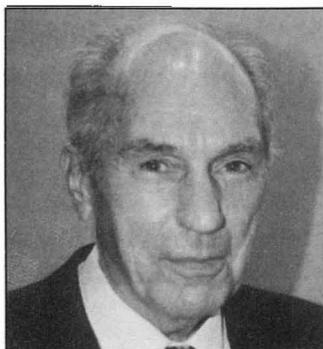


THE LOGOS EXPERIENCE

Gordon Graham



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Four years ago, when I retired from Butterworths, I felt I knew quite a lot about journal publishing. Butterworths by that time were publishing about a hundred journals. I consorted with editors. I was familiar with production methods, subscription numbers, break-even calculations and cash flow. I made speeches about the economics of publishing in which I justified pricing practices.

On one occasion, at one of these lively annual Conferences of US Academic Librarians held at Charleston in South Carolina, I revealed the circulation numbers and gross margins of each of the one hundred journals. That is to say, I displayed the names of the journals on one chart in alphabetical order, and the circulation and the gross profit percentages on another chart in descending order. The most profitable journal had a gross margin of 70%, and the least profitable a loss of 400%. My purpose was to point out that price is a product of number and that since it can take new journals many years to attain profitable numbers, mature journals have to carry new ventures.

US librarians (at least those at Charleston) are more vocal than their British counterparts. Although they seemed to find my frankness disarming, I could not make much of a dent on their suspicion that European journal publishers were enriching themselves at the expense of hard-pressed US libraries. In any case, I could speak only for Butterworths. At one point, one of the more militant librarians and I were shouting at each other across a crowded room, although not on an enchanted evening. I remember saying: "Your trouble is that you don't believe that publishers are capable of a decent act". It was all very invigorating, and quite in contrast with counterpart meetings in the UK, where decibels are low, and suspicion is expressed by courteous scepticism, with occasional pauses of wide-eyed disbelief.

After I graduated from Butterworths, I became a journal editor. In journal publishing, as in war, being closer to the action sharpens the vision. Everyone told me it was the worst possible time to start a journal, but I managed to persuade my old friend and colleague Colin Whurr that it was a good time to start this journal. In fact, I had no choice. I had had the idea for fifteen years. The time had come to move out of headquarters, and this means the front line, unless one elects to leave the battlefield. The first issue of LOGOS was published in April 1990.

Since it was a bad time anyway to launch a journal, we decided to break a few established rules. One is that successful journals always have discrete constituencies. LOGOS seeks a constituency

so geographically scattered and culturally disparate as to be difficult to find. Instead of capturing the membership of some dedicated society, united by its members' enthusiasm for some narrow-spectrum subject, we created a journal which by definition is inter-disciplinary and supra-national, and on top of that, eclectic. In our age of specialisation, everyone in the book and journal world - all the many different species of publishers, librarians, authors, booksellers, subscription agents, literary agents and so on - are busy with their own knitting. Our thesis is that it is a good idea to take occasional interest in everyone else's knitting, in order to see one's own in better perspective.

A second rule we broke was to make the journal physically lavish. In this we were aided and abetted by our 40-strong International Advisory Board whom we had selected on several simple criteria: they were all at the top of their professions; they were all articulate and strong minded; they all had a world view of the book community. One of their messages at our first meeting was: "Make this thing look good". And so we did. (Some established journals have changed their formats to resemble LOGOS in the past few years).

I am an old book publisher, and strongly attached to the belief that a book should feel good in the hands. I have never regarded a journal as being essentially different from a book. A journal should not be published to be thrown away. It is, indeed, a sequential book. We dramatise this, in the case of LOGOS, by issuing a cumulative index every year and offering subscribers portfolios to house back issues for archival reference.

Thirdly, we decided not to be scholarly. Our contributors write from their experience, not their research, which makes the journal discommendable to some librarians. From this follows our non-use of footnotes, which, as a reader, I compare to the doorbell ringing when you are making love. End notes are equally distracting, since they attempt to interrupt your post-climactic reverie. LOGOS also eschews abstracts on the grounds that authors are suitors and the editor should not presume to pre-empt their foreplay. But we do assist authors by flashing, in the body of their texts, some of their finer feathers - extracts in bold to catch the eye of

the running reader. And we do occasionally publish reading lists, since, after all, we are about the book business.

The recipe for articles is quite simple. We seek out leading people in a skill or art or profession or region and ask them to explain to their peers in other sectors of the book and journal community what they have learned, what they are doing, and where they are going. We call contributions pieces, not papers or articles. Most pieces arise in correspondence between the editor and prospective contributors, although, as time has gone on, we have begun to receive unsolicited pieces which fit into our recipe.

The editor is activist. He sees his job as ensuring that the contributor gets his or her message across. And having set the scene, he gets off the stage. We set a high store on readability. Texts travel back and forth between the editor and contributors, until both are satisfied. The text is then keyed and copy-edited by my partner Betty Cottrell.

The result is a journal which has been widely praised, but not widely purchased. One librarian-reviewer compared it to an ad-free *New Yorker*, but went on to say that since it was not a research journal he could not recommend purchase. Michael Webster, publisher of the *Australian Publisher and Bookseller*, said that the difficulty in attracting subscribers to LOGOS is that the journal is a "should-read", not a "must-read". LOGOS does offer a sort of challenge to publishers, librarians and booksellers: do they want serious and entertaining reading about the worldwide totality of the book community, or do they want to read only about topics which are 'close to their own immediate concerns? Book culture tends to be nation- and language-centred. This creates large gulfs to bridge.

Apart from the particular mission of LOGOS, it faces the questions that all journals face today, e.g. competition from other media, particularly media which can be accessed with less effort and expense.

Extraordinarily, some librarians will not even consider a journal unless it is cited in the relevant databases. All they want to do apparently is to call it up, or get copies of articles. Another basic challenge is that people everywhere have too much to read, and as a result are reading more

but in less depth. For LOGOS, this second challenge is compounded by the fact that those who publish and disseminate books, much though they read, do not regard themselves as "readers". They see the readers as people out there.

Those of us involved with LOGOS by definition seek to help dissolve adversary elements in the relationship between publishers and the rest of the book chain. The natural partnership between authors, publishers, librarians, booksellers and readers has been damaged by the commercial motive. The success of a book or a journal is judged too often on its numbers, too seldom on its quality. However, ideas do travel irrespective of numbers. We are often pleasantly startled by meeting or hearing from people who have heard of LOGOS or read it, but do not appear on the subscriber list. That's fine with us. The purpose of publishing is to be read. Fortunately, neither of the editors is trying to bring up a family, but we are intent on ensuring that the publisher some day makes a profit, not just so that he can have a return on his investment, but because profit in the end is the corollary of excellence. It would be simpler to go to a Foundation, or establish a Foundation, to publish LOGOS and give it away. But everyone benefits from the discipline of the marketplace.

As we start our fifth year, we know there are enough willing and interested subscribers around the world to make LOGOS a viable proposition. The only problem is to find them. They are either leaders in their professions or they are going to be. One of Britain's top librarians told me that LOGOS is the only journal he reads from cover to cover. But most reading is selective. We try to create sufficient variety in each issue so that there are some topics about which all the readers will immediately want to read. We entice them to read also the others.

Many LOGOS subscribers recognise that the journal is not office reading, and have it sent to their homes. In offices, the journal circulates, which is a slow process. But that does not worry us. The journal is not time-critical. The issues with which it deals were there yesterday, are here today and will be with us tomorrow. Our role is simply to act as a vehicle to transfer ideas across boundaries - professional, cultural, disciplinary and national.

One of the things which worries me about LOGOS is that it does not reach places where it is needed most. We receive letters from publishers, librarians and booksellers in the developing countries (both post-colonial and post-communist) saying how much they would like to read the journal but that they cannot afford it. In an attempt to serve their needs, we have set up the LOGOS Royalty Trust Fund, so called because we would like to recognise through the Fund the creative input of our honorary contributors. Once the Fund achieves charitable status, it will be modestly endowed by the editor for the purpose of making gift or subsidised subscriptions. Whurr Publishers also offer a 50% subscription to individuals or institutions who are ready to donate subscriptions to members of the book communities in countries where the price is out of proportion to the local purchasing power.

The LOGOS experience has confirmed my long-held belief that the journal as an institution will continue to flourish in the age of information-processing - provided each title has a distinct rationale, a clear mission and meets a need. That not particularly profound observation, in my opinion, explains how journal publishing as an industry has created its own recession in the last twenty years. What journal publishers have learned, and in some cases are still learning, is that their ultimate boss is the reader.