

Course Check: Three open access publishers on the challenges of sustainability

A follow-up to the SPARC-ACRL Forum on Emerging Issues in Scholarly Communication, June 2007

INTERVIEW II:

Bryan Vickery
Deputy Publisher, BioMed Central, and Editorial Director, Chemistry Central

June 23, 2007

The three interviews in this series were conducted by Alma Swan of Key Perspectives Ltd., for SPARC and ACRL, with executives from three leading open access publishers: Mark Patterson, director of publishing for the Public Library of Science; Bryan Vickery, deputy publisher for BioMed Central; and Paul Peters, director of business development for Hindawi Publishing Corporation. Additional materials are available at www.arl.org/sparc/meetings/ala07.

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Interview II – BRYAN VICKERY, BioMed Central – June 23, 2007

ALMA: Bryan, can you tell me what the current role of print subscriptions is in your business model and where you see that going in terms of helping your sustainability?

BRYAN: Well, print subscriptions aren't a significant revenue stream for Biomed Central, but we do publish three portfolios of journals and the BMC series, which we manage in-house. Our independent journals and the power I niche have some subscription content and a print subscription that runs alongside them, but the others don't. We also offer the service of producing a print issue at the end of the year. I think one of the things we have to take into account is that we don't publish in volumes and issues. We publish each article concurrently, so binding them together is a slightly worthless task. But, in terms of print, we are doing things that help authors, like adding a personal cover page to the front of each of the articles and offering print-on-demand for our supplements. And I think supplements and the fanatic series are quite useful to offer in print. However, in a year we may publish 100 articles in a particular journal, but not all of those articles will be relevant to the reader, so binding them all together is not always the right thing to do. I'd be much more interested in allowing readers to create their own personal journals and sending them to a print-on-demand service. But we don't have print subscriptions as a significant revenue stream.

ALMA: The issue of moving money around to pay for article processing charges, possibly from the subscriptions budgets in the library, is something that worries librarians, I think, and it's difficult to see how that can happen or how it can be organized in the first place. Can you say a few words about where you see that going? Where is the money coming from to pay for the charges that you are levying on your authors?

BRYAN: Well, that's an interesting question. The more authors look to publish in open access, the more we need to make sure that these funds are available for them. We're not seeing a diversion of subscription funds into open access funds, but that will happen. I mean there's \$7 billion tied up in subscription costs. And we're seeing authors paying for processing charges with money from their research grants; research agencies around the world are now allowing for the inclusion of those fees in grant proposals. I think institutions need to encourage their faculty and their authors to include publication charges in their grant proposals, then, ideally, the university can create a central fund using all of those publishing charges and overhead that are associated with the grants. One of the things about open access publishing is that we're getting away from the haves and the have nots--the people who can access content and the people who can't. And we need to make sure that the mechanism is all-encompassing. Everyone needs to be able to publish in an open access journal, whether they're grant-funded or not. That's why we see a central pot of money as essential, and I think universities need to move quite quickly on this.

ALMA: So that some disciplines are not disenfranchised, you mean?

BRYAN: Yes, that's right. Some research areas have very little funding.

ALMA: You're seeing a rise in submissions, you reported that. Do you know why you're seeing that rise? It's jolly good news, but do you know why authors are flocking to you?

BRYAN: We can make a good guess. We ask each author who is published with us to complete a questionnaire a few weeks after the publication has gone live. The four main reasons as to why they published with us is first, that they've read a paper in one of our journals, which causes a snowball effect: the more articles we publish, the more we meet the research requirements of more and more researchers. Second, an author in one of our other journals will often recommend BioMed Central because they've enjoyed the publishing process with us; our publishing system is very smooth and very simple to use, and we have a lot of repeat authors. Third, a significant number of respondents put open access down as a reason for publishing with us; and, fourth, we saw quite a big increase in submissions when we announced our income factors. Another reason for the rise in submissions is that we're constantly rolling out new journals in our portfolio. We publish a journal for every area of biology and medicine, so we do cover everything.

ALMA: Does BioMed Central have a policy on supporting data? Do you encourage your authors to submit supporting data with their article or to submit it to another database somewhere?

BRYAN: Yes, we require authors to deposit the data in a repository and include the session numbers for those databases in their articles. They can also upload that data directly to BioMed Central. We like to keep a copy of the data with the article, and we use it for archiving purposes on our end. We also allow authors to submit other types of additional files, such as movies, Excel spreadsheets, or PowerPoint presentations. I think we need to move to a point where the peer reviewers let us know whether they think additional data should have been supplied with an article so that we can ask the authors for that. I just wanted to say one more thing. In terms of interacting with these repositories of data, one exciting thing we're doing with the physema central portal that we've just launched for physics is allowing prospective authors to submit their files (on the archive preprint server) directly to us.

ALMA: Bryan, you have talked a little bit about new measures for impact using Web 2.0. Could you elaborate on that a little bit, because that's obviously something that's going to be really important?

BRYAN: Yes. I think we still, as Mark Patterson described it, have this tyranny of the impact factor, and the impact factor obviously is a measure of the quality of a journal and its retrospective. It looks at the citations over the last few years, but not really as a measure of the success of the author or the authors of a research article. The Web and electronic delivery now allow us to look at usage statistics from an article and more accurately count citations. I know Mark and PLOS 1 are doing some fantastic things with Web 2.0, including adding annotations and comments to their research articles. We feel that all of this technology is coming together to make post-review of articles a very valuable thing. And we can measure that. I think an important step for the community would be some kind of international researcher ID, where each researcher at an institution would have a unique ID that stays with him or her for life to help us disambiguate authors in research articles. A researcher could also use the ID to comment on articles, say how valuable they found another researcher's comment, or immediately call up a researcher's publication record. So I think we're moving to a position where the value a researcher adds to the community is what we're measuring in terms of their publication record, but also in terms of the way they post-review articles and build on what's already there.

ALMA: Excellent. Thank you very much Bryan.

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