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Jan Willem Dijkstra, Director, Trade Relations,
Elsevier Science, B.V.

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Against the Grain

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Interview with Jan Willem Dijkstra

Director, Trade Relations, Elsevier Science, B.V.

by Katina Strauch (College of Charleston)

It was Wednesday, July 27, 1994. The famous Elsevier Science is set in the outskirts of Amsterdam amid high rise brick buildings. A charmingly American secretary shepherded us into the inner sanctum and offered us tea and cookies. And here is what the captivating and very direct Jan Willem Dijkstra told us.

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ATG: The logo of Elsevier says it all -- the fact that Elsevier is an old and established publisher. Will you tell us about Elsevier, the man? Was he a scientist?

JWD: The Elseviers were a family of printers and book-

sellers who settled in Leiden in the late sixteenth century. They published books in Latin, French and Dutch and were instrumental in advancing the traditions of a free exchange of information during the early days of printing. The last member of the Elsevier family died in 1712, but the family's place in the publishing history of the Netherlands was preserved when the name was revived in 1880 as the name of a new publishing company. Elsevier's corporate logo (which has been changed only slightly over the years), dates from 1620 when it was first used as a printer's mark by Isaac Elsevier of Leiden. It features an elm, its trunk entwined by the tendrils of a vine. A solitary man stands next to the elm which supports in its branches a banner bearing the Latin motto, *Non Solus*, meaning he is not alone.

As for the identity of the man, he's not Isaac Elsevier. Some people say he's a monk, I've heard all sorts of speculation about who he is. Let's just say he's a scholar.

Recently, I visited a library at the University of Osaka. They took me downstairs to the rare book collection and showed me a precious little book, one of the first books published by Elsevier, with the same logo. This is a nice touch that I'm happy to say happens

quite often — someone proudly displaying a rare, old Elsevier edition when one of our staff visits a library or bookseller.

ATG: When did Elsevier gain its "niche" in science publishing? The universal language of science used to be French, then German, and now English. Was it after WWII when big changes occurred in publishing?

JWD: Yes. After 1945 there were several big changes. English increasingly became accepted as the international lan-

guage. Science, which had always been international, became more so as barriers to communication and trans-

portation were — and continue to be — broken down. Science recognizes no national boundaries. Go to any scientific meeting today and you'll always find an international mix. And these people from all points on the globe often know one another and are in regular contact, thanks to electronic communication.

If you look at scientific publishing, it too is global. Elsevier has group offices in Amsterdam, New York, Oxford, Paris, Lausanne, Shannon, Tokyo, and Seoul. That's a fact of life . . . if we want to be part of the international scientific information network, linking scientists from all over the world, then we must have an international presence.

Our experience in science publishing in English goes back more than 50 years. The company's steady growth has occurred, in part, through mergers with other established scholarly and scientific publishers, including the North-Holland Publishing Company and Excerpta Medica, and Pergamon. All of these imprints are still in use.

ATG: Dutch is a thriving language in Amsterdam. I was noticing that there is a trade magazine, like *Time*, called Elsevier. Obviously, Elsevier has its hands in many pies and is a publicly traded company. Would you comment on the

ELSEVIER
SCIENCE

acquisition of Pergamon? You publish, with that acquisition, 1100 journals.

JWD: First of all, let's make it clear that people often refer very loosely to organizations without really understanding what they are referring to. For example, most American librarians associate the Elsevier name with Elsevier Science, the company that I represent. But if you say Elsevier here in Holland, it has other connotations. Yes, there's a very large weekly magazine titled *Elsevier* and many will think of that. Also, many adults grew up using an encyclopedia published by Elsevier, a reference book that was sold door-to-door and could be found in most Dutch homes. For many years, Elsevier had a very visible presence in Dutch trade book publishing. It all depends on your frame of reference.

Since last year, of course, we have been part of the Reed Elsevier group, and that brings an entirely new and vastly more complex corporate structure. But we're not here to talk corporate structures, but to better understand the nature of our activities in scientific publishing.

You mention the acquisition of Pergamon and that's something that seems to interest people. Elsevier has, for many years, published in nearly every field in the physical and biomedical sciences. We also publish in economics, statistics, management, and psychology. Before the acquisition of Pergamon we did not have significant programs in the social sciences or the humanities. We view the Elsevier and Pergamon programs as complementary. For example,

you will find important neuroscience journals under both the Elsevier and Pergamon imprints, but all these journals complement each other and serve individual markets. We are proud of our role in the scholarly community.

It is always difficult to merge two companies. When we acquired Pergamon, there was a difference in culture. Not only were the individual companies' cultures different but there is a difference in business cultures between the Netherlands and the U.K. It's also funny when you consider that the two companies were very similar — almost mirror images of each other — and yet there were so many ways, large and small, in which we differed. Some of these differences are cultural, some the result of the driving forces behind the companies and some, I think, are just by chance.

But Elsevier and Pergamon shared a very important commonality — we covered every field of science on a truly global scale. The tenets that we try to go by are quality, integrity, speed and service. We realize that we are *non solus* -- not alone, but part of the vast world of science.

ATG: Elsevier certainly has an impressive publishing record. Many of our faculty consider your publications "must subscribe" items. Still, what do you have to say about Elsevier's high profits?

JWD: Obviously we must make a profit in order to stay in business. Scientific progress depends on fast, reliable communication. Elsevier has been — and continues to be — responsive to that requirement of the scientific community. Over the years, our understanding and ability to meet the needs of the scientific community have been an important factor in our success.

Scientists must keep abreast of new developments and achievements in order to break new ground. Moreover, each individual researcher seeks international recognition by publishing the results of his or her own work. Elsevier serves as an intermediary between researchers and those who need to keep track of the latest research results in universities, industry and the clinical world. It's not an easy task to do this across the breadth of disciplines we cover and to maintain this on an international scale.

ATG: And the high profits?

JWD: I am surprised by the discussion. We are a business and we exist to provide competitive, quality products at prices that will profit our shareholders. Too often, people read a blurb in a newspaper or get a copy of an annual report and begin to draw all sorts of inferences from some statistics. Elsevier Science is part of a very large, complex organization, and the statistics that tend to be quoted relate to corporate-wide performance rather than the programs we're discussing today.

ATG: What about the fact that discounts to subscription agencies have been cut? I know that many feel that Elsevier had no small role in the troubles of Faxon as a subscription agency because of the move to cut discounts. Do you care to comment on this?

JWD: I don't have a lot to say about Faxon. It is problematic. They were our largest subscription agent in the world. They were a professionally run company with a good staff. They played a crucial

"Our discount ... continues to be on the generous side of the industry spectrum ..."

role in moving technology and industry standards forward. I can speak from firsthand experience that we have long had a cordial and mutually constructive working relationship with Faxon.

What has happened in the past year or so was a mix of unfortunate circumstances. The fact that so many libraries have stayed with Faxon in the face of all of this shows the value of the subscription agent and the loyalty that Faxon has engendered in the marketplace.

Worldwide, I would estimate that there are about 2000 subscription agents.

As to the matter of discounts, **Elsevier Science** has shown its support of the role of the agents by extending a reasonable discount. Remember very many publishers — particularly the not-for-profit sector — give no discount to agents. Our discount — even though it went through some adjustments in the past few years — continues to be on the generous side of the industry spectrum, whether you're talking in terms of percentages or actual dollar amounts. From my observation, agents like to handle our titles. I don't think anyone could deny that we more

than pay our way.

ATG: I know you are in the process of setting your prices for 1995 even as we speak. How does that process work?

JWD: It is much more complicated now than it used to be. We have many meetings in which many, many people in the company are involved. They aren't five minute meetings. Remember that we also consult with people outside the company — including the journal editors themselves. They are the ones who know what's happening in their fields and they have a pulse on the manuscript flow. They have an important voice in the amount of material we'll be publishing in the coming year.

We are now about to "announce" our prices for 1995; the process of actually setting the prices takes upwards of three months. As you know, for the past two years we have stated our prices in American dollars. We are also adhering to the "firm pricing" principle recommended by **Donald Koepp of Princeton**.

ATG: Why don't you consider advertising in your journals as a way of bringing down the prices to subscribers?

JWD: We would like to have advertising but our opportunity for this is minimal. For the most part, we have a specialized international library subscriber base. Most advertisers look for a list of domestic individual subscribers, not international libraries. We cannot compete for advertising dollars, for example, with a publication like **Chemical and Engineering News** which has a circulation of 140,000, most of which is in a homogeneous market. Very few of our journals exceed circulation levels in the 1000 - 2000; many are even smaller.

In a few instances where we have sizable individual subscriber bases, our journals do sell considerable advertising and the savings are passed on to all subscribers — institutional and individual alike. The clinical journals published in New York and, to a lesser extent, the **TRENDS** titles published in Cambridge, England, are examples.

ATG: How about page charges?

JWD: This is not a widespread practice. Traditional society journals sometimes charge page charges. In the U.S. it is more common to have page charges

than in other countries, but even in Western Europe it is not customary. It is Elsevier's general policy not to charge page charges.

If you consider the historical function of pages charges — to reduce the risk to

December of 1995 but it has already proven a valuable learning experience. We will continue some form of TULIP as a commercial product.

There is no question that Elsevier Science Publishers is investing consid-

erable time, energy, and resources in the development of innovative technologies to keep pace with the dra-

matic changes in the ways scientists work and communicate and the ways research libraries collect, organize and disseminate information.

ATG: Can we talk for a minute about the use of the electronic medium by the researcher and editor?

JWD: On the editorial side, we have dozens of publishing editors within Elsevier Science, and most of these people hold Ph.Ds in the various subject fields. Our external journal editors and editorial board members guarantee editorial integrity and administer peer review. It is important for researchers to publish their findings and preferably they want to publish in high quality scientific journals. This medium satisfies important needs for visibility, certification, status within the scientific community. These requirements have not changed, despite a growing interest and enthusiasm for electronic options.

But there is a growing demand to use electronics to speed up the process, to make it more flexible. I truly don't believe that the research community wants to compromise the traditional role of scholarly publication. They want everything they've always had and more.

From the author's standpoint, we have not been as successful with electronic communication. The peer review process has still not been significantly impacted by electronics. Many authors submit manuscripts

on disk — more and more each year, particularly from the Western countries. But

this is still a learning curve for everyone — authors and publishers. Sometimes it takes more time to resolve an author's codings on a disk than it would to typeset it from scratch. But it's an investment in the future. We're all getting better at the process.

At the delivery end, we have made some important first steps. I discussed

TULIP earlier. We have **Nuclear Physics Electronic** which offers immediate electronic access to researchers at institutions that subscribe to this journal. We are in the last stages of negotiations to offer one of our **TRENDS** titles electronically, but there are some very exciting enhancements that will make it much better than merely loading the page image on screen.

But these things don't come quickly — or cheaply for that matter. And they can't be done in one giant step, particularly for a company like Elsevier that has such a large, broad-ranging program. There's a lot of thought and trial-and-error that's done before you get to the point where you can offer something commercially.

In the end, we always feel that the scientist will continue to value the quality and integrity of the information. If we don't have that, then we're all lost. And as we move into more electronic communication, once some of the novelty and excitement have subsided, I think there is going to be an even greater emphasis on the gatekeeper's function. Finding someone to separate the wheat from the chaff is going to become even more important.

But we're used to doing that, you and I. Hasn't that been the role of the librarian and publisher?

ATG: What is the role of libraries in the scientific communication process?

JWD: We certainly support the role of the library in this process. At Elsevier we view libraries as our partners — just as we view the authors as our partners. In the past few years, the tensions between librarians and publishers have flared, sometimes rather nastily. But our whole community — publishers, librarians, researchers and vendors — have gone through some very sobering times. Basically, we're all expected to do more

with less. We're expected to deliver more information and faster, but with

less money, less staff, less time.

It is in the publishers' best interest to improve the position of libraries. The more important the library is, the better the organization and dissemination of scientific information. But librarians should better position themselves within their organizations. In many cases, the library budget is the first thing targeted

“[The research community] want[s] everything they've always had and more.”

the publisher for disseminating a research article — then you see why the tradition grew. Money for publication was built into many grants. Since a lot of American-funded research landed in society journals the mechanism was intended to protect societies from risk. For-profit publishers work on a different model: we take the risk and, for those titles that succeed, we make profits. Of course, a lot of other factors have come into play in the decades since this basic structure has evolved and the lines of distinction are not so clearly drawn anymore.

ATG: What about the future and the electronic distribution of knowledge? In many respects, this distribution channel is a free one.

JWD: We are obviously working on making the change to other media as are Springer-Verlag, Kluwer, and other publishers. There have been some cul-de-sacs along the way; that's been the case for everybody. But we have also made a lot of progress which we are not always ready to announce publicly until we have something tangible to offer to the market.

As a company we sell to 150 countries worldwide. The U.S. and Europe are about 65% of our market. Japan is about 15%. Africa and some of the developing countries still don't have the technological infrastructure in place. The trend in the industry is to filter the information, whether it be electronic or print, and much scientific information is still needed in the print medium.

Our TULIP (The University Licensing Program) is very important as is ADONIS, in which Elsevier Science participates with other scientific publishers. These allow us to find out about how our journals are used and this will eventually allow us to adjust our products to user needs.

TULIP began in 1991 and is a library-based product at nine university campuses with networked, electronic delivery. The experiment will be over in

“Elsevier Science is part of a very large, complex organization ...”

when cuts have to be made. Libraries must get funding for their collections to maintain the flow of information . . . to

"Document delivery certainly cannot take over the functions of scientific journals ..."

meet the increased service and information demands placed on them.

Easier said than done!

ATG: *How about the move toward document delivery? Is this a viable business prospect for a publisher like Elsevier?*

JWD: This is a big question. Document delivery certainly cannot take over the functions of scientific journals; however, it can enhance the process and it can help us all cope with the additional volume of information that is being generated every year. Researchers want to know not only what is in their library, but want to see an overview of all available information in their field. And they want it delivered now.

The marketing of information is changing. The process is a "push pull" distribution column. You have authors, publishers, librarians, agents, the end user. As a publisher, we are a long way from the end user. We produce 10 million pieces of direct mail a year trying to get to the end user. We inform subscription agents about our publications. We go to scientific conferences to meet the authors and end users. We visit libraries and attend library conferences. Our publishing editors cover the globe visiting authors and journal editors, maintaining a pulse on what's happening. It seems to me that we have to maintain all of these existing networks while we open new ones. Working with new partners. Learning about new methods of distribution and how our products are used in a changing world.

ATG: *How about subscription agents? What is their role in helping you to increase your sales? And in justifying your prices?*

JWD: The subscription agent makes life easier for librarians by providing one-stop shopping, one communication channel. For us, the agent provides efficiency, accuracy and, more and more, a technological partner. It's a lot easier for us to maintain contact with a few dozen major agents and several hundred smaller agents around the world than to deal

with tens of thousands of subscribers. We build relationships with agents over time, a knowledge base which makes the

whole process easier. They are responsible for knowing our titles, our policies, even our peculiarities in ways that thousands of end-users never

could.

Despite what many agents would like us to believe, however, they really cannot do much to help us increase our sales or explain our prices. Our products are, for the most part, so technical, so specialized that it's impossible for most people to understand the subtleties that are needed to convince a customer to select one title over another. Imagine doing that for our list of 1100 journals? No, from a sales and marketing standpoint, we ask agents to represent us fairly and honestly and give us credit for the things that we do well.

ATG: *We have talked a lot about your journals business and I guess that is what we hear the most about. But you have closed your American distribution channel for books in the U.S. Why did you do that? Was it because of the drop in sales? And how about the move toward printing on demand?*

JWD: Selling books is not easy now. The market for specialized research books has weakened for decades since 1930. It is harder to have a book program and ours is being reduced. North America accounts for a surprisingly small part of our books turnover. The future of books at this specialized level is uncertain.

We made use of a relatively large warehouse in New York and it was an expensive proposition. We consolidated that warehouse with our warehouse in Amsterdam. That was very successful.

Now we ship books by KLM jets to New York and distribute by surface mail or air lift all over the U.S. It has provided faster and more efficient service than the previous local American distribution operation, but much of this has to do with improvements in international dispatch and delivery services. There's been a real improvement in the ways in which our society moves things around the globe quickly and efficiently. When I'm visiting our New York office, I'm often surprised to see courier services — DHL,

Federal Express, UPS — on every other corner. This is a whole sensibility that you didn't find five or ten years ago. But this echoes what I talked about earlier — how international boundaries are breaking down; the world is getting smaller.

ATG: *And printing on demand ...?*

JWD: Printing on demand is growing and we are looking at it though we are not doing it yet. The technology exists to make it all possible. It is a challenge to find the best way to deliver this information.

ATG: *What sort of Internet initiatives is Elsevier involved in?*

JWD: We are planning to make our **Home-Page** available over the **World Wide Web** this fall. On the Page will be our catalog. We'll also have information regarding the **TULIP** project, with access to the TULIP newsletters. While TULIP uses the Internet as a delivery mechanism, TULIP itself is only available to those nine participating universities.

We are also offering a number of table of contents services — called **Contents Alert** — over the Internet. And there are many things in the pipeline. But if you polled our competitors, they'd probably have similar plans.

ATG: *What is your training? How did you come to work for Elsevier? The Dutch seem to have an incredible work ethic.*

JWD: I have experience in almost all activities within a scientific publishing company with the exception of the editorial side. I am a generalist. I consider this an asset. I have worked for Elsevier for almost thirty years.

"The future of books at this specialized level is uncertain."

The Dutch are disciplined in their work methods. Publishing journals has a structure and system to it. The Dutch

maintain a good work ethic and pride in jobs at all levels. €

*Well, that's it at least for now. At this writing, Elsevier has announced its **HomePage** on the **Internet** which will be viewable at the **Charleston Conference** or you can go directly to <http://www.elsevier.nl>. Another use of the **World Wide Web** and electronic communication. Check it out. -- KS*