The Scholarly Publishing Scene – The Maxwell Effect

Myer Kutz

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>

Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries.
Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

An eBook works for Shakespeare. For patient care, you need a database.

The R2 Digital Library database takes health sciences eBooks beyond a routine web search.

Visit R2library.com for a free trial.

R₂ DIGITAL LIBRARY

customerservice@r2library.com • R2library.com • 800.345.6425

The Scholarly Publishing Scene — The Maxwell Effect

Column Editor: **Myer Kutz** (President, Myer Kutz Associates, Inc.) <myerkutz@aol.com>

I could say that I've been remiss during my years writing this column in not talking about **Robert Maxwell**, who reigned over the hugely successful **Pergamon Press** for nearly 40 years, except for four years in the 1960s, when **Saul Steinberg** of **Leasco Data Processing** wrested control away from **Maxwell**. (**Maxwell** had wanted to mount **Pergamon** journals on **Leasco's** computers so they could be distributed electronically — an idea 25 years ahead of its time.) **Maxwell**, justifiably, was one of the key figures — if not the key figure — in the rise of the commercial STM journal publishing business in the years after World War II. It was a time when the scope and size of government and university sponsorship of scientific research in one discipline after another accelerated dramatically.

I'm prompted to write about **Maxwell** because his name has surfaced in press accounts of the **Jeffrey Epstein** scandal and **Epstein's** having been found dead in a federal holding pen. The two men are linked through **Maxwell's** daughter, **Ghislaine**, the youngest of his nine children and his companion on his travels to the United States.

As of this writing, in August 2019, shortly after **Epstein's** death, there has been a spate of articles about **Ghislaine's** having been a British socialite, linked with **Prince Andrew**, **Donald Trump** and **Bill Clinton**; **Epstein's** girlfriend, after her move to New York in the early 1990s; and later allegedly the procurer of underage girls, which she denies. When her father is mentioned, the focus is often on his having been a media mogul considered a rival to **Rupert Murdoch**. Sometimes, his founding of **Pergamon Press** goes entirely unmentioned. STM publishing isn't sexy enough, apparently.

Pergamon's founding dates back to 1951. During World War II, **Maxwell**, a poor Czech Jew, was part of a group of European exiles who fought for the British army. After the war, when he worked for British intelligence in Berlin, he got a foot into publishing by importing **Springer Verlag** publications into the UK. At that time, the British government, petitioned by eminent scientists to fix the sorry state of British scientific journal publishing, formed a joint venture with **Butterworths** and **Springer**.

Maxwell was hired to run the new organization together with **Paul Rosbaud**, an Austrian metallurgist who had spied for the British on Nazi scientific activities and smuggled reports on German weaponry. When **Butterworths** abandoned the joint venture in 1951, **Maxwell** and **Rosbaud** bought it for 13,000 pounds. They named their new company **Pergamon**, after an ancient city near the Aegean Sea, which became highly influential during the Hellenistic Period. (**Rosbaud** left the company in 1956.)

It's not an exaggeration to say that **Maxwell** supercharged **Pergamon's** STM journal publishing. (The company also published reference books.) He expanded the journal list by introducing a new title whenever researchers and practitioners began to work on a new scientific or technical discipline or sub-discipline. He easily outstripped competitors. By 1959, **Pergamon** was publishing 40 journals, four times as many as **Elsevier** was publishing in English. By 1965, **Pergamon's** journal list numbered 150. **Elsevier** didn't reach 50 until four years later. In the 1970s, **Maxwell** launched a boatload of life science journals — a hundred in 1974 alone, according to one account. (These numbers come from a June

continued on page 72

27, 2017 long-form *Guardian* article, “Is the Staggeringly Profitable Business of Scientific Publishing Bad for Science?” by **Stephen Bury**.) So much publishing activity could be justified by two insights: that journals covering the same discipline or sub-discipline don’t actually compete for subscribers and readers (papers are unique, after all) and subscription prices can be raised even as more and more journals are being published — providing, of course, that libraries have the wherewithal.

Maxwell knew how to make his journals succeed. Titles often started with “International Journal of,” a feature which recognized the growing globalization of scientific and technical work and research. He was adept at drawing journal editors and contributors close to him. According to a brief memoir written by **Brian Cox**, who worked at **Pergamon** for three decades, **Maxwell** himself made telephone calls to them and correspondence appeared above his signature. And he wasn’t bashful about wining and dining them, often at **Pergamon’s** splendid headquarters at a 53-room mansion, Headington Hill Hall, to which the company began migrating in 1959 from its original base in London.

It had been built for the **Morrells**, a local brewery family, who lived there for 114 years, until it was used as a military hospital during World War II, then as a rehabilitation center after the war ended. **Maxwell** leased Headington Hill Hall from the Oxford City Council, which had bought it from the **Morrells**. He and his wife renovated the property.

Maxwell was mercurial and autocratic. According to **Brian Cox**, **Maxwell’s** office was located in the mansion’s largest room. His desk was in the corner furthest from the door. To reach the desk, you would have to traverse a great expanse of floor. Upon arrival, you would

be asked a question. The correct answer would allow you to be seated and you would be given something to drink. Give the wrong answer, and you would have to remain standing.

Whatever his temperament and the way he treated his subordinates, he did know how to run a journal publishing business. Sales results were terrific. According to **Brian Cox**, journal circulation grew by five to ten percent each year during the 1960s. Prices must have increased, as well. One advantage of continually growing the number of titles, **Cox** notes, was that older, established titles would subsidize newer titles that were still finding their audience.

If you were to propose a candidate for founder of the modern commercial journal publishing business, could you find a better candidate than **Robert Maxwell**? He was cosmopolitan; he’s said to have spoken nine languages and he spoke BBC English. He was no doubt able to exhibit enthusiasm for scientific discovery and for the means of reporting on discoveries. He was adept at deferring to the wishes of scientists and he knew how to pamper them with his nosh and his wines. He managed to become the confidant of his authors and editors, through flattery, no doubt, and with his continual telephoning and correspondence. He recognized an obligation to please editors and authors with speed of journal article publication, as well as with the physical quality of his journals. He was fearless in expanding **Pergamon’s** journal portfolio. There were his insights about pricing and competition. He ran his company like a dictator so that, I presume everything would be done his way, which in his mind — and the results spoke for themselves — was the right, and only way to get done what had to be done.

Unfortunately there was also a great appetite for status, fame, and fortune. **Maxwell** was driven around in a Rolls-Royce; there was a helicopter and a 200-foot yacht, called the *Lady Ghislaine*. He served as a Labour Member of Parliament from 1964 to 1970.

He bought the London based **Mirror Group Newspapers** in 1984. He bought the American publisher, **Macmillan**, for \$2.6 billion. He was chairman of a British professional football team. He owned, among other properties, **Nimbus Records**, **Prentice Hall Information Services** and the **Berlitz** language schools. He also owned a half-share of **MTV** in Europe and other European television interests. In 1990, he founded a transnational newspaper, *The European*, which I can actually remember reading. (It folded in December 1998.)

His reputation, outside of STM journal publishing was in bad shape. Except for the **Mirror Group**, British press barons refused to sell their properties to him. The satirical weekly, *Private Eye*, called him the “Bouncing Czech,” a nickname **Prime Minister Harold Wilson** had bestowed on him when he was an MP. He was continuously litigious.

In 1991, **Maxwell** was so much in debt (he’d recently scooped up the *NY Daily News* when it was in bad straits, not a smart financial move) that he had to sell **Pergamon**. **Elsevier** bought the company, which published thousands of reference works, in addition to the journals, for 440 million pounds — something like a billion pounds today — which strikes me as a steal. Then his life really ended. He went missing off his yacht near the Canary Islands and was later fished out of the sea. It was, most likely, suicide. He was facing not only mounting debts, but also the impending revelation that he had bilked his employees’ pension funds. (Conspiracy theories still abound, however, perhaps due to allegations that he was an agent of Israel’s Mossad.) His death and disgrace may be the things he’ll be remembered for, more so, I would guess, than for his **Pergamon** stewardship — for better or worse, depending on where you stand on the creation of modern commercial STM journal publishing. 🌿

Considering Games in Libraries and Such — On using a Game to Actually Teach Something. Part I: The Accidental Learner

Column Editor: **Jared Alexander Seay** (Media & Services Coordinator, Addlestone Library, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC 29424; Phone: 843-953-1428) <seayj@cofc.edu> blogs.cofc.edu/seayj

Does using a game to teach actually work? If so, to what degree does it work? Without fully admitting (yet) to a full-blown existential crisis, such thoughts of imparting knowledge to students using the medium of games or gaming or gamification has given me pause. I suppose this often happens when one starts to apply a pet pedagogy only to find that real life is a bit more complicated than what’s on paper. It’s not unlike the feeling one gets after acquiring a new puppy, and thoughts of

“what was I thinking” pop up during moments of cleaning “accidents” off the carpet and finding your third pair of chewed up shoes. It is that moment of fleeting panic when you realize you are fully committed now and turning back would be as painful as chucking the whole idea. Though this may not be an existential crisis, I think it is at least a panic attack.

About a month or so ago my application was accepted for a small teaching grant to create escape rooms for teaching. The application

narrative is a bit more complicated than your traditional escape game experience. But, without getting into details, let’s just say that my concept includes several game mechanics in addition to traditional escape games. The concept is, I believe, sound. But, of course, now it is time to make it work practically. Practical application: a tricky thing that.

Throughout this column, and most of my waking life, I have extolled the virtues of the

continued on page 73