

Jasmine Wallace: Mastering the Art and Science of Peer Review

Jonathan Schultz

High-quality peer review rarely happens spontaneously. It takes a skilled and knowledgeable staff to keep the peer review process moving along in a way that is fair and equitable to all researchers while ensuring that only the best science advances to publication. For the American Society for Microbiology journals, that process is managed by Jasmine Wallace, who brings a love of scientific publishing and a passion for communication to peer review. In August, Jasmine and I spoke about the opportunities in the future for peer review and publishing, the attributes and skills she thinks are essential for success, and her role in developing a new podcast for CSE.



Science Editor: Tell me about your job and organization.

Jasmine Wallace: I'm a peer review manager at the American Society for Microbiology, which means in layman's terms that I'm responsible for ensuring that the peer review practices and the policies are up to date and applied consistently across all of our peer-reviewed scientific journals. It also incorporates a bit of analyzing and identifying measures to improve, for example, speed and efficiency for reviewers, editors, and authors. I'm also constantly having to make sure that everyone is aware of any new tools, workflows, or policies surrounding peer review and making sure that everyone is on the same page about what that means. I do a ton of analyzing and monitoring statistical metrics on submissions, acceptance rates, turn times, and so on. Now we're additionally adding things to help us increase diversity within our organization; we're taking a look at our reviewer boards and our editorial board. The American Society for Microbiology is a medium-sized society publisher, but the society has over 30,000 members, including researchers, educators, health professionals, and more. We're actually one of the largest life science societies in the world and I think that's a pretty cool thing to be part of.

Science Editor: I saw some of your journals cover virology so I imagine this has been busy year for you.

JONATHAN SCHULTZ is Editor-in-Chief, *Science Editor*, and Director, Journal Operations, American Heart Association.

Jasmine: Yes, there's a ton going on right now. Our workloads have increased so much. We have initiatives within our organization that are working on with the White House Coronavirus Task Force and other initiatives. Our scientists are so strained right now. We have tons of members who are clinicians, so they're in these labs. We had quite a few editors that actually contracted the virus and then they're writing about it. It's interesting in the greater scheme of things, but when you're doing the work behind it, it's just managing a lot of different... adjustments to our workflows. We've had to do things like extend deadlines, almost indefinitely right now. Everyone agrees turnaround times are important, but right now they're not as important. Having to make those adjustment is a lot for us, but I think it's necessary. It shows our members that we're listening to them and we're catering to their needs. It just makes me feel good that we are listening to them in a time where they really need us.

Science Editor: At my journals, we've told all our editors that this year is going to have a giant asterisk next to all the stats.

Jasmine: Yeah. We are actually seeing an increase in submissions. We do have a journal on virology and one on clinical microbiology, which is also getting a large influx of

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papers, with the clinicians writing about all their experiences. So yeah, I guess we need some asterisks, because it's just going to be crazy.

Science Editor: How did you get involved in editing and peer review?

Jasmine: I actually did it by choice, which I think is unusual for publishing only because most people stumble into it, which I think is weird for most professions. But I made the decision to do it. I graduated from undergrad with an English degree and wanting to do something with my degree. I landed my first job at an organization called Health Affairs, a medical journal. It was very entry-level: I was an editorial assistant, but I don't think that was what my title was officially. And I just started loving what I was seeing everyone doing, loving the processes, and really wanting to get more engaged in what publishing meant and what kind of careers were available. Prior to coming into this space, I only knew what a copy editor was and honestly, looking back, I didn't even really understand what they did. But I knew that I wanted to do writing and editing. Once I started really enjoying the things that I learned, I decided to go to grad school to really solidify myself. That was one of the major things that I think helped propel me to this next level, because it taught me about everything that I didn't know within the scientific publishing world, and kind of quickly.

Science Editor: Where did you get your Master's degree?

Jasmine: George Washington University. They have a wonderful publishing program. I think that it's one of only a few programs in the nation. It was fairly new; I was cohort 8 and I think they're now up to 16, or so.

Science Editor: It sounds like it was a valuable experience for you.

Jasmine: Very, very valuable. It led to a ton of networking opportunities. I met some of my closest acquaintances and mentors and that's led to a lot of other opportunities.

Science Editor: Now that you've kind of gone through all that, how do you describe what you do to somebody who doesn't know, basically someone like yourself from a couple of years ago when you didn't really know what scientific editing and publishing was?

Jasmine: What I do is first see what their overall knowledge of publishing is. I think about my family, and they still don't know what I do, so I don't know if I'm describing it well. I usually step back and I ask, do you know what a journal is? So I manage that process. I manage that from beginning to end; the research is evaluated and moving through this process quickly. Then it is published and can be found by other researchers. I've tried to go at it from that angle. And usually they get it at that point. A lot of people think publishing and they think, oh, magazine or book. And it's like, no, it's something a little bit different. I think everyone's familiar with research findings, so that's a good place to start. I did a career day once at an elementary school and that's what forced me to know how to break this down to the minute detail.

Science Editor: Your title is Peer Review Manager, which I think is interesting because not every organization has staff that get to focus only on that part. How do you keep yourself kind of informed about what's going on in peer review, especially this year where there's a lot changing, a lot that's being questioned.

Jasmine: I read a lot. I read more than I do anything else. I follow a lot of different blogs and read a lot of articles. People kind of know that about me, so they'll send things to me that I'm not familiar with or haven't heard about just yet. I also attend a lot of conferences. I make a lot of connections because I think sometimes it's easier to ask your friend what's going on in their area versus just reading about something. And I ask a lot of questions. I also sit in a lot of meetings to try to see how peer review fits into other areas, because just as peer review is changing, other areas such as production are moving too. It's usually pretty segmented but we can learn from each other. Production is focusing on, for example, introducing artificial intelligence and automating their workflow and there may be ways we can bring some of that into peer review.

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Science Editor: What skills, abilities, and personal attributes have you found to be essential to success in your position?

Jasmine: I was asked something similar at a career panel recently, except there was one slight difference: What are the skills that you think are essential, but additionally, how are they transferable to different career paths? I say that because I think that all skills should be transferable because of how much change we're experiencing. It should be a skill that can move with you and grow with you, so those are the types of skills and personal attributes that I love to highlight.

The first is vulnerability. It's something that I continuously strive to achieve within myself and within my workplace, because it's hard to feel "dumb" or to feel like you can't ask or answer a question. You miss opportunities when you don't allow yourself to say, "Okay, I'm going to take this moment to say: I don't know, I need some help." I think that's a skill that you definitely need in this space. Again, we talked about how I am staying abreast of knowledge: I'm asking people, I'm using that skill of vulnerability to put myself out there. And I guess on some level it's more like a personal attribute, but I consider it a critical skill because you can develop it.

The other thing I think about is time management, and [laughs] it's something that I struggle with still. I read as many books as I can to try to get as good at it as I can. I have my planner beside me when I'm making any decisions, because there was a point where I was really struggling to manage my time. Especially in publishing, I find that we have to juggle a lot. Because of these professional silos, you have to volunteer in some capacity to learn more about what even the person next to you is doing and that requires you give your time to an industry organization like CSE.

And to balance all of that, without feeling overwhelmed, you need to master how you get everything done and strive to get there. I'm still learning as I go: I didn't even have a real planner for 2 years. I think we're going to all be asked to do more things, so time management is a critical skill.

The last skill I want to mention is communication. Oral, written, verbal: all types of communication are really critical to master. In editing and publishing, you don't always have to talk to people, but you have to be able to communicate because we're working with an author's form of communication in journal articles. It seems like it should come naturally, but it's a skill you have to craft: Even if you're writing emails or editing every day that doesn't make you an exceptional communicator. Learning how to communicate is only going to become more critical.

Science Editor: Speaking of communication, how are you staying connected with coworkers and other colleagues these days?

Jasmine: I'm still doing the standard things: phone, email, LinkedIn, Twitter, happy hours, lunch, Zoom. Well, Zoom is facilitating almost all of that anyway. It's forcing me to be more aggressive with my communication because before you had those moments where you're passing by and can stop and chat. Now you must be more intentional, and because of that, I'm probably having more valuable conversations now. When we have these virtual conferences, we wrestle with how different are they from in-person conferences, but there can be benefits if you're a person like me who has been described as an ambivert, but leans introvert. I'm okay with doing it, but I'm not one to naturally start a conversation. I think right now is a time where introverts can reign because we don't have to deal with those uncomfortable starts: Walking up to someone isn't the same as sending someone a message or an email. I like networking in a virtual space a lot more than I do standing around, talking, and feeling awkward.

Science Editor: I want to ask about the CSE podcast you are starting with Carolyn DeCourt, specifically how you envision it and what you want CSE members to know about it?

Jasmine: The podcast we are starting through the Professional Development Committee at CSE is called SPEAK: Scientific Publishing Exchange Around Knowledge. I love acronyms and SPEAK is so much easier to say. The name is from the core of the CSE mission. The idea behind the podcast is to have conversations, professionals to professionals, about everyday operational matters—things that are happening in the workplace. Not just high-level industry initiatives and developments, but more into the grit of things: What are you doing? What are you seeing? How is it transforming what you have to do? What needs to happen? We want to give a space to have those types of conversations. If we have a request of the CSE membership, it would be to reach out: if you think that you have something that is worthy of being talked about and that someone else may want to know. Or things that you have questions about. We can get it out there so that people are aware of what issues you're dealing with in the publishing workplace. And not just any workplace; I think that is critical. If you are, say, a copy editor or a production editor, and you want to talk about some new efficiencies that are happening, this can be a place to share that, but not as involved as a full session at a conference. We want to create a unique space where we can better connect and share that body of knowledge with each other. Usually, we focus on experts, which is great (I love experts) and we don't want to exclude them, but we want to make people feel more comfortable and more included in these conversations even if they feel uncomfortable calling themselves an expert. So members, if you're out there and you want to see this happen, contact us. We envision this being led by members and I would love to see people first

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listen, tell us what you think about it, and feel free to join the conversation.

Science Editor: What do you see as some of the biggest changes that are happening in the industry?

Jasmine: Right now, COVID-19 is taking over everything because it's forcing us to make even larger scale changes that we otherwise wouldn't even begin to approach. It's pushing peer review to the max. I absolutely love that. I love challenges: Every day there's a new challenge or something that we must figure out and work around or adjust. It's forcing us to evolve into the next level. Where I think this is going is towards more open science and open research. What that means to the publisher is understanding that we're going to have to be a bit more collaborative and we're going to have to release some of the power that we think we have in order to allow for more collaboration. I can see growing partnerships between organizations that may seem like they have no reason to have a partnership but are going to have to connect a bit more. I love that because when you get more people at the table and more collaboration happening, you have so much more growth. And I also think it gives us a really good opportunity as publishers to take back our power. I like to say it like that because I think we struggle with showing people the value of what we do, and I think this has given us more opportunity to add value in a different way if we allow ourselves to embrace that change and open ourselves up.

Science Editor: What's something surprising about yourself that that our readers might be interested in knowing?

Jasmine: I am an artist. I paint. I took painting up in college and I recently decided to share my art at the urging

of my family. I signed up for this really cool art gallery that's going to be virtual this year, of course, but any level of artist can display any type of art that they want. A lot of people are surprised to know that I paint and know so much about painting. I studied abroad in Italy. I took up sculpting in an Italian sculptor studio and worked there for an entire semester. While there, I traveled all over the area to go to different art museums, to see different things that I just longed to see. I almost feel awkward calling myself an artist, but I do because I do paint and I love it. I'm talking to you from my art studio, which has now become my office.

Science Editor: As we wrap this interview up, is there anything you want to share with our readers that we didn't already cover?

Jasmine: I have found that I like what I do for a living. I really like understanding how research funding works, how things get funded, how things get studied. I'm also a cyclist, so I'm looking into starting an organization or a nonprofit where you take the 2 things that I love and merge them together into a bike ride to raise funding for underrepresented minority groups' research in mental health. When you don't study it, it doesn't get studied. That seems very simple, but I didn't realize how much went into understanding research, how to get funding for things, how some things never get funded so it never gets researched. I think of this as a good opportunity for me to bring all that I've learned and done professionally into my passions. I want to encourage people to try to find some similarities that you may not have thought were there at first between what you do and what you love to do.

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