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ATG Interviews Deborah Kahn

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Publishing Director, BioMed Central, www.biomedcentral.com

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

ATG: I see that you are charged with leading the publishing teams to provide an excellent experience for authors, editors, and referees, and for ensuring that BioMed Central continues to grow its portfolio of open access journals. What are your approaches in this regard?

DK: STM publishing exists to support the research process. As publishers, we need to continue to ensure that we meet the changing needs of researchers. At the same time, those researchers are getting more demanding. Traditionally, the economics of research publishing were hidden from authors, with all financial transactions carried out between the library and the publisher. In open-access publishing, authors are much more aware of the cost to their institution or funding body of publishing their research. As a result, they also recognize that they are our customers, and they are clearer about the levels of service they require. At **BioMed Central**, our aim is that authors will be keen to submit their future papers to us and to tell their colleagues to do so too. So we work hard to ensure that their experience is a good one, all the way through the process from submitting their article through to the final publication, and beyond. We survey our authors twice, once on submission and once on acceptance, and we ask them about their experience, and we pay close attention to the ratings and comments we get from these surveys. Happily they overwhelmingly say they will publish with us again and will recommend us to their colleagues, but we are always looking to improve on that. So we work hard to make sure that our peer-review processes are fast, fair, and friendly, and that we continue to provide excellent author service and improve our processes to cope with an ever-increasing number of submissions to our journals.

ATG: Are there specific examples where author responses to your surveys have resulted in a change in the way BioMed Central meets author needs?

DK: It is a system of continuous improvement. Our customer services team monitor all author surveys and send on any comments to the relevant head of department. Any suggestions for improvement are investigated, and the respondent receives a personal response. We then make changes to our processes accord-



ingly. For example, we are currently revising our production processes to combine a number of communications that we have with authors, so that we can reduce the load on them, as this is something we have had a number of comments on. Other examples range from appointing additional Associate Editors for a particular journal to improving peer-review times in areas where we need more Editorial Board coverage, through to enabling additional formats that authors can upload as supplementary files, to major improvements in download times around the world.

ATG: And how have the approaches to OA changed over the history of BioMed Central?

DK: As the pioneer of open-access publishing, **BioMed Central** had to forge the way — to prove to the world that quality of research published, the peer-review process, and the Editors or Editorial Boards which serve on open access journals are every bit as good as those for traditional journals. We are proud to number many leading scientists amongst our Editors and Editorial Board Members, and to publish journals with some of the highest impact factor rankings in their JCR fields (see for example Tropical Medicine, and Veterinary Science). Now that that argument has been well and truly won, and everyone else has decided to get into the game, we need to remain the leading open access publisher.

ATG: Do you have any sense how the growth of open access has impacted traditional journal publishers? Has the competition improved the quality of their efforts? Do you think that subscription prices have been affected downward? Or, perhaps more dramatically, does the success of open access prove that the traditional subscription-based model is unsustainable?

DK: You would really have to ask a traditional journal publisher how it has impacted them! From the outside, we can see that many of the traditional publishers are now offering open access in some form. Most started through offering an open-access option within their subscription journals, but now more and more can see that open access offers additional options, for example, allowing them to launch new titles in a market where starting new subscription journals has become extremely hard. Some journals have reduced subscription prices where there has been significant take-up of the open-access option, but generally I don't get the impression that subscription prices have been affected downward. I imagine that open-access revenue has helped to subsidize the subscription journals and allowed prices not to rise as much as they might have. No, I don't think that the success of open access proves anything about the sustainability of the subscription model, and as far as the future is concerned, I believe that open access and the subscription-based model are likely to coexist for a long time to come.

ATG: Your career has spanned STM journal and book publishing, database publishing, and research and consultancy. What and when in your background did you become an open access advocate?

DK: It has always seemed obvious to me that the peer review and dissemination of research results is an integral part of the research process. Also, I have always had a problem with restricting access to scholarship, which should be publicly available to anyone. So I think I have always been an open access advocate, since long before the phrase was coined. As early as the mid-1990s, when the first electronic journal experiments emerged (at **Chapman & Hall**, for example, we were beta-testers of **Adobe Acrobat** with the **CAJUN** project, which with **Wiley** and the **University**

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Program, we invite you to visit us at www.cengage.com/mindtap.

In this ever-changing educational space, it is crucial that we create learning solutions that are as efficient and effective as possible. We plan to keep listening and learning from our customers in order to discover better ways to serve them and address their needs. 🌱

Endnotes

1. Instructors and Students: Technology Use, Engagement and Learning Outcomes, Cengage Learning/Eduventures Survey, December 2010.
2. Omnibus Survey, OnCampus Research and the National Association of College Stores, November 2010.
3. OnCampus Electronic Book and E-Reader Device Report, On Campus Research and the National Association of College Stores, March 2011.

of Nottingham published one of the very first electronic journals), it seemed clear that researchers would embrace the new technology to help them to collaborate and share their results more efficiently. I expected that the whole paradigm of publishing would change rapidly, and that the peer review and dissemination would be covered by research grants and that results would be made freely accessible. This is now happening and is called open-access publishing. It is just that the change has taken a decade or two longer to actually come about than I expected.

ATG: *What trends are emerging in open-access journal publishing?*

DK: Open-access publishing is basically a growing subset of STM publishing, so it is subject to the same trends. Researchers are being pressurized to publish more and more. This leads to a pressure on peer reviewers and on Editors, who need to continue to apply the same high standards of peer review to an increasing number of incoming submissions. It also puts pressure on subscription journals who are having to reject papers that they would never have done in the past, because of page budgets, and these papers are now being channeled to open-access journals, which do not have the same limits on space. This has been the motivation for the launch over the last 12 months of *Scientific Reports* from **Nature Publishing Group**, *BMJ Open*, *G3* from the **Genetics Society of America**, *Open Biology* from the **Royal Society**, and many similar journals.

At the same time research budgets in Europe and North America are being cut, while those in the emerging markets are increasing rapidly — with the output of high-quality scientific papers from countries such as China, Brazil, and India growing extremely rapidly. So the demographics of the authors are changing, and they have different needs which we need to cater for.

The other major trend is the move towards Open Data — to quote a recent blog on our site from **Alex Wade** of **Microsoft**: “scholarly communication can and should evolve from static and disparate data and knowledge representation, as embodied in today’s typical PDF representations of research papers, to a rich integrated content which grows and changes the more we learn.” **BioMed Central** is again leading the field in this regard.

ATG: *What has been the impact of Springer’s purchase of BioMed Central on the attitudes and business plans of BioMed Central?*

DK: It is the difference between being a start-up company owned by an individual and being part of a large international business. **Springer** is interested in the long-term future of the business so has invested substantially in **BioMed Central** and allowed us to take a longer-term strategic outlook. **Springer**’s infrastructure is really helping us to realize our potential for growth. For example, **Springer**’s global network of offices allows us to have staff in key locations, such as China and the U.S., as

against the grain people profile

Publishing Director, BioMed Central
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Deborah Kahn

BORN AND LIVED: Born in Manchester, lived in Manchester, London, Utrecht, Amsterdam and Oxford.

EARLY LIFE: My parents (a Professor of theoretical astrophysics and a Mathematics teacher) encouraged me to be curious and question everything. Has got me into hot water from time to time.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: STM publisher through and through. Started in book and journal production, moved into acquisitions and journal management. Ten years with the **Thomson Corporation** learning to be an electronic publisher. Tried to leave the industry and become a psychotherapist, but STM publishing pulled me back, when I found my dream job (this one!).

IN MY SPARE TIME: If I had some, I would spend more time with my partner and dog, play the piano, walk in the mountains, go to the gym, sing in a choir, read more books, cook gourmet food.

FAVORITE BOOKS: *The Bone People*, *A Fine Balance*, *The Blind Assassin*.

PET PEEVES: People who don’t question things.

MOST MEMORABLE CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: That’s for others to assess.

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: Still to be enjoying my job as much as I am now.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: I am continually surprised by the glacial speed of change within the academic publishing. Really nothing much has changed in 300 years. Granted, electronic communications make everything happen much faster, and electronic access makes journals much more accessible, but the article PDF still looks much like the printed article did when journals were invented, the peer-review system functions in much the same way, subscription journals still make up 90% of the market. So much the same I imagine. 🐾

well as to continue to develop our services and tools for our library customers, our editors, societies, authors, and reviewers whilst managing the spectacular growth in submissions.

ATG: *Tell us about SpringerOpen and its impact on BioMed Central. Is this a game changer?*

DK: **SpringerOpen** completes the open-access publishing package from **Springer**, giving authors the chance to publish in a high-quality, open-access journal, whatever their scientific discipline. It is “powered by” **BioMed Central** — that is, it uses all of our systems and processes but also benefits from the powerful **Springer** branding in the areas where **Springer** is a leading force. Since its launch less than a year ago, **SpringerOpen** has announced nearly 50 titles in mathematics, engineering, information sciences, chemistry, and other non-biomedical fields, and is proving to be a significant force in the open-access publishing field.

ATG: *You are a mathematician by training. Has OA journal been successful mathematically? How would you define success in this case?*

DK: According to **Wikipedia**, “mathematicians formulate new conjectures and resolve the truth or falsity of them by proofs which are sufficient to convince others of their validity.” When **Vitek Tracz** and **Matt Cockerill** started **BioMed**

Central in 2000, they believed that there was a new publishing model that could work in journal publishing which would allow open access to research in a sustainable way. This has now been proven without doubt. So, yes, OA publishing has been successful mathematically.

ATG: *What does growing OA publishing mean for small publishers? Is OA their salvation or ruination? Why or why not?*

DK: Well, **BioMed Central** was only launched 11 years ago, and until recently could have been designated a small publisher. Now, with nearly 300 staff and publishing 215 journals, we are probably medium-sized. So, as far as this small publisher is concerned, OA has been a good thing! In business, whatever size business you are, you need to be able to meet the needs of your customers. If you do, you thrive. If not, you fail. The same is true for small publishers. If customers want OA and they are not in a position to provide it, they will fail.

ATG: *To finish on a personal note, tell us about yourself. What do you do in your spare time? What do you like to read?*

DK: I love to spend time with my partner and dog walking in the country. I love to travel and am looking forward to my summer holiday walking in the hills in Southern Spain. I love to read, listen to music, go to the theatre, and eat great food. 🐾