

Mary K Billingsley: Promoting the Healthy Development of Scientific Publishing

Jonathan Schultz

As the Managing Editor and Journal Department Director at the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP), Mary K Billingsley, ELS, relishes the challenges posed by scientific publishing. Managing the multitude of stakeholders, schedules, and stresses that come with producing a high-quality scientific publication takes a thoughtful, organized, and flexible leader; all skills she hopes to bring to her new role as President of the Council of Science Editors (CSE). At the start of her term, Mary spoke with *Science Editor* about her love of publishing and CSE, her goals for CSE over the coming year, and her hope for a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive scientific publishing enterprise.

Science Editor: How did you get involved in scientific editing and publishing and what career path led you to this place?

Mary Billingsley: I have 2 answers. One is brief: I was an English major in college and afterward I worked briefly in the FDA Biosciences library where I learned about science journals. When it was time to move on, I briefly considered library school but then realized that there were science journal-related jobs, and that my newfound experience was a pathway into publishing. I started at AACAP as an Editorial Coordinator and later served as Assistant Managing Editor and then Managing Editor. I have been there for almost 13 years and have served at every level within the journal office.

My longer answer is that I developed a passion for publication management in high school, although I did not know to call it that at the time. I was an editor for our school literary magazine and was involved in reviewing submissions, but also in production aspects like layout and proofing. I even once hand-delivered the disks containing



our book to the printer. It did not click until years later that what I had loved about that experience was publication management. When I finally made that connection, I was both surprised and delighted to realize I'd been following that career trajectory all along.

I think there is something there: a pathway to workforce development for scholarly publishing in reaching out to high school or college literary magazines and yearbook clubs and undergrad and graduate English departments to promote scholarly publishing—science publishing in particular—as a career path. English majors can be quick to say, “I want to go into publishing,” but for many, publishing is a nebulous idea. It is easy to set your sights on publishing because you love books and reading, but you might not really know what that means. What are the jobs and job tasks? What expertise is required? If someone had said, “Oh, what you’re describing is publication management, and by the way, it would really help to take some business classes,” I may have adjusted my coursework or looked for opportunities to prepare myself differently for this career. I’m really interested in that angle: how to draw real-world connections between English departments and scholarly publishing in ways that might help give people the tools they need to pursue careers in this field.

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Science Editor: With that in mind, thinking back to yourself in high school, how would you describe what you do now to that young version of Mary to make her interested in it as a career?

Mary: Even now I struggle with explaining my job to those outside the scholarly publishing and association spheres. I would have to start with some basics but then I would emphasize the project management aspects of it. I would tell her that at the core of it, you're coordinating the creation of this final product, a journal, but there's so much more that goes along with it, so many opportunities to wear different hats and dabble in different areas. Then expanding on that, the work you do in this field supports the greater mission of the publishing organization.

Science Editor: What have you enjoyed most about your roles at AACAP?

Mary: I enjoy problem solving. I like meeting member, editor, and author needs, facilitating discussions about how to make things happen, and completing a finished product or successful project. Planning, development, implementation, launch: Seeing something through from start to finish is really satisfying. At AACAP, my work is in support of children's mental health, which gives it greater meaning and purpose. Publishing is the way that I can contribute to that mission. And I have wonderful colleagues. Our members are warm and thoughtful and so appreciative of the experience and energy that staff bring to the table. I have a great relationship with my editor-in-chief, our editorial team, and my AACAP staff colleagues, particularly the department directors. Most of us have worked together for many years. I value the relationships I have been able to build, and the opportunities to learn from and support amazing people.

Science Editor: What skills, abilities, personality attributes have you found essential to success in this career?

Mary: Flexibility, in all capital letters. A positive attitude and a sense of humor are important. I probably don't need to say to the readers of *Science Editor* that attention to detail and organization are essential. Also, openness. Our field thrives on open lines of communication and a ready willingness to share and collaborate with an appreciation for other people and their knowledge and expertise. No editor is an island.

Science Editor: This May, you are starting your term as CSE president. What has CSE meant to you and what are you looking forward to doing as president?

Mary: CSE has meant so much to me. The first time I attended a CSE meeting, I had just started in my role as Managing Editor and my then-editor-in-chief insisted that I

join the CSE Program Committee and get involved, pushing me into conversations where, as an introvert, I would have stood off to the side and observed. Getting involved has been so valuable to me and has presented great opportunities for learning, but coming from an editorial office of 3 people, just meeting others in our field and participating in discussions about our shared experiences, was a revelation. It was probably the first time I'd heard the term "publication management" and it felt like I had found my people.

I continue to feel that way when I engage with CSE. Within CSE I have been mentored and have had opportunities to develop my expertise in our field. I have learned so much from some truly amazing people. With my presidency, I want to give back to CSE. Our Past Presidents, Dana Compton and Carissa Gilman, have worked so hard to ensure that CSE has continued to provide education and support to our members during the COVID-19 pandemic. That work needs to continue so that is my primary focus.

We do not know yet what 2022 is going to look like, but there's a strong chance that it will be our first opportunity to be in person in several years. That's on my mind a lot. What does that look like? What does hosting a hybrid meeting mean for CSE? I also want to get back to our strategic plan. CSE's board and committee chairs put thought and effort into strategic planning under Dana's leadership in November 2019. The organization's needs during the pandemic have just been different since then, but the priorities we talked about at that meeting are still relevant and important for CSE and we need to get back to that and move forward.

Science Editor: How have you changed how you collaborate and work with colleagues, both in CSE and in your work this past year?

Mary: Video conferencing, but it isn't that simple. For both AACAP and CSE, our work with member volunteers was already virtual, so the switch to working from home did not change our workflows. All our standing meetings are still there and in some cases we meet even more often than we did before. I used to see my team in the office every day, but I would only meet with them maybe once or twice a week. Now we briefly meet every day. The dedicated time together on the calendar helps us reduce email and move our work forward more efficiently. In addition to helping me orient and prioritize, it's also a good opportunity for me to check in with them as people. I enjoy seeing their pets and talking about what they might be doing outside of work. We get that team feeling at the start of each day, which is nice. For CSE, we have increased the frequency of our board meetings, and the senior leadership team meets weekly, which has been so valuable to me coming into this role. I know there is work being done on the long-term effects of video conferencing, particularly on children who are trying to learn and connect

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with their peers this way, but I think video is here to stay, and I never thought I would say this, but I prefer it to audio-only calls. It is not the same as being in a room together, of course, but it has been such an amazing tool over this past year.

Science Editor: I'm curious what's it like to be a parent and work for the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry? I'm a parent of young children myself and every article on parenting and child behavior catches my eye, so I wonder what it's like to be surrounded by the information every day.

Mary: Every article on parenting and child behavior catches my eye, as you said. Maybe it is confirmation bias, but it does seem like a lot of the books and resources I reach for as a new parent are written by people I know or have at least heard of, which can be odd. Every parent worries, but I do think my fretting might sometimes run along specific lines because of the content I am exposed to through AACAP. That said, because of my work, I am so aware of the importance of early intervention and reducing stigma around mental health. It's easy to feel overwhelmed in the pediatrician's office, but I usually feel that my familiarity with child development concepts is some small advantage. And our members love working with kids and love seeing baby pictures, so I often get to wear my proud parent hat and share updates about the latest toddler developments happening at home.

Science Editor: What do you think you'd be doing if you hadn't gone into publications?

Mary Billingsley: I like to imagine that I would have pursued my love of American literature. I wrote my senior thesis on Willa Cather, and I spent more than 2 years deeply immersed in her work. My mentor, Merrill Maguire Skaggs, was a Cather scholar, and in her classes I learned to appreciate authors like Whitman, Dickinson, Emerson, Poe, and Twain in ways that still resonate with me now. I like to think that in an alternate universe I followed in her footsteps.

Science Editor: Coming back to science publishing, what would you say have been the biggest changes over the past decade and where do you see the industry going?

Mary: When I started at AACAP, it was the first year of the new editor-in-chief's term, and it was the first time that an editorial office had been located at the central office and not in-person at the editor's institution. It was a big cultural shift for our organization to have the journal office there as a department rather than a distant and time-limited satellite. Over time, it made the journal operations less siloed than might have been possible otherwise. The journal has editorial independence, of course, but there are opportunities to collaborate or to do things in tandem with the organization that wouldn't have been there in the past. My team being part of the larger association operations helps to make that happen and has created wonderful opportunities for growth and cooperation. A decade later, our editorial office was the first to manage an EIC transition and remain in place, which allowed for greater continuity and more seamless operations in a way that had not been possible before. I know that similar circumstances have been playing out in different ways across the industry for many years, but it was important for our organization and is still talked about as a decision that had a tremendously positive impact.

In terms of the future, like others, I've been thinking a lot about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). The need for work in this area is not new, but there is so much energy and motivation right now to create positive change, and to learn and do better. There's so much demand for education and for action. This is not unique to our industry, but there is a need within our industry for efforts and education specific to the work that we do: not just DEI education and discourse, but editorial- and peer review-focused DEI education and discourse. And that is where CSE needs to be to meet the needs of our members and to support our field. Many organizations and journals have, and I hope will continue, to take bold steps and to innovate to address structural racism and disparities. It is exciting to think about the possibilities and know that the work underway now will lead to new industry standards and best practices. My hope is that the future of scientific editing and publishing is diverse, equitable, and inclusive.