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ATG Interviews Patrick Alexander

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ATG Interviews Patrick Alexander

Vice President and Publishing Director, North America,
De Gruyter/Mouton-De Gruyter, <palexander@degruyterny.com>

by Katina Strauch (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <kstrauch@comcast.net>

ATG: *The scholarly publishing house of Walter de Gruyter has for decades been synonymous with superior academic and scientific literature. Tell us about yourself and how you came to be in charge at Walter de Gruyter.*

PA: My publishing career started in the early '80s when I was freelance editing and working on professors' books as a graduate student. Laying aside — tossing aside, really — plans to pursue Ph.D. studies, I found in editing a natural balm for my obsessive-compulsive personality and started a career in publishing. For about fifteen years I served first as an academic editor and then as editorial director for **Hendrickson Publishers**, an academic/trade house specializing in religious studies. Along the way I made many friends (and a few enemies) in the publishing industry both here and abroad. I was always intrigued by the different kinds of publishing models and markets. Consequently, when the chance came to join **Brill Academic Publishers** as the publishing director in North America (Boston), I seized it. This was my first foray into publishing almost exclusively for libraries and institutions. After four and a half years with **Brill**, a new opportunity arose, this time with **De Gruyter/Mouton-De Gruyter**, where I've been since January of 2005.

ATG: *Eckart Scheffler was a long-time friend and colleague. In fact ATG interviewed him in both 1996 and 2005. Did you work with him before taking over De Gruyter?*

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ideas about how some libraries are using usage statistics in their decision making, and to discuss practical ways that usage reports can be analyzed to help inform decision making within libraries, whether this is regarding budgets, identifying training issues or access difficulties.

ATG: *What do you like to do in your spare time?*

MS: I love going to the movies. I recently saw *Capote* which I thought was great! I rushed out to buy the book, *In Cold Blood*, straight away — it's certainly a page turner and I'm getting through it pretty quick.

Next up on my reading list is *The Sea* by **John Banville** which won the **Man Booker** prize last year — I'm looking forward to getting my teeth into that one!

For more information on **ScholarlyStats**, visit www.scholarlystats.com. 

PA: Of those many friends and colleagues I have made along the way, **Eckart Scheffler** is one. Besides seeing him at the odd conference and commiserating about work from time to time, during my first year at **Brill** I collaborated with **Eckart** to create a partnership between **Brill** and **De Gruyter/Mouton-De Gruyter** to share a North American accounts manager, a partnership that lasted until the end of 2005. We naturally stayed in regular touch after that, and joined forces at industry events occasionally. When **Eckart** retired in 2005 I was invited to fill his rather large shoes.

ATG: *De Gruyter publishes more than 250 new books, and over 60 academic journals each year. You also publish electronic media. Tell us about your publishing plans current and future.*

PA: Like most European publishers, **De Gruyter/Mouton-De Gruyter** recognizes that English is the language of choice in academia. Scholars and librarians around the world — whether in Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Namibia, Nicaragua, or Venezuela — realize that English, at least for the time being, is used by the largest number of researchers. In an effort to extend its international presence, **De Gruyter** determined to expand its presence in North America and to publish more in English. We will especially concentrate on giving broader marketing and exposure to its exceptional linguistics imprint, **Mouton-De Gruyter**. As far as my publishing plans, one of my priorities is to create new English-language print and digital content, especially in the humanities, and particularly in religious studies, for this worldwide marketplace. I am currently developing new journals, for example the *Journal of World Christianity* (2007), and books, and reference products. Future plans must recognize the shrinking demand for academic monographs and the growing call for content that serves multiple purposes, whether book, article, online, on-demand, downloadable, etc.

ATG: *Who owns de Gruyter?*

PA: **De Gruyter/Mouton-De Gruyter** is a privately owned, Berlin-based company.

ATG: *Who do you see as your competitors? Do you plan to continue to publish in print? What are your plans for electronic publications in the future?*

PA: Like most institutionally focused publishers, the number of our competitors is not as much an issue as the narrow little strip of ground we all occupy. Among our chief competitors I include **Brill**, **Oxford**, **Cambridge**, **Brepols**, **Peeters**, and quite a few American university presses, including the **University of Chicago**, **University of California**, **Columbia**, the **University of North Carolina**, and **Harvard**. My

thoughts about print? While I do not foresee print publishing disappearing entirely, I do think we will experience a shift — particularly among academic publishers — from print-runs of several hundred to more instances of on-demand printing. As the technology and quality of on-demand printing improve, its advantages will soon outweigh the benefits of even small print runs in the hundreds. Superpowers like **Google** and **Amazon** will almost certainly play a role in distributing on-demand volumes, as resources like **Amazon's Search Inside the Book** and **Google Book Search** morph into on-demand services. As far as plans for electronic publishing, we can only try to keep pace with the mercurial changes in end-user habits, the rising cry for 24x7 remote access, and the ever-changing delivery options. Fortunately, **De Gruyter/Mouton-De Gruyter** has in its backlist more than one hundred and fifty years' worth of content which can be digitally repurposed.

ATG: *Is the print book still viable in today's library market? How about the reference book or encyclopedia?*

PA: When it comes to the "print book" I sometimes feel like a manuscript illuminator in 1550, especially given the realities of academic publishing, the budgetary and space demands on libraries, and the growing options to deliver content. Books will always be around, but I suspect the combination of on-demand printing technology and the potential to deliver a book (or eBook) via the Internet to a handheld or to someone's computer will only further erode monograph sales. At the same time, the potential for electronic delivery and for on-demand editions means that getting the content to the end user can be easier rather than more difficult. The opportunity to reduce returns because of on-demand printing, for example, should put a gleam in every publisher's eye. Reference works must first and foremost be conceived as platforms for delivering online content; a "book" will be but one delivery option. We saw this clearly in our *Atlas of North American English*, by noted **University of Pennsylvania** linguist **William Labov**, **Sharon Ash**, and **Charles Boberg**. Users respond to multipurposed content in ways they could never respond to a one-dimensional book.

ATG: *Care to make some predictions about the future of scholarly publishing and communication?*

PA: Scholarly publishing faces obstacles and opportunities that differ from those of trade publishing. And within scholarly publishing STM and humanities publishers face different challenges. Pressures like Open Access, institutional repositories, shrinking library budgets, and ease of worldwide com-

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SUPERBOOK Research Project at UCL

by **Anthony Watkinson** (Senior Lecturer, Centre for Publishing, School of Library, Archive and Information Studies, University College London, London, UK) <a.watkinson@ucl.ac.uk>

We are about to witness a major paradigm shift in the use of books: electronic or “eBooks” are emerging as a major resource in the academic world. In recognition of this development, **CIBER (Centre for Information Behaviour and the Evaluation of Research)** at the **UCL Centre for Publishing**, together with **UCL Library Services** and partners from the Department of Information Studies, **University of Wales, Aberystwyth**, the Department of Media and Communication, **University of Leicester**, **EmeraldInsight**, **OUP**, **Taylor & Francis** and **Wiley** will be embarking on a one-year major investigation into the use of eBooks in the higher education sector.

Until now, research into how, when and why digital resources are used within Universities has focused primarily on the use and impact of journals available within digitally enabled libraries.

Considerable steps have been made in understanding journal user behaviour and the actions of the virtual scholar, through groundbreaking studies conducted by **CIBER** of **EmeraldInsight**, **Blackwell Synergy**, **OhioLINK**, **Elsevier’s ScienceDirect** and the **IOP Electronic Journals** database.

All of these evaluations have been based on an analysis of the digital “fingerprints” left by the users of electronic journals — a technique the **CIBER** team will now take to eBooks.

In practice, scholars use a much wider range of digitally delivered content and materials to achieve their research, teaching and learning goals. Determining how these digital resources are used is vital for commercial and academic reasons. We need to know how scholars and students use this online resource and whether the emergence of the eBook marks the beginning of the end for the paper textbook.

It is also important for publishers to establish what kinds of business models will work best for eBooks. Internet users are accustomed to receiving all kinds of content and services for free. Publishers cannot survive

evidence is in short supply.

The **CIBER** team, having spent the last five years robustly mapping and evaluating the roll-out of e-journals, are in an ideal position to take honed skills and techniques to the roll-out of eBooks.

A case study/action research approach will be undertaken in this project. This means using a variety of different research methods and collection of data from many different sources. The research will gather intelligence from all the key stakeholders — publishers, librarians, academics, researchers and students.

The research will also be undertaken in a real-life environment, that of a major researched UK university. This lends power and a reality to the data and we believe this pioneer project will prove to be the biggest and most important of its kind. **University College London** provides an excellent learning laboratory for eBook publishers.

The broad objective of the study is to create a live research laboratory at the **UCL** which puts eBooks through their paces, under the microscope, and in a real-life setting. From this “laboratory,” academics, publishers, users and librarians can learn and exchange information and they can also contribute ideas to be tested. This way, hopefully, the fallouts (and blinkered thinking) that have occurred over e-journals will not happen here.

In this research **UCL** academic user communities (students, researchers and academic staff) will be exposed to a significant and relevant population of eBooks (more than 3000). The research team will observe and measure what happens.

Certain subject groups will be targeted and pre-planned interventions will be introduced to the learning environment to evaluate the uptake of eBooks and the impact of the way they are provided on usage and satisfaction. Interventions will enable the researchers to measure the effects of different forms of eBook promotion within the learning environment and to assess the efficacy of different business models — in effect determining whether users are prepared to pay for eBooks and how much.

Three eBook publishers have agreed to take part in the experiment:

Oxford Scholarship Online
Wiley Interscience
Taylor & Francis

For more information contact: **Professor David Nicholas, UCL Centre for Publishing** (www.publishing.ucl.ac.uk; <David.Nicholas@ucl.ac.uk>).




“In this research UCL academic user communities (students, researchers and academic staff) will be exposed to a significant and relevant population of eBooks...”

in that kind of market. Users must expect to pay for access to eBooks, but how much and in what ways?

There has been much talk about the potential of eBooks, especially in a higher education context and the need for user studies of eBooks by staff and students has been articulated strongly and recommended in a number of the **JISC**-funded research reports. But a lot of the information available is based upon studies of insufficient depth and robust

narios. Traditional print-runs of academic titles will diminish to one-off, on-demand volumes. Research itself will take on new forms, with monographs, theses, and dissertations being at times entirely digital, including film clips, audio samples, and hyperlinks.

ATG: *What do you do for fun and what do you read in your spare time?*

PA: For fun? I listen to more music than **Nipper**, crave **Tarheel** basketball when it's not in season, love to fish from my kayak, and play **Scrabble** with friends at **Cold Spring**, New York's finest, the **Foundry Café**, every chance I get. As far as reading I try to keep one fiction and one nonfiction going. Right now, though, I'm grinding away only at **Stephen Pinker's Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature**. Averaging two paragraphs per night before falling asleep, I hope to finish that by Christmas 2012. My last nonfiction was **Dan Brown's Digital Fortress**; nothing else's in the wings. 

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munication will force publishers — as they are doing already — to create and implement new business models, to find ways of enhancing the value of content, and to become more aggressive in the marketplace. On the plus side, these new business models will mean a publisher's content can be used more effectively and more widely. For example, ten years ago, a scholarly article in a print journal might have languished on a library's shelf, overlooked by even the most diligent researcher. With online access, articles — or even more importantly for scholarly communication, chapters in books — can be accessed 24x7 from virtually anywhere in the world. The distinction between “book” and “journal” and “reference” will blur because the content in a book, journal, or reference work can be repurposed to suit endless sce-