

# “I Had No Idea That the Option to Pursue a Career as a Professional Scientific Editor Even Existed”



Stavroula Kousta



**Abstract** In our interview with Stavroula Kousta, we learn about her current position as chief editor for *Nature Human Behaviour*. This was preceded by several earlier full-time editor positions and can be a great option for those who love to read lots of papers and become involved in journal policy and may not want to focus on specific research questions themselves. As an editor, however, you can still champion topics that are close to your heart and help shape science and its communication. Stavroula suggests that PhD students consider their skill set and what they would enjoy doing when exploring different career paths.

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S. Kousta (✉)

Nature Human Behaviour, Nature Portfolio, Springer Nature, London, UK

e-mail: [stavroula.kousta@nature.com](mailto:stavroula.kousta@nature.com)



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## Chris: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your current position?

Stavroula: I am the chief editor of *Nature Human Behaviour* (<https://www.nature.com/nathumbehav/>), a multidisciplinary journal that publishes research of outstanding significance on any aspect of individual and collective human behavior. I started my career as a professional scientific editor back in 2008, when I became the editor of *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* (<https://www.cell.com/trends/cognitive-sciences/home>), a monthly reviews journal. In 2013, I joined *PLOS Biology* (<https://journals.plos.org/plosbiology/>), a peer-reviewed scientific journal covering all aspects of biology, as a senior editor. I was hired to launch *Nature Human Behaviour* in 2016 and have been its chief editor since then.

In my role, I am responsible for the journal's overall strategy and editorial policies. I oversee a small team of six editors, and together we work on the evaluation, peer review, and editorial decisions for research manuscripts submitted to the journal. Unlike the majority of research journals, we do not have an external editorial board – all editorial decisions are made by our team of in-house professional editors. We also commission reviews and opinion pieces for the “front-half” or magazine section of the journal and work with individual authors to improve their manuscripts for publication. A key part of my role is engaging with the scientific community by giving talks on the publishing process, doing site visits to meet scientists and discuss their work, and participating in initiatives that aim at improving the publication process and policies.

## What was the focus of your PhD?

I did my PhD at the Research Centre for English and Applied Linguistics at the University of Cambridge back in the early 2000s. My doctoral work was in the field of psycholinguistics and used behavioral experiments to examine the psychological processes that underlie our understanding and resolution of ambiguity in connected speech. Specifically, my work examined how we identify the right antecedent for



pronouns (e.g., s/he, him/her) in cases where more than one antecedent is available – how do we combine syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic information on the fly to select the right referent for an ambiguous pronoun?

### **As you were finishing your PhD, what were you thinking about your career plans?**

Doing a PhD wasn't part of my initial career plan – but when the opportunity arose, I was very excited to have the chance to continue learning. As I was finishing my PhD, I had a very limited understanding of career possibilities outside academia – my eyes were firmly on an academic track because that's what I thought was the main option available to me. Happily, I was wrong, but it took 4 years of postdoctoral research before I actually found out!

### **Can you tell us a bit more about how you started to consider other options and became the editor of *Trends in Cognitive Science*?**

I enjoyed my doctoral and postdoctoral work, but unlike many of my colleagues, I found it difficult to restrict my interests to a narrow field of research, which is both necessary and inevitable for early career researchers who want to stay in academia. I was very broadly interested in science and enjoyed learning, so I started looking into potential careers that would enable me to stay very close to science and continue learning but didn't involve specialization. At that time, I came upon an ad for the editorial opening at *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*. I had no idea that the option to pursue a career as a professional scientific editor even existed – I thought that all journal editors were senior academics who edited journals on the side while continuing to do research as their main job. However, when I read the job description, I thought I'd found my calling – the job profile had everything I was looking for and no previous editorial experience was required. I've never worked harder than I did on the application and test materials for that position, and luckily, I received a job offer!

### **Can you tell us a bit about what day-to-day life is like in your current position?**

There is never a dull moment at this job, and I learn something new every day. My day typically starts by looking at the new submissions we have received over the past 24 hours, doing an initial triage, and assigning manuscripts to individual editors within my team (including to myself). I handle the editorial and peer review process



for my own manuscripts and also weigh in on the decisions my team makes as one of our aims as a journal is to make consistent decisions regardless of who the handling editor is. We discuss manuscripts a lot as a team: we have dedicated triage sessions where the handling editor presents a manuscript and we reach an initial decision collectively on whether to peer review a manuscript or return it to the authors without review. Keeping on top of new developments is also a key part of the job. I scan on a daily basis what has been published in other key journals as well as new preprints posted on preprint servers. I check out press releases and what is being discussed on social media. I also attend talks, workshops, and conferences internally and externally to keep up to date with new research and science policy developments, as well as network. Talks, the news, and social media are frequently the source of commissioning ideas for our magazine section – I will often commission an opinion piece after seeing an interesting exchange on Twitter, for example. I also talk to scientists a lot – either to discuss their manuscripts, ongoing work in their laboratories, or interesting developments in their fields. My day may also include giving a publishing talk at a workshop, conference, or as part of a site visit; writing an editorial or a press release for one of our papers; developing a new journal policy; or working on a new publishing initiative with colleagues from other journals.

### **How do you think having a PhD has helped you succeed in your current position?**

Having a PhD is a required qualification for professional editors of scientific journals – I would have been unable to pursue a career in publishing as a science editor without it.

### **If someone currently finishing their PhD was considering a similar position as you have now, how might they decide if it would be a good fit?**

This job is for you if you like reading (a lot!) and making decisions, if you enjoy learning new fields and new skills and juggling several different tasks during the working day. Very broad interests in science are a must, as is a keen eye for the big picture and how different fields and disciplines relate to each other. Interactions with scientists are intellectually stimulating and rewarding, but editorial decision-making can also be challenging: publishing is a key vehicle for career advancement in academia, and dealing with unhappy authors whose work was rejected is a core



part of the job. As an editor, you will need to be firm but fair, treating all scientists equally, regardless of whether they are a Nobel laureate or a PhD student submitting their first research manuscript. You need to be able to always maintain professionalism, as well as willingness to admit and correct errors. Being able to communicate effectively and network with scientific community leaders is also an essential skill.

### **If someone was interested in pursuing a similar career path, what would you suggest they do to better prepare themselves?**

Read, read, read! Read as widely as you can, not just in your own and neighboring fields, but also in other disciplines and sciences. Sign up for eTOCs of general science journals and read sources of high-quality scientific journalism. Take every opportunity that arises to act as a peer reviewer – this is not only community service but also a valuable opportunity to see the editorial process in action. Build a strong network of contacts in your discipline and seek opportunities to collaborate on projects that extend beyond your core research topic.

### **What do you like most about your work?**

I love the fact that I learn something new and exciting every day (I still can't believe that I'm getting paid to do something that I'd happily do as a hobby!). I also find the work incredibly intellectually stimulating – as a researcher, a substantial portion of my work involved running routine tasks or analyses that could feel repetitive or mind-numbing; there's nothing mind-numbing about editorial work, and my interactions with scientists at the cutting edge of their fields provide a constant source of intellectual stimulation. But perhaps most of all I value the opportunity to do work that has an impact on how science is carried out and communicated through journal policies, advocacy, and promoting research that is robust and has high social significance.

### **And what do you like least about your work?**

The pace of editorial work can feel at times unrelenting – for instance, we don't have control over the volume of manuscripts that are submitted at any point in time. However, I generally thrive in fast-paced environments, so this is a minor quibble.



**A lot of people like academia because they feel it gives them an opportunity to work on a topic that they deeply care about. Do you think this is also true in your current position?**

Although editorial work doesn't allow you to work on a single research question you care deeply about, it does offer ample opportunity to work on multiple topics that are close to your heart. For instance, I believe strongly in the importance of meta-science and meta-research, so I encourage the submission of meta-scientific research to *Nature Human Behaviour*. I commission a lot of meta-science for the "magazine" section of the journal, and I develop policies for the journal that draw on the latest meta-science findings. I also care deeply about research that directly supports the sustainable development goals – again, this is research that I strongly encourage, prioritize for peer review and publication, and advocate for in my editorials.

**Another reason many like academia is that they feel it provides them with more freedom than they think they would get in other positions. How much freedom do you feel you have to work on what you think is interesting?**

As an editor, you have the opportunity to shape the journal you work on. For instance, when I was hired to launch *Nature Human Behaviour*, I shaped the journal according to my own vision of what its mission and identity should be. I wanted the journal to straddle the gap among the social, biological, health, and physical sciences and to be not just multidisciplinary, but the home for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research that struggles to find a home in disciplinary journals. I also felt and feel very strongly about rigorous, reproducible research – so I developed journal policies that support this vision, I encourage the submission of meta-science, and I have written numerous editorials that advocate for robustness and rigor in science and publishing. I wanted to redefine what constitutes a "significant scientific advance" in the context of a highly selective journal (not just novel findings but also replications, (dis)confirmations, evidence-based advances, and applied advances), and this is reflected in the papers we choose to send out to review and ultimately publish. For better or for worse, the journal's identity would have been very different, both in its scope and in its priorities and policies, under a different launch chief editor. Freedom to shape the journal you work on is true not only when you launch a journal yourself or are the chief editor of a journal. In well-managed journals, individual editors have the freedom to shape the portion of the journal within their remit, can take the journal in new directions by expanding its scope, and also contribute to shaping its policies. For instance, as an editor for *PLOS Biology*, I spearheaded the introduction of meta-science as a core discipline covered in the



journal. I was also responsible for the magazine section and could put my own "stamp" on the range and types of content and opinions we featured in that section of the journal.

### **Based on your journey, what advice or suggestions do you want to pass on to someone who's currently finishing their PhD?**

Doing a PhD is a substantial investment of time and energy. It's also the cause of lost income: you are still a student, likely counting the pennies, while most of your former schoolmates are earning and climbing the property ladder. Toward the end of your degree, you may be wondering if you did the right thing to invest in doing a PhD given that academic positions are limited and competition for them is fierce. However, having a PhD does offer a professional premium that is unavailable to first-degree and master's holders. More importantly, it opens many more exciting professional doors than you may think, and the fact that you are reading this book is a great step toward discovering some of them. Academia is only one potential path, and in fact, at least in the UK, more than half of PhD holders pursue a career outside science altogether right after their PhDs, with a further 17% securing non-university research positions in industry, government, or NGOs (see Figure 1.6 in "[The Scientific Century: Securing our Future Prosperity](#)," a policy report by the Royal Society, 2010). The range of possibilities for a rewarding, successful career is so much broader than before you started your PhD, which has equipped you with much more than subject matter knowledge. Take the time to think about your skill set and what you would most enjoy doing. Talk to PhD holders in different professions to gain insight into their roles and whether they would be a good fit for you. Attend career fairs and use any career resources your institution makes available to discover different career paths. If you are uncertain whether a particular job would be right for you, internships are an excellent option that will allow you to get first-hand experience of what a particular job would be like day to day. Ultimately, no matter what you decide to do, you will likely discover that your PhD was the most worthwhile professional investment you could have made – I certainly feel this way.

**This was very informative. Thank you so much for sharing your experiences with us!**