## Keynote Address

# The Journals Crisis: Origins And Resolution

*Gordon Graham,*
*Editor "Logos", UK*

With a topic like "the journals crisis", I have to believe that this record attendance is to some extent a worry index. We at least can go away less worried, if only because we learn that everyone else is also worried. Or perhaps we find out we have been worrying about the wrong things. We all tend to over- emphasise the economic aspects of everything. Prices are "high"; funding is "limited"; reprography is "cheap"; and profits, of course, are always "low". We are the victims of our own quantitative thinking. Behind every economic squeeze lies the inner crisis, which is always, in one form or another, loss of social purpose. In publishing, more than most human activities, there is a delicate balance between commerce and culture, between individual good and societal gain, and if we disturb that we have trouble. It is not a coincidence that the journals crisis has become acute in the 1980's, which will be remembered as a time of surfeit - too much growth and over-consumption. We are now entering a period of shake-out, and the only question of importance is how to manage it. We shall have to devalue our quantitative measurements - the amount written, the amount published, the amount bought and the amount sold. I include all the constituents of the scholarly enterprise in this. Quantity is a sterile way to measure an activity which cannot be better than the quality of its ideas.

What we call market forces are a process of re-evaluation. A tighter market improves quality, and we should welcome this. We don't need the statistics to tell us what is happening, but they are there if we need the evidence. Academic libraries are cancelling subscriptions. Less in real terms will be spent on serials in 1991 than in 1990. In the US, North Carolina State University alone has cancelled 3000 subscriptions in the past two years. The British Library is cancelling 1000 subscriptions this year. Fewer new journals are being started. The number of journals ceasing publication has increased annually although there is still a net increase in the number of serials in print, which is today close to 120,000. Publishers are responding by tightening schedules and improving quality. Publishing of all kinds is notorious for its bandwagon syndrome. Unless you disguise your prosperity so that no one is aware of it, you are going to have more and more competitors until the market is saturated. No market is unlimited. But we should welcome this. Market resistance is simply a discipline to encourage more quality.

But we shy away from the demand for higher quality. We look for alternatives to maintain growth. When the crisis was first evident, in the 1970's a favoured solution was that the reprography-prone journal would be replaced by the database and the terminal. We were going to have a paperless society. When? By 1990. This is the revolution that wasn't, not because the technology didn't work. It works very well. It's dandy for airline timetables, stockmarket prices, bibliographies, directories - any mass of material that needs to be searched. But not for scholarly journals. We should have recognised the weakness of the electronic option because its apostles always speak quantitatively. They do not speak of publishing, but of information, data, communications.

The computer and the terminal are magical for organisation, manipulation and searching of information, but paper remains the appropriate vehicle for the individual, fragmented, leisurely, opinionated, intellectual, eclectic fruits of research, study and reflection. We now know that the substantial effect of computer science on the journal has not been, and will not be, to replace it, but to make it easier to produce. That explains why publishers' main concern over the electronic media is to protect their copyright. They tend to leave the development and exploitation to information companies, who have great services to render when speed and mass are required.

Burdened, or blessed, with such traditional views, I demurred when you honoured me by inviting me to keynote this conference - unless, I wrote to Hazel Woodward, you want me to attempt that kind of lofty historical sweep of the subject which provides more food for thought than fuel for business.

My graduation from the corporate life has had two main effects: one is the gift of freedom. Released from the handcuffs of vested interests, one can look meditatively at the past, the present and the future. History becomes more meaningful, especially that in which you have played a part. History experienced imposes a duty to attempt to transmit its meanings downstream. Publishing houses, like all commercial enterprises, are bad at recording their history. They have no memories, and little interest in the future beyond next year's budget. The members of most commercial enterprises are too absorbed in their daily efforts to feel curious about the experiences either of their predecessors of their successors.

A second effect of my release from the executive life has been increased creativity. As the editor of a newly launched journal, I perceive afresh that writing, editing and production are an art and a science, before they are a business. These are processes of exacting perfectionism, processes incapable of being mechanised, which makes publishing, of all businesses, the least quantifiable and among the most satisfying.

So with this improved perspective, freedom, and creativity, why not look at some of the early struggles of journal publishing enterprises that are today large and successful? We might learn something.

Journal publishing, as we know it today, effectively began in 1946. Of the 700 new journals started in that year, 300 were in the United States and 400 in Europe. The rate of new launches increased up to 1980 when there were 3000 or more. In 1991 we are below the 1946 level: 700 launches and 400 demises. Two things to notice about the 700 start-ups in 1946: Most of them are still going. Journals have this fearful problem of longevity. The other is that we should marvel that there were more journals started in war-devastated Europe than in the vast powerhouse of the United States in the year following the end of World War II. The strengths of the European journal publishers were born at that time and in the succeeding decade.

Somebody had vision. Without any overall history to study, one can only deduce fragments from occasional company histories. In every journal at which I looked, forty years ago the impetus sprang from the partnership between the publishers and the scholars. The publishers were small and poor, but they had a vision of the world. They appointed international advisory boards. And the Europeans recognised, before the Americans, that the United States had become and would remain not only a major consumer of scientific and scholarly publications, but also a major originator of research. These early practitioners were responding to a moment of opportunity, prompted, on the side of the sciences, by the strategic value of scientific information, and, in the social sciences and the humanities, by the urge to build a better world.

There was quite a struggle in the late 1940's between the British and the American victors to determine who would pick up the bits of German scientific publishing. Springer, Pergamon and Butterworths had a triangular, complicated relationship which was concluded when Robert Maxwell purchased the Butterworth list of scientific books and periodicals in 1951, for the sum of £13,000 and founded Pergamon Press. With the sale of Pergamon to Elsevier, Maxwell has now said goodbye to the business which made him and, at one stage, almost broke him.

I am sure he has neither time nor inclination to regret that he has said goodbye to scholarly publishing, to which he devoted more than half of his professional life; the kind of publishing which is slow in the building, satisfying to the intellect and involves a greater sense of partnership with its authors and readers than any other.

Maxwell understood this from the outset of his astonishing career. Cultivation of the scholarly community, combined with his financial acumen, were a winning combination. Nine years after he bought four Butterworth journals, Pergamon had 59 journals. These did not come spontaneously to the door. Maxwell worked at it night and day, devoting his endless energy to cultivating the scientific community, who came to his defence when he lost his company.

The story of Pergamon illustrates the extraordinary marriage between commerce and culture, each driven by the imperative of growth, which brought previously unimagined impetus to the scholarly journal in the second half of the 20th century.

There are many other such stories. Only a few miles from Pergamon, under the banner of the traditional and quintessentially English house of Blackwells, another scientific publishing house was being built in the 1950's also by an immigrant from the mainland of Europe. Per Saugman arrived in England in 1948, and by the mid-1950's he was into the journals business. Blackwell Scientific now publish about 130 journals. Their story also illustrates the creative partnership between scholars and publishers, each becoming indispensable to the other.

Elsevier have published a history of one of their journals, which fully illustrates this thesis. Biochimica et Biophysica Acta first appeared in January 1947. The subscription was $9. It was published in Holland, but only one of the editorial board was Dutch. The others were British, Russian, American, French and Danish. It was a source of great financial worry for its first few years. By 1950 there was a cumulative loss of 102,500 florins. But by the 1960's, BBA was in no way a European journal. Most of the papers came from the United States. The board had 135 members. Today it is a large journal in the Elsevier stable of 856 journals.

Springer, another European leader in English-language journals, published their first journal in English in 1957. It was The Archive for Rational Mechanics and Analysis. Today Springer have 219 journals in English compared with 47 in German.

The older established British journal publishing houses equally demonstrated that the secret of successful journal publishing is collegiality with the academic constituencies. But they did not have the hunger and concentration of Springer, Elsevier, Pergamon or Blackwell. Why did not Macmillan, publishers of Nature, become leading scientific journal publishers; or Hodders, publishers of The Lancet, leading medical publishers? They had other things to do, as did OUP and CUP, both of whom are substantial journal publishers. Taylor and Francis would make an interesting study of academic partnerships.

This partnership is the common strand which can be found in the history of all journal publishers. The contributors, the advertisers and the readers of each journal form a homogeneous constituency, and that is the strength to this day, which makes the journal business impervious to economic forces which would drive, and have driven, other forms of publishing into recession long ago. Unfortunately, this partnership has seldom been consciously extended to include librarians. A mistake of journal publishers in the past was to regard librarians merely as customers. A mistake of the academics was to regard them merely as storehouses. Now both have learned that librarians are also the keepers of the purse.

The growth of journal publishing in United States, where 55,000 of the 120,000 serials in Ulrich's are published, illustrates the same principle of partnership, but with significant variations. There is considerable evidence that the idea of a journal serving a world community was European in origin. US journals have tended, and many still tend, to serve only their national communities, which are large enough to support them. It is interesting to note how some of the larger US journal houses were founded by European immigrants, such as Walter Johnson, who founded Academic Press, or Maurits Dekker and Eric Proskauer, who founded Interscience, which became part of John Wiley. The university presses and professional societies in the United States are much more powerful than in Europe, where the scope for such institutions is limited by the many cultures and languages.

Replicating these histories one hundred and twenty thousand times, can it now be imagined that the journals business is in serious jeopardy? Every one of the serials now in print is based on the beliefs and enthusiasms of its aficionados. This explains why many small, specialised journals continue to exist against the odds. They draw on the voluntary unpaid services not only of contributors, but also of editors and publishers. They are both fragile and vigorous. For every one that dies, another springs up, aided by the proliferation and fragmentation of disciplines. Professor Irving Louis Horowitz of Rutgers University, who has, remarkably, combined the careers of professorship and journal publishing, agrees that journals survive and grow according to their own economic laws. Expanding faster than the constituencies they serve, they grow as a function of academic requirement - the desire to be published. This is probably the most serious weakness of the business today. There is a danger that being published is becoming more important than being read. Horowitz relates that while the membership of the American Sociological Association has not grown during the last 20 years, the number of sociology journals has doubled in that time.

But as the statistics I cited earlier indicate, journals are not immune to market forces. These forces take less obvious forms. The resistance of universities to the free-loading use of their facilities by campus-based specialist journals - another topic on which Horowitz expatiates, and on which he is no doubt an authority - is a form of market resistance. The questions now being asked about the validity of a system whereby academic authors seek to prove by publication that they have satisfactorily completed their research projects and are entitled to promotion, or at least a further research grant, are another form of market resistance. But the principal market resistance obviously comes from the librarians, not willingly, because their funding problems conflict with their own sense of duty to provide comprehensive services.

Against these forces, the journal displays a unique inner durability. That which takes decades to build, responding to the enthusiasm of a tightly-knit community, and which makes no demands on their individual pockets, is not easily rebuffed. So the strengths of journals can be summed up as follows:

- 1. A strong sense of partnership between the publisher as editor and the scholar as both author and reader.
- 2. The serving of well-defined communities.
- 3. The fact that they are habit-forming.
- 4. The fact that they are purchased mostly with institutional funds.
- 5. The fact that they grow in response not to simple demand, but to the proliferation of

research, the fragmentation of knowledge and the irrepressible enthusiasm of all scholars for their chosen disciplines.

If these are their strengths, revealed and established by history, what are the defects? I shall not dwell on the more obvious ones - the ease of reprography, which was not foreseen in the 50's and 60's; the tendency towards self-perpetuation, whereby the existence of the journal evokes matter which could have remained unwritten without loss to humanity; the ambiguities of copyright; and the progressive annexation of library budgets.

But I would like to expatiate on two defects, which are not often examined. One concerns the publishers. Journal publishing has become too attractive. This is mainly because of the cash flow, which with the rising interest rates of the last two decades, has become more important than the profit margin. Once you have a stable of established journals, it is not difficult to start new journals with the cash which they generate. The crucial moment in the life of a journal is generally about the third year. If it survives and becomes viable, and provided the discipline it serves does not begin to fade, a journal becomes the kind of assured income which is very attractive in the volatile world of publishing today, particularly to the financial mind. This in turn explains concentration of ownership in journal publishing, because the larger an enterprise the more influential the financial mind becomes. Market resistance, in the form of cancelled subscriptions, reluctance to subscribe to new journals, document supply and resource-sharing - has a salutary influence, not externally visible, on concentration of ownership. It can result, for example, in closures; in the spinning-off of less attractive journals into the hands of small publishers who, because of their lower overheads, personal management and specialisation, are able to run profitably journals which are unattractive to larger organisations. So the pressure from the market place is salutory. Librarians are quite right to cultivate qualities foreign to their gentle natures, even to verge into militancy.

The second defect I want to dwell on is on the side of the academics, where I see excessive worship of research and the desire to see it published as having contributed to the crisis. We should not criticise the system whereby publishing can lead to professional advancement, but question whether the use of it has reached unhealthy proportions. The problem is imbalance. A most regrettable effect of this imbalance has been, in my opinion, the decline of the monograph. It worries me that nobody seems to mourn about it. Publishers don't want to publish them; scholars don't want to write them; and librarians don't want to buy them. The diversion of library funds from books to journals has done serious damage to literature. Creative effort which should be going into writing books, textbooks as well as monographs, has been diverted to journals. One has to suspect that books are less favoured both by authors and publishers because they offer less reward.

I am about to publish an article by Richard Abel of Portland, Oregon, which makes this point trenchantly. He distinguishes between the book-writing scholar who is devoted to the generation of knowledge and the journal contributor who is concerned with the discovery of information. By favouring the latter over the former, Abel maintains, scholars are neglecting their duty to generate knowledge. He has put this point to senior scholars, who have enjoyed substantial research grants; who are at the top of their professions; and all of whom have written and published standard books in their disciplines. "They are unanimous", Abel reports, "that the sole criteria in awarding rank, in improving salaries and in research grants are their journal papers. Their books, which in their personal view have marked their greatest contributions and involved their hardest work, counted for nothing".

So who is suffering from this diversion from books to journals? When I first became involved with academic publishing forty years ago, the major vehicles and the glories of the business were the college textbook and the monograph. In those days professors and lecturers seemed to spend most of their time teaching. They were always looking for better textbooks. Being invited to write a textbook was an eagerly grasped honour. Today, research is king, and the major volume of academic writing goes into journals, which can only deal with subjects fragmentarily, and are read too often as citations issued reprographically to give brief insights into the minutiae of the subject, instead of the broad grasp which is offered by a book. Books, not journals, are what libraries should be mainly concerned with. The fact that needed books are not being written and not being published for economic reasons is a scandal of which academics and publishers should both be ashamed. And librarians, who through their expenditure of acquisition funds are poignantly aware of this change of balance, should be the ones to draw attention to it.

To begin to draw these thoughts together, my message is that commercial considerations are too dominant in scholarly publishing today, and we are all guilty - publishers, academics, librarians, university presses and professional societies. Our duty to scholarship has become clouded by the pressures to make us pay our way. We ask "How much?" and "How many?" before we ask "How good?" and "How true?" The origins of today's journal crisis, seen externally in the pricing of the product, proliferation of titles and insufficiency of funds, lie in our motivations and priorities. Librarians and publishers and subscription agents can take a lot of credit for the dialogue and self-analysis in which they have engaged. Academics and university administrations on the other hand too often regard libraries and publishers as peripheral to the scholarly enterprise. Scholars have become too remote from their own support system. The discipline of the market place is calling attention to this, and quality control by publishers and librarians will cure it.

I do not share the view that books and journals are basically under threat. They are suffering only from our excesses. This suffering will cease when the balance between quality and quantity is restored. The other scenarios, put forward in many conferences and papers and articles, are part of the market discipline. There are three such scenarios. (I do not include among them the school of thought among some publishers which says that if libraries would just keep quiet and find more money we would all live happily ever after). The three scenarios are:

- 1. The electronic takeover.
- 2. The de-commercialisation of publishing.
- 3. The emergence of the invisible college.

The invisible college consists largely of the conference circuit, paid for with grants, plus all the forms of one-to-one communication between scholars within the same discipline. The fax machine, electronic mail, the telephone and the terminal are equipment of the invisible college, which would diminish the role of the library. Yet the members of such colleges still seek publication. And putting one's prose into a database is not publishing. One of the basic qualities of the book and journal which assures their perpetuity is tactility. Elia Kazan, the great film producer greeted publication of his first novel, at the age of fifty-five, with the words "A book! A book! I can hold it in my hands".

A quality of journals, which they share with the invisible colleges they serve, is transnationalism, a quality which the early European practitioners clearly perceived. In a world in which nationalism is still rampant, but slowly and painfully on the wane, the journal represents an ideal of boundary-less knowledge. It is ahead of its time.

To those urging that the electronic media will manage better the literature now conveyed in books and journals; and to those advocating that the academic institutions would do a better job disseminating their own research than as entrusting it to commercial publishers, the answer is "Go ahead". Journal publishing can only benefit from competition. The only caveat should be that the electronic and not-for-profit apostles should get their money from their own research funds and not poach it from libraries. Let the journal compete with the terminal; let the universities and scholarly communities compete with commercial publishers; let those scholars who wish set up their self-contained networks. The book and journal will continue to prosper. They are not passing through a crisis which will throw them into desuetude, but through a series of adjustable tremors. Adjustment will require librarians and publishers to continue their vigorous dialogue, and to draw academics into the debate. The solution will require us to modify the imperative of growth, and to use technology as the servant, not the master. The role of the book and the journal will not be to resist the electronic revolution but to provide, against the apparently uncontrollable flood of quantitative data, the essential life saving counterbalance of quality.

Looking over the large landscape of scholarly and academic publishing, as it was, as it is, and as, I believe, it will be, I see confirmation that those who cherish the roles of editors and authors are those who prosper. The ultimate security of journal publishing, and all folio publishing, is that it works at the level of the individual. As we polish a phrase for felicity, accuracy and style, we realise that doing it smaller is the freedom to do it better. Not only in publishing, I believe that the individual is regaining centre stage in a society which has been too much dominated by technology and institutions. One person writing, one person editing, one person reading, and all one word at a time. That is the heart and will remain the heart of the scholarly enterprise.