

# Reinventing Our Publications Department: How the COVID-19 Quarantine Pushed Us Into the 21st Century

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*Half a century ago, paperless work environments were a speck on the horizon. Theoretically, the introduction of computers with visual displays would eliminate the need for printing because information could be shared digitally. The idea of paperless publishing—rapid delivery of content to an expanded audience—followed. But what about publishers themselves becoming paperless? Would the workflow process, and final product, suffer? This case study details how the Publications Department at the American Urological Association navigated the transition to a paperless office during the COVID-19 pandemic, propelled by the sudden switch to a virtual work environment.*

When our organization's headquarters shut down in March 2020 for the COVID-19 pandemic quarantine, our publications department was still heavily paper-based. We'd made steps into the 21st century in our use of the cloud-based platforms Editorial Manager (EM) for manuscript submission/tracking and Citrix Files (ShareFile) for copyediting, but much of our work still involved printing out reams of article correspondence and proofs to mark by hand, scan, and email to our publisher.

Our department produces 2 peer-reviewed journals, a monthly organizational news magazine, and a yearlong continuing medical education (CME) series—all handled by a relatively small group of 8 people (3 managing the peer-review/acceptance process and 4 handling all duties related to production, including copyediting and proof management, overseen by an executive editor). Though our

peer-review team had been whizzing through the ins and outs of EM for years, our production team had barely started using the companion ProduXion Manager for content management and postacceptance tracking.

As we watched the reports of the spread of COVID-19 in early 2020, we realized that the switch to working from home was a matter of "when" and not "if." Over a period of about a week, we conferred to determine how we could continue to operate on a fully remote basis.

## Communication

One of the first issues was communication between our peer-review and production teams. Traditionally, information was passed to production staff via printed pages and handwritten notes in the bundled "correspondence"—a stack of papers for each article with printouts of submissions, notes and forms that could range up to hundreds of pages, bound by a rubber band or metal clip. We knew immediately that these bundles would not translate to a remote environment.

We'd already been sharing documents through ShareFile, creating a folder for each scheduled issue where peer-review staff could upload invited content (such as editorials/commentary/author replies) as it was received, and had also been keeping our production status list for each issue there. We decided to expand our system of folders on ShareFile to accommodate article files at each stage of production and developed a file-naming system that would enable us to immediately recognize what had been done with an article as it passed through our workflow. We also began recording all of our notes for each article in the "Details" box in EM, which served as a virtual notepad to which we all had access.

## Full Speed Ahead

Just as the finer points of our production process were being hammered out, our executive editor unexpectedly retired a few weeks into the quarantine, and our remote office experiment moved into its next phase. We were now a ship without a captain in somewhat unfamiliar waters (a virtual

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work environment), but not uncharted territory. Strangely, in this new environment, with its requirements of near-constant communication, we began working more closely than ever, continuously adjusting and refining our workflow.

Within 2 months, a new executive editor was brought onboard, and our course changed again. An ongoing sticking point had been our issue-driven deadlines. Since before we could remember, these deadlines had served as the framework for the production schedule. During any given month, proofs for one publication could be due on the same day as copyedited manuscripts for another, and proofs for our newsletter could be due around the same time as copyedited manuscripts for our CME series.

Our first order of business was to transition from issue-based deadlines to an article-based workflow to eliminate the inevitable buildup of work being turned in at the end of a production cycle. This shift would involve copyediting manuscripts as soon as they came in from conversion and reading proofs as soon as they came back from composition, regardless of publication or issue month. Where we previously had a dedicated proofreader and 3 copyeditors, now the team (made up of 2 copyeditors, an editorial coordinator, and a publications production manager) would work on every phase of production for all publications, moving seamlessly across various tasks in a typical workday.

Streamlining

As we leaned into initiating this article-based workflow, it quickly became evident that the sheer volume of articles printed across our publications necessitated an internal tracking system. With that need in mind, we created the Journals Production Tracker in Google Sheets (Figure). The beauty of this Web-based spreadsheet software (apart from its \$0 price tag) is its collaborative nature: every member of our team can simultaneously view and edit the spreadsheet, allowing us to see the work being copyedited and processed in real time, and preventing any redundancies or missed tasks.

Each scheduled issue is given an individual sheet in the tracker, which is then populated with a row for each article in that issue. With a little spreadsheet magic, thanks to data validation (dropdown menus) and conditional formatting (color coding), the result is an easy-to-use tool that allows us to track articles through all stages of the production lifecycle.

It's important to understand that the Production Tracker did not replace anything. We still use ProduXion Manager for the actual production process. Edits and comments are still made in Microsoft Word. Proof markups still appear on PDFs in Adobe Acrobat. We still get plenty of mileage out of Outlook. Instead, the tracker supplements the process: it pulls back the curtain and allows every member of our team to know exactly where we are at any given point.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
1	Status	First Author	Ms Number	Article Title	Article Type	CE	FER	Proof	Revised Proof Review	Insights Status	Insights CE	Insights Proof	Notes
2	Revised Proof	Stone	JU-20-2659	Disparate practice patterns and survival outcomes: the impact of centralization of cancer care for adrenocortical carcinoma in the United States	Adult Urology Article	SCM	WF	SCM	SCM	Included in ar	SCM		
3	Revised Proof	Chapman	JU-20-2845	Urinary Symptom Non-Response ("LUTS-Failure") After Urethroplasty: Incidence and Associations	Adult Urology Article	WF	SCM	SCM		Included in ar	WF		
4	Edited MS se	Khojoh	JU-20-2906	Interstitial Cystitis/Bladder Pain Syndrome's Correlations with Pregnancy and Neonatal Outcomes: A Study of a Population Database	Adult Urology Article	SCM	WF			Received			
5	Revised Proof	Urkmez	JU-20-2913	Freehand versus Grid-Based Transperineal Prostate Biopsy: A Comparison of Anatomic Region Yield and Complications	Adult Urology Article 2-Prostate	SCM	MF	WF	SCM	Included in ar	SCM		Use the file marked "USE THIS FILE FOR PROOF" in the production folder for proof. (Done - XIV) Also, please find attached the "supplemental material" in PDF. I would appreciate if you could upload this on the website instead of the word file.
6	Revised Proof	Martini	JU-21-147	Oncologic Surveillance for Variant Histology Bladder Cancer after Radical Cystectomy	Adult Urology Article	WF	SCM	MF		Marked proof	SCM		
7	Revised Proof	Cheung	JU-21-184	Real World Practice Patterns and Predictors of Continuous versus Intermittent ADT Use for Prostate Cancer in Older Men	Adult Urology Article	MF	SCM	MF		Marked proof	SCM	MF	
8	Revised Proof	Chakriyan	JU-21-228	Patterns of Recurrence Following Inguinal Lymph Node Dissection for Penile Cancer: Optimizing Surveillance Strategies	Adult Urology Article	SCM	MF	WF					
9	Revised Proof	Bhat Kulthe Ran	JU-21-236	A predictive pre- and post-operative nomogram for post-operative potency recovery after Robot-Assisted Radical Prostatectomy (RARP)	Adult Urology Article	MF	WF	SCM		Included in ar	MF		Table 2a -> table 2; table 2b -> table 3; table 3 -> table 4; suppl. fig 4 -> suppl. fig 1; suppl. fig 5 -> suppl. fig 2 suppl. fig 6 -> suppl. fig 3
10	Composition	Lihhitz	JU-21-261	Cardiovascular Proteomics: a post-hoc analysis from a phase II randomized clinical trial comparing GnRH antagonist Vs GnRH agonist among men with advanced prostate cancer	Adult Urology Article	WF	SCM			Edited ms se	SCM		
11	Edited MS se	Khanna	JU-21-294	A Contemporary Analysis of Urethral Recurrence following Radical Cystectomy	Adult Urology Article	MF	WF						
12	Composition	Timishina	JU-21-317	Factors associated with discontinuation of active surveillance among men with low risk prostate cancer: a population-based study	Adult Urology Article	SCM	MF			Copyedited			CEPd but unsubmitted; waiting on insights
13	Composition	Agarwal	JU-21-417	Apalutamide Plus Androgen Deprivation Therapy for Metastatic Castration-Sensitive Prostate Cancer: Analysis of Pain and Fatigue in the Phase 3 TITAN Study	Adult Urology Article	WF	MF			Copyedited	SCM		CEPd but unsubmitted; waiting on insights
14	Revised Proof	Chakriyan	JU-21-491	Pathologic downstaging and survival outcomes associated with neoadjuvant chemotherapy for variant histology muscle invasive bladder cancer	Adult Urology Article	WF	SCM	MF	MF	Marked proof	SCM	MF	
15	Composition	Punjani	JU-21-64	Standing Ultrasound Adds Clinical Utility for the Diagnosis of Varicoceles	Adult Urology Article	MF	SCM			Copyedited	MF		

Figure. Production Tracker segment for *The Journal of Urology*®.

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For the production team to achieve a fully functioning article-based workflow, we realized that we needed to focus on both the small picture (those tasks that were imminent) and the big picture (those tasks that were on the horizon). To help reach this goal, we devised a daily team email that contains a list of 3–4 tasks, including copyediting, postedit review, proof review, revised proof review, and article formatting, listed in order of importance for that day. Each day, the production manager assesses all of the tasks remaining across the 4 society publications to determine which need the most immediate attention and puts together a daily workload for an 8-hour workday.

The daily team email includes a list of the issues of each of the publications currently in production, with updated counts on which articles still need copyediting, postedit review, proofreading, and revised proof review, along with all of the important production deadlines leading up to the publication of each issue. At the end of the day, the team members send the production manager their accomplishments, which the production manager reviews to determine the next day's goals. Importantly, daily accomplishments are not viewed as an indication of failure or success, but as a gauge of real-life expectations for future scheduling. Weekly check-ins between the production manager and each team member are held to assess how team members are doing in hitting the daily goals, and what

is needed to overcome any “pain points.” This practice has enabled the team to maintain focus on what needs to be done each day while not losing sight of what's on the horizon. Also, by dividing the total workload into “bite-sized” pieces, we're able to chip away at the iceberg at a much reduced stress level.

**Conclusion**

Fast forward to June 2021. With all our new efficiencies in place, we have increased the size of our publications, added 1-page Insight articles that summarize our full-length clinical articles, achieved a fluid workflow (avoiding end-of-cycle pileups) and are considering launching a new Open Access publication. A welcome byproduct of our new modus operandi is that every team member can take time off knowing that the rest of the team can step up, step in, and handle virtually any task required.

Important factors in our success were team communication and respect. Whether marking the status on the tracker as “in progress” or changing a filename to include “waiting for reply,” we have created a workflow where any of us can assess what needs to be done at any moment. And in a supportive environment we all feel comfortable suggesting improvements. To be sure, our process continues to evolve. But, based on our handling of all the attendant changes during the past year, our department feels ready for whatever comes next.