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Richard Charkin
MacMillan, richard@macmillan.com

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Looking Back, Looking Forward — Q&A with Richard Charkin

by Richard Charkin (Chief Executive, Macmillan, 4 Crinan Street, London N1 9XW UK; Phone: +44 20 7843 3645; Fax: +44 20 7843 3600) <richard@macmillan.com> Weblog: http://charkinblog.macmillan.com/

Richard Charkin, chief executive of Macmillan, one of the world’s leading educational, scholarly, and general publishing companies, is known for a willingness to take risks, even to the point of starting to blog earlier this year. We turned to him with questions about innovation in publishing, the book supply chain, and electronic publishing. The most surprising thing about his comments is that there is not a single word here about cricket or The Ashes, but you’ll be able to follow England’s fortunes, as well as news about UK and international publishing, at http://charkinblog.macmillan.com/.

Q: What’s the most exciting new thing Macmillan has done since you’ve been there?

A: The transformation of Nature and its sister journals from a paper-based magazine company into a global electronic scientific information and navigation service. Sales have tripled and annual investment has increased more than tenfold. Every single part of the value chain has been inspected for “fit for purpose” in the twenty-first century and abandoned, replaced, or improved. Most importantly, we have never ceased taking risks, launching new products, experimenting, and promoting talent.

Q: Tell us more about the improvements to the value chain.

A: To start with, the vast majority of our submissions are now electronic. The remainder are digitized before anything else happens even though most of them will not make it into Nature which has an extraordinarily high rejection rate. This cost of rejected manuscripts is usually forgotten, of course, but it’s an important item in publishing and the higher the quality of the journal the higher the cost. All refereeing, copy-editing and design are done digitally and the output held in formats as friendly to electronic delivery as to print. Selling and advertising are done digitally, and marketing, too. We have saved a lot of trees.

Q: One of your most controversial innovations is the New Writing program (www.macmillannewwriting.com). What makes it different and why has it not ignited as much anger from other publishers and literary agents?

A: New Writing is a program that gives a voice to new authors who are talented but who might otherwise not get into print. We offer standardized terms that are modest at the beginning but place the commercial risk on the publisher rather than the author. The author receives no advance but also pays nothing (unlike typical arrangements with vanity publishers) and benefits from a royalty arrangement that is generous and open-ended. The author is published in standard book format and distributed through our normal Macmillan channels and through www.macmillannewwriting.com. We review only adult fiction, take only electronic submissions, and look only at complete manuscripts — and there’s still a 99 percent rejection rate.

When it comes to the negative reaction we’ve had from some quarters, I suppose that when a system is established it’s very hard for its practitioners to accept that it may be flawed and that something much simpler (and actually more old-fashioned) might be a better model. In fact, we just applied Oceaan’s Razor. What are the essential elements for spotting new talent? What are the bits that are counterproductive or un-economic? Let’s keep the former and abandon the latter. We’ve had general break-even. One or two titles have done better than par, but the real success will come only when we find an author who really breaks through in sales or esteem, and that’s still to come. However, the key thing is that when searching for the new superstar we don’t lose money — and that we have achieved. We have also rewarded our authors fairly, which is important.

Q: How about other approaches you’ve tried or seen? How have they worked, and how have people in the industry reacted?

A: The book business is, in my opinion, over-complicated and over-sensitive. This makes the implementation of change, however mild, very hard to achieve. But some publishers have made great strides, particularly, for instance, in the adoption of new technologies such as print on demand for academic monographs and the support of Websites for textbooks.

Q: Given all our exposure to new ideas, one might think publishers would be innovative and likely to try new things. But publishers aren’t known, to put it gently, for being innovative. Why’s that?

A: I disagree. I think there is a misconception here about the role of the publisher. Where publishers are conservative is in their desire to publish “safe” content — in other words, high-quality authors in a traditional format — novel, reference book, textbook, etc. However, content production is not the primary role of the publisher. The primary role is content dissemination, and here publishers have been innovative. For instance, the complete invention of a new business model — the site license — in scientific publishing. Or Westlaw and Lexis-Nexis. Or www.xrefer.com. Or http://www.onesstopenglish.com. I could go on but won’t.

Q: What needs to change in publishing?

A: How many pages am I allowed? Get closer to readers as well as to intermediaries. Stop saying, “I bought this book” rather than, “I’ve been granted a license to publish this book.” Stop and turn around the movement to disintegration of rights. Improve profitability in trade publishing. Have more multilingual people on staff. Have more genuine all-rounders and more genuinely specialist people. Get less arrogant and accept that publishers are no more than a link between writer and reader and that there are plenty of others in the chain adding at least as much (and frequently much more) value. Reduce the number of times a book is handled between printing machine and reader (currently around twenty-five times in my estimation and another twenty-five times on the way back for 35 percent of books that are returned). Buy into on-demand printing at point of sale. Library, bookstore, corporation. By the way, this is one reason why journals are more profitable than books. The process for journals publishing is much simpler.

Q: What’s in danger of being lost as we change?

A: Arrogance. Some easy money. Some bonhomie (compensated by greater bonmarrre). And, of course, les neiges d’antan.

Q: How about Google and Amazon — threat or opportunity?

A: Both are both. The biggest threat is the threat to copyright. There is a balance in society between the need to protect the inventor or creative talent and the need for society to benefit from their works. The Internet has a significant inelimination toward the rights of the user and tends to undervalue the rights of the inventor. Google and Amazon don’t always realize the consequences of their actions, in terms of maintaining this balance. The opportunity they offer is, at very low cost, to publicize the existence and help people find and buy books, in e or print form.

Q: You’re now a blogger. What has that taught you, do you expect to continue, and what do your publishing colleagues say about it?

A: How to do acents on letters (but I’ve now forgotten). How to insert a hyperref link. Words generate extra traffic. Which statements generate comments and which ones don’t. My colleagues by and large think I’m mad or a showoff or a fool.

Q: Are publishers an author’s natural enemy, and is that the real reason for open-access journals?

A: No, readers are the author’s natural enemy because most of them don’t want to read a particular author’s work, however good it is. There have always been open access journals — they’re usually called “controlled circulation” (or “organs of state propaganda”), and normally they are rather substandard. I’m sure that Public Library of Science and others are excellent, but I don’t think they are the result of continued on page 24

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Thinking Globally: The Benefits of Interdisciplinary Publishing

by David Levinson, PhD. (Anthropologist and president of Berkshire Publishing Group, 314 Main Street, Great Barrington, MA 01230; Phone: 413-528-0206) <david@berkshirepublishing.com>
Blog: www.duboisweb.org/blog/

Last evening I was reading the new, 50th-anniversary special edition of New Scientist. The issue contained a piece titled “Predictions: Brilliant Minds Forecast the Next 50 Years,” and one thing that jumped out at me as I read the predictions (each a long paragraph or so in length) was how narrowly focused most were on what would happen in the expert’s scholarly discipline (whether molecular biology, paleontology, or astrophysics) that would affect the larger world. Equally striking was the almost complete absence of any interdisciplinary thinking or suggestion that possibly a mix of new developments from different sciences might have the most influence on the future.

The Problem of Specialization

The single-discipline approach showcased in the anniversary issue of New Scientist is typical of today’s knowledge production industry. This industry is made up mainly of people from academia and public and private research institutions. It is funded by tax dollars, foundations, and private donations. Specialization and differentiation of interest and function in knowledge production and dissemination are the norm; that specialization means that disciplines subdivide into increasing numbers of subdisciplines, each with its own concepts, methods, theories, language, associations, and publishing outlets. This trend is no surprise: the study of human