



Editorial

John Merriman

Please write to the Editor at:

*Thames Gardens, Charlbury,
Chipping Norton, Oxon OX7 3QH
E-mail: uksg@dial.pipex.com*

In October, I paid my last visit to the Frankfurt Book Fair to attend a meeting of the Association of Subscription Agents. A number of things struck me, apart from the outrageous cost of everything. The crowds were the same: a multitude of unknown faces, with just the odd chance of bumping into someone you knew.

Although the electronic halls continue to expand each year, paper is fighting back and many thousands of books and journals are on display, published in every part of the world. The giants and the pygmies cohabit alongside each other. The small independent publishers from rural England eagerly await the opportunity to sell the rights of their one or two titles. Happily, the world of the eccentric is not yet dead.

At the other end of the scale, the giants occupy vast areas of display space at a cost equal to the annual turnover of many small publishers. These super stands are manned by the bright young things of the glittering world of publishing still smiling after a punishing week of work and social activities, and thankful that at the weekend the bosses will have all gone home and left them in peace, mindful, however, that the following week they may have to face their performance reviews.

The Fair is a notorious place for gossip: who has changed jobs, who has been fired, etc. But the burning topic of conversation this year was the proposed merger of Reed Elsevier and Wolters Kluwer, together with the acquisition of the Current Science Group. This will create the giant of giants, something beyond even the wildest dreams of the late Robert Maxwell. The figures being bandied about are mind-boggling. One company publishing about 1,400 of the leading journals in science and medicine, with 42,000

employees. A few enquiries have revealed that about 30% of the journal expenditure of the average university will, in the future, be with one publisher. Are academic authors, editors and users happy with this, or is it of no importance? It certainly is for the subscription agents with so much of their turnover with one publisher. Even a minor adjustment of discount downwards would have a drastic impact on their net profit, and cause a knock-on effect on the prices charged to their customers, who increasingly would be enticed to deal direct. Companies with large financial resources and predatory policies appear to be unstoppable.

For those authors and editors who do not believe that big is beautiful, there are, fortunately, alternative choices of independent publishers with a good reputation like, for example, Taylor and Francis, Blackwell Science and of course the well-know university presses. Long may they keep their freedom.

While on the subject of growth, it is pleasing that the UK Serials Group continues to flourish with an all time record institutional membership of 572. Also, the number of pages in *Serials* indicates an increasing flow of worthwhile articles for publication. Worrying about whether we would have enough material to fill an issue is now a thing of the past.

We are considering a redesign to allow for more words per page, while at the same time taking into account aesthetic considerations. There are no plans to increase the length of the Editorial, thank goodness! A word of comfort for all librarians: no changes will be made in the middle of a volume.

John Merriman