

My life as an editor - Kristen Overstreet



On a Wednesday afternoon, I sit down at my computer in a quiet part of my office and prepare to call Austin, Texas, via Skype. I am going to have a virtual meeting and chat with Kristen Overstreet, a managing editor and Senior Partner at an editorial firm she set up. It's an interview that I would not be able to conduct without the help of the Internet to shorten

the 4900 miles between our places of work. Such a feat certainly would not have been possible when Kristie started out as an editorial assistant many years ago. At that time, there was no internet. There was no email. There was not even fax.

Kristie started out studying English and Journalism at the Metropolitan State University of Denver in the 1990s, with the intention of becoming a secondary education teacher. However, whilst at college she started working as a project manager, and then a data manager, at what was then the Health Sciences Centre at the University of Colorado. She managed to convince a faculty member to take her on as an editorial assistant for a nursing journal, and she later progressed to become a full time managing editor. Her role now is varied, and no two days are the same. She is a managing editor of three journals, an executive peer review manager of another ten, and she oversees two medical titles. On top of all this, she is the managing partner of Origin Editorial, an editorial office, management, and consulting company, as well as being president of the International Society for Managing and Technical Editors (ISMTE). For her, life as an editor involves "spinning many plates".

When I ask Kristie about the changes she has witnessed during her career, she laughs before launching into a story about the process of taking a manuscript through submission, peer review, and publication in the early days. Five hard copies were received; and if the manuscript was of high enough quality, three of these would be sent out to reviewers, one would go to an editor, and the final copy was filed. Of course, the reviewers could only be contacted by phone, so the managing editor would first phone to ask if they were happy to provide a review. Frequently, a secretary or answering machine would pick up the call and there was nothing that you could do but wait until the reviewer returned your call. All hard copies travelled by post and, inevitably, the work of the journal office was slow moving. The exciting introduction of fax, and then email, speeded things up enormously. Authors were more easily contacted, and reviews could whizz through electrical wires to the offices of academic experts.

It was only ten years ago that the first of Kristie's journals moved to an online platform. Looking back, it is hard to believe how recent this is, and she tells me that she "can't imagine doing it any other way now". Of course, the Internet is changing science publishing entirely, by altering the way readers access content. Gone are the days when subscribers received an issue of a journal in the post, sat down, and read it from cover to cover. We are moving towards an article-based model, where people search for articles on a topic in a focused way. Kristie predicts that this will continue into the future, to the point where we will move away from issues altogether. She tells me, "it's all about the individual article and not about an issue that it's published in", and she suggests that whilst some traditional hard copies will still be produced, they are likely to be collections of articles based around a topic and will look entirely different from what we are used to.

I take Kristie's word for it, given her 25 years in the business. Despite such a long time in the same career, she actually says that she 'fell into' science publishing. What is it then that keeps her interested and motivated? She stresses the importance of managing editors to monitor the ever-increasing numbers of submissions and to support journal editors, who must concentrate on obtaining quality content. With constant upgrades of online systems, updates of best practice for peer review, and other changes in publishing, for Kristie there is a constant need for continued education to keep abreast of it all. She finds it exciting to be always learning something new. The only down side to such a fast-paced and dynamic work environment is that the editorial office must be active 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Working internationally means that there is no down time: "when I'm sleeping someone else is just starting their day". But even as she tells me this, I feel like Kristie might secretly thrive on the frenetic working style.

From our brief chat, I pick up on some of the qualities that make a good managing editor: hard-working, flexible, energetic, willing to learn new things. Giving me advice about making it in the editing world, Kristie stresses the importance of networking and making use of organizations, such as EASE, to connect with peers and keep up with current practice. Kristie clearly enjoys what she does. Trying to search out any negatives, I ask about her editorial 'bugbears' and she suggests that busy editors and reviewers are what annoys her most. "They miss deadlines and sometimes a very busy reviewer doesn't provide the quality review we hoped for." But even then she is cheerfully equanimous; after all, for her "it's just part of the process."

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