

My Life as an Editor - Bob Campbell



By the time you read this, Bob Campbell, Senior Publisher at Wiley, will have stepped down. Bob has had an exceptional career in publishing spanning more than four decades. Here he shares some of his experiences, insights, highs and lows of a life well spent in publishing.

Bob, can you tell us a little about your formative years?

I was brought up in an isolated old farmhouse north of Oxford; electricity reached us when I was 13. As a boy, I spent most of my time outside stalking animals or fishing, and this didn't change much when I went to Marlborough College. After leaving secondary education, I worked for a brief spell as a junior technician in the cardiology department at Oxford University, a job that included being the anaesthetist for vivisections. Subsequently, I worked on a farm in the Dordogne, France and gained a wide experience of ancient tractors, building (converting barns to houses) and wine.

When I went to Aberdeen University, the zoology department was fairly relaxed about me spending most of my time fishing, although the Professor (Vero Wynne-Edwards) caught up with me some years later: "As I put up with you for four years you should now publish my book." We were happy to.

My taking a degree in what was essentially ecology and ethology, then acquiring friends in these subjects during my time living in Oxford, probably led, in later years, to Blackwell building up a successful programme in books and journals in these subjects. To have this picked up by the British Ecological Society, which made me an honorary member in 2011, was one of the high points of my publishing career.

Unlike many in your line of work, you entered the world of publishing at the beginning of your career. Was this a deliberate career strategy or something more serendipitous?

When I graduated in 1968, Frances and I were planning our wedding, so finding a job quickly was a priority. The options at this point were a horse racing column or a post in publishing. Fortunately for all concerned, Per Saugman at Blackwell Scientific Publications (BSP) hired me, probably because my father was a well-known ornithologist rather than because of any aptitude I displayed at interview. At that time medicine was BSP's great strength, and Per tasked me with building up a book list outside the subject of medicine. Although journals seemed more promising, I persisted with the book list for years, as BSP considered itself to be primarily a book publisher. On the positive side, I did a great deal of travelling to universities and research institutes, which enabled me to build up a network that would become so valuable during my time as a journal publisher.

What took you from books to journals?

Looking back, I should have switched to journal publishing earlier. Although I launched my first two journals in 1971 - *Freshwater Biology* and the *Journal of Biogeography* - and started to work more with societies, journals were a sideline throughout the 1970s, along with helping to manage a couple of start-ups (Micromedia and Oxford Microform Publications) which we sold off at a considerable gain before the technology was left behind. I co-authored a book about microform publishing with Peter Ashby and a book on coastal birds with my father, both of which sold better than my later works on journal publishing.

Although in the 1970s there was the usual doom and gloom about the future of journals and the likely breakdown of the peer review system, the negativity increased with the realization in the early 1980s that new technology could change everything. I felt that the journal would not be replaced but would evolve with the technology. Thus our strategy was to expand our journals programme so that when change occurred we would have sufficient titles to get us a place at the "top table". By this time we had a great young team plus a more senior colleague, Keith Bowker, who converted from a traditional book sales director to being one of the most effective journals directors in the industry, especially when it came to looking after learned societies.

What prompted your move into management?

When I succeeded Per Saugman as Managing Director in 1987 I had little conventional senior management experience - I had not even produced an annual budget. Nigel Blackwell said in November 1987 that it would be nice to see a budget for the next year, so Jon Conibear and I knocked one out on the bonnet of our car on the bank of the Tweed; we agreed no fishing until the task was completed. The budget proved to be as accurate as any much more sophisticated later efforts.

What was it like being "the boss"?

Running Blackwell Science Ltd (BSL) (we changed the name from BSP) from 1987 to 2000 was a huge job. But, just as I was lifted by colleagues in our drive for growth through journals in the 1980s, in taking BSL global to become one of the major STM publishing companies by the end of the 1990s I was supported by a tremendous team and of course the relationships with well-run partner societies. After merging BSL with Blackwell Publishers to form Blackwell Publishing (BPL) in 2001, we had the stimulus of working with new colleagues. I learnt a lot from them, in particular from René Olivieri - as he pointed out we offered a near 24-hour management service as I would work until 2 am and René would start at 5 am.

You have been very involved with the newer innovations in publishing - how do you see the evolution of electronic publishing and the challenges that it brings?

Much depends on the durability of pre-publication peer review and the other value added by publishers. We seem to be

evolving towards a mix of the established model for scholarly communication, variants from this model and complementary social media, all made more effective by search engines, mining and enhancements to peer-reviewed content.

The main drivers for change are the research funders, who have only become part of scholarly publishing in the last ten years. When we put an idea to funders in the 1990s they said we were mad even to consider that they might pay for anything other than research. As they now see dissemination and impact as part of their mission and governments continue to invest in R & D, we are entering a new era. The challenge is to evolve a more complex scholarly communication system with our traditional partners (researchers/authors, teachers, libraries and societies) and funders.

Can you tell us a little about your involvement with the UK Finch Group?

After the sale of BPL to Wiley, I landed up with a different role as Senior Publisher. It's been great fun. I remained involved in publishing, particularly with learned societies, but took on "government affairs" with Pat Kelly. We worked closely with the trade associations representing academic publishing in policy debates in Brussels and in the UK. When the Finch Group was first being discussed within the UK Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, we argued for representation from learned societies as an important but overlooked element in scholarly communication. This was

supported by HEFCE and other organizations and I feel we ended up with a fair balance of interests.

Our brief was to widen access to journals. The important initial assumption was that we are looking at a mixed economy. We made it clear that a considerable investment would be required to move ahead of the rest of the world in widening access. The UK Government has made a bold policy decision in deciding to provide extra funding to universities to pay Article Publication Charges, but it has put pressure on universities by only partially subsidizing the cost of Gold ("author pays") open access. After an initial rough patch, I feel the implementation of such a policy has brought research funders and publishers closer together.

If you had not gone into the publishing world, what do you think you would have been doing these last 40 years?

It is difficult to imagine anything else so stimulating, mixing working on practical issues with the excitement of evolving technology and ideas. When I had an X-ray of my right hand recently after an accident, the doctor said he was surprised to find I appeared to be an office worker when my bones indicated a manual worker. I do prefer to be working outside whenever possible and have built up a farm, which has included planting woods and hedges and has enabled us to win various conservation grants. Perhaps a career in conservation might have been possible but I doubt that I would have done so well.

Correspondence

Criteria for selecting members of editorial boards

I agree with most of Armen Gasparyan's criteria for choosing members of an editorial board.¹ Armen recommended that editors should be good authors but I would put more emphasis on editors being good reviewers. Reviewers who provide thoughtful, helpful comments on manuscripts, express their concerns clearly, write tactfully and submit their comments promptly are likely to be an asset to an editorial board. Superficial and consistently late comments, in contrast, may reflect a disorganized person not suited to being an editor or someone with too little time and interest to invest in the journal, regardless of their qualifications as an author. I have found that reviewing skills are particularly helpful for identifying younger editors who have not yet accrued a long publication record and editorial experience.

Editorial boards also need specialists, eg for my journal an expert on animal welfare, and a statistician is essential.² Finally, in a recent study, editors knew surprisingly little about authorship, plagiarism, peer review and conflicts of interest,³ suggesting a need for better training.

Angela Turner

Managing Editor, Animal Behaviour

angela.turner@nottingham.ac.uk

References

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Penalty for low impact factor

Despite several initiatives to eliminate the use of journal-based metrics in funding, appointment and promotion, the ISI Impact Factor (IF) is used increasingly for such purposes. In the Netherlands, at least one academic institution not only stimulates publication in high-IF journals, but also actively discourages publication in low-IF journals. For a designation as "principal investigator", researchers are required to publish at least eight papers in three years in journals that are in the top 25% of the journal's ISI category. This may seem pretty tough, but even more demanding is to avoid low-IF journals. Every publication in a journal that is in the bottom 25% of its ISI category is punished with a penalty point and thus invalidates one of the "top papers". This regulation was deliberately introduced as a "malus" measure.

Arjan Polderman

Pharmaceutisch Weekblad, The Hague, The Netherlands

a.k.s.polderman@pw.nl