

Profile: Michael Mabe



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Michael Mabe was speed-reading the Gowers report (*Gowers Review of Intellectual Property*) just before our interview, ready to field journalists' questions and, of course, to brief the members of STM (the International Association of Scientific, Technical and Medical Publishers) of which he is CEO. Michael took over this high profile position from Pieter Bolman in May of 2006, and is now settling into their brand new offices in Oxford.

Many will know Michael from his previous positions at Elsevier (latterly as Director of Academic Relations), where he had worked since 1986, when it was still Pergamon Press. In fact he has always worked in publishing, starting his career at OUP in the Oxford English Dictionary Department researching the history and writing the definitions of scientific vocabulary. Although he was originally intending to go to Bath University to do a PhD in new methods of carbon-dating, he needed to pay off his university debts, saw the OED advert in *Nature*, and was intrigued by the possibilities of using the Bodleian stacks for research into obscure etymology and philology. These interests may sound surprising coming from a St Catherine's College, Oxford chemistry graduate but, as the founder of the Oxford University Egyptological Society, and possibly one of few chemists able to read Ancient Egyptian, Greek and Latin, it was a perfect fit.

So started his career in publishing, and 26 years later he still has no PhD but is in the same profession. After OUP he left Oxford to take a position as Technical Editor at the British Standards

Institution, then based in Mayfair (although he nearly ended up at *Nature*), where he was working in mainstream scientific publishing for the first time. Although he hated the commuting, he was introduced to the delights of the Proms at the Albert Hall, and has since had an arena season ticket every year.

While looking round for other jobs, Michael was head-hunted by Pergamon Press to manage a small team producing scientific encyclopaedias. These were large-scale, tertiary-level works in systems and control, mathematics and engineering science which later on he also commissioned. In 1988 he had his first (but not last) encounter with Dr Pieter Bolman, who was in the process of introducing North-Holland-style active editorial management to Pergamon. Other notables in Pergamon at that time include Dr Peter Shepherd (now COUNTER) and Norman Paskin (now IDF). In 1990 Pergamon decided to develop a physical science editorial team and Michael was appointed Senior Publishing Editor for Materials Science reporting to Peter Shepherd, managing a programme of 35 journals and over 200 books. Elsevier acquired Pergamon Press in 1991 and Mike Boswood took over as its Managing Director. When Pergamon and the other Elsevier UK companies were brought together in 1994 under the single moniker of Elsevier Science Ltd, Michael was made an Editorial Director of the new entity.

Elsevier at that time was very federal in organization with each separate Elsevier company in each country managed semi-autonomously and

having its own (often overlapping) publishing programmes. By 1996, and as part of the development of Elsevier's ScienceDirect platform, there was a movement to bring these groups together under one roof, and in the globalization Michael was appointed as International Publishing Director for Materials Science. He says that this was like running a "mini-multi-national company" with offices and staff in many countries: good experience for the future.

Materials Science was one of the fastest growing programmes in Elsevier. During his tenure as its Director, Michael became interested in how the evolution of journals matched the evolution of scholars in a field, and how this could be measured and analysed. He began looking at growth curves and became interested in bibliometrics, the study of the science system through the relationship between references, authors and journals. It was at this time that he first read Derek J de Solla Price's classic, *Little Science, Big Science*, and was hooked.

The globalization of Elsevier had coincided with two other momentous events: the completion of the ScienceDirect electronic platform and Elsevier's transformation into a fully electronic publisher in terms of all its publishing processes as well as its products. These revolutionary changes had disrupted almost every department, changing the ways each interacted with the other and with the outside world. In 1998 Derk Haank became CEO of Elsevier and recognised that it was essential that the electronically born-again company reconnect with its academic authors and editors, rediscovering its publishing DNA. Part of this renaissance was to be an entirely new department focusing on understanding the author as a customer and reflecting that learning back into the management of the company. Derk encouraged Michael to take on this new dual-facing role which in 1999 led him to become Elsevier's Director of Academic Relations and a spokesperson for the company.

As head of Academic Relations, Michael spoke regularly around the world on the scholarly publishing system, directed research into the information behaviour of scholars, and authored a number of major papers with Mayur Amin on journal growth, on the abuse of impact factors, on quality and its measurement, and in scholarly publishing more generally. His department developed unique tools to measure the satisfaction of authors and editors with the journals they were involved in, continuous survey processes

involving sending out over 180,000 questionnaires and analysis of 65,000 returns each year, allowing the development of internal objective setting tools and quality benchmarks.

His research studies brought him into contact with Carol Tenopir, Don King and David Nicholas, and he got involved in teaching information science at University College London (where he has close links to the Centre for Publishing Studies), City University and at the University of Tennessee Graduate Summer School Program. The latter is an intensive semester course in the history, philosophy and business of scholarly publishing taught over two weeks and involving over 45 hours of class time. The preparation for (and teaching of!) this course is gruelling and he has been trying to encapsulate the course into a book (but it is still only an incomplete manuscript).

After 20 years at Elsevier, with a different job nearly every four years, Michael was ready for a change. After the Elsevier/Harcourt merger, Pieter Bolman had re-joined Michael as a colleague at Elsevier, and then became the CEO of STM. Pieter and Michael remained in touch, so Michael was familiar with the work and issues that STM's CEO faced. It came as no surprise that when Pieter decided to retire, the head-hunters contacted Michael about the STM job. Michael liked the idea of being in charge of his own show, and his lobbying and communications experience made him an ideal candidate. It was like going back to his 'mini-multi-national' and being able to make a visible difference.

STM is the only global scientific, technical and medical publishing trade association; it is open to all types of publisher (university presses, learned societies and commercials), who have an equal role in its governance and seats on its board. Its members collectively publish over 55% of all STM journals and over 65% of all STM papers. Michael's focus is very much on the public affairs part of his brief: to articulate the value and worth of the publisher, the added value they bring to the process and to make sure this is understood by governments and other agencies worldwide. The lobbying is important; recently he has spent a lot of time talking to the EU in Brussels trying to get them to understand that publishing is about so much more than just 'distributing' information. The biggest value that the publisher brings to the table is that the journal exists at all; and that the publisher maintains the image and reputation of

the journal (brand creation and management in marketing speak). Anyone can produce and distribute content, as the Internet so clearly shows, but only a publisher creates, nurtures, manages and supports brands through time and makes changes to match those occurring in the scholarly environment.

Michael believes that STM publishers have made a huge difference, transforming the industry from a declining paper-based subscription universe to one with the vibrancy of electronic access, enabling extraordinary expansion in the nature and availability of electronic content. In the UK alone it is estimated that through deals like NESLI and other electronic licensing programmes about 90% of researchers have access to virtually all important scientific publications. At a recent session at the Charleston Library Conference, Michael pointed out that there may be new tools, but that they are new tools for old purposes, and the scholarly purposes have not changed.

Michael has ambitions for STM. He wants to recruit more members, and has already introduced a new lower subscription category for small organizations with a turnover of less than EUR 1 million. He feels that a key role for STM is in technology transfer and the pre-competitive cross-fertilization and sharing of experience. The meetings, courses and seminars, such as the STM Intensive Journal Course and Master Classes, will be expanded into new locations. STM will start to

move further into books with another Book 2.0 at the London Book Fair and STM's financing and involvement with the access enabling projects, PatientINFORM, HINARI, AGORA and OARE, will continue. Michael is determined to dispel the old image of a "Head of House Club" and create a place for all the STM publishing industry to come to meet and learn from each other.

When Michael is not travelling, he lives in a small Oxfordshire village and really enjoys village life, especially when there is peace and quiet to read and listen to music. His tastes in music are eclectic – anything from Mahler and Sibelius to Peter Gabriel and Rufus Wainwright. He is also interested in the history of science (especially 1640–1680) and his hero is Henry Oldenburg, who single-handedly invented the journal and was the first commercial journal publisher.

Michael's favourite place in the world is Rome. He admits to being a 'Rome Nut', reading anything about the city from ancient Roman history to contemporary travel books [a special plea here for a new edition of Amanda Claridge's *Rome: An Archaeological Guide* (OUP)!]. Having taught himself Italian so he can read the newspaper – and, of course, the menus – it looks like Michael has a fantastic perspective, with the ability to look back into history at the great Egyptian and Roman empires while taking STM forward with confidence into the future.