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ATG Interviews Sean Pidgeon

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Reference Publisher for the Nature Publishing Group

by **Tom Gilson** (Head, Reference Services, Robert Scott Small Library, College of Charleston; Phone: 843-953-8014; Fax: 843-953-8019) <gilson@cofc.edu>

ATG: Can you give us a little background about yourself? How long have you been involved in reference publishing? What is your role in the *Encyclopedia of Life Sciences* project?

SP: I began my career in STM publishing in 1986, at the **Institute of Physics (IOP)** in the UK. I first became seriously involved in reference publishing with IOP in 1990, and I became reference publisher there in 1992. At **IOP** we developed a series of updatable print-plus-online reference works in computer science, one of the earliest ventures of its kind (see <http://www.iop.org/Books/CIL>). I subsequently moved to **Oxford University Press** (New York), where I developed a program of scholarly reference works in the sciences, including the *Encyclopedia of Global Change* and the *Encyclopedia of Evolution*. I joined the **Nature Publishing Group (NPG)** in 2000, and since then have overseen a number of major reference projects, including the *Encyclopedia of Astronomy and Astrophysics* (<http://www.ency-astro.com>) and the (forthcoming) *Encyclopedia of the Human Genome* (<http://ehg.naturereference.com>). Earlier this year I assumed overall publishing responsibility for **NPG's** flagship reference work, the *Encyclopedia of Life Sciences*. I am currently working closely with the in-house ELS team, in particular **Michael Calais** (Project Manager), **Fenella Cooke** (Assistant Editor), **Jo Trapnell** (Online Project Manager), and **David Atkins** (Managing Editor), to implement an ambitious program of content expansion and updating as well as technical and functional enhancement.

ATG: With all the mergers and collaborative efforts in today's publishing world, it is hard to keep up. What is the **Nature Publishing Group**? What is your relationship to **Macmillan** and **Grove**?

SP: **NPG** (<http://npg.nature.com>) is the scientific publishing arm of **Macmillan Publishers Ltd** (<http://www.macmillan.com>); it was formed in 1999 through a divisional merger aimed at unifying and consolidating **Macmillan's** science publishing activities. **Macmillan** is itself owned by the **Holtzbrinck Publishing Group** (<http://www.holtzbrinck.com>). **Grove's Dictionaries Inc.** is now part of **Palgrave Macmillan**, **Macmillan's** global academic publishing arm. (We continue to work very closely with our **Grove's** colleagues; indeed, we occupy the same office space and have a combined sales force.) In addition to the **NPG** Reference division, **NPG** has four journal publish-

ing divisions: **Nature** (publishing the well known weekly science journal); **Nature Research Journals** (publishing such journals as *Nature Genetics*, *Nature medicine*, etc.); **Nature Review Journals** (*Nature Reviews Genetics*, *Nature Reviews Immunology*, etc.); and **NPG Specialist Journals** (publishing a broad range of journals, in many cases on behalf of learned societies: *British Journal of Cancer*, *Cell Death and Differentiation*, etc.).

ATG: The production of a reference source like the *Encyclopedia of Life Sciences* is a major undertaking. How does a project like *ELS* get started?

SP: *ELS* started as a great idea from a very creative publisher, **Gina Fullerlove**, who initiated the project in the mid-1990s and saw it through to its launch in 2001. Her extensive market research indicated that the timing was right: given the tremendous growth in life sciences research, stimulated in particular by new developments in genomics and bioinformatics, there would be strong interest in such an ambitious and inherently dynamic work. Ably assisted by **Sarah Robertson**, then Managing Editor of *ELS*, **Gina** established the distinguished (and very large) academic advisory board, and simultaneously built a highly qualified in-house team capable of bringing *ELS* to fruition.

ATG: The content and scope of *ELS* is truly impressive. How does the editorial staff focus the work of so many scholars and maintain the consistent level and high caliber quality evidenced in *ELS*? What are the major difficulties in coordinating such an effort?

SP: Editorial quality is maintained through strict adherence to processes and guidelines, through rigorous peer review, and through a great deal of dedication and hard work. It is also important to have good in-house technology, and we have invested heavily in database and text-management systems designed specifically for *ELS*. Problems inevitably arise when the amount of material to be processed becomes overwhelming, and at such times we make use of an extensive network of highly qualified freelance editors.

ATG: Literally thousands of scholars combined to create *ELS*. What criteria did you use in selecting your contributors?

SP: To find a contributor for a particular topic, we work with our external advisors to identify two or more highly regarded scholars in the relevant field who are known as good writers. Because outstanding scholarship and strong writing skills do not always go hand in hand, especially in the sciences, we are particularly careful in our initial choices. The perceived likelihood that a particular author will in fact

be able to deliver a contribution in a timely fashion is also a factor in this process. If the first candidate turns us down, we go to the second, but keep the first in mind as a possible reviewer.

Authors for one category of article in *ELS*, the special essays (which provide a forum for discussion of controversial issues in research and topics

that have a far-reaching impact in society), are selected very deliberately on the basis of their pre-eminence in a particular field and their known views on a particular topic.

ATG: What do you mean by a forum for discussion? Are you referring to an interactive discussion among readers and contributors about controversial issues via email or a listserv?

SP: No, I used this term too loosely. The special essays are simply one type of article in *ELS*, in which we give the author some freedom to express personal opinions on important and controversial issues.

ATG: When did it become obvious that you would need to publish an electronic version of the encyclopedia? What were the major factors in that decision?

SP: *ELS* was planned from the outset as an online reference work. **Gina** recognized that, for a major work in a popular and fast-moving subject area, the online medium holds many functional advantages over print, and she anticipated the strong growth in online information access that took place in the late 1990s.

ATG: Then why go to the trouble of publishing a print encyclopedia? What made you decide to produce a print version of *ELS*?

SP: There was some discussion of publishing in the online format only, but customer feedback indicated that there was still a strong demand for print in our core markets (US and

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Europe) and especially in overseas markets such as the Far East. Moreover, we felt that the relative immaturity of the online reference market would make the online-only solution too big a financial risk.

ATG: From your experience, what are the major differences between producing a print encyclopedia and an electronic encyclopedia?

SP: All book-lovers would agree that a well-produced print encyclopedia can be a thing of beauty; but all reference publishers would agree that it can be a nightmare to produce. I would say that the biggest single difficulty in producing a print encyclopedia is the stringency that the format imposes on the production schedule. For a print encyclopedia, all articles that are ever going to appear in that particular edition must be written, reviewed, revised, re-reviewed, copyedited, typeset, proofread, corrected, and made into pages by a particular cut-off date; otherwise they will simply have to be omitted. In an online encyclopedia, one has the option to reserve a particularly problematic (or late) article for one of the online updates, which might happen as soon as a month after launch. This eases the last-minute pressure on authors, editors, and production staff alike. The online format does of course bring with it a host of novel and sometimes puzzling considerations with respect to functional and graphic design, data capture, hosting requirements, access management systems, and so on. We are all learning a very great deal in a very short space of time.

ATG: From a use standpoint, what do you think are the strengths of each format? What are the weaknesses?

SP: In a direct comparison of the "functionality" of the print and online versions, I believe that the online version wins hands-down. The web-based format offers the possibility of updating the content as frequently as required (*ELS* core content is updated on a monthly basis, and highly topical information on the site is updated at least once per week), providing novel and powerful browsing and searching features (such as the *ELS* subject browser, online index and cross-referencing technology), linking to other online resources, adding novel forms of content (such as multimedia), making functional improvements in direct response to customer feedback and, not least, providing convenient desktop access to many simultaneous users.

The print version wins in other areas, however. A multi-volume print set has an aesthetic quality that a website will never match. It has superior browsing characteristics, allowing the reader to come across items of interest in a serendipitous fashion. And it is a tangible entity that advertises its own weight and substance (simply by occupying a certain num-

ber of feet on the shelf), allows a librarian to feel that she/he really "owns" it, and elicits appropriate pride in such ownership. I do not believe, however, that the print version is superior in terms of the physical readability of any single article. Most library patrons are (perhaps despite themselves) becoming more accustomed to reading information on screen; and for those who are not, *ELS* offers high-quality PDFs of every article: when printed, they have the same look and feel as an article in the printed work.

ATG: How do you think the electronic version of *ELS* will affect the print version in the short term? What will be the impact in the long term?

SP: In the short term, the availability of the online *ELS* will decrease the rate of sale, and probably the total sale, of the print edition. In the long term, we expect the online version to take over completely.

ATG: So you see a future without print reference works?

SP: I see a future in which smaller print ("trade") reference works, such as single-volume dictionaries, companions, handbooks, etc., remain important—particularly as purchases for individuals—but multi-volume works designed for broader institutional use migrate to the online medium.

ATG: How did you establish your pricing model? It seems as if the print set is seen as the foundation with the electronic version as an enhancement or add on. (The print set alone is \$4200 while the bundled price for 1-3 users is \$4860.)

SP: It is important to note that the bundle price mentioned in your question is not structured as the full print price plus a bit extra for online, but rather as full price for online plus a discount on print (\$1500 for online + \$3360 for print). I would in no way view the online version as an add on. As time goes by and we add more and more material to the website, the online version will become the primary product. The print price reflects the tricky economics of print reference publishing: very high initial costs and a limited sales life. The online pricing scheme reflects our desire to make this version as widely available as possible, and also recognizes that this is a subscription-based product rather than a one-off print purchase.

ATG: You have touched on an issue for librarians. The print version of a reference work is seen as a one-time cost. With an electronic reference work this one-time cost becomes a continuing commitment. What value added does *ELS* offer to warrant the cost of an annual subscription? Why should librarians make this type of commitment?

SP: I believe that we add a great deal of value to the online product by maintaining its currency (through our weekly and monthly updates), continuing to expand its scope (hundreds of completely new articles have been

added to the site since launch, i.e. articles that do not appear in the print set), and extending and refining its functionality (for example, by adding a sophisticated online version of the print index to the site). The online *ELS* is a dynamic reference product that will evolve and expand as the field itself evolves and expands: whereas the print version is of necessity very static!

ATG: How has the market reacted to the *Encyclopedia of Life Sciences* so far? How do initial sales compare with those of the *Encyclopedia of Astronomy and Astrophysics* or even the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*?

SP: The market's reaction to *ELS* has been gratifyingly favorable. Librarians and end-users have welcomed the breadth, depth and quality of the coverage, and applauded the availability of the online version. One librarian recently told us that *ELS* has completely transformed the way in which the life sciences are taught at his institution. Sales are beginning to pick up after a relatively slow start, and we expect great reviews and strong word of mouth to accelerate the sales process in the fall. Direct comparisons with the *Encyclopedia of Astronomy and Astrophysics* (a smaller work aimed at a very well defined market) and the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (a long-established product in a very different subject area) would probably not be helpful.

ATG: What is in the future for the *Nature Publishing Group*? What new encyclopedias and other reference sources can we expect from you?

SP: NPG's reference division will be launching three major new reference works within the next 18 months: the *Encyclopedia of Cognitive Science* (November 2002, initially print only, 4 vols), the *Encyclopedia of the Human Genome* (March 2003, online + print, 4 vols), and the *Dictionary of Physics* (September 2003, initially print only, 4 vols). Meanwhile, the journals divisions of NPG will continue to launch new journals on a highly selective basis (for example, the *Nature Research Journals* division will shortly be launching a new journal in materials science, entitled *Nature Materials*).

ATG: That is an ambitious publishing schedule. One last question, if electronic reference works are the medium of the future, why are the *Encyclopedia of Cognitive Sciences* and the *Dictionary of Physics* initially being offered only in print? Are there plans for electronic versions of these references?

SP: Yes, we are planning to launch an online version of the *Encyclopedia of Cognitive Science* in 2003. We are also planning to use the *Dictionary of Physics* content in the online medium, though not in quite the same way as for the other reference works (I'm afraid I can't elaborate further at the moment.).