June 1995

Interview with Mary Anne Liebert

Katina Strauch

College of Charleston, kstrauch@comcast.net

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>

Recommended Citation

Strauch, Katina (1995) "Interview with Mary Anne Liebert," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 7: Iss. 3, Article 12.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.1753>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Interview with Mary Ann Liebert

President and Founder, Mary Ann Liebert, Inc.

by Katina Strauch (College of Charleston)

I was in New York a few months ago and dropped in at Mary Ann Liebert, Inc. when they were located in Manhattan. They have just moved to spacious new headquarters in Larchmont this month. And Mary Ann Liebert herself is a dynamo. Read what she told us! — KS

ATG: Who are you? How did you come to start this publishing company?

MAL: I started the company exactly fifteen years ago. It seems like yesterday. The receptionist's desk out there was my original desk in my apartment, which is where I started the company. Previously I was Vice President of Marketing at Marcel Dekker, Inc., but I wanted broader responsibilities, including acquisition. I was restless.

My son was young, and I wanted more flexibility as a mother, more time to spend with him. I also had these ideas for journals that Dekker was not interested in doing. So — I decided I would start my own company. I was particularly intrigued with the fields of genetic engineering and biotechnology and decided to start a publication in that field.

I was lucky. I didn't need venture capital because venture capitalists would have said, "Mary Ann, how many genetic engineers are there?" It was such a new field, nobody knew and, of course, I've never met anybody who calls themselves a genetic engineer even now. I launched *Genetic Engineering News* which was the first publication in the biotechnology industry and is today the most widely read biotechnology publication worldwide. I'm very proud of it.

ATG: When did you launch it?

MAL: I launched it in 1980 and it came out in the beginning of 1981. It started out six times a year and then it went to ten times and a few years ago, we took it to 21 times a year.

ATG: Did it take a lot of money to start the company?

MAL: Yes, it takes a lot of money!! Today more than ever. I couldn't start such a company today.

ATG: How many people work here?

MAL: About 50.

ATG: In contrast to when you started when it was just you? What did you do? What happened when you started?

MAL: When the company got a little bigger, I took another apartment in the building as an office. That lasted about a year. We outgrew it and have been outgrowing our offices ever since. We have just moved to Larchmont, and I have an option on all the space in the building as it becomes available.

I did everything for my first publication, *Journal of Interferon Research*. I designed it, copy-edited it, proofread it, sold subscriptions, sold advertising, and did the billing. I still remember the first subscriber. Years later, I gave her a lifetime complimentary subscription to *Journal of Interferon Research* because she's very special to me.

ATG: I can remember the first subscriber to *Against the Grain*. I never cashed the check I was so excited!

MAL: Oh, I cashed the check. Once I got the printing bill I cashed the check.

ATG: What's your training and background?

MAL: My background is publishing but I've always had a very keen interest in the sciences and medicine. Both my ex-husband and my current husband are doctors. I'm fairly knowledgeable and I'm a voracious reader; I read everything I can get my hands on everywhere, not only journals and books, magazines and articles, but direct mail pieces, promotion, what people call throw-aways. I feed on those.

What I like most is to create journals that are in the newest and most exciting areas of research and medicine and science. We're not a "me too" publisher. We were the first publisher to publish any journal in the field of AIDS; before AIDS was declared a public health hazard, we had the first scientific peer-reviewed journal, on AIDS research. We then established *AIDS Patient Care*, a pragmatic journal for doctors, nurses and health professionals who care for HIV-positive patients regularly. We publish *Journal of Women's Health*. I sent you a press release recently about Bernadine Healy who was the Director of the National Institutes of Health and who has just become the editor in chief of *Journal of Women's Health*. We're very excited about that.

We have two new journals in the field of alternative and complementary medicine; both are medical journals. One is peer-reviewed and the other is more pragmatic — educating health care professionals about alternative therapies. Patient interest is driving the field. We like to be early, we like to be first, and we like to be really good. And I like to believe that the journals that we are creating are not only a contribution to the literature, but to the fields they serve. They make a difference.

We have the first journal on *Human Gene Therapy*, and it's now monthly. I like to be in a field two years too early so we can take a field and nurture it and help it grow. The nice thing about a privately held company such as mine is that I don't have to worry about unreasonable profit expectations that may be imposed by some conglomerate. My board of directors are a few, well-picked individuals who understand what I'm trying to do and where we're going. I am the only stockholder.

continued on page 34

ATG: How do you use your board?

MAL: I use my board as a check and balance just to make sure that what I'm doing seems to be on track. I always like to have input from bright and talented people who have careers in medicine, science, or business. I like good questions to challenge my assumptions.

ATG: You know, there are so many ideas out there and it's hard to figure out what to put one's energy into. How do you do that? Do you have science training?

MAL: No, I don't have any science training. But I think that I have a very nice ability, perhaps unique, to see what's new, to see what's exciting and to be able to identify it in my mind very quickly. Sometimes I'll hold it there thinking about how that's going to translate into a publication, what does a publication need in terms of its shape to make it different. For instance, every journal we publish here is different and they're all conceptualized to meet the needs of that particular field. I think very carefully about what's going to meet the needs of the particular field.

ATG: Tell us more about your publishing program. Do you publish books and journals? How many? How about electronic publications?

MAL: We publish about sixty journals and we certainly will do more before 1995 is over. We publish a few books and we will expand in that area this year. All of this wonderful new office space in Larchmont allows for unlimited expansion. We don't have much of an electronic presence yet.

ATG: How many new journals are you going to launch in 1995?

MAL: Five are already announced for 1995 including the first journal on *Telemedicine*; that's going to be interesting and has enormous potential for improving health care in rural areas and developing nations. We've just published Vol. 1 No. 1 of *Microbial Drug Resistance*. At a certain point each year I say to myself "all right, no more new journals this year!" but then an idea grabs hold of me, and I'm off and running.

ATG: What do you do when you have an idea?

MAL: Once the idea comes to me, it

doesn't let go. It doesn't just come and go away. It comes and keeps poking me in the arm saying feed me, feed me, until I have developed it into a concept. I'm very well-

"We aren't a 'me too' publisher."

connected with scientists and physicians all over the world. I'm a phone person. I get on the phone and I start calling and talking to a lot of the people that I know, asking them questions and getting a better sense of the field, where it's been, where it's going, how it's going to impact on society, the science that it serves. Who are the people that are leading the field; what kind of a journal is needed; what is the competition? All of these questions. And I don't just speak to one person. I might speak to six; I might speak to ten; or twenty. I'm trying to get a feel for if it's the right journal for two years from now.

ATG: How do you present your ideas to the board?

MAL: In addition to presenting my view, I have substantial material to document the rationale for a new publication. By the time I've read about it and talked to some people, I have a solid idea about where I want to go with it. I ask the board for input as well. I can ask pretty good scientific questions too. Although I'm not a scientist, I know a lot of science. My husband, a pediatric surgeon, is my closest advisor.

ATG: What's your degree in?

MAL: Journalism. It has nothing to do with science but having been in science for so long I understand the areas in which I'm publishing. For instance, when I started *DNA and Cell Biology*, I knew enough about DNA to see where we could go with such a journal and how it would fit broadly into molecular and cellular biology and biochemistry and the other fields. In *Journal of Women's Health*, I recognized that women's health was more than gynecology. Today,

most women still are using gynecologists as their primary health care giver, but gynecology is only part of women's health; women's health includes endocrinology and psychiatry and internal medicine and cardiology and oncology. So I thought about doing an interdisciplinary journal in women's health and the timing was perfect because Congress had just approved the Women's Health Initiative that Bernadine Healy created at the National Institutes of Health.

"I don't have to worry about unreasonable profit expectations that may be imposed by some conglomerate."

That's why I'm so thrilled that Bernadine Healy is the new editor in chief.

ATG: It's perfect timing.

MAL: It's absolutely marvelous. When I began thinking this idea, I could actually see it. When I thought, "what should it look like," it obviously wasn't pink, it wasn't lavender . . . women's health is red. So, the journal cover is red. I actually have a physical concept. It may not be quite the concept that translates itself into a final cover design but there is something very tangible in my mind. As I'm working up an idea, I see it, and it's real as I'm discussing it with authors and editors — I talk to librarians too, by the way — I find librarians know more about a field than almost anyone. They can tell you where there's duplication. They can tell you what's really interesting. They know their readers. I never publish something without consulting a couple of librarians.

In fact, I was addressing the pediatric librarians section at MLA one year, and I was talking about our AIDS journals, *AIDS Research and Retroviruses* (and we also have *AIDS Patient Care*). I said that I thought we were really AIDSed-out. A couple of librarians said, "But Mary Ann, there really needs to be a journal on pediatric AIDS." I was intrigued and a whole bunch of us went to dinner and I listened very carefully to what they were saying. As a result of that conversation we started a journal called *Pediatric AIDS and HIV Infections* (plus I changed the title on two other publications because this wonderful group of librarians thought that the titles weren't as clear as they needed to be). Of course, you know how librarians just love title changes. I wrote a letter to everybody apologizing but saying how these title changes had come about because of my listening to their colleagues.

I like to work with librarians. I like to visit libraries. I like to see which journals look well worn. Even in the creation of a journal, I think about how the library displays its journals. Will a title way up at the top of the cover be too high and lost under a shelf . . . should it be centered . . . what looks best.

ATG: Is your market libraries largely? And have you lost subscriptions in the past several years like everybody else?

MAL: Our market is libraries (both sci-tech and medical) and individuals (researchers and clinicians). Hospital libraries, uni-

versity libraries. Yes, there have been some cancellations but because our journals are both so pertinent and well priced, this has not been a real problem.

I want the journals that I publish to be affordable by the people that need them. So we're very careful about pricing. For years it was assumed that if you came out with a journal, the library

would buy it. That was a given. But that's not so anymore. Libraries have become much more selective and much

more cost-conscious, and they're speaking up about it which I think is terrific, because I think for years publishers just took it for granted that they could price a journal anywhere they felt like it, and libraries would take it. My policy is — and I really believe this — that our journals are very well priced, but if a library ever writes me, particularly from overseas, and says they cannot afford — but need — a particular journal, I will make certain that they get that journal. The purpose of these journals is to provide the information that people need. Otherwise why do them? I want them to be used, and I want them to be read by scientists, researchers and clinicians. These are my heroes anyway. They are changing and improving the quality of our lives. I want them to read these journals, and I like to believe that there's something in one of these publications that's going to make a difference in the way someone approaches a research problem, seeks a solution, or treats a patient. That's very gratifying to me.

ATG: And there's more to Mary Ann Liebert, Inc., than publishing, isn't there? You have a meetings division? Tell us about that.

MAL: We have a meetings division. We have three biotechnology conferences and this year we'll have an international meeting on gene therapy. We're doing one on alternative medicine. We have the Third Congress on Women's Health coming up in June in Washington. And another one was just proposed to me yesterday afternoon by an editor of one of my publications. I thought about it a lot overnight. And I can tell you I'm going to be on the phone tonight seeing if indeed he's right and whether we could create a meeting in that field. I think he's right. Then I'll ask myself whether it should be in Washington, in New York, or on the West Coast. Where would it do the best and attract the most people? I consider where most of the academic centers are that would be interested because researchers and doctors have less travel money today.

ATG: Video-conferencing is the current big thing, isn't it? Are you considering that?

MAL: We're not going to do too much of that. I think that in terms of things like electronic publication and videoconferencing and some of these online ventures, we're going to sit back a little bit and

watch what happens. I remember, I think it was about eight years ago at MLA, they were saying journals were going to be a

thing of the past, everything was going to be electronic. And then five years later they reversed that position completely. And that's not the way things are going. I think that there are people who are absolutely fascinated by the concept of electronics and they like online. But when it comes to usage, it's still not enough. They're not user friendly enough, CD-ROMs are slow. There's nothing like the printed page and I don't think anything's ever going to replace it. You can't do parallel reading, you can't really edit well on a screen (even copy editors prefer hard copy), reading in front of the screen for a long time is very tiring, you use your eyes differently. Then when you print it out, it isn't collated and pages get lost or misplaced . . . etc. . . . So we're going to proceed with caution and see how it all

shakes out.

Some publishers are still saying to editors of journals, "we'll put your journal on the Internet." It sounds glamorous, it sounds exciting, but the truth is that in the long run it doesn't really mean anything. And journals should only be on CD-ROM if there is a component to them that cannot be handled better on the printed page. Of course, it's nice for storage. But I also believe there is something to flipping through a publication. When I'm on the computer and I'm reading, I'm reading for something very specific. Whereas if I have a journal or a magazine in my hand, as I'm looking through it there may be something else in there that's a point of information I really want but didn't think to inquire about or search for. You have to be much more precise in electronic communications whereas the printed page allows you to think more expansively and creatively. I believe that's very important.

ATG: So tell me what is Mary Ann Liebert? You started off really as a publisher of journals and then you spun off because of your journals into meetings? Which came first, the chicken or the egg — your publications or your conferencing?

MAL: My first publication, *Journal of Interferon Research* spawned a meeting first. Usually a meeting spawns a publication. *Journal of Interferon Research* held a

AIDS RESEARCH ARCHIVES

AVAILABLE ON MICROFICHE

OBSERVATIONS ON SOCIAL & POLITICAL CHANGE 1980-1990

Over 3,000 Items from Non-Mainstream Publications

DOCUMENTS THE HISTORY OF AIDS GROWTH AND TREATMENT SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF ALTERNATIVE MEDIA.

The AIDS RESEARCH ARCHIVES provides your organization with thousands of complete articles and reports documenting the spread and treatment of AIDS. The majority have never been readily available to the public in one collection.

WRITINGS FROM THE GAY PRESS, RESEARCH AND CLINICS.

AIDS RESEARCH ARCHIVES provide a compelling view of the rise of AIDS and the efforts to treat it from sources reporting close-up. This gives your organization an alternative media perspective on AIDS spread and treatment during the early years of the pandemic.

What you get:

- Paper User's Guide—Includes alphabetical listing of the categories, shows fiche numbers and inclusive frames for each microfiche.
- 136 fiche
- 160 Subjects
- 150 publications
- 3,000 Articles
- Pamphlets and reports housed at The New York Public Library from the Gay Men's Health Crisis Files.

Price \$675.00

For immediate service call 1-800-521-4206

"...it is a remarkable project and a very exciting resource for people like me who are working in the area of AIDS research."

Michael R. Fraser
University of Massachusetts

JERRY ALPER

INCORPORATED
P.O. BOX 218, EASTCHESTER, NEW YORK 10707

FAX: (914) 793-7811 • EMAIL: INTERNET . ALPERBOOKS@delphi.com

congress and the members who were on the editorial board made up the program. And it was a very nice way to bring them together and to develop the publication, and a society was born. Our meetings division is smaller. The publishing company is still the main enterprise.

ATG: How do you balance the creative side and the administrative work?

MAL: There is much administration and creativity that goes into a publishing company. In fact, I would say that the creative side gets done on the weekends and the evenings. But happily I am blessed; it's hard to explain it, but I'm blessed with a mind that can really think about three subjects at once. I can be having a discussion with my husband about theater or a movie, and in the other part of my head, I'm tallying up the day's subscriptions, and there's another part of my brain which is determining what we need if we should stop at the supermarket on the way home. I'm able to balance these things all the time so my mind is never really inactive, ever. That's probably why I can't do yoga. I don't know what it is to clear my mind. I have a mind that will not clear. It's a very happy mind. It's going all the time.

ATG: Can we go back to an earlier comment you made about the journal that spawned a society. How important is such an affiliation?

MAL: I don't think that a society affiliation should be the main criteria for journal selection. I publish both society affiliated and independent journals and sometimes the independent journals have much more flexibility and foresight in editorial content. Also, an independent journal can develop an editorial board without being affected by the politics of the sponsoring organization. Years ago society sponsorship might have been a determining factor for whether a journal was selected by a library. I don't think that's valid anymore. Nor do I think that inclusion in *Index Medicus* is a valid reason for selection anymore.

ATG: Really? Can you explain that statement?

MAL: There are so many very good journals that don't get into *Index Medicus*. We have many, many that are in; we have some that are not. *Index Medicus* can't begin to handle the number of journals that are submitted. Also, a specialty journal, for instance, may be sent for review to members of associations who are concerned that this new specialty journal will draw both manu-

scripts and advertising away from the society's journal and they may, in fact, try to keep it out of *Index Medicus*. I don't fully understand some of their journal selection process. For instance, our *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychopharmacology* is a very highly regarded journal for psychiatrists but the NLM reviewed it under their subject review for pediatrics, which is totally inappropriate. Furthermore, there is no appeals process. Inclusion in *Index Medicus* is not the sole criteria on which a journal should be judged. I think that what is important is that the library should see the journal for themselves and then determine how appropriate it is. This is why we're very generous with sample copies. What will probably happen in time is that there will be competition to *Index Medicus*. *Index Medicus* is important, but it is not the be all and end all. There are many good journals that are in *Index Medicus*, but there are many that are

"Libraries have become much more selective and much more cost-conscious, and they're speaking up about it which I think is terrific."

not and the criteria for acceptance is sometimes bewildering and worrisome. Its mandate needs revisiting.

ATG: It seems to me that with the proliferation of information, especially online, indexing is going to become more and more important.

MAL: I agree. But, when institutions of higher learning are looking to make cuts, one of the first places they cut is their library. My husband, who is on the staff of a number of hospitals, was telling me that the hospital library hours have been cut tremendously. They cut down on the librarian's time, and they cut down on the number of publications, but the truth is, as more things come online, there is greater need for expertise. Professionals need the professional librarian even more in order to search and search well.

You know the drug Ritalin which is used for ADD? We published a definitive book on that drug and when I was determining what should be in that book, I sat down with *Grateful Med* and did a literature search on Ritalin. I had all the key words and the expanders. A few weeks later I was out at Ciba Geigy (which manufactures Ritalin) and the librarian showed me her reference bibliography. Now that was the professional search! *Grateful Med* is user friendly but there is no substitute for expertise. Therefore, the librarian's role, because of electronic publishing and because there is so much more material online — is tremen-

dously expanded. Researchers and clinicians may miss bits of information that may indeed affect a particular piece of research or influence treatment strategy. The expansion of databases makes the librarian's role even more vital, and I think that such cuts in library staff are extremely short-sighted.

Until the last few years, I don't think librarians really were as vocal as they needed to be. In the last five years librarians have spoken up much more vigorously about journal pricing and if the publishers hadn't listened before, I believe they are listening today. Now, librarians need to do the same thing about their enormous importance as a resource of professional information in the electronic era.

ATG: You like keeping your independence. You must get offers to buy your company frequently.

MAL: Very frequently. We had one that was so aggressive. I won't mention the name of the publisher, but he was really aggressive. He kept on saying, "Mary Ann, you know, you'll retire, you'll have all this free time to yourself, you'll be able to do whatever you want." I said, "I'm doing what I want right now." He said, "you'll travel all over the world." I hate to travel! He said, "you'll just relax, you can go to exercise class." He made me so anxious. He was saying, "name your price, we'll give you a contract; you'll work less and you'll be so happy." And I kept saying, "well, I am happy . . . I am very happy . . . I am the happiest person I know." And he said, "think about it — what would you do with all this money?" And I said, "I'd start another company just like the one I have."

Each journal is like a special child. I'm so involved with each one beginning with the concept. It's like a family of publications. I know each one intimately. I usually know the members of the editorial boards on each one. I've had a hand in the way that each journal is developed. I've had a hand in the way it looks. And I have a very strong hand in the way it's marketed. So I wouldn't want to give up any members of the family. I'm a very family-oriented person.

What a note to end on! When I was talking to Mary Ann about an interview she had recently with Fortune magazine, the interviewer wanted to know what "stressed" her at the office. Mary Ann replied, "nothing stresses me here. There are things that go on that may be aggravating or may cause me to think a lot about something, but this isn't stress. Stress is a problem at home with the kids or the husband or the dog and cat." Maybe those are words to live by. — KS