What Does a Managing Editor Do All Day? An Analysis of Emails Received in an Editorial Office

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Editors’ Note: Alethea Gerding won second place in the ISMTE North American poster competition. See her winning poster at the end of this article.

In early 2016, I attended a focus group at the offices of J&J Editorial. The purpose of the focus group was to collect information on managing editor job tasks and functions, and the results of the focus group were used to formulate the survey of Managing Editor Core Competencies, the ultimate results of which have been reported previously in EON.1–5

My group was led by Jan Higgins, who asked us to tell her what tasks we were responsible for, while she wrote our (politely) shouted answers on a white board. Check in manuscripts! Run plagiarism reports! Manage production schedules! Chase reviewers! The answers came fast and furious. Once the low-hanging fruit was identified, the answers started to slow. Check for image manipulation, copyedit accepted manuscripts, present reports to editorial boards, schedule social media posts... We were now on a list of things that some, but not all, of the participating managing editors do. Next came the list of things that most of us didn’t do: collect publication fees, produce podcasts, manage editorial assistants.

At some point I realized that if I could check my email from the last week, I could quite easily and quickly list most of the tasks I accomplished on a daily or weekly basis, and if I checked a month’s worth of emails, I could tell with some accuracy everything I had accomplished in the past month.

At some point not too long after, it dawned on me that I had a working concept for a poster: Because many, if not most, managing editors work remotely from their editors-in-chief, societies, publishers, authors, and reviewers, the vast majority of a managing editor’s tasks are assigned via email. Additionally, questions from authors, editors, and reviewers tend to come through email (often via online peer-review management systems). Therefore, I thought that an analysis of a managing editor’s email inbox would provide an answer to the question, “What does a managing editor do all day?”

Methods

I decided I would track every email I received for three non-consecutive months. I chose the first month (July 2016) randomly, and then in four-month increments from there (November 2016, March 2017). I chose non-consecutive months because I wanted to capture a bigger picture of a year. Choosing only summertime (when I find myself chasing authors and reviewers more frequently) or autumn months (when much of my time is spent preparing for my society’s annual session) may not have been completely representative of my working life.

For each of the three selected months, I entered every email I received into an Excel spreadsheet (Fig. 1), capturing the following data: sender, email synopsis, and my action taken in response. The following emails were excluded from data collection: spam, acknowledgements to my email (i.e., “Thanks! Got it!”), and personal emails (i.e., inside jokes with colleagues). I used the data provided to categorize the emails into associated tasks (peer-review management, production, ethics issues, article promotion, journal business, society collaboration, etc.).

Results

The three months surveyed showed remarkable consistency in the number of emails received (July: 342; November: 346; March: 341).

Tasks

In all three months, most emails were related to peer review (49.7%, 54.6%, 50.0%) and production (17.3%, 15.0%, 22.3%). Outside of peer review and production, the other most common subjects of emails were:
While peer review and production reliably made up the bulk of the emails, non-peer-review or production activities were more variable from month to month, given the differences in work assigned (i.e., a non-journal-related project completed by October, executive director turnover in the fall, a plagiarism concern arising in March). Figure 2 compares the emails received for each month tracked.

Overall (Fig. 3), for the three months observed, nearly 70% of emails received were in reference to the peer-review (51.1%) or production (18.2%) processes. While this study did not track the time spent on each of these emails, to say that managing editors in general, and I in particular, spend 70% of the time on peer review and production seems reasonable.

**Correspondents**
Managing editors are often the hub of communication between the society, publisher, authors, editors, and reviewers. The data collected here reflect that role (Fig. 4).

Given the primacy of production and review, it is unsurprising that more than three-quarters of emails came from authors (37.9%; many of these auto-generated through ScholarOne), the editor-in-chief (EIC; 20.3%), the production editor (7.8%), and ScholarOne (4.4%). The society’s communications/marketing director (my immediate supervisor with the society) and communications/marketing manager (the other member of my division) were the most-prolific correspondents outside of the production and review process. As a group, society colleagues sent 15.4% of emails received.

For the period studied, the top five journal-related tasks (and associated correspondents) were:

1. Peer review (authors, EIC, AEs, reviewers)
2. Production (production editor, EIC, authors)
3. Journal business (Wiley journal manager, EIC, society executive director, communications director)
4. PR & promotion (society marketing manager, media/PR director)
5. Ethics (EIC, Wiley journal manager, authors, ISMTE)

**Limitations of this study**

**Email ≠ time.** While many responses to peer-review and production emails are pro forma and take very little time, other emails (i.e., a plagiarism concern in a published article) can take up hours or days of work. This project shows that nearly 70% of emails I receive involve production and peer review. I feel in my gut that this is roughly the amount of time I spend on those two processes, but have no proof that this is so, and I am considering a similar project to track the time I spend on my day-to-day activities.

Each email was coded into one category. For instance, an acceptance letter from the editor-in-chief could be considered a peer-review task (it completes that process), production task (it begins that process), or ethics task (plagiarism screening is part of the acceptance process). I made these judgments myself. Having a second person to ‘code’ the tasks and an inter-rater comparison would improve the reliability of the data. Additionally, I could have given each email more than one code to improve the study’s accuracy.

Statistics were not analyzed. This is a descriptive view of emails received and meant to serve as a snapshot of one particular journal. Statistics were not analyzed to determine if any results were significant.

**Conclusion**

I am not so narcissistic as to believe anyone is interested in hearing about what I do in painstaking, cross-tabulated, and pie-charted detail. Quite frankly, even I found it a little navel-gazing! But as a society, we are interested in naming what it is that the members of our profession do. This is a portrait of what a single-staffed, society-employed, Wiley-published managing editor’s job looks like. Therefore, while the data presented here may accurately reflect this and similar journals, a larger, publisher-owned, or self-published journal might have different results.

That said, given the data presented, this study identifies the following core competencies of a managing editor:

1. Excellent communication skills; ability to communicate journal goals consistently with varied journal stakeholders.
2. Attention to detail for successful, efficient peer-review and production processes.
3. Ability to multitask, with responsibilities as varied as business and administration, scientific integrity, and grammar/proofreading skills.
4. Desire to stay up-to-date on issues in the field.

References
2. Overstreet K. ISMTE Core Competency Survey results: what we need in regard to reports and reporting.

ARTICLE

What does a Managing Editor do All Day?
An Analysis of Emails Received in an Editorial Office
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Objective 1. Use detailed email data to characterize types of managing editor tasks.
2. Identify the tasks managing editors do daily.
3. Use detailed email data to identify common competencies of a managing editor.

Background
Through focus groups and a survey, BMTE has been working to develop a picture of managing editor core competencies. Because many, if not most, managing editors work remotely from their offices, chair, societies, publishers, authors, and reviewers, the vast majority of a managing editor’s tasks are assigned via email. Additionally, questions from authors and reviewers about clinical significance and treatment modalities to come through email often via an online peer review management system. With this in mind, it seems that an analysis of a managing editor’s email inbox would provide an answer to the question, “What does a managing editor do all day?”

Methods
Choosing three months (i.e., November, 2016; March 2017); random, I examined every email received into an Editorial spreadsheet, capturing the following data: sender, email address, and my actions taken in response. The following actions were recorded: data collection (open email), acknowledgment (send ‘Thank you’ email), forwarded the email to another (i.e., editor, section chief, etc.), failed the email to be answered, the email was deleted, or no action was taken (i.e., deletion of email). Every email received was cataloged and reviewed.

Results
The three months surveyed showed remarkable consistency in the number of emails received (April: 342; November: 345; March: 341). In all three months, most emails were related to peer review (46.7%, 44.6%, 51.0%) and production (17.2%, 19.2%, 22.3%). Outside of peer review and production, the most common subjects of emails were: secularity-related issues (i.e., high-ed policy, ethics, etc.), preparing for staff meetings, non-peer-reviewed projects, personal education (i.e., ISMTE newsletter, Wiley Society Newsletter, Publications information), journal business (i.e., APD, submission processing, page budget negotiations), PM and promotion (i.e., social-media and society-sponsored PR), and ethics (i.e., plagiarism concerns).

Email correspondents
While peer review and production-related tasks made up the bulk of the emails, non-peer-review or production-related activities were more variable from month to month, given the difference in work assigned (i.e., a non-peer-reviewed project completed by October, executive director turnover in the fall, a plagiarism concern arising in March).

Overall, for the three months observed, nearly 70% of emails received were in reference to the peer review (51.1%) or production (18.2%) processes. While this study did not track the time spent on any of these emails, to say that managing editors spend 70% of their time on peer review and production seems reasonable.

Study limitations
Emails may be many responses to peer review and production emails are very brief and take very little time, other emails (i.e., a question about manuscript status) can take up hours or days to respond to. Each email was only given one category. For instance, an acceptance letter from the editor-in-chief for a manuscript that is not part of the process for the manuscript is not counted as a new manuscript. However, while the author may receive feedback and comments from editors, this is not counted as feedback from the author.

Conclusions
Managing editors often tell of the hub of communication between the editor-in-chief, publisher, authors, editors, and reviewers. Data collected here reflect this role. Given the size of production and reviews, it is unsurprising that more than three-quarters of emails came from authors (37.2%), many of these were generated through ScholarOne, the editor-in-chief (20.3%), the production editor (17.6%), and ScholarOne’s system (15.6%). The editor-in-chief’s communication includes editor (my immediate supervisor with the society) and communications/marketing manager (the other member of my division) were the most frequent correspondents outside of the production and review process. The group reflects the eight groups sent 15.6% of emails received.

For the email study, the top 9 journal-related tasks (and associated correspondents) were:
1. Peer review (authors, EIC, AOs, reviewers)
2. Production (production editor, EIC, authors)
3. Journal business (WMi, journal manager, EIC, society executive director, communications director)
4. PM and promotion (society marketing manager, media PR manager)
5. Ethics (EIC, Wiley journal manager, authors, ISMTE)

Editorial Office News: Feb 2018

Looking for New Members for the Awards Committee!

The Awards Committee is looking for several new members to help develop the society’s awards criteria, promote the awards to members, and evaluate the nominees. US and non-US members are encouraged to volunteer. Committee meets via teleconference six to eight times a year. Click here to volunteer today!