opportunity and leverage it into other options. I started as a publications secretary wanting to become an editor.

If I hadn't taken that position, I don't know if I would have followed this path. Studying for the CAE exam also really elevated my thinking for *mBio*. Some of the key principles are to scan the environment, plan and implement, and evaluate. These principles shape the way I now do my work:

- Scan: What is important to readers and editors?
- Plan and implement: Make it happen (this is the part I love to do).
- Evaluate: How well does this work, and how can I change and improve it?