

My life as an editor - Philip Campbell



Nature is a weekly, interdisciplinary journal that spans the breadth of science and is amongst the most famous science journals in the world. It has an impact factor of 42.351 and was the most highly cited interdisciplinary journal in 2013 (Thomas Reuters, 2013). With a vast readership and a prestigious reputation, the

journal has the power to make careers. After all, getting published in a journal like *Nature* can open doors to promotion and funding, and can get your work noticed by the media. Dr Philip Campbell, Editor-in-Chief, is the man at the helm. He has held this position for 20 years, gaining experience prior to this as Editor-in-Chief of *Physics World* and in more junior editorial roles at *Nature*. With such a weight of experience behind him, he was the perfect candidate for the My Life as an Editor column. He answered a few of my questions, sharing his thoughts on being an editor, the success of *Nature*, and the future of publishing.

Describe a typical day at work

There is no typical day at work for me. There is a weekly cycle in which we have to choose what editorials, news and other content to publish, and a daily news cycle. Apart from some of the editorials, I leave it to my colleagues to fill our pages in print and on digital platforms. I spend a great deal of my time meeting people (for example, scientists and policymakers) in many countries, and contributing to or leading internal conversations about future content in *Nature* and future *Nature*-branded publications.

What do you like most and least about being an editor?

I most like the huge intellectual and societal scope that *Nature* covers, especially when it uncovers important, fundamentally new concepts and facts. I least like having to work within a budget!

You have a background in astrophysics, yet at Nature you deal with a broad spectrum of scientific fields. Have you found it easy to apply your skills to new fields?

I left physics research to join *Nature* precisely because of its breadth of interests. People at *Nature* tend to have an aptitude and a hunger for learning, in a professional spirit, about many strands of activities in and around research. I am no different. Physicists claim to be good at reducing problems to their essentials. That's a great asset to an editor. I very much enjoyed the focus and challenges in my upper-atmospheric research, and miss that intensity of attention on one intellectual project. However, my current role also gives me opportunities to look quite deeply into topics.

What is the biggest challenge you've had to face?

I will mention three challenges out of many. The first: initially, my key personal challenge, coming from a physical sciences background, was getting to grips with biology. I thank the stars for the textbook 'Molecular Biology of the Cell', which I carried around with me for several months of global travels, as well as my great biology colleagues, who do their best to overcome my naiveté. The second: keeping a cool head when controversy erupts around something we have published. The third: for my colleagues and me, getting to grips with social sciences selection and editing, which we already do in *Nature Climate Change* and will do in other journals in future.

Nature is one of the most prestigious and famous journals in the world. What unique challenges does that bring compared with working as an editor elsewhere?

A fundamental goal of editors in any publication is to increase the impacts of their content – in other words, the positive difference they make to their readers as a result of their efforts. The main challenge is further increasing that sort of impact, in and around science. I want any prestige that results from that to be truly earned by us, rather than, as happens too often, to be glibly bestowed on us by others for their own reasons. And, by the way, my team and I don't focus on our competitive position most of the time. We just relentlessly seek to publish the most interesting content that we can come up with.

You are also responsible for ensuring Nature sustains its quality and integrity. What strategies have you used to ensure this?

There are four components of strategy for quality and integrity: hire people of quality and integrity; ensure they have time to do their jobs properly; keep abreast of new developments and technologies; and promote a culture of quality and integrity by means of policies and setting internal standards of best practice.

Do you think personal and political affiliations can sometimes affect the outcomes of peer review?

I can only speak for *Nature* and the *Nature* journals. It's a cardinal rule for editors that we select referees for their knowledge and experience, and also that we do not let the authorship of a paper influence whether we'll select it. We have recently introduced an option of double-blind peer review (ie where the referees are not told the authorship of a paper), if authors want it.

Before your current role, you worked at the Institute of Physics setting up a new journal. What prompted this move, how did your role there differ, and why did you come back to Nature?

In my first stint at *Nature*, colleagues and I developed physics content from almost nothing, but it was a hard slog and I wanted to engage with physics in more breadth. The opportunity to launch a new magazine, *Physics World*,

which would allow me to follow that interest, was too good an opportunity to ignore. My role there differed because I was the Editor-in-Chief, so was ultimately responsible for the whole publication. Also, our job was not to assess a flood of unsolicited papers but to commission articles on our own choice of topics. Why did I come back? To be the Editor-in-Chief of Nature was impossible to resist.

What has been the biggest change in science publishing that you've noticed since you began your career and what do you predict for the future?

The biggest change has been the internet and the related development of globally accessible information and opinion. Despite the internet, and despite much comment, the fundamental roles of editors and journals in science have not changed greatly. But there's no room for complacency, and many people express dissatisfaction with the current ways of doing things. Maybe only when artificial intelligence and virtual reality have become commonplace will things fundamentally change.

What is your take on the move towards open access publishing?

I'm all in favour, provided publishers truly add value (I claim that we do) and provided somebody out there pays what it truly costs to do that (even open access publishers are very opaque about that – it costs much more than many people realise).

Do you think that there is a problem in publishing of a failure to publish negative findings, and could a better balance be struck between publication of 'sexy findings' and negative findings?

Let me first substitute 'positive' for 'sexy' in your question; then we can focus on the resistance to publishing negative results. Generally speaking, yes there is too much resistance to that. I hope that all publishers in future can address that need better than we have. That being said, *Nature* journals will publish negative findings if they truly add new insight. We also have an open access journal, *Scientific Reports*, which publishes original research that is technically sound and scientifically valid, but which does not select papers for significance or impact. This journal easily accommodates papers that report negative results. Submissions of this kind of paper remain low.

Now to focus on 'sexy': we have always sought to publish results that seem to us to be very significant. We sometimes overrule all three referees on a paper and publish it (as long as it's technically valid), because we recognise a significance that they didn't. We never select papers just because they'll get big citations (something that would be difficult to predict even if we wanted to) and we never select papers to make media headlines.

What would be your advice for young aspiring editors?

Show initiative and get some experience – on university news networks, local media... It won't be enough in a job application just to say 'I am very interested in communication'. If you're aspiring to be an editor who selects our papers, participate vigorously in journal club discussions.

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New member of the editorial board

ESE would like to welcome Rhianna Goozée as a new member of the editorial board. Rhianna will be responsible for the Viewpoints section and My life as an editor.



Rhianna Goozée is the Resources Editor (professionals) at Parkinson's UK, where she writes and edits publications for the charity's Excellence Network of health and social care professionals working with Parkinson's disease. She is also a freelance editor specialising in clinical sciences and public health for Edanz Group Ltd., editing manuscripts written by non-native English authors. She holds a BA in Natural Sciences (Biological) from University of Cambridge and has just completed an MRC 1+3 programme, in which she gained a MSc in Psychiatric Research before pursuing doctoral studies in Psychosis Research. Her thesis explored the neurobiological basis of treatment response to antipsychotic medications in schizophrenia.