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Surviving Another Year

by Karen Hunter (Senior Vice President, Strategy, Elsevier Science) <k.hunter@elsevier.com>

For a number of years I have frequently answered anyone asking how I am with a simple response: “Surviving.” After September 11, I suppose that takes on a different meaning for all of us and I will have to modify my answer. But survival is still at the core of what many of us are trying to do day by day, either with respect to our personal lives or what we are trying to accomplish at work.

Survival for journal publishers, particularly biomedical publishers, in 2001 meant something a bit different from some past years. For one thing, we faced the “free the literature” movement in a new guise. Frustrated by the failure of *PubMed Central* to get traction among publishers, a small group of biomedical researchers decided to try a different approach. Labeling their effort the *Public Library of Science* (PLoS), they started a campaign to get researchers to sign a statement that as of September 1, 2001, they would not submit a manuscript to, edit or review for, or personally purchase any journal that did not make its research articles available for free, and without copyright restriction, on a public server (preferably *PubMed Central*) within six months of publication. By the time September 1st arrived, over 20,000 scientists from around the world (many of them graduate students, but also at least one Nobel laureate) had signed.

The flag was up the flag pole, but very few publishers saluted. The demand was simply naïve and unreasonable and there were scientists who understood this and spoke out in opposition. Publishers collectively watched and waited as the summer wore on to see if there would be any effect. To date, a cautious estimate is that there has been little fallout. A couple of scientists have said they would not review for one or two of our journals. I am told that one of our most prestigious journals received an article in the summer from one of the most well-known of the *PLoS* advocates, asking that if we accepted the article after peer review we be sure that it was published before September 1st. Now, that’s funny.

But that does not mean that all is quiet. A new, for-profit publisher *BioMed Central* is trying to piggyback on this *PLoS* initiative. They have chosen to charge authors (a variation on page charges, which have always been an option) and to ask for institutional support, albeit in a somewhat different way from a traditional subscription. Another new publisher, *The Scientific World*, is also trying to craft a business that would feed into (or on) this model.

Will either of these – or other such efforts – succeed? Or even if they succeed (where success is measured as making sufficient profit to stay in business or, in the case of *BioMed Central*, follow what has become its founder’s pattern of finding a deep-pocket acquirer), will they affect our survival? Too early to tell, but I am not losing sleep over it.

Survival in 2001 also meant getting very serious about digital archiving. Not that we haven’t been serious before. *Elsevier Science* added a formal archiving commitment to its *ScienceDirect* license in 1999. But the notion of a transitional period of dual paper and electronic collecting is under pressure at many universities. There simply is not the funding to support it and e-only is the preferred answer. That means archiving issues must be resolved. Fortunately, there appears to be enough people now focused on the problem that at least some of the hand-wringing angst is easing.

The *Mellon Foundation* stepped in to fund digital archiving research in 2001 and *Elsevier* participated in a project with *Yale University Library*. The *Library of Congress* was authorized by Congress to receive up to $100 million for digital preservation. Real demonstration projects have shown success, most notably at the *Royal Library* in the Hague. On a national basis, I heard concerns about archiving from major libraries around the world, including in the U.S., Canada, Australia, Japan, Germany, England, Scotland and Switzerland. There is a clear sense of wanting a copy of the files within a specific national community. We are now close to agreements on establishing more than one large external library-based archive.

*Elsevier Science* has also introduced a new licensing option, called *E-Choice*. Modeled on the *Academic Press* licenses that we inherited with the AP acquisition, *E-Choice* offers electronic subscriptions independent of paper subscriptions. If a library then also wants to buy paper, they may do so at a “Deep Discount Price.” This decoupling is a part of the process of making the transition to e-only easier administratively for both sides.

But many questions related to e-only and archiving remain. Indeed, one of our staff recently asked me what I thought we would do if we were suddenly at war with a country holding an archive. Would that affect our delivery of services? It was an interesting question. Who is “we”? *Elsevier Science* is headquartered in the Netherlands, is a part of Reed Elsevier in London, and hosts its *ScienceDirect* database in the U.S. I honestly don’t know the answer. I would like to think there would be no effect, but that might be naive.

In a somewhat related project, in the course of 2001 *Elsevier Science* and several other publishers agreed with the *World Health Organization* to make medical journals available at no charge to libraries in the poorest countries in the world. WHO, in particular *Barbara Aronson* from the WHO Library in Geneva, convinced us that the time to act was now and the way to act was to provide online access. Some of us reacted initially with stereotypical responses: these countries lack the necessary infrastructure; surely basic biomedical research journals are not what is needed; and what about any business we might lose (note that these last two points are clearly contradictory). Barbara and her colleagues had done their homework and convinced us in no uncertain terms that we could do this and survive and that if we did not do it, someone else’s welfare would be compromised. The project is moving steadily ahead and I am glad that the political situation in Afghanistan is now such that we don’t have to make a decision on whether they should be stricken from the roster for political reasons.

On another front, this year brought us back into the book business, big time. With the acquisition of the STM businesses of Harcourt, *Elsevier Science* now has within it a very large book publishing program. It is fascinating and not a little frightening to be plunged into the world of medical books anc coursework. This is a true Darwinian world, working to gain the attention of medical educators and professionals. For someone focused so intently on libraries for so many years, I have to learn new survival tactics, or make them up as we go along.

The penetration of handholds among medical students, for example, is truly extraordinary. Some medical schools now...
On the Road

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I know that a few columns of “On The Road” have not been published due to my hectic schedule, however, in view of the events that happened here in New York on September 11, 2001, I thought it was imperative to not only publish a story about travel, but also encourage those who have not flown since that date to continue your routine and travel with a renewed spirit. My first flight after the World Trade Center was two weeks later, flying to the NELA Conference in Burlington, VT. It was an uneventful flight from New York’s Laguardia Airport to Burlington on US Airways. A normally crowded 52 seat twin engine plane only carried 8 of us passengers. The security at New York’s Laguardia Airport was more intense, however, arriving at the airport 2 1/2 hours prior to flight guarantees getting through security and making it on to the plane in time. As previously mentioned, the flight was quite beautiful as the twin engine deHaviland propeller-driven plane flew at a lower altitude, approximately 18,000 feet. Traveling north of Albany, New York, you could see the Adirondacks approaching on the left and to the right were the green mountains of Vermont. Finally, landing in Burlington over Lake Champlain, was a fitting conclusion to my first flight since the events two weeks earlier in New York City. Since then, I have had approximately eight other flights with no particular incidents, however, security has been tight in most airports, including National Guard to ensure everything is checked and any irregularities reported. One flight that I had recently was on an airline called Jet Blue, out of New York’s Kennedy Airport, going to New Orleans, Louisiana, non-stop for a Tri Chapter Medical Library Conference. I had flown Jet Blue before and enjoyed their service which is marked by some interesting features such as first class seats throughout the cabin, in addition to assorted snacks comprised of their unique blue potato chips, a signature of Jet Airlines. The reason why I am mentioning this flight is because Jet Blue is known for their investment in security, purchasing the first secure cabin door to the cockpit costing $10,000 per installation. This was very comforting to me and many of the other passengers knowing that the door was in place for that flight. The cabin was approximately 1/3 occupied, which was better than my previous flight to Vermont, and included a few people that attended the same conference. In my same row seated next to me was another business traveler who had flown many times before as he mentioned in our brief conversation, however, approximately 1 hour into the flight I happened to look up from my newspaper and discovered that the cabin door had been opened by the stewardess who was engaged in conversation with the pilot and co-pilot through the open door. Standing along side of her and observing the cabin was a slight sized steward, evidently seeing if anything might happen with the door open, at least I hoped that is why he

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