

Randy Townsend: On Finding His Calling and Founding a Journal

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Starting a new journal is hard. Starting a new journal during a pandemic is harder still. As the inaugural Editor-in-Chief of the *GW Journal of Ethics in Publishing*, Randy Townsend is up for that challenge, bringing with him his experience as Director of Publishing Operations for the American Geophysical Union (AGU) and a team of dedicated student volunteers. This Spring, Randy spoke with *Science Editor* about the new journal, publication ethics, and the importance of putting together a diverse team.

Science Editor: How did you get started at the AGU?

Randy Townsend: Dumb luck brought me to the AGU 15 years ago. I was looking for a job in the DC area, and I started as a temp. After a few months, they invited me to apply full time for a production coordinator position, where I worked my way up to production manager after a couple of years. Then AGU partnered with Wiley who assumed all production related activities. I had to reinvent my career and lean into editor support where I eventually became Director of Publishing Operations.

Science Editor: Director is my title also, and it can be a bit broad of a role. How would you define your role at the AGU?

Randy: I view it as being responsible for the staff that help support the journals. I'm responsible for the editors who work throughout the journal and for ensuring authors have a clear understanding of expectations so they can enjoy an easy publishing experience. There are a couple of levels of responsibility: content integrity, process integrity, and ensuring quality of output. It's also prioritizing the commitment to our stakeholders and consistently offering the really best service that we can possibly provide. You



want to make sure that however they engage with us, the various stakeholders walk away with a fantastic encounter and want to come back again. You want them to share their rewarding experience with their colleagues and, hopefully, they will want to engage with us too.

We spend a lot of time focusing on the experiences of authors, reviewers, editors, and other outside stakeholders. We have about 26 people in the publications department at AGU organized into different teams, with each team responsible for considering a different stakeholder. We have a team solely focused on the needs, experiences, and challenges of peer reviewers. For example: how do we expand our peer reviewer pool? How do we ensure diversity? How do we ensure we have the right resources and training? How do we make sure that our instructions are up to date? Then we have teams specifically for authors, editors and editorial board members, strategic partners, and most importantly, we have a team devoted to staff operations. When we have a new procedure or policy—for example, open data—I bring all of my team members to the table and say, this is what we want to do and we want it to apply to all of our journals. We will want the editors to do X, Y, and Z, and we expect the reviewers to know what to do. We will also need the authors to understand the expectations in advance, and we need staff to know what they need to integrate it into their process. That's the opportunity for each

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stakeholder: The editor stakeholder group will say, well, the editors need this kind of training and these resources. They need to know what they need to say to the authors if they're not seeing compliance. Then the author group will report that authors will need to know about resources, and where they need to go to make their data available. They will need to know what statements are required and how to write a data citation. Then staff needs to know how to communicate with authors and editors, and how they add these expectations on top of what they're already doing. It's a convergence of minds and thinking into any particular process, and it's great to get a large team involved because they feel more ownership over the process and a better appreciation of the stakeholders we serve and represent.

Science Editor: That's an interesting structure. I think a lot of places have teams focused on individual journals, and the AGU really has made the effort to center around individual stakeholders. How does it work in practice: Is each person working on one journal or are they working on all the journals?

Randy: Each team has several journals. There are those idiosyncrasies, and each journal has a little individual personality, but we try to have consistency wherever possible. Part of that is because we have a cascading model. If a paper is submitted to one of our journals and it's slightly out of scope for that journal, rather than just reject, the authors may be given the option to transfer the submission to another one of our journals. If the peer review experience is vastly different from the original journal to the other journal, then we're not the same AGU publications. Having each team responsible for a group of journals breaks up the homogenization and gives them an idea of the individual characteristics of their journals, but also they see the bigger picture that we're all AGU publications, and that we have an ecosystem that is interdependent on each other. Our editors talk to each other through platforms and opportunities we create for them to engage with each other.

Science Editor: How did you get involved in the *GW Journal of Ethics in Publishing*?

Randy: This is really a full circle for me because I was in the George Washington University (GW) Masters of Publishing program years ago. I've always stayed in touch with that program and then in early 2019, I met with the director of the program, John Warren, and soon after that, they posted a call for an editor of a new journal on publication ethics. This piqued my curiosity because at AGU I've managed their ethics program since 2009, and I wanted to see how I could help. I've never been an Editor-in-Chief, but I've served tons of editors. The ones I have experience

with are really inspiring, fun, and engaging. I was excited at the potential that I could bring to launch this journal.

Science Editor: We're talking in Spring 2021: Where does the launch plan for the journal stand?

Randy: We have a good number of submissions, but COVID really knocked the timelines out of whack for everything, pushing everything back almost a year. I wasn't announced as Editor-in-Chief until late October 2020. I then took an inventory of what was needed, such as author and reviewer instructions. I started to go through making changes, but I put the brakes on it because it's important that people understand that this is not *my* journal. My priorities then shifted to pulling together an editorial board. That's fundamental. I started writing out my short list of people that I would want to invite, and it was important that I have different perspectives and people looking at what we're trying to do from different angles. I wanted to meet with each of them first to hear about what inspires them about publishing. It was heartwarming to hear their stories, backgrounds, and vision. I was grateful that they would share, sometimes very personal, their stories and perspectives.

As I started bringing them into the editorial board, I realized we needed a student rep on the board because this is a student-run journal. From there, I decided we needed student committees, similar to how the AGU Publications structure is arranged around stakeholders. We came up with four committees: Strategy and Sustainability, Marketing and Outreach, e-Pubs, and Editorial. We put out a call for volunteers for the students asking them to rank their first choice, second choice, and third choice to make it equitable as well. From that group we also were able to identify our student editorial board members and unified leads for each committee.

I then drafted a charge for each committee and gave it to them as a draft. I asked them to talk among themselves, without me on the call, and think about what they want to accomplish, and how they want to approach their charge. If they had a magic wand, what would this look like? What could they do with that? And then start thinking practically: How do they build up to that based on the resources and time they have available?

Now, each committee is working in their respective areas. We're doing a double anonymous peer review and we're working to get that set up along with a peer review system. We're in spring 2021, so depending on how the peer review timelines go, it may end up becoming early summer. I'm slightly disappointed by that adjustment, but at the same time I'd rather take it slow and do it right than rush it through and fail the authors that contributed or fail anybody that is looking forward to this content and wanting to support the journal. Doing it right is much more valuable and important to me than rushing it through.

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Science Editor: It sounds like you brought a lot from your AGU experience to this new journal, and I'm curious, has there been anything from your year or so as an Editor-in-Chief that you've brought back to the AGU?

Randy: It's a big eye opener from the volunteer side. And in the COVID environment, it's hard to separate this particular moment in time from conventional wisdom. With the committees, they are students, and many of these students are working or have families and commitments. They may be quarantining, or they have a spouse that's in quarantine or a child that may be returning to school. There's the intent for them to participate, but the time may not be there. We knew at AGU that we wanted to give a lot of leeway to peer reviewers because they're volunteering their time. But with people starting to get vaccines, we are having the conversation about removing the messages and trying to restore some kind of normalcy to peer review schedules. But I don't know if we should, maybe we still need to give that leeway, and that message is still powerful. People see that and feel better about wanting to contribute or finding ways to volunteer knowing that we're giving that consideration.

Science Editor: What struck me about the Call for Papers¹ for the *Journal of Ethics in Publishing* is the significant focus on diversity, equity, and inclusiveness (DEI), which I don't think has traditionally been considered part of ethics in publishing. In addition, you cochair a few organizational committees on DEI in publishing. What do you see the state of DEI progress in scientific publishing?

Randy: For context, that association of the vision of the journal was in place before I became involved. John Warren and the advisory committee envisioned DEI as an important component from the beginning. But in my experience, diversity has not really been a part of our industry or something that we've traditionally thought about on a broader scale. I've written about this, but when I first entered scholarly publishing, I was at a publishing conference and one of the themes was diversity and the big keynote speaker focused only on gender diversity.

I scanned the room, and it was full of professional women; there were definitely men there, but I think overwhelmingly it was professional women. That was great, but I saw I was the only Black male in that entire room. There were a couple of Black women or women of color, but I was the only me. When I realized we were only talking about gender diversity, I kind of went into a shell, as if no one was considering me, that maybe I don't belong here. That's on the publishing professional side, but if I look at AGU and our editorial board members, again, there's nobody who looks like me.

I find it hard to believe that there are no Black geoscientists that could be Editor-in-Chief, an editor, or a peer reviewer. There are a lot of reasons why, and I think

a lot of organizations are starting to do assessments. They want to see the numbers, and the numbers that I've seen so far have been disappointing. They're hard numbers to see because you want to think that we're better than this. So the question is, if this is our starting point, what are we going to do to expand participation? How do we invite and include people and make sure they are welcome? These are the conversations that I'm seeing more, and I'm inspired by the allies that do speak up if they see something that's offensive, or a micro-aggression, or something that will alienate somebody. I'm inspired to see them defending the humanness of individuals and making people feel comfortable to participate by creating safe spaces and safe environments for them to participate.

Science Editor: You mentioned earlier that you kind of stumbled into the position at AGU. How did you envision what your career would be like, if not scientific publishing?

Randy: I'll be very honest with you because it's not a story I share with many people: I envisioned myself in the world of finance. I spent 6 years in banking, and I figured I'd worked my way up into a regional director or manager of a bank. Unfortunately, I was a victim of a bank robbery, of a violent crime. I was actually held hostage for about an hour at gunpoint, with the gun literally right here to my head. After that, I lost a big part of who I was to posttraumatic stress. One thing I knew at that point in my life was that I don't need two guns to my head to know that maybe banking isn't for me.

I started rethinking everything as I was working through the depression. I connected with some people that I've known for years, and we started our own entertainment company. Through that, I learned a lot of skills about networking, entrepreneurship, and business finance—that you have to get up early in the morning to make it happen, and sometimes you work late at night. It's exhausting, but it's a passion. That helped get me out of the rut that I was in and gave me something to look forward to. But my approach ultimately changed as I found myself in rooms where I knew what I was talking about, but people had degrees and they were the ones that were being listened to more so than me because I didn't have a degree.

I went back to school and got my bachelor's degree in journalism, and I felt like I could do anything. I grew up in New Jersey, and when I relocated to DC I realized how competitive the DC market is. I definitely humbled myself really quickly and went to a temp agency. From there, I guess it was dumb luck because they set me up with a job at the AGU and I loved it. I saw XML coding for the first time in my life, and I fell in love right away.

Science Editor: I have a background in film and video production too and I think there's a lot of overlap between that and editing and publishing where you're managing all these different aspects to produce a cohesive project.

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Randy: It's funny because I think I get on my human resources department's nerves a little bit because when we're hiring, I want to see every resume that comes through. From their perspective, they are looking at the publishing department, setting aside anyone with editorial experience, and weeding out anything else. I think there are so many relatable skills that can really benefit a publishing house. We have two colleagues that had backgrounds in theater management: There's something about the skills required for that role that I saw valuable because if you're managing a play, you must have the actors and actresses ready on a schedule. The costumes must be ready. The venue must be ready, and props must be where they need to be. I think we can use that kind of thinking when we're reshuffling 22 journals and we're trying to figure out how to bring in a new policy, rotate editorial board members, and bring on new staff. Human resources may not be looking for those types of skills because the relatability isn't obvious, but I'm looking for something different sometimes.

Science Editor: I love that approach because I think it also ties back to diversity and inclusion because you're expanding how you think about people, what they're capable of, and what type of role they fit into.

Randy: Yeah, absolutely. How boring would it be to only talk to a room full of Randy's? I love hearing the angle I missed or the idea I never would have dreamed of!

Science Editor: As we wrap up, is there anything else you want to share about the new journal?

Randy: Two things. First, we have an open Call for Papers¹ and I would love to have a conversation with any of your readers about what they may be interested in seeing published. Second, I want to convey how excited these students are. They're excited about publishing. They're excited about our industry. They're excited to contribute and what path they could take. If anybody is interested in engaging with students, they would appreciate that exposure. If anybody wants to become a peer reviewer or contribute to this publication our intent is to be valuable for our evolving industry. So, if you enjoy having philosophical conversations about how people engage with content and how we reach people, I invite your readers to join the conversation and be a part of this journal.

References and Links

1. https://docs.google.com/forms/d/15fgxqJqkAIH3KZI6PVyU5k2v868aybpxYfCTZLqhGYs/viewform?edit_requested=true