April 2002

ATG Interviews Vitek Tracz

Daryl Rayner
xrefer, daryl@xrefer.com

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

Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rayner, Daryl (2002) "ATG Interviews Vitek Tracz," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 14: Iss. 2, Article 12.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.3178>

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.

Chairman of The Current Science Group

by **Daryl Rayner** (Marketing Director, xrefer; Phone: +44 (0) 20 7479 9204; Fax: +44 (0) 20 7479 9212)
<daryl@xrefer.com> www.xrefer.com www.xreferplus.com

ATG: You are chairman of the *Current Science Group*. When was it formed and what did you do before?

VT: I started what has now become **The Current Science Group** in 1979. I was born in Poland and studied mathematics at **Warsaw University**. I then attended **Jerusalem University** and worked for a while at **IBM** as a mathematician. After that, I came to the UK and enrolled at the **Slade School of Art** in London. I started making cinema films and then formed a company that made medical and scientific documentaries. I soon realised that learning from a book was far more effective than from a film and in 1979 I started **Gower Medical Publishing**. The focus of the company was in producing colour atlases for medical research. We produced a chapter at a time. Each chapter was sponsored by a drug company. As soon as we secured the sponsorship for one chapter we made the next. The books became very successful and, at the same time, I became fascinated by journal publishing. These were the signs that it was time to move on. So, I sold the book company to **Harper and Row**. They then sold it to **Mosby**, who was sold to **Harcourt**, who was sold to **Elsevier** – such is life. Shortly before that we started the **Current Opinion** range of review journals. Since libraries are slower to buy review publications than individuals, my journal publishing activities began in a world where I had little contact with libraries but a lot of contact with scientists.

ATG: Who owns the *Current Science Group* and what exactly is it? How is it financed?

VT: **The Current Science Group** is owned by me and some key managers within each of the companies. The group is made up of a series of independent companies that collaborate closely with each other to develop information and services for the professional biomedical community. There is a long list of companies but they include **BioMedCentral Ltd.**, **Current Drugs Ltd.**, **Genome Biology Ltd.** and **Praxis Press Inc.** It is financed in a very simple way. We are continually generating lots of ideas. We invest time, effort and money in some of these ideas until we reach the point at which we feel they work and are profitable. At this juncture, if we can, we sell that part of the group. When we sell, we take the profits and invest in the next idea. We are not motivated by money,

our motivation resides in working on interesting projects. Our key expertise is in taking challenging concepts and through agility and persistence turning them into workable solutions.

ATG: You are an unusual combination of a humanist – with your cinema background – and a scientist, with your mathematics studies. Your publishing activities are focused on biological and medical research. What is your motivation to work in this area?

VT: I would say that in most of the things that I do I am motivated by a fear of boredom. Science publishing is incredibly interesting. It is an area of immense advancement and change. I guess I enjoy being part of a genuine partnership with scientific research.

ATG: Your recent press release announced that *The Scientist Inc.* (the Philadelphia based publisher of *The Scientist*) and *BioMedCentral Ltd.* (a member of the *Current Science Group* in London) “have joined forces with the aim of making *The Scientist* the most widely read and influential magazine in the life science community.” What are the implications of this merger and why did you decide to do it?

VT: We have always wanted to publish a truly great life science magazine. There are already several great publications that cover more than the life sciences but there is not one single, strong magazine focused purely in this area. Together with **The Scientist** we have agreed to relaunch the publication whilst significantly increasing the circulation from 50,000 to 100,000 recipients worldwide. We will jointly finance and

develop it. I see **The Scientist** as a fantastic medium for communicating developments in science publishing and specifically how they are taking place at **BioMed Central**.

ATG: Could you tell me more about *BioMed Central*? What are its aims? Who supports it? What is the relationship with *PubMed Central*?

VT: **BioMed Central** is a publishing house and it is a big new project. It is a scientific and biomedical publishing company. It is trying to develop a new model of publishing. The existing scientific and medical publishing models are being questioned and many of them simply cannot survive. Historically, the single most important element of scientific and medical publishing has been the publishing of primary, archival papers and the subsequent selling of subscriptions for access to these papers. We believe that this will no longer be the most important role for publishers. Indeed, we believe that the publisher will no longer be necessary for it to happen. It has to go. So the question is whether there is a place for science publishers in the future. We believe that there is a fantastic future for publishers but it has to be reinvented. So **BioMed Central** is an experiment to see what will work and what will not work.

We believe that we have to offer services to scientists that are sufficiently useful that they will pay for them. We believe that access to all research papers in biology and medicine should be free and without restrictions. For this to be achieved we offer services to authors to handle the process of publishing research papers. These services are not expensive (\$500 per paper currently) and it will become cheaper as the costs involved go down until finally, I believe, it will be free. But this is only one of the many services we offer and plan to offer. Another service is offering selections, evaluation and commentary on what is published, as we do in our recently launched **Faculty 1000** service. In addition we publish useful databases for researchers, such as **Images MD**. We are also offering groups of scientists the services and support required for starting their own journals.

There is no formal relationship with **PubMed Central** except that I have been an enthusiastic supporter of this initiative

continued on page 38

from the start. I am part of a movement that advocates free access to scientific articles. I believe that there is a need for a central repository and that **PubMed Central**, which is such a repository, is doing a good and important job.

ATG: *What is your view of the changing relationship between libraries, publishers and scientists?*

VT: Most science publishers have historically been very close to libraries as the result of an “unspoken conspiracy” where the needs of libraries combined with the opportunities of publishers have resulted in what is now considered to be an unjustified exploitation of the science community – by science publishers. Publishers did it for revenues. Libraries did it to attract good researchers to their institution, given that the level of an institution is judged by the size of its hold-

ings. At the same time, scientists were prepared to give the publishers everything in order to get their work published and visible. In this way publishers developed a monopoly structure. If a paper was published in a certain journal you couldn't get it from anywhere else. Libraries had a need to acquire the information, so the subscription prices kept increasing. But with the arrival of the Web, the structure of this relationship has been altered dramatically. Suddenly a scientist can type his/her own paper and make it visible and free for the whole world to see on the Web. There is no need for libraries to buy multiple print copies of the same publication. Indeed, the whole process has been turned on its head. Currently science publishers do not provide services that can remotely justify their charges. Librarians are now in the front lines of these changes.

ATG: *What do your ventures have to do with the future of libraries and publishing in the 21st century?*

VT: We see librarians as our natural partners in our current plans. There are many aspects of publishing that cannot be efficiently achieved in the future without working with libraries. In this new electronic world, institutions and libraries are much more central to the dissemination of information. The electronic delivery of information is complex and needs to be co-ordinated. You are looking at a completely different set of services that all need to work in conjunction with each other. The library has become a super-structure for the delivery of online information. Scientists are using increasingly large amounts of data and they need to express their needs and desires to the librarian. It is easier for librarians to look at the statistics of what is being used in the library, to canvas views of library users and to make informed decisions. Librarians have a stronger, more enhanced role that is not just about buying information but about building structures for its delivery and training users. Our publishing activities are aimed at reflecting this new way of thinking and behaving.

ATG: *What is Faculty 1000? What has been the reaction from libraries to this product to date?*

VT: **Faculty 1000** is part of the **BioMedCentral** publishing programme. It is a new online research tool that highlights the most interesting papers in biology, based on recommendations of over 1400 leading scientists. Faculty members are asked to evaluate and comment on 2-4 of the most interesting papers they read each month. The comments for each paper are individually attributed, but its

F1000 factor (“recommended,” “must read” and “exceptional”) is consensual and incorporates both the ratings it receives and the number of times it is selected by different faculty members. We believe that it is much more rational to judge papers individually than to judge them on the impact factor of the journal in which they are published. **Faculty 1000** is a subscription product and was launched in December. I have never published anything that has received such an enthusiastic response.

ATG: *ImagesMD and PraxisMD are aimed more at the medical community than life science research. Can you tell me more about these products?*

VT: **ImagesMD** is a collection of 40,000 images in clinical medicine. Each image is carefully annotated and searchable. Subscribers can create their own image library, edit text and incorporate them into **Power Point** presentations. **PraxisMD** is very different and is not part of **BioMed Central**. It is a highly ambitious project. The objective of **PraxisMD** is that we believe there is a need for a high quality reference to current practise in medicine. It is designed to be a useful tool to both the patient and physician at the point of care. It is continually updated.

ATG: *Everyone who works or who has worked with you comments that you have a very unusual management style. How would you describe it?*

VT: I see my job as being the one to come up with ideas or to encourage other people to generate ideas. I never look at spreadsheets and wouldn't know how to interpret a balance sheet. I push people very hard. I get very involved, perhaps too involved with projects for a short period of time. I disturb the people working on them and then get interested in something else. We encourage a culture of experimentation. We do not punish people for making mistakes. Lots of things happen that makes my hair stand on end, but everyone carries on regardless! After all, their chances of getting something right are as good as mine.

ATG: *What are your hobbies? What do you do in your spare time?*

VT: I never take holidays. I find work too interesting. I once took a year off in between companies and made a movie, and another year (some years later) built my house in London. I travel quite a bit to the various **Current Science Group Offices** – in Philadelphia, New York and Japan. I enjoy classical music and go to a concert three or four times a week. I mostly read non fiction. 🌳

Op Ed — Opinions and Editorials

from page 34

ferred with housekeeping staff about the café and worked out a menu that would avoid crumbly foods or dark food dyes, which could stain the furniture.” **Mr. Seal** reported that visits to the library increased from about 8,500 a week in 1997 to more than 17,000 per week in 2001, even though books checked out decreased in the same time period.

Further in the article **Samuel Demas**, College Librarian at **Carleton College** calls (cafés in libraries) “co-location” and says other universities are doing similar things in tutoring centers and writing centers — “a sort of one-stop shopping experience, academic style.” He concludes by saying “I think the (library) is still going to be a lively place — only as long as people still need community. As soon as that characteristic in the population declines, then libraries will decline.”

The creation of “information commons” is a growing trend in libraries, a wired, user friendly space that in conjunction with teaching and reference, and appropriate architecture and facilities (with or without coffee bars) can truly make a part of the library a comfortable and active center for “collaborative learning” and study, while preserving more traditional quiet study areas. And coffeehouses, cafés, and coffee bars may not be a panacea for declining door counts and circulation, but they are a great place to sit, sip a cup of coffee and try to think of one. 🌳