Thought leader interview: Alison Mudditt

ALISON MUDDITT

Executive Vice President, Higher Education Group

SAGE

The UKSG Editorial Board decided it might be interesting to invite some key thought leaders in the information industry to be interviewed for *The E-Resources Management Handbook*. A list of five questions was drawn up, ranging from the reasonably straightforward – "How long have you been in the industry and what is the most significant change you have seen?" – to questions for the professional seer – "Where do you see the industry going in the future?" A number of professionals from varying backgrounds – Stephen Abram, SirsiDynix; Martin Marlow, Ingram; Peter McCracken, Serials Solutions; Jim Mouw, University of Chicago; Alison Mudditt, SAGE – agreed to be interviewed. The resulting material makes fascinating reading, giving a range of very different per-spectives on the information industry at this time of change and upheaval.

Why are you in this industry?

Like many people, I sort of fell into the industry after university while I was trying to decide whether to go back and do a PhD. I got a good job at Blackwell's in Oxford and I have just stayed in the industry. What I've always enjoyed about it is the two sides of the business: the business side – and the challenges of the business side – and the academic side. I love being in the scholarly publishing industry. It means being able to have a stake in the academic world. The publishers I've worked for – Blackwell, Taylor & Francis and SAGE – have always had a strong commitment to the importance of the scholarship that they published. They see a role for 'making the world a better place'. That's something at the heart of the divisions of SAGE. The company that Sara McCune founded 43 years ago aimed to give social science a stronger impact on public policy. There is a role for the social sciences there and that's an important part of what we do.

How long have you been in the industry and what is the most significant change you have seen?

I've been in academic publishing for 20 years and I think the most significant change I have seen during that time has to be the shift in the journals business to a primarily online business from a totally print-based business. When I was first at Blackwell, around 1990, discussions about online journals were just beginning. We were concerned about whether the journals business would change dramatically. Would there be one year when suddenly the renewals didn't come in? There hasn't been a dramatic shift or step change in that sense, but the journals business now looks entirely different to a decade ago. That's had an impact in all areas; not just what we do as publishers but how users search for and use information. Users are now searching for and accessing information primarily online and that obviously has an impact on how libraries are processing and delivering that information. It's been a tremendous change across the business and as technology moves ahead we will continue to see change.

What will replace Google?

I think Google is absolutely great at what it does and I don't think anything will replace Google as such. At this point in SAGE – and this is true for other publishers – most of our traffic comes through Google. One of the things we've had to learn and understand as publishers over the last five or six years is that most of the interfaces to our content that users are going to discover are ones that were created by

somebody else – whether it's Google or another search engine. So our focus is around optimising our content for all the different search interfaces, whether it's something like Google or a library interface.

Google is good at what it does, but that doesn't mean that either publishers or librarians should give up search to Google. With more and more information out there, there's going to be a demand for more robust searching and filtering mechanisms to help people to work their way through this ever expanding mass of information. Librarians and publishers know their users in the academic market better than Google can or ever will. So it's not about what will replace Google, but what will complement Google.

What has been your biggest disappointment (in a work context)?

One of the things that I find disappointing in academic publishing is that the perception of publishers has become somewhat tarnished over the last 10 or 15 years. This is something a lot of publishers are struggling with. For a long time publishing was viewed as a somewhat fusty but generally benevolent profession, but I think we've lost some of the respect that we once had. This may have been driven to some extent by pricing policies – pricing policies on the serials side and also on the text-book side – but also the dramatic shifts we're seeing in our marketplace at the moment. Having said that, everybody I know in the industry is fully committed; they're in it for very similar reasons to the reasons I'm here, which is a real belief in the information we provide, the services we provide, and the value of that information.

Where do you see the industry going in the future?

It's hard to say exactly where things are going. Some trends are certainly going to continue. One is obvious – the move of information online rather than in print. So far it's been primarily in the serials market. On the book side it's more in reference with a spill-over into other books. A lot of e-book experiments so far haven't been that successful, but I'm sure that will change.

Over the last few years there has been an explosion of user-generated personalized content using social networking tools of various kinds, and that is a trend that will continue. Both publishers and librarians are going to have to find ways to respond to this.

There are really two potentially opposing trends that can co-exist: greater fragmentation, but at the same time, continuing consolidation, on the publisher side. Even large- to medium-sized companies have become part of the few large conglomerates and that will continue. The cost of entry for a small publisher – certainly on the journals side with the cost of electronic publishing and distribution – has become almost prohibitive. When you compare a company like SAGE – even though we are number five in terms of the number of journals we publish – with numbers one and two (Elsevier and Springer), there's a dramatic difference in size. So if it is pretty difficult for a publisher like SAGE to compete, then it becomes very hard, if not impossible, for smaller publishers.

But there are opportunities for entrepreneurial publishers who are really focused on high quality products. One that I admire greatly is Alexander Street Press, based in Virginia and run by Stephen Rhind-Tutt. They are producing very high quality electronic databases – primarily in the humanities – and they're doing really well. So it goes to show that in a world of information overload, there is still a role for publishers in providing a service, commissioning and selecting.

That's a lot of what my role at SAGE is about. We're lucky in that we are privately held and will remain privately held for the long term, which allows the senior management team to think about how we ensure that we are still here and thriving in 20 years' time. We are going to have to weather some tough times. There is a healthy long-term future for libraries and publishers, but things are going to continue to change and look very different.

At this point I don't think there is a clearly defined future for the industry. There are a number of possible futures and in all likelihood what we'll see as we move forward is the co-existence of a number of different business models. Open access is a good example. SAGE is trying to take an open stance on open access and experimenting with a number of different open access business models. We're seeing it not as something that completely decimates scholarly publishing, but as something that becomes an important part of the mix as we move forward.

Alison Mudditt was interviewed for UKSG by Catherine Jamieson on 18 October 2008

To view more thought leader interviews and more chapters from
The E-Resources Management Handbook, published by UKSG, click here:

http://www.uksg.org/serials/handbook.asp