

Course Check: Three open access publishers on the challenges of sustainability

A follow-up to the SPARC-ACRL Forum on Emerging Issues in Scholarly Communication, June 2007

INTERVIEW I:

Mark Patterson
Director of Publishing, Public Library of Science

June 23, 2007

The three interviews in this series were conducted by Alma Swan of Key Perspectives Ltd., for SPARC and ACRL, with executives from three leading open access publishers: Mark Patterson, director of publishing for the Public Library of Science; Bryan Vickery, deputy publisher for BioMed Central; and Paul Peters, director of business development for Hindawi Publishing Corporation. Additional materials are available at www.arl.org/sparc/meetings/ala07.

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Interview I - MARK PATTERSON, Public Library of Science – June 23, 2007

ALMA: What is the current role of the print journal in your product portfolio, and how significant are print sales for your business and its sustainability?

MARK: Currently we aren't doing any bulk printing of our journals. But it was really important at the very beginning, especially when we were getting *PLOS Biology* and *PLOS Medicine* off the ground, that we provide a tangible product that would develop a sense of trust in the kind of product that we were producing. Initially it was really a marketing tool used to help get the journals established. But now, several years later, print has become less important, and all of our efforts really are now focused on developing the online journals. We have a print-on-demand service that authors or anyone else can use for reprints of whole issues or even subscriptions, but currently that's not a major source of revenue for us.

ALMA: So is print publishing fading out of your business?

MARK: At the moment, yes. But it may become important again as we develop the print-on-demand service and make it more sophisticated and personalizable.

ALMA: The issue of moving money from subscription budgets to pay for article processing charges worries librarians and it also rather infuriates them because they feel that some publishers are double-charging them. I wonder if you could comment on how you think this is working out at the moment. How is this money moving or is it moving at all, and do you see it moving in the future? Where is your money coming from?

MARK: I think long-term one might expect that the billions of dollars that currently support subscription-based journals will be rerouted. The major source that's paying the publication fees for our journals is coming from authors' grants and from their funding agencies. Of course many funding agencies support the idea of using grants to pay open access publication fees because publishing is an integral part of the research process, and so publishing fees are a legitimate cost of doing research. Some funding agencies are providing additional funds to make that possible for authors. So that's one route. The other really interesting thing that's happened just in the last week or two is that Nottingham University has created a fund to help pay open access publishing fees for researchers at the university. The money that makes up that fund comes from the indirect expenses associated with grants. The research councils in the UK stated in their position statement last year that this was a legitimate way of supporting open access, but it was really a decision that had to be made at the institutional level. It has the potential to be a scalable mechanism for supporting open access. At this point, I don't think that fund has diverted money away from the library, but I think there will be a diversion of funds at some point.

ALMA: You're seeing a rise in submissions, you reported that. Do you know why that's happening?

MARK: I suspect it's because of the publishing strategy we took, which was essentially to start at the top of the pile and launch two journals, *PLOS Biology* and *PLOS Medicine*, that were completely committed to being open access alternatives to top tier subscription-based journals. And I think that has certainly attracted authors to PLOS as a whole. So when we

launched *Computational Biology, Genetics, and Pathogens*, they took off very rapidly in terms of submissions. And submission to *PLOS 1* took off incredibly fast when we launched it six months ago. Last month we had over 200 submissions to *PLOS 1* alone, and in the most recent quarter we had 1,500 submissions overall.

ALMA: So they're attracted by the quality?

MARK: I think so.

ALMA: Do you have any policy on supporting data at the moment? Are you doing anything to help authors post their data on your Web site along with their article?

MARK: We have editorial policies in which we require authors to deposit data into those databases that are established for their particular communities, so that's one thing that depends on the community and depends on the field. In addition to that, we encourage authors to provide data as supplementary information when there isn't a database available. I think there's a lot of work to be done amongst all publishers. So perhaps in the future we will use the e-publishing platform that's currently supporting *PLOS 1* and be able to provide data in more useful formats that could be reanalyzed and reused and even annotated and commented on in much the same way as a *PLOS 1* article. So I think that's a direction that we'd like to go in.

ALMA: Which brings me to another question. You often emphasize when you speak about the difference between free access and open access. Could you just reiterate how you define free access and open access, and why they are important?

MARK: I think they are tremendously important, first of all, and I think they are also quite underappreciated, particularly in the research community. And the reason I say that is because some of our own authors come to us and ask if they can reuse their figures, so clearly the message isn't really getting across to the extent that one would want. Open access does two things: it makes the literature freely accessible and removes any restrictions on reuse, but it also increases the utility of the literature. And what that means is that you can reuse the literature in any way without asking permission from the author or the publisher. So you can do translations, you can do data analysis, you can use the literature for text mining--you can do whatever you want. And I think that's the key to making the literature a much more powerful resource for research, for education, and for any other purpose. And so that's why I always try and emphasize that in my talks.

ALMA: Finally, *PLOS 1* is very innovative, I think, and it's exploring new ways of doing the peer review part of the publishing process. Could you say a few words about how that's going and explain how you use peer review with it?

MARK: Before an article is published, it is peer reviewed. And the editors and reviewers ask questions about technical rigor and about whether the work has been properly described, properly reported, and ethically conducted. What they're not asking is how important the work is, which is traditionally a question that would be asked before publishing the work in a journal. Is this work good enough for my journal? We don't ask that question. The idea with *PLOS 1* is that publication isn't an end point, the peer review process continues even after the work has been published. So what we've done is to provide the technology and functionality for any user to annotate and to comment on an article. Within the next

few weeks we'll be introducing a mechanism for rating articles according to various criteria. The idea is that it is possible to make judgments about papers after they've been published. Other users will see the impact this work is having based on the comments that are being generated. It will also provide another mechanism for sorting out important versus less important papers. The usage is reasonable at the moment, but we're certainly going to put a lot more effort into making the technology better and to really getting the message across to the user community.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]