

Publishing Professional Interview: Randy Townsend

Bio:

Randy Townsend, MPS, (he, him, his) translates organizational vision and mission into clear priorities and practical goals to ensure alignment and optimized collaboration. He has been a global leader in policy implementation and publishing strategy. Randy is President of the Society for Scholarly Publishing (SSP) and has served in leadership positions for the Council of Science Editors, and AM&P Network's Association Council, and co-chaired DEIA Committees for AM&P Network and SSP. He has actively supported C4DISC and contributed to the development of many of their freely available resources. At Origin Editorial, Randy takes innovative approaches to develop and implement peer review strategies. Randy proudly served as the inaugural Editor in Chief for the GW Journal of Ethics in Publishing and is an Associate Professor of the MPS in Publishing program in the College of Professional Studies at George Washington University.

What does ethics in publishing mean to you?

In a very general sense, ethics is the difference between right and wrong. The line seems extremely clear from the surface. That formula becomes more complicated when you begin to introduce variables. The way in which I prioritize values and interpret and respond to actions and behaviors are unique to my perspective and are heavily influenced by my experiences and understanding. This grows more complex when you begin introducing more people, perspectives, interests, and activities into the equation. What may seem so right from one perspective may be so wrong from another perspective. That's when you move into the foggy gray areas and have to adapt an ethical framework to navigate the issues.

Because of the power of the published word, whether it's in responsibly reporting groundbreaking research or telling an incredibly rich story, the way in which we publish and who we are as publishers is critically important. Research results can have financial and political implications, and results can become the target of strategic attacks intended to undermine legitimate findings. If the peer review, for example, was flawed or compromised, it can become a thread used to pull apart the research and discredit the researcher. The increased pressure to ban books applied to librarians, schools, and teachers could lead to important stories never seeing the light of day.

Ethics in publishing, to me, means integrity, respect, trust, and process. It's a passionate dance towards understanding the varying degrees of motivating factors that influence the interpretation of ethical dissonance, seeking common ground, and sincerely attempting to reach the "most right" decisions while remaining sensitive to the shortcomings that prevent achieving "absolute right."

What recent ethical topics in publishing are you interested in and why?

There are a number of ethical topics that interest me for vastly different reasons. The way in which artificial intelligence impacts the content and the way in which we publish that content is rich with ethical considerations that don't have any easy answers. Despite a number of well-supported activities, there is still a tremendous lack of diversity throughout the publishing industry that has sustained discriminatory practices and pay inequities. Targeted book bans continue to alarm me, and I'm curious to see how these conversations evolve and their overall impact on society.

How would you describe your experience with the journal?

As the inaugural Editor-in-Chief of the GW Journal of Ethics in Publishing, it was one of the most rewarding and demanding experiences of my career. John and I aligned on a vision; then, we had to design a blueprint and build an operational structure that infused ethical best practices, guidelines, and student instruction. I was equally inspired by the energy of student enthusiasm and the overwhelming GW faculty and industry support. There seemed to be a universal desire to participate and contribute.

How has ethics in publishing influenced your job/career/profession?

Ethics in publishing has played a significant role in the development of my career. When I was early in my career, it was unclear how what I was doing in Production connected beyond successfully validating XML. When I started having ethical conversations and connecting the standards and practices I was responsible for to the people who were being impacted by my actions, it elevated the way in which I approached my work. When I began to identify why and how the content could be threatened and realized the importance of protecting the content, the way in which it is developed, handled, enhanced, and distributed, it became my north star. I started carrying myself a little differently. My actions meant something beyond my cubicle.

What is something you would like to see the journal do in the future?

I would love to see more students submitting their Capstone projects to the journal. When teaching ethics in publishing, I see a number of well-done projects that contribute to important, relevant conversations. If I had a magic wand, I would be able to convince more students to expand on their projects specifically for publication in the journal. The students should feel confident and empowered to publish well-done research, and the journal is the perfect place to elevate those conversations.