Against the Grain

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ATG Interviews Zac Rolnik, Publisher, now publishers

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ATG Interviews Zac Rolnik

Publisher, now publishers

by **Tom Gilson** (Associate Editor, *Against the Grain*) <gilsont@cofc.edu>

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

ATG: Can you tell us a little bit about what makes now publishers tick? Where did you get your start, and what is the goal of the company?

ZR: What makes **now publishers** tick is the quality of our content. We thrive on it. When we started this company we optimistically said we will publish only the "best" content, and we went out and focused on quality. We picked robust research areas and targeted the best academic institutions for our editors including **Harvard**, **Princeton**, **Chicago**, and **Stanford**, to name a few.

I started this company after spending 17 years at **Kluwer Academic Publishers**. I was leaving **Kluwer** at the end of 2002 and a former colleague at **Kluwer**, **Mike Casey**, approached me about starting a new publishing venture. **Mike** had been the Director of Electronic Publishing at **Kluwer** and left in 2000 to pursue some consulting opportunities in the UK. We knew each other well and shared the same ethos about quality of content and fairness to our customers. Our goal was to make research more accessible to graduate students, professionals, and researchers alike. The plan was to publish short-form works — "minigraphs" — that provided current and concise surveys of the research, and we branded it *Foundations and Trends (FnT)* (*www.nowpublishers.com*).

ATG: Can you explain what is different about your business model? What separates you from the competition? Are you trying to occupy a particular niche within academic publishing?

ZR: Review articles are the most cited articles in the academic literature but believe it or not they can be hard to get published. Primary journals often send review articles out for review and get reviewer decisions like "very nice, nothing new, reject" or you might get commissioned to write a survey on a topic in 20 pages. I can't tell you how many authors I would meet who had a longer manuscript that they cut down for a journal losing much of the integrity of the article. They would ask if I could publish the longer manuscript, but it was often too long for a journal and too short for a book. Handbooks offer an alternative outlet, but they have two problems — they are often not included in the indexed literature and they have the problem of having to wait for late authors before going to press. While handbooks remain very valuable, they are often dated on the day they are published.

Our idea was to decompose the handbook into its elementary parts so that each chapter was its own entity. Then using a journal publishing model we publish each chapter as an individual issue. This allows us to publish each contribution as it is accepted and maintain quality control through peer review. Furthermore, it's open-ended — we can continually cover new topics as they become mature. Publishing this content as a journal allows us to have our content covered by a multitude of A&I services increasing the discoverability of our content.

In terms of business models, we have developed true multi-channel publishing. An individual issue is our basic product, but we put different wrappers around it in terms of delivery mechanism and functionality to package it attractively for different parts of the market. It means we can offer our customers true choice in how they prefer to purchase the content, be it as a printed book, an eBook, or a fully-functional journal article. This also enables us to sell our content as packages, but most importantly, our customers can mix and match to get the best deal for their own particular needs. This is, as far as I know, unique in the academic publishing industry.

Finally, consistent with our ethos of being customer-friendly, we are RomeoSherpa Green, allowing our authors to retain copyright, we provide honoraria to both authors and reviewers, and we share revenues with our editors. We allow for unlimited concurrent usage, unlimited downloads, and perpetual access to the content without extra annual fees. We are SERU-compliant, and I am a member of the original SERU Working Group.

ATG: It strikes us that this idea of different wrappers raises the possibility of duplication of content. What do you mean by different wrappers? How do customers keep things straight and avoid buying the same content in these different wrappers?

ZR: As I mentioned, each issue of *Foundations and Trends* is one long survey article — sort of a hybrid between a book and a journal. These are long, serious reviews and tutorials that are great for graduate teaching and to quickly come to speed on current research in an area, and we find some demand for these on an individual issue basis. We clearly note on the print book versions sold and on our PDFs that these have been previously published as *Foundations and Trends*. In addition, we are pretty close to our customers and manage all customer service in-house, including relationships with subscription agents to avoid double purchases in two different formats unless the customer wants both formats.

We were aware that buying the same content in different formats might be an issue, so we use CRM software to track the holdings of every customer. We try to point out to customers that they already hold a version of an article if they try to purchase it in a different format. We go as far as letting individual academics know their library subscribes when they purchase printed copies at conferences. Often the response is "Yes, I know, but I like the print copy in my office. Anyway, thanks for pointing this out to me."

ATG: You also mentioned the problem of "not being included in the indexed literature." This is really part of the discoverability issue. With the diversity inherent in your model, how do you ensure discoverability? Where are your publications indexed? What role do library discovery systems play in enabling researchers to locate your content?

ZR: *Foundations and Trends* are published as a journal. The articles go through a full review process and are published on a prescribed number of times per annual volume. *Foundations and Trends* are currently covered in **EconLit**, **Scopus**, **Google Scholar**, and **Zentralblatt MATH**, to name a few. These are relatively new journals, so they are just starting the evaluation process at **Thomson Reuters ISI**. In addition, we provide our customers with free MARC records since many patrons aren't looking for *Foundations and Trends in Communications and Information Theory*, but may be looking more granularly at "Random Matrix Theory and Wireless Communication." In addition, we are KnowledgeWorks Certified with **Serials Solution**, SFX-compliant, and try to work with the customer to maximize the contents discovery through their systems as well as using alerts, RSS feeds, etc.

ATG: Your main focus is journal publishing, and your "books" have all been previously published as an issue of a Foundations and Trends journal, correct? Are you planning to publish any original monographs? Why or why not?

ZR: Yes, in order to sell the journal on an issue basis we have attached an ISBN to each issue and sold them as "books." We find there are many people, in particular individuals and professionals, who do not want a subscription but have an interest in a particular topic. Since each issue is in effect a small book, we also make them available as books and eBooks. We also provide both book buyers and subscribers with MARC records to help cataloging and improve discoverability.

We originally wanted to maintain a focus on *FnT* to get it successfully off the ground. Now that *Foundations and Trends* is secure and growing, we are looking into new publication forms including books and journals. In terms of books, we have started a new book partnership with **World Scientific Publishing Company** (*http://www.worldscientific.com/series/wsnpsb*), and a typical forthcoming title is *The History of Marketing Science* by **Scott Neslin** at **Dartmouth** and **Russ Winer**

continued on page 43

Interview — Zac Rolnik
from page 42

at **NYU**. We are also starting an occasional traditional journal when we see an opportunity in the marketplace — a new topic, a paradigm shift, a growing field — and still applying our same author copyright policies. Our first new journal, *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, edited by **Keith Krehbiel** at **Stanford** and **Nolan McCarty** at **Princeton**, was started in 2006 and accepted for coverage in the SSCI in 2007 going back to Volume 1.

ATG: You mention on your Website that now publishers "deploys a liberal and fair copyright policy." What does that mean? How does it impact your authors? What about libraries?

ZR: I never understood why authors had to transfer their copyright to the publisher in order to get published in the academic/scientific marketplace. It was the authors' intellectual property, and all the publisher really needed was a license to distribute the work. I realize that many publishers "consent to publish agreement" allows the author to retain many proprietary rights, but it often requires the author to request permission. Said permissions were often not cleared quickly, and it was inefficient. Furthermore, if an author was to reuse their content for teaching, why should they have to ask permission for using their own work?

ATG: What about libraries and other faculty? Does this mean that they would have to ask the author for his/her permission to use the work?

ZR: The authors' institution and subscribing institutions have access with almost no limitations. An author is free to distribute their work to a colleague for research or teaching purposes. And there is nothing to stop someone from asking the author for the article — this happens all the time with journals. But if you wanted to teach from the article or reuse the article in any commercial setting, it is probably best to contact the author (for teaching use) and the Publisher for any commercial reuse.

ATG: Is print-on-demand a cornerstone of your business, or do you consider yourselves primarily a digital publisher?

ZR: We consider ourselves a publisher who offers our content in multiple formats. While our primary publications are digital, if a customer wants print, we offer print, and we do this via print-on-demand vendors. It works very well for us and allows us to satisfy the customers' format needs.

ATG: Overall, can you comment on the new eBooks and print book formats that are emerging? Where does now publishers see itself fitting into the equation?

ZR: We tend to be more focused on the content first — what is in demand in the marketplace? Is there a need for this content? Do the authors and editors represent the best minds on these topics? Then we focus on format, giving consideration to the end users of our content. Since we are a small publisher we are not taking the lead technologically on new eBook formats, but we always try to comply with the latest industry standards and adopt new delivery mechanisms to continue to meet our customers' needs.

ATG: We notice that you have formed partnership with Edward Elgar Publishing, Ltd and World Scientific Publishing to market your products. How does that work? You mention that you will provide effective non-intrusive marketing for all our products. Please define non-intrusive marketing.

ZR: Both **Edward Elgar Publishing** and **World Scientific Publishing** were interested in our new publication model and are investor-partners in our business. Early on we used **EEP** for some marketing activities, but that has ended and in effect **EEP** is a "silent" partner in our business but sit on our board. We have a closer working relationship with **WSPC** in that we use one of their subsidiaries for our production work and they market and sell our content in their local markets in Southeast Asia.

By non-intrusive marketing we mean we put a lot of effort into targeting our marketing to the individual receiving our message. We do not undertake a scatter-gun approach, sending out large mailings or mass emailings. We research our intended recipients and send them information only relevant to their particular interests. For example, a professor in Finance will not get any information from us pertaining to a journal in Marketing.

ATG: Your model seems more attuned to the needs of individuals. In fact, you have only mentioned libraries briefly in your comments. Where do they fit in? What percentage of your customer base do they represent? Are there librarians on your board?

ZR: Thank you, our model is attuned to the needs of the individual — the researcher or the student. We want to help the researcher do their research and the student to learn from the most recent research by making research accessible. At the same time, I do not think

continued on page 46

against the grain people profile

Zac Rolnik

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BORN AND LIVED: I was born and raised in Bayonne, NJ, spent two summers in an NSF high school biology program at **UT Austin**, went to college at the **University of Rochester**, and graduate school in Cambridge, MA. After spending a couple of years in Washington, DC, I returned to the Boston area and have lived here since with the exception of a two-year work assignment in the Netherlands.

EARLY LIFE: I was a science nerd, loved science fairs, biology class, and chemistry experiments.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: After receiving my Masters degree in Public Policy from **Harvard**, I worked for the U.S. Department of the Treasury in the Office of the Secretary. I had a good job but was not happy. A college friend worked at **Kluwer Academic Publishers** as an acquisitions editor and it sounded interesting. One thing led to another, and long story short, I spent 17 years at **Kluwer** including two years in the Netherlands. I left **Kluwer** as Vice President of Global Publishing.

FAMILY: I have known my wife, **Diana Murray**, for 29 years, and we have been married for 20 years. Our daughter **Olivia** is 15 years old and we have a six-year-old Belgian Shepherd.

IN MY SPARE TIME: I love to cook (and eat). Believe it or not, even with all my work travel, I still love to travel.

FAVORITE BOOKS: I'm a foodie, so probably something like *Map of Another Town* by **MFK Fisher** or *A Year in Provence* by **Peter Mayle**.

MOST MEMORABLE CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Starting my own business.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: I believe that the proliferation of scholarly information on the Web will increase the demand for information professionals (librarians, subscription vendors, publishers) to help information consumers (students, researchers, professors, professionals) find, evaluate, and assimilate the unmanageable level of data available to them. On the business side, this will continue to drive new entries into the market, often to be eventually swallowed up by larger players in the market. But in five years my guess is most of us will still be doing what we do in this interesting business we inhabit.

we have left out the library, and our policies are very customer-centric and focused on the library. These include our liberal *licensing* policies including being an early adopter of SERU, our business model providing for unlimited concurrent access, unlimited downloads, no DRM to make things user-friendly, and perpetual access with no extra fees. We archive our content via Portico. And so on… But many of these policies are based on constant feedback we get from the library community.

When we travel, we spend time speaking with both the academics (authors/end-users) and librarians. Probably 20% of our time is spent meeting librarians. While the library is our most important revenue source, they are an even more important source of ideas and feedback. We also try to attend smaller, more focused library conferences like **ACRL**, **ER&L**, **NASIG** and **Charleston**. You ask about our "board"… We actually don't have an advisory board per se. While we have lots of friends who advise us, we have never set up a formal board.

ATG: What is the access model for libraries that subscribe to your content? IP address? Does now publishers host its own content, or are there aggregators involved? Do libraries have to play a role in hosting content?

ZR: Access is via IP authentication. We currently host our own content and will be moving to a new platform in the first quarter of 2013. We are pleased to be working with **Semantico** on this, who will redesign and reengineer our existing platform using their highly respected technologies Scolaris and SAMS. Scolaris will vastly improve our discoverability by providing intelligent, full-text search with rich taxonomy support for searching and browsing.

We have licensed our content to aggregators in the past, but question the value of offering our content through these channels going forward. On occasion we found our content sublicensed to other channels that may or may not have been beneficial to our business. As a result, we have terminated our licensing deals effective January 1, 2013, and we will see if we can expand coverage through our platform with **Semantico**.

I am not sure if libraries have a role in hosting content — is this really part of their mission? I do believe the libraries have a role (as do publishers) to make content discoverable. We as publishers need to make it accessible. We deploy certain technologies on our hosting platforms to make our content accessible to librarians and academics, which may work less efficiently if hosting of content was diffused across library hosts. But I am not a techie and could be missing something here.

ATG: Your content focus is on business and technology. Do you have any plans to expand your list into other subject areas? What can we look for from now publishers in the future?

against the grain publisher profile

now publishers

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OFFICERS: Mike Casey, COO and Treasurer; **Zac Rolnik**, President and CEO.

KEY PRODUCTS AND SERVICES: *Foundations and Trends* journals, *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*.

CORE MARKETS/CLIENTELE: ACRL libraries.

NUMBER OF JOURNALS PUBLISHED ANNUALLY: 25 - 20 *Foundations and Trends* and 5 traditional journals.

HISTORY AND BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF YOUR COMPANY/PUBLISHING PROGRAM: now publishers is an international publisher of science and technology, dedicated to improving the accessibility of research. An independent company, it was founded in 2004 and continues to deliver on its initial promise of partnering with the research and library communities to help bring about a new era in academic publishing which values editors and authors, deploys a liberal and fair copyright policy, and provides librarians with value for money. The primary mission of **now publishers** is to improve scholarly communication, speed the flow of information, and reward the scientist. The company uses Web-based marketing and manufacturing techniques to minimize costs, allowing for the compensation of authors, editors and reviewers, and passing on cost-savings to librarians.

now publisher's marquee product is *Foundations and Trends*, a unique publishing model focusing on very high-quality reviews, surveys, and tutorials of significant research topics written by the leading lights in their fields. All of the content is stringently peer-reviewed, and the quality control is overseen by world class editors-in-chief and their editorial boards. The authors, editors, and board members are "household names" in their respective fields, and the emphasis is on quality, readability, and timeliness of content.

ZR: We have been very deliberate in choosing the areas in which we publish. We were looking for robust research areas that were currently not being served by major review/reference publications. We feel that business, economics, computer science, and electrical engineering are active research areas with international markets. We are looking to expand both organically and through partnership with other publishers or societies. Currently, all of the journals that we publish are new and started from scratch. While we would always look to acquire journals from societies and publishers, we find that most of the content available for sale is either of relatively low quality or gets bid up in price by the big publishers. So we focus on organic growth.

Some examples of new growth include expanding in our existing areas as well as launching journals in new areas adjacent to our existing product so we can best serve those markets. In 2014 we will start a set of new *Foundations and Trends* journals in energy including *FnT Energy Markets and Policy*, *FnT in Electric Energy Systems*, and *FnT Renewable Energy*. In addition, we are selectively starting new journals in business and economics including three new journals in 2014 — *Journal of Law, Finance and Accounting* in partnership with **NYU** and **Harvard Law School**, *Review of Behavioral Economics*, and the *Journal of Marketing Behavior* with the **European Marketing Academy**.

Starting publications in a new area is relatively expensive. You have to hire a publisher, including all associated costs (travel, marketing, etc.) and it can take three years or more until you start to actively publish content — this can easily cost you more than $250k before you even start to see any revenue. So we have reached out to other publishers or societies who have an existing position in the marketplace to try and "franchise" the concept. We have just signed a deal with **Brill Academic Publishing** to establish a program of reference journals in some areas where they have a strong editorial presence — classics, international law, and linguistics. We are very excited to work with **Brill** in these areas since they have well-respected publishing programs in these areas and have a good reputation in the trade.

ATG: Why did you name your company "now publishers"? Is NOW an acronym that has special meaning? Does it have a special connotation or speak to what you hope to bring to the industry, researchers, and libraries?

continued on page 47

Interview — Zac Rolnik
from page 46

ZR: Actually NOW means exactly what it says — now. Neither **Mike** nor I thought that naming the business after ourselves was very modern, and we were eager to get going. We also thought that we might create a family of different products, each with its own possible branding, so we did not want to attach too much to the company name. After a couple of glasses of wine with dinner at **Mike's** house, I just said "how about now — now publishers?" We liked it and thought that "now" is always current and easy to remember. That was it — no consultants, brand advisors, etc.

***ATG:** When you're not out there building the business, what fun things do you like to do? What activities and hobbies occupy your down time?*

ZR: When I am not traveling for work or burning the midnight oil, I am deeply home. I love to spend time with my wife, daughter, and dog — my three girls. In addition, I love to cook, spend time in the garden, exercise, and volunteer for civic things in my community, including our local cultural council and diversity council.

Rumors
from page 35

will no longer be posted via **FDLP-L**. To continue receiving notifications and announcements regarding the **FDLP**, sign up for the replacement email service or follow the RSS feed. **FDLP**-related news and events are posted to the **FDLP** homepage and subsequently sent out via email and RSS. **FDLP-L** subscribers will NOT be ported automatically to the new system.

And speaking of the **Charleston Conference**, we will be putting up information about 2013 shortly, hopefully in late March. The tentative theme is **TOO MUCH IS NOT ENOUGH**! Ain't it the truth? It appears, happily, that the **Embassy Suites Historic District** and the **Hampton Inn Historic** will be back on our list of hotels with room blocks! Whew!

In the meantime, there are many **Penthouse Interviews** from the **2012 Conference** — **Peter Binfield** (PeerJ), **Eric Hellman** (GlueJar), **Alison Mudditt** (University of California Press), **Annette Thomas** (Macmillan), and **Stanley Wilder** (UNC-Charlotte). Please visit *http://katina.info/conference/atg_interviews/* and *http:// http://www.youtube.com/*.

Speaking of interviews, we interviewed **Bryn Geffert** (Librarian of The College of Amherst) <bgeffert@amherst.edu> but were unable to get the interview in this ***ATG* print issue**. The interview will be loaded online at the ***ATG* NewsChannel** and will be printed in the **April print *ATG***. Coming soon! **Bryn** talks about peer review in the new **Amherst College Press**. And, close to my heart, he was the **West Point** librarian before joining **Amherst**. **West Point** is my son's alma mater. In fact, one of the things I remember fondly (and scarily) was being flown over **West Point** and Poughkeepsie by **Betty Oktay** (once at Vassar) and her handsome husband, **Sevgin**! How exciting.

Pictured here is **Dennis Brunning's** newest granddaughter, **Mia Catherine**, along with her sister **Elianna**, and mother **Christina**. Congratulations, **Dennis**!

Speaking of **Bryn**, was talking with **Bob Kieft** (Occidental) who has talked to **Bryn** considerably about his new press. **Bob** is interested in running a plenary **Charleston Conference** panel on the business of scholarly society publishing. I am looking forward to it. The call for papers will be up shortly. *www.katina.info/conference*

Speaking of ***ATG*** (above), wanted to tell y'all about the great peer reviewers in the Dec 2012/Jan 2013 issue of ***ATG*** who worked with **Jonathan Harwell**. Special thanks to **Karen Jensen**, Collection Development Officer, Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks and **Jim Bunnelle**, Acquisitions/Collection Development Librarian, Aubrey R. Watzek Library, Lewis & Clark College.

Continuing to speak of ***ATG*** and interviews, this issue has a great interview with **Mitchell Davis** of **Bibliolabs**, etc. One of the founders of **BookSurge**

continued on page 58