

James Butcher: An Editor and a Publisher

Jonathan Schultz

When James Butcher started his weekly *Journalology*¹ newsletter in August 2022, it quickly became a valued resource for tracking and understanding the many changes occurring in scientific editing and publishing. In his more than 20 years in the industry, James has held many roles, from reporter to editor to publisher, and he brings that experience to his balanced and pragmatic analysis. Recently, *Science Editor* spoke to James about what makes a good editor and publisher, how he stays on top of industry developments, and what the future may hold.

Science Editor: Let's start by telling us a little about your background: how you got started in scientific editing and publishing?

James Butcher: I'm a neuroscientist. Well, not really because I haven't worked at a lab bench for 20-odd years, but I still think of myself as a neuroscientist. I did a PhD in neurophysiology at the University of Bristol. After that, I worked as a medical writer for a pharmaceutical company for a year, and then I worked for a popular science magazine called *Inside the Human Body*. It was a "part-work"—subscribers got a new issue each week, which was divided into sections. The idea was to help readers learn a little about anatomy, physiology, emergency medicine, and so on. It was a consumer magazine and had a very high circulation. I was the token scientist. Most of the other people on the team were arts graduates, but they were amazing editors. They helped me understand how to write good headlines and what makes good copy. I did that for a year, and then I got a Senior Editor job at *The Lancet*. I couldn't believe how lucky I was to be working in that environment, reporting on big stories like the Human Genome Project, and reading science as a peer review editor. I launched *The Lancet Neurology* as the Editor in 2002, had a brief stint at *PLOS Medicine*, and then came back to *The Lancet*, the flagship, as Executive Editor.

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After about 7 years as an editor, I joined Nature Publishing Group as publisher of what was then the Nature Clinical Practice (NCP) journals. There were 8 journals, which had been launched between 2004 and 2005, and when I joined in 2008, they weren't doing particularly well, commercially or editorially. I was managing the editorial teams and was also responsible for the financial performance of the journals. We rebranded the NCP journals to *Nature Reviews*, turned them around, and increased the quality. I took on the whole *Nature Reviews* portfolio, and then became involved in the launch of *Scientific Reports* and *Nature Communications*. A few years later, I became the publishing director for the *Nature* journals, responsible for all of the *Nature* journals in terms of their business performance. In 2019, I became Vice President of the Nature Research and BMC journals, leading a team of 500 editors in more than 15 countries. It was a hell of a job.

SE: What do you consider the main difference is between being an editor and a publisher?

Butcher: I don't think there are many people who have done both jobs. I think that's one of the things that gives me a different viewpoint to most other people in the industry—I've peer reviewed hundreds of papers and can see the editorial point of view, while also understanding the business requirements. I was trained and taught about editorial independence and the importance of being thorough, of doing high quality peer review. Then from a publishing perspective, I have a bit more of a pragmatic opinion. Editors tend to be idealistic, which is good and that's what they need. But as a publisher, you have to be a bit more pragmatic. You've got financials that you need to hit, you've got revenue targets, you've got costs that you need to control, and you need to be pragmatic about how that works.

I would argue the best publishers have a deep understanding of editorial workflows and values and know where the line is. If you push the commercial angle too far, you're not doing your job properly. You also need to push back against senior management, as appropriate, but you can't be totally idealistic as a publisher. You need to be pragmatic about the business because that's fundamentally

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what you're responsible for. I look back, and when I was an editor, I was totally idealistic, hated corporate life, hated the idea of making money from science. I went on a journey over time. When I was managing the *Nature* editorial team, who often had a strong dislike for corporate values, I would often think "I was just like you 15 years ago," because a lot of people go on that journey. You start off thinking it's all very simple, and then as you move on and learn more things, you realize it's a bit more complicated than that.

It's a different mindset. On the *Nature* journals, many of the publishers had been editors themselves. Annette Thomas, Alison Mitchell, and Sarah Greaves were all editors who moved into publishing. I think that's what made *Nature* Publishing Group a pleasure to work at. We were a bunch of scientists. Some of us had more of a business leaning, some of us were much more editorial, but everyone cared primarily about providing a good service for researchers and for science. And if you can make some money out of it as well, great. But generating revenues was never the primary driver, an outlook that was fundamental to our success.

SE: What led you then to switch to consulting and starting the newsletter?

Butcher: It was a mixture of different things. We've got two young kids. They're now 6 and 8, and during the pandemic, they were 3 and 5 or so. In many ways, I had my dream job. I was running the *Nature* journals, but I was also working very long hours. It was quite a difficult time for the *Nature* Journals with the open access transition: there was a lot of pressure from above, pressure from below, pressure from outside, and pressure on myself to do it right and not mess it up. I wasn't seeing my kids, and during the pandemic that made it even harder. I took a look at myself, and asked: What do I want to do for the rest of my life? Do I want to be one of those people who's working constantly, traveling, and not seeing their kids? The answer was "no."

That wasn't what I wanted out of my life. My wife and I decided to sell the London house and move up to the northwest of England, where the property prices are cheaper and where my wife's family are all based. We've got a family network in the northwest that during the pandemic we didn't have access to. I'd been working on the *Nature* journals for 15 years, and I also fancied doing something different.

I miss being part of the team, and I miss my *Nature* friends, but you can't have it all. I have no regrets. It's absolutely been the right thing to do. For most of last year I worked closely with Clarke and Esposito, while also doing some stuff on my own, including the newsletter. I'm now working full time as an independent consultant, content creator, and coach.

The reasons for doing the newsletter are two-fold: first, I wanted to have an outlet for my thoughts. I enjoy writing *Journalology*. I used to do occasional newsletters for the *Nature* team, but I'd do it for 1 or 2 weeks, and then something urgent would come up, and it wouldn't happen again. Now that I'm my own boss, it gives me that flexibility to say, you know what, I'm going to spend 5 or 6 hours this week writing this newsletter. Partly because as a consultant, you need to raise a profile, of course, but also because it helps me to think through what's going on in publishing. I've always read the news wires, but it's not until you sit down and write and think about the implications of this week's news that you start putting the different pieces together. I certainly remember more than I did back in the day when you read a news story and then emails would come in or you'd be in a meeting and then you'd never really process what you'd read.

I feel that one of the things that made me a good editor and a good publisher is that I was on top of what was going on in science and in publishing, and I feel the same as a consultant. If people are going to pay me to give them advice, I need to know what's going on. So, it's not entirely altruistic, but if I didn't enjoy the process, I wouldn't do it.

SE: To your point about staying on top of things: it is daunting sometimes. How do you stay on top of the news wires and the developments in scholarly editing and publishing?

Butcher: Mainly, it's RSS feeds. Back in the day, I used Google Reader, and when they shut that down, I moved over to Feedly. I've been gathering RSS feeds for at least 15 years, probably longer. I guess over the years, I've spotted what sites produce interesting things, and if they've got an RSS feed, added it to my RSS feed list. I process in excess of 500 articles a week, I would imagine, plus the PubMed searches (I've got RSS feeds from PubMed as well), which can be hundreds and hundreds. I don't read them all but tend to do keyword searches or scan them. There's a lot that's coming through and a lot of it isn't of broad enough interest for inclusion in the newsletter.

When I was thinking about starting the newsletter, I thought about how do I pitch it? I didn't want it to be another source entirely about the business of publishing. I'm writing it for editors, but often I'm talking about the business side of things. I'm trying to keep it relatively simple, but I think it's really important for editors to understand the world that they're working in and how it's changing. I'll cover some research integrity things or something new about open peer review, which are very editorial, but a lot of it is the business of publishing. But I've always got an editor in mind when I'm writing, particularly an academic editor, someone who's

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a professor at a university: How can I help them understand what's going on?

Or it may even be a professional editor, a *Nature* editor who's new to publishing. I'm always thinking of someone who's at the early stages of their career. I'm trying to keep it at a high enough level so that someone who works in user experience, who wants to understand publishing better, can pick it up and at least get the gist of what's going on. I think there's a real need. If you don't understand the commercial decisions that are being made by executive teams, it can all feel a bit like "Why are they doing that?" There's likely a very good strategic reason that publishers, commercial and not-for-profit, go down certain paths, and I want to try and help people understand that. It helps me to think it through as well.

SE: As you've been digging through all those feeds, what would you say is the most surprising or interesting insight from your first year or so of the newsletter? What are the topics that are jumping out to you that you maybe didn't think that you would be focusing on a year ago?

Butcher: AI (artificial intelligence) is probably the biggest story, but I haven't covered AI much. I'm certainly no technophobe, but there's a bit of me that wants to watch and wait and see what happens.

The newsletter is framed on my personal experiences, and I was particularly interested in what's happening in terms of the tensions between quality versus quantity. I've got my two hats, my editor hat and my publisher hat. The editor hat says, "quality matters." The publisher hat—in an open access world where revenue per article is much higher under a subscription model than under an open access model—realizes that you need to increase quantity to survive. I was fascinated to see how quickly perceptions changed last year. I'm thinking in particular of what happened with Hindawi and Wiley. I wouldn't have predicted that in terms of the financial knock on. To be fair to the Wiley executive team, they stood up in front of their shareholders and told them they had a problem, but then the share price fell off a cliff.

What worries me is that other publishers will see what happened to Wiley and will be more likely to push things under the carpet, which I think would be disastrous for our industry. We're at a tipping point: We've got paper mills and we've got academics under massive pressure to publish. An open access business model means that publishers are willing to publish as many papers as hits their quality thresholds, which to some degree, are set arbitrarily. Under a subscription model, there were always page budgets, there was always a cap on article volumes because it was hard to monetise those extra papers, which isn't true under an open access model. So, I think it will be fascinating to see what happens over the next few years.

In the newsletter, I've done a deep dive into *Frontiers*,² not because I've got a downer on *Frontiers*, but because I'm really interested in what's happening there. There are a lot of society publishers who've really struggled off the back of competing with *Frontiers*, and their output has dropped significantly because *Frontiers* is outcompeting them by offering something authors want. And then to see *Frontiers'* article outputs change so dramatically.³ I missed the initial inflection and was 2 or 3 months behind the curve. I guess that trying to spot those trends and how open access business models are changing for better and for worse in scholarly publishing is something I find very interesting. On top of that, you've got AI, which is going to boost paper mills, but also make it easier to detect fraud. I think it's going to be a lot more transparent, and that's a really, really good thing.

SE: When you're researching a topic or diving into a database, do you ever get to a point where you're not sure if anyone else is actually going to be interested in this, and if so, what do you do?

Butcher: It's a very good question. I must admit the last 2 weekends, I have spent a lot of time looking at *Dimensions* and writing about *Frontiers* rather than playing with kids, which is somewhat ironic since I told you earlier that I left the corporate job so I could spend more time with the kids.

Email used to be the bane of my life. In every corporate environment, you get thousands of emails. Now I send an email to over 3000 people, and I might get 2 or 3 replies a week. I never know how it's being received. Occasionally, I hear something on the grapevine and people say they enjoyed the newsletter. Some weeks you get a lot more new subscriptions than other weeks, so it's likely that emails are being passed around, and more people are signing up. You kind of get indirect feedback and a little bit of direct feedback. But I feel that I'm writing blind, and that's quite a weird feeling actually. Over the last year, I've had enough people saying nice things and not many unsubscribers, so I'm probably doing all right.

SE: Are you traveling to meetings and different conferences to see what's going on?

Butcher: Trying to. When you're independent, a travel budget means something, right? Your money. So I'm going to some meetings because it's nice to get out and about and meet people. It's nice to meet old friends and meet new people and get the industry's pulse, but I need to get the balance between traveling and actually doing some work that pays the bills.

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SE: You touched on this, but where do you think scientific editing and publishing is going in the next few years? What do you think you'll be covering in 2025?

Butcher: I genuinely don't know. I strongly suspect that AI is going to develop in good ways and bad ways. I'd like to think there's going to be more transparency. I think we are on the move toward open research, and that will mean more transparency. But whether or not the recent failures in terms of the open access business model will mean that more publishers are more reticent about moving to open access. It's possible, but I think anyone who thinks they know where it's going is probably somewhat deluded.

This year, *eLife* is going to be an interesting one to watch because it's the poster child in many ways for the PRC (publish, review, curate) model. Will they get delisted by Clarivate? I've looked at the small print on the website. To me, if you read the small print, it looks as though they might, but we'll see what happens. Just simply because they're effectively publishing papers that have failed peer review, right? Because the authors are able to choose whether to publish a paper or walk away with it right after the peer review. Even if the reviewers come back and say it's rubbish, the authors can still choose to publish. If *eLife* loses its Impact Factor, will their submissions fall off a cliff in the way that's happened for every other journal? If they don't, that's interesting because it says that the particular community doesn't care about Impact Factors, but all of the historical evidence suggests that probably wouldn't be the case.

The big picture outside of publishing is how academic reward systems change. There are lots of different organizations that are trying to change how academics' performance is measured. Judging researchers by the journals that they publish in is a proxy measure. If that changes, if people develop new ways of measuring an

academic's performance, that could change publishing hugely.

SE: Any thoughts you want to leave the reader with?

Butcher: One of the things I'm trying to do (and this is going to sound a bit grandiose) is champion editorial values, while helping editors to understand the commercial environment that they are working in. The vast majority of editors are academics who are trying to fit in their editorial work alongside their teaching commitments, their research, or clinical commitments, and they're being an editor between 10:00 AM and 12:00 PM 3 nights a week. That system, where we're asking academics to act as editors, is very different from the world that I've worked in, where you've got full-time professional editors who're spending 50 hours a week reading papers as their primary job.

It will be interesting to see how that changes over time, because academics are under massive pressure. They're being pulled in so many different directions. Fundamentally, if we need to collectively spend more time on research integrity, how are academic editors going to do it? It's not about capability, it's about time. How are they going to be able to manage that? If they can't do it, how does that change the role of an editor? I think there are some big existential questions there, and it will be interesting to see what happens in the future. In the newsletter, I try to champion editorial values and bring different types of editors together to think about the issues that affect all of them. If I can help in a small way, that would be a win.

References and Links

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