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Interview — Bob Campbell

Managing Director — Blackwell Science

by Liz Chapman (University of Oxford, England)

Will wonders never cease? The wonderful, fantastic, splendiferous, awesome, etc., Liz Chapman recently interviewed the w, f, s, a Bob Campbell. Let's see what they talked about. — KS

ATG: How did you get into publishing?

BC: My parents both wrote for a living so I knew about publishing from them and from publishers coming to the house. But in fact when I was leaving University (Aberdeen) I can remember asking someone "what is publishing?" None of us really had any idea. But that was in '68, there were more jobs than people. I went to **Paul Hamlyn** where I was shown round and offered a job on the spot. **O.U.P.** virtually offered me a job on the phone. I went to **Blackwell Scientific Publications** and again by the end of the interview I was offered a job. There were no science graduates looking to go into publishing in those days. BSP had no science graduates in the company — two ex-librarians though. **Per Saugman** persuaded me that it was a small company where I could develop. So after I got the job I phoned up friends and said "get into this publishing — it's such a doddle..." These friends got jobs in publishing and 6 of us used to meet regularly at Frankfurt.

ATG: So how did BSP develop?

BC: When I joined it was pretty small. The company started in 1939 and by 1951 annual turnover was £10,000. **Per** took over in the early 1950's and it took him a while

to learn what modern publishing was about. Established houses like **Longman** or **Methuen** just sat there and manuscripts came in. **Per** reversed that, and he actually went out to universities and met the new young stars of medicine, many of whom later became professors. **Per** was the first publisher to work the gos-

sip column of medicine. He would remember and use gossip he picked up and I learned this trick from him, so that I could impress Nobel prize winners, even though I knew nothing about their subject.

ATG: A bit like librarians use book-sellers to pick up gossip from library to library.

BC: And publishers' reps. too, even in the same university, traveling between departments. **Per** began to commission books in the 50's which came out in the 60's and so BSP only hit the international scene in the 60's. By the time I arrived in '68 he had published some

"What we think is document delivery will be part of a service we will offer libraries..."

major books, and raised his own status and that of the company.

ATG: So was your first job going out getting authors?

BC: I started as a production sub-editor to get an idea how to put together

a book. We had a brilliant production director **John Robson**, who retires next year, who gave invaluable advice, and still does, to all editors.

ATG: Can you explain some of the links between the various Blackwell companies?

BC: We were started because **Sir Basil Blackwell** saw **Lord Nuffield** putting money into the medical school and so he thought he should start a medical publishing firm. We were going to be called **Blackwell Medical Publications** but he changed it to give us more scope. The original investors were the bookshop, the original publishing company, and some family investors and individuals. It never needed more funds as in the 50's we distributed books from big American companies which gave us cash without investment.

ATG: What are the links now — are the Blackwell family involved?

BC: The Blackwell family keep a reasonably close eye. There are 3 family shareholders and **Nigel Blackwell** is the Chairman. He reports to all shareholders every 6 months. At the AGM we report on plans for the next 3 years. That's usually pretty lively as the Blackwells know the library market and our specific markets so they don't just sit there as dumb shareholders. **Toby** is well up on modern developments, and they are concerned about status and quality. And they do want us to provide some discount to the booktrade.

ATG: So you've worked up from being the production assistant to being the boss?

BC: Yes it's just happened over the years. The directors were all a clear generation older than me with nobody in-between. I was lucky to be in the right place at the right time, having a science

background. I could've been slung out as for a period of 2 or 3 years I wasn't apparently doing anything very obvious. Per never gave up on me and was patient, which is the nature of a private company. Then as books came in and journals improved it was fine. Being at a small company

you learn a lot. I had to draft letters and reports for Per, which was a tremendous help to me, such as drafting a bid for a new journal. When I took over from him in 1987 it was a "young" company with 2 new directors in their 30's coming in. We should've grown and indeed the turnover has trebled in the last 6 years. It was a risk by the shareholders though.

ATG: Now you're changing the name of the company to **Blackwell Science** — why is that?

BC: That came from a pretty silly start — our original letter heading having been designed in the 50's . . . we began to think about our image. We talked a lot to our colleagues in the other companies. We found that Blackwell Scientific Publications is too long a name in the States, they just call us Blackwell. Another problem is that "publications" is seen in some parts of the world as just magazines. We know ourselves inside the company as BSP but it never stuck outside. So we wanted a shorter snappier name. We didn't want Blackwell Scientific as it sounds like a laboratory.

ATG: It's not because you're dropping publishing?

BC: Well one thought was that if you're trying to present information on the screen BS looks better than Blackwell Scientific Publications. We also thought that it had to be a strong enough design to work in black & white for fax, or any electronic transmission. So we came out with this striking B. The strange thing is that Elsevier Science Publishers have dropped the word Publishers and that Springer Verlag may drop the Verlag. So all 3 of us in Europe have come to the same conclusion; we don't need the word publisher in our titles.

ATG: To move on a bit. Let's talk

about document delivery which I know you've just written about. Is BS involved?

BC: My interest in this came in the

"With Adonis we got that wrong, we thought librarians would like just-in-time and take articles when they needed them."

70's when I used to get upset about copyright, no revenue from photocopies. That's how we started with **Adonis** in the 1980s. I wrote a long article about how scandalous it was that the **British Library** was selling photocopies of articles without any copyright revenue to publishers . . . **Gilbert Richards** of **Pergamon** took this up and invited me to talk. So I went to Pergamon to talk about taking a stronger line and he asked me to join the group of **John Wiley**, **Academic Press**, **Springer Verlag**, **Elsevier** and **Pergamon** — the five big STM players and us. Within a month I ended up as chairman because we were the small company and nobody really wanted any of the powerful companies, who were deadly rivals for years, to take a lead. I learned a lot from this, by moving out of parochial Oxford (we had no overseas offices at that time) — and having meetings, dinners, with these top people and learning what was going on in the trade at a completely different level. Per used to call it the most expensive dining club in Europe. We spent money like idiots trying to design a technical system, which was not available off the shelf, and were conned left and right by consultants . . . It raised our profile, though it cost us money. To be suddenly seen in a consortium with those 5 major publishers gave us more confidence. We always thought of ourselves as minor players and now we were on the high table.

"This may be right in 5 years time but the immediate problem we're faced with is all these different publishers with their own different services."

I was feeling under pressure in the 1980's. Should we publish electronic journals? I decided it was all too early and what we should do was to actually publish as many journals as possible so

that we had lots of copyright. So that when electronic publishing really came in we were sitting on lots of copyright — we would have a few cards to play.

Although we kept up with electronic publishing I switched away from book publishing. In one year we brought in 14 new journals. Now we're the 3rd or 4th biggest journal publisher. In electronic publishing and licensing we more or less automatically get consulted, because if outside agencies want to do anything with existing copyrights they have to come to us. A few years ago we wrote a model to see whether we could bring in enough revenue from licenses to cover loss in subscriptions to hard copy. What actually happened was that hard copy subscriptions did not decline as quickly as we thought they would. Our model looked at 4%-7% attrition which didn't happen. In fact taking authors' discs rather than typesetting compensated. Document delivery revenue has increased — **Adonis** is now going up in volume 25% per quarter, but also we're having direct arrangements with **CARL/UnCover** (small but growing), **UMI** and **ISI** which are paying more, so revenue is coming in from document delivery. But **David Brown**, who is a good thinker in this field doesn't see document delivery as the ultimate answer but sees it peaking in 5 or 6 years time and in fact sees it being replaced by electronic journal subscriptions. We think he's right and have written a different model where we see in 5 or 6 years time a kind of mixed service where we go to a university and say "we've got 200 journals and you're only taking 40 of them, wouldn't it be better if you had access to 200?" We could do this with a mixed package where you had Tables of Contents and Abstracts for your local server, you can have core journals and perhaps they can still be in hard copy, and where you don't have the title you can access our

server. **Acrobat** and other similar software makes all that possible. What we think is document delivery will be part of a service

we will offer libraries which I think will make it very interesting for librarians.

Some of the reports last year showed that librarians are not going for just-in-time delivery but they like just-in-case.

With Adonis we got that wrong, we thought librarians would like just-in-time and take articles when they needed them. Some librarians using Adonis would actually like to pay for it on subscription, which we are going to change to, for those that want it.

ATG: Where does all this leave librarians?

BC: The new librarian has got to be technically able because although we think our system very easy, and other publishers may think their system very easy, librarians will face a whole string of these things. People in the field say there won't be a problem because there'll be such good software that the user won't have to bother much beyond the new super Gophers, which will hop and jump between systems and find what hits you want. This may be right in 5 years time but the immediate problem we're faced with is all these different publishers with their own different services.

I would think most of us are working on similar strategies producing all our journals in SGML — there is quite a lot of standardisation. The interesting thing for librarians is that financially we are all in the dark. Librarians will have to become information brokers. They'll have to come to us and say — "We're teaming up with other universities — we have 30,000 students between us, we want to buy such and such journals from you, what shall we pay you for this service?" We're already training people to do that job from our side. Elsevier are doing something similar for site licences. So I think that's going to change librarians' jobs. On the one hand there'll be less physical handling of items on shelves, and on the other they could have a very sophisticated job, negotiating from various sources, to put material on their local networks. This could be a huge job for a new player, or it could be a job for subscription agents.

There's not much sign that subscription agents are looking to do this, but they could, particularly as there's a declining market for paper subscriptions. They could live on much bigger margins. Some bright spark (like BIDS) might do this.

ATG: Librarians aren't going to be redundant then?

BC: No but it'll be a different job. A fellow publisher admits that moving into

"... there'll be less physical handling of items on shelves, and ... a very sophisticated job, negotiating from various sources, to put material on local networks."

electronic publishing has not cut his workforce, he took on an extra 50 people. A lot of the publishing process can no longer be done on an outhouse basis. In conventional publishing we used to buy in everything; proofreading, design, blockmaking. Booksellers did the selling for us for the hungry library market. We do the marketing now, not the booktrade.

We sell more to individuals now. With our latest project **Ecofile** where we have 28 ecology journals on CD the overwhelming interest is from individuals. They can join the Ecofile club for £25, get regular discs and free access to all the Tables of Contents of all the journals. If they want abstracts they pay a dollop of money, and if they want individual journals they can take out a subscription in effect. The attractive idea is that they might join and take just one journal — but we shall have a 24-hour help-desk so that they can have instant (credit card) access to all the others.

ATG: Could libraries join that club?

BC: They could, but the interest has all been from individuals. The individu-

"We sell more to individuals now. The individuals are building up their own electronic libraries. I don't know where the librarian fits in this."

als are building up their own electronic libraries. I don't know where the librarian fits in this.

ATG: What do you think of the Follett Report on UK Higher Education libraries?

BC: I think Follett is trying to improve libraries and come out with ideas for libraries to take away some of the publishing process from us. But unless the right people are there in the library trade they're not going to do it. I was very struck when I spoke to the Publishing Course students at **Oxford Brookes University** that these students, who hadn't yet worked in publishing, were so sharp. If you think of these quality people going into publishing, that would suggest that the publishing industry will do pretty well. Unless the library community does the same, perhaps trains their people in a different way, any aggressive stance on smashing publishers is completely unrealistic. We've made a real effort at **Blackwell Science** to recruit a number of younger people, to sort out the future potential. We think it's an exciting period. Libraries are the same; they've got to get the right people in position.

ATG: What do you do when you're not publishing?

BC: Mainly fishing. (Well mainly I'm at home with the family) but it's interesting how in the States if you talk about fishing you find lots of the other publishers go fishing. Fly fishing has caught on with eminent scientists who are under pressure. It is very relaxing because if you want to be successful you have to think totally about the water, what fly the fish are taking, putting the fly in the right place. It takes a lot of concentration. I prefer Scotland though I have fished a little with colleagues in the States. You can fish in Sutherland, and not see another person all day. In the States they seem happy to fish shoulder to shoulder.

ATG: What about your family?

BC: Our eldest **Tom** who has just taken a History de-

gree from Edinburgh, has gone to Sussex University to study Artificial Intelligence. **Chloe** is at Cambridge studying History. The third, **Nancy** has just entered her last year at school. My wife **Frances** who is a psychotherapist keeps us all going. ☺