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Thinking Globally: The Benefits of Interdisciplinary Publishing

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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

Richard Charkin

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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

continued on page 26

societal forms has shown that as any type of human organization grows, it becomes more complex, with specialization and differentiation the key manifestations of that increasing complexity. Another manifestation of specialization that we are seeing today is the decline or nearly complete disappearance of "public intellectuals" — people like **Lewis Mumford** (*The City in History*) or **Erich Fromm** (*The Art of Loving*), who, free of disciplinary restrictions, asked the big questions and looked far and wide for the big answers.

One result of specialization and differentiation is that it becomes much more difficult to share knowledge across disciplines and to arrive at new synthesis of knowledge. In my own field of anthropology, the four-field approach that combined cultural and social anthropology, linguistics, biological anthropology, and archaeology in one department is quickly becoming a thing of the past. Linguists have gone off on their own; cultural anthropology is now split between the humanists and the scientists, and biological anthropology and archaeology have become ever more scientific and data-driven, rather like modern medicine — with some of the same negative consequences when it comes to broad understanding.

Why does this matter? What are the implications of this trend for the growth and spread of knowledge? The answer is simple: those seeking knowledge are not getting the full story. Certainly not from any single publication, and not even when they search across disciplines. How can they, when each discipline has become so narrow and focused? Our understanding of virtually any phenomena is less broad and less nuanced that it ought to be.

Solutions to the Problem

And solutions? Certainly modern technology and the new array of electronic information dissemination tools have made knowledge dissemination easier and quicker than ever. But one unintended consequence has been that now there is so much knowledge available that people are quickly overwhelmed and are lopped back into narrow approach.

Another solution is to embrace a multidisciplinary approach. That was the intention behind anthropology's four-field system, discussed above. Although that approach seems to have been largely abandoned, its benefits are still apparent to me. Last year, for example, when I visited a rural New England archaeological site dating to the mid-18th century for research on African-Americans today, the archaeology survey course I took more than 30 years ago helped me understand the site better than I would have otherwise, and cultural anthropology and history helped me place the site in its context. The unifying theme, in this case (and in anthropology generally), was the concept of culture. I believe the secret to successful cross-disciplinary work is identifying these unifying themes.

A third solution is to take a broad, global

approach to an issue. A global approach is not synonymous with an interdisciplinary one, but they overlap in important ways. In both, one must work with alternative and sometimes contradictory concepts, a broad range of information, different methods, and different disciplines. At the **Berkshire Publishing Group**, global content is the focus of our publishing program, and yet we also know that none of our works — whether *World History*, *World Sport*, or the *Homelessness Handbook* — have been as fully global as we would like. To be truly global, a work must cover not only Europe and North America, but also non-Western regions, peoples, movements, and individuals; it must cover cross-cultural interactions, exchanges, migrations, and the diffusion of culture and

ideas; and it must involve authors from outside the United States and the English-speaking world. But going global has its own problems. At the top of the list are integrating concepts that are particular to a particular nation or region. For example, sports scholars in Europe talk about "sportification," a concept that has no equivalent in U.S. sports scholarship. Sportification seems to mean the transformation of sport in a society from folk sports to organized, globalized, and commercialized sports. This is the history of sport in many European nations, but not how the history of sport is conceived in the United States.

There have been formal, structured attempts to forge interdisciplinary work, primarily

continued on page 28

against the grain people profile

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BORN & LIVED: Jersey City, NJ; Newark NJ, Elkins WV, Fort Bragg, NC, Williamsville, NY, Hamden/Branford, CT, Great Barrington MA.

EARLY LIFE: Born at an early age, grew up in Weequahic section of Newark NJ which at the time was a mainly Jewish enclave with one of the best public high schools in the nation and many students already preparing for medical and law school. Most famous alumni is **Philip Roth**. All changed after race riots in 1967 and white flight to the suburbs.

FAMILY: Father **Elias Levinson** (1919-), mother **Irma Gruenwald Levinson** (1920 - 2000), sister **Judith Levinson** (1950 -). Mother was a Holocaust survivor and my father, only child in his family who lived to adulthood, so we had a very small extended family.

EDUCATION: BA **Montclair State College** (psychology), MPA **New York University**, PhD **SUNY/Buffalo** anthropology.

FIRST JOB: Counting all the books in the **Newark Public Library** at age 16. Next summer I worked in a gas station.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: Cultural anthropologist — research and writing on human issues such as homelessness, family relations, ethnic relations, substance abuse, religion and social methods and theory. Editor of several major encyclopedias, author of a dozen books. Editor/Publisher — helped launch electronic HRAF and other very early databases that are still being published and used; co-founded **Berkshire Publishing Group LLC**.

IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE TO: Home chores including carpentry, painting, wall papering, gardening, minor plumbing; watch football and baseball less often, read, shop for food, cook.

FAVORITE BOOKS: *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud), *Souls of Black Folk* (Du Bois).

PET PEEVES/WHAT MAKES ME MAD: Anxiety; sloppy thinking and work, limited insight.

PHILOSOPHY: Have a better attitude and superior state of mind.

MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Development of ten-volume *Encyclopedia of World Cultures* which became a model for reference publishing in the 1990s and also spawned a "world cultures" industry.

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: See the sky each morning.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: A return to quality and integrative reference and other publishing. More effective use of online resources. 🌱

through the creation of interest-focused departments such as Asian, Native American, African-American, women's, and peace studies. Unfortunately, many of these hybrid departments are driven more by political concerns than intellectual ones; they often develop a specialized perspective and approach that, ironically, shuts off contact beyond the department and renders them just as insular as other knowledge producers.

I have come to realize, too, that interdisciplinary publishing is not especially popular with publishers, librarians, or booksellers, all who have pragmatic reservations. Librarians, it is believed, do not like interdisciplinary works because it is harder to catalog them and place them in the "right" place on the shelves. For example, where does one place a book like **Berkshire's** forthcoming *Community Building Handbook*? Under sociology? History? Anthropology? Community studies? Booksellers have the same problem: they can place a book in only one place in the store. Publishers, recognizing librarians' and booksellers' reservations, then reason that it will be more difficult to sell interdisciplinary works because librarians and bookstores will resist buying them.

From the perspectives of these three intertwined groups, a book must be either geography, or history, or sociology or New Age, or whatever, but not some combination thereof. (Electronic publishing, interestingly, makes interdisciplinary cataloging and placement much easier, as a document can be assigned to any number of classifications, and readers or purchasers can then find it easily.)

Publishers have another reason for preferring single-volume works that focus on a relatively narrow topic: such works are relatively easy and cheap to publish. They require only one author or a few authors who share the same perspective; they tend to be written more quickly and to require less editing. A multidisciplinary work that involves experts with different perspectives, methods, and priorities, on the other hand, is a much more difficult endeavor. I recall an editorial meeting for the *Encyclopedia of Human Emotions* (**Macmillan**), which I edited, at which the psychiatrist and lawyer disagreed over the meaning of "dependency." For the psychiatrist, it meant emotional dependency; for the lawyer, it meant economic dependency. We resolved the conflict by making sure both definitions were discussed in the book.

The specialization and differentiation I mentioned earlier also make it difficult — sometimes actually impossible — to communicate across disciplinary conceptual, theoretical, and methodological borders. For example, the core knowledge bases of anthropology, sociology, geography, and psychology are distinct, and history has no conceptual or theoretical core. Every time I talk shop with historians, I feel a strong urge to run home and write a primer on anthropology for them to explain such basics

as the fact that a matriarchal society is not the same thing as matrilineal descent or matrilineal residence. Conversely, anthropologists could well benefit from a simple history of the world that allowed them to see developments in the region, people, or culture they study in a broader context.

One big issue that chases people away from interdisciplinary work is that it can be very hard to agree on what the topic is. For example, experts on community do not share a definition of community or even a typology of communities. The same is true of the growing field of leadership studies. Experts in these new "disciplines" identify the topic in much the same way that **Justice Potter Stewart** identified pornography — they know it when they see it. Indeed, when **Karen Christensen** and I were developing the *Encyclopedia of Community*, we never did get a single definition of community that all the participating historians, anthropologists, sociologists, geographers, demographers, psychologists, and communication experts could accept. To get things going and to be as inclusive as possible, I developed a five-category scheme of community types. No

one objected, but I don't recall anyone praising the scheme either.

A more ambitious effort comes from our friend, the world historian **David Christian** at **San Diego State University** (author of *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History*), who realized some years ago that he was unable to answer his students when they asked him, "When did the world begin?" and that history (which tends to view the beginning of the world as the beginning of writing) did not have the answer either. His almost single-minded search for the answer led him into astronomy, biology, religion, paleontology, and anthropology and to the development of the "Big History" approach to history, in which history begins with the Big Bang.

And what **David Christian's** experience offers is perhaps the most compelling reason to engage in interdisciplinary studies and publishing, in the face of all reasons to the contrary: we humans have been moving toward a world community since we first appeared in Africa 3 million years ago, and world community requires shared understanding and true communication. 🌱

From Collection to Connection

by **David Pollard** (Founder & Principal, Meeting of Minds, Former CKO & Global Knowledge Innovation Director, Ernst & Young LLP, Canada)

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Those of us who manage written information have a great challenge. How can we make what is written down more meaningful, more valuable? How can we have it "make more sense"? The great challenge in this task is enlightening management since the majority of executives still see **Information Technology (IT)** as a means to disintermediate information and get rid of the **Information Professional (IP)** role entirely. In my experience, no one in the modern organization is as underutilized and underappreciated as the information professional.

While this article focuses on work within corporations, the proposals I make here to "remediate" information professionals are relevant in virtually every way to the work done by IPs in academic and other libraries.

There are a wide variety of tools and skills we can use, but too many collaboration and "virtual presence" tools are over-engineered, not intuitive, and too complicated to learn. Even tools that offer the best features of wikis and other "groupware" (like **Jotspot** — recently acquired by **Google**) are cumbersome and intimidating to the majority on the other side of the digital divide.

Before these tools and techniques can begin to augment and partially supplant face-to-face conversations as a means of adding meaning and value to information, many more people need to become much more adept at using them. In my opinion, the best way organizations can do this is by reintermediating the role of the Information Professional, and to change the

role from "collection" to "connection." Here's how:

Revamp and upgrade the role of Information Professionals from content managers to personal work effectiveness enablers. Most knowledge workers have figured out how to get the content they need to do their jobs well, without any help from **Knowledge Management (KM)**. Centralized content management initiatives offer little or no incremental value to them. What they need is hands-on help using the information and technology at their disposal more effectively in the context of doing their own unique jobs. This does not lend itself, in most organizations, to either classroom or computer-based training — it needs to be face-to-face, anthropological: The IP needs to observe how the worker uses technology and information now, and then advise them how to do so more effectively. And at the same time, the IP needs to help each worker organize their personal content so that they can manage it effectively and find (again) what they need when they need it. We need to get IPs away from their collections and help-desks and out into the field helping workers one-on-one. This is the essence of **PKM (Personal Knowledge Management)**.

Reintermediate Information Professionals

continued on page 30