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Looking Back, Looking Forward — Q&A with Richard Charkin



by **Richard Charkin** (Chief Executive, Macmillan, 4 Crinan Street, London N1 9XW UK; Phone: +44 20 7843 3645; Fax: +44 20 7843 3600) <richard@macmillan.com> *Weblog:* <http://charkinblog.macmillan.com/>

Richard Charkin, chief executive of **Macmillan**, one of the world's leading educational, scholarly, and general publishing companies, is known for a willingness to take risks, even to the point of starting to blog earlier this year. We turned to him with questions about innovation in publishing, the book supply chain, and electronic publishing. The most surprising thing about his comments is that there is not a single word here about **cricket** or *The Ashes*, but you'll be able to follow England's fortunes, as well as news about UK and international publishing, at <http://charkinblog.macmillan.com/>.

Q: What's the most exciting new thing Macmillan has done since you've been there?

A: The transformation of *Nature* and its sister journals from a paper-based magazine company into a global electronic scientific information and navigation service. Sales have tripled and annual investment has increased more than tenfold. Every single part of the value chain has been inspected for "fit for purpose" in the twenty-first century and abandoned, replaced, or improved. Most importantly, we have never ceased taking risks, launching new products, experimenting, and promoting talent.

Q: Tell us more about the improvements to the value chain.

A: To start with, the vast majority of our submissions are now electronic. The remainder are digitized before anything else happens even though most of them will not make it into *Nature* which has an extraordinarily high rejection rate. This cost of rejected manuscripts is usually forgotten, of course, but it's an important item in publishing and the higher the quality of the journal the higher the cost. All refereeing, copy-editing and design are done digitally and the output held in formats as friendly to electronic delivery as to print. Selling and advertising are done digitally, and marketing, too. We have saved a lot of trees.

Q: One of your most controversial innovations is the New Writing program (www.macmillannewwriting.com/). What makes it different, and why has it ignited so much anger from other publishers and literary agents?

A: **New Writing** is a program that gives a voice to new authors who are talented but who might otherwise not get into print. We offer standardized terms that are modest at the beginning but place the commercial risk on the publisher rather than the author. The author receives no advance but also pays nothing (unlike typical arrangements with vanity publishers) and benefits from a royalty arrangement that is generous and open-ended. The author is published in standard book

format and distributed through our normal **Macmillan** channels and through www.macmillannewwriting.com. We review only adult fiction, take only electronic submissions, and look only at complete manuscripts—and there's still a 99 percent rejection rate.

When it comes to the negative reaction we've had from some quarters, I suppose that when a system is established it's very hard for its practitioners to accept that it may be flawed and that something much simpler (and actually more old-fashioned) might be a better model. In fact, we just applied **Occam's Razor**. What are the essential elements for spotting new talent? What are the bits that are counterproductive or uneconomic? Let's keep the former and abandon the latter. We've had general break-even. One or two titles have done better than par, but the real success will come only when we find an author who really breaks through in sales or esteem, and that's still to come. However, the key thing is that when searching for the new superstar we don't lose money — and that we have achieved. We have also rewarded our authors fairly, which is important.

Q: How about other approaches you've tried or seen? How have they worked, and how have people in the industry reacted?

A: The book business is, in my opinion, overcomplicated and oversensitive. This makes the implementation of change, however mild, very hard to achieve. But some publishers have made great strides, particularly, for instance, in the adoption of new technologies such as print on demand for academic monographs and the support of Websites for textbooks.

Q: Given all our exposure to new ideas, one might think publishers would be innovative and likely to try new things. But publishers aren't known, to put it gently, for being innovative. Why's that?

A: I disagree. I think there is a misconception here about the role of the publisher. Where publishers are conservative is in their desire to publish "safe" content — in other words, high-quality authors in a traditional format — novel, reference book, textbook, etc. However, content production is not the primary role of the publisher. The primary role is content dissemination, and here publishers have been innovative. For instance, the complete invention of a new business model — the site license — in scientific publishing. Or **Westlaw** and **Lexis-Nexis**. Or www.xrefer.com. Or <http://www.onestopenglish.com/>. I could go on but won't.

Q: What needs to change in publishing?

A: How many pages am I allowed? Get closer to readers as well as to intermediaries. Stop saying, "I bought this book" rather than, "I've been granted a license to publish this

book." Stop and turn around the movement to disintegration of rights. Improve profitability in trade publishing. Have more multilingual people on staff. Have more genuine all-rounders and more genuinely specialist people. Get less arrogant and accept that publishers are no more than a link between writer and reader and that there are plenty of others in the chain adding at least as much (and frequently more) value. Reduce the number of times a book is handled between printing machine and reader (currently around twenty-five times in my estimation and another twenty-five times on the way back for 35 percent of books that are returned). Buy into on-demand printing at point of use — library, bookshop, corporation. By the way, this is one reason why journals are more profitable than books. The process for journals publishing is much simpler.

Q: What's in danger of being lost as we change?

A: Arrogance. Some easy money. Some bonhomie (compensated by greater bonfemie). And, of course, les neiges d'antan.

Q: How about Google and Amazon — threat or opportunity?

A: Both are both. The biggest threat is the threat to copyright. There is a balance in society between the need to protect the inventor or creative talent and the need for society to benefit from their works. The Internet has a significant inclination toward the rights of the user and tends to undervalue the rights of the inventor. **Google** and **Amazon** don't always realize the consequences of their actions, in terms of maintaining this balance. The opportunity they offer is, at very low cost, to publicize the existence and help people find and buy books, in e or print form.

Q: You're now a blogger. What has that taught you, do you expect to continue, and what do your publishing colleagues say about it?

A: How to do accents on letters (but I've now forgotten). How to insert a hypertext link. What words generate extra traffic. Which statements generate comments and which ones don't. My colleagues by and large think I'm mad or a showoff or a fool.

Q: Are publishers an author's natural enemy, and is that the real reason for open-access journals?

A: No, readers are the author's natural enemy because most of them don't want to read a particular author's work, however good it is. There have always been open-access journals — they're usually called "controlled circulation" (or "organs of state propaganda"), and normally they are rather substandard. I'm sure that *Public Library of Science* and others are excellent, but I don't think they are the result of

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anti-publisher sentiment but rather a legitimate desire to make available everything to everyone for free. The problem is there is no such thing as a free lunch, and a good value one can be pretty sustaining.

Q: How about other new things at Macmillan you'd like to mention?

A: The list could be very long. Here are some highlights: the new edition of the magisterial, multivolume *Palgrave Dictionary of Economics*, which marries the authority of tradition with the use of the Web to create an economics community; **ScholarlyStats** from **MPS Technologies**, which offers librarians a high-quality statistics service for journal assessment and reduced overhead costs; new products from *Nature* in the fields of photonics, nanotechnology, microbial ecology, climate change, and the geosciences, as well as a continued push into clinical with *Nature Clinical Practice* and *Macmillan Medical Communications*; more development of the American-English version of <http://www.macmillanenglishcampus.com/> for university-level students; significant expansion of our Chinese and other Asian activities, <http://www.macmillan.com.hk/>; and, in particular, Spanish-language children's publishing such as <http://www.edicionescastillo.com/>; and I am personally looking forward to our publication next year of **Borat's Travel Guide** — I think he'll be addressing with utmost indelicacy all matters of diplomacy between the United States and Kazakhstan.

Q: This article is for *Against the Grain*, which is read by academic librarians, publishers, and vendors. Anything else you'd like to talk about related to libraries?

A: Library acquisition budgets should be increased significantly as the productivity of librarians improves. But I would say that, wouldn't it? 🌱

against the grain people profile

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BORN & LIVED: Born in London UK and have lived there and Oxford, with two short stretches in Boston.

EARLY LIFE: Perfectly fine, thank you.

FAMILY: One wife, three children, and four grandchildren so far.

EDUCATION: Natural Science Tripos, **Trinity College, Cambridge**, Part 2 History and Philosophy of Science. Advanced Management Program, **Harvard Business School**.

FIRST REAL JOB: Science editor, **George Harrap and Co**, London.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: 1971-3 Harrap

1973-4 Pergamon Press

1974-88 Oxford University Press

1988-95 Reed Elsevier

1995-7 Current Science Group

1997- Macmillan Publishers and Verlagsgruppe Georg von Holtzbrinck

Current non-executive roles at **Wisden Group**, **Melbourne University Press**, **University of the Arts London**, **London Business School**, **British Library**, **Baldons Cricket Club**, and **Common Purpose**.

IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE: Music, sport.

FAVORITE BOOKS: *Flatlands*, *Billy Bunter*, *Blandings*.

PET PEEVES/WHAT MAKES ME MAD: Overcomplexity and lousy signage and bad spelling.

PHILOSOPHY: Occam's Razor.

MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Computerisation of the *OED*.

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: Survival.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: Search me. And I don't believe anyone else has a truly better answer to this question. 🌱



Thinking Globally: The Benefits of Interdisciplinary Publishing

by **David Levinson, PhD.** (Anthropologist and president of Berkshire Publishing Group, 314 Main Street, Great Barrington, MA 01230; Phone: 413-528-0206) <david@berkshirepublishing.com>
Blog: www.duboisweb.org/blog/

Last evening I was reading the new, 50th-anniversary special edition of *New Scientist*. The issue contained a piece titled "Predictions: Brilliant Minds Forecast the Next 50 Years," and one thing that jumped out at me as I read the predictions (each a long paragraph or so in length) was how narrowly focused most were on what would happen in the expert's scholarly discipline (whether molecular biology, paleontology, or astrophysics) that would affect the larger world. Equally striking was the almost complete absence of

any interdisciplinary thinking or suggestion that possibly a mix of new developments from different sciences might have the most influence on the future.

The Problem of Specialization

The single-discipline approach showcased in the anniversary issue of *New Scientist* is typical of today's knowledge production industry. This industry is made up mainly of people from academia and public and private research institutions. It is funded by tax dollars,

foundations, and private donations. Specialization and differentiation of interest and function in knowledge production and dissemination are now the rule; that specialization means that disciplines subdivide into increasing numbers of subdisciplines, each with its own concepts, methods, theories, language, associations, and publishing outlets. This trend is no surprise: the study of human



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