

A Conversation with Derk Haank

Derk Haank, CEO, Springer Science+Business Media, was interviewed at the 2009 STM Annual Conference in

Frankfurt by David Worlock, Chief Research Fellow, Outsell Inc. Following are some edited excerpts from the

interview. Members may access a complete recording of this interview from the [STM website](#).

Worlock. Scholarly communication is changing so much that the traditional role of the branded journal will change. What is your feeling about this?

Haank. The journal is a very simple product that has served us well and will serve us well in the future; also in the electronic era. The print journal is dead or thereabouts, but the electronic journal plays the same role as the print journal.

The journal title is the first indication for the interested party to know what to expect. All of these journals have been around for some time, and there is ranking and brand. It is a very efficient way for us to know what type of content to expect. I do agree that the unit in our industry is the article, but there are hundreds of thousands, millions of articles a year. The first classification is the journal, and this will not go away.

Worlock. If you say that the currency is the article, then why not brand the database with the old journal and do away with subsidiary journal titles which are less important?

Haank. I disagree. These databases we all have - whether they are called SpringerLink or WileyInterscience or ScienceDirect - in my opinion they are not products. They are contracts, contracts to deliver these hundreds of thousands of articles, and we group them by journal titles. The journal title is the first element in the article metadata. A database is an anonymous bucket; the value of the database is assessed by what titles are in it.

Worlock. All of the stuff in the bucket is peer-reviewed. In the world we live in, the scientist's work comes, often, years before a journal article is published.

Haank. We have had versions of pre-publication communications in the past. Now we have blogs. All of this is in addition to the journal article which is refereed. I do not believe people younger than me will live to see the article lose its importance. Sometimes at sessions like these scientists ask whether they need publishers? Publishers perform an essential function that we cannot emphasize enough. We organize the entire process in a neutral way. For all the criticism I have heard, I hardly ever hear that publishers do not organize the review process in a neutral way. We do not care what is published, as long as it is good science. We do not have any link to any nation, any school of thought. And, even if scientists were to do it themselves, no one will believe it is done in a neutral fashion. This is a great barrier to entry.

Worlock. Let's talk about open access. In the perception of colleagues here, you're probably seen as facing both ways. Springer acquired and re-invigorated a leading Open Access house - have you embraced open access as a new orthodoxy?

Haank. I have never been against open access. I have claimed from the beginning that open access is just a different business model, not an orthodoxy. It does not change scientific quality. If all of the scientific community wants to change the business model, be my guest. I want to be on the receiving end of article flow. We are used to the subscription model, and open access does require tremendous adjustment. Five years ago when we launched it, I said there would not be more than 5% take-up for this model. Five years later, we have seen only 2% take-up amongst all articles published by Springer. There is a lot of emotion about this issue, particularly in biomedical sciences, but it will never completely take over the subscription model.

Worlock. If you have no fear of open access, what about institutional repositories?

Haank. We should never be complacent. Repositories, theoretically, could be a threat. If in ten years time, everything is published in very well-organized repositories that mimic the journal, I'll be concerned. We are not anywhere near that and I am convinced we'll never get there. At best, it will be very, very poor version of what we deliver. But what it has done is taken the anger out of the debate about serials crisis, because everything is available somewhere in a repository.

Worlock. Arguably, you could say if the lower slopes of data gathering and accessibility pass into other hands, journal publisher would move upstream to become much more of a software player?

Haank. I don't believe it. I am a content person. I do not believe in developing software tools, let others do that.

Worlock. The way the industry is evolving is in a number of global firms. Do you see greater consolidation? Do you have to own things in China, India, Brazil, and Russia? What is global?

Haank. It is a very interesting industry. We had a few big players, even before the electronic media, but there were really

no economies of scale. The only reason you wanted to be bigger was to be more profitable. Publishing has changed a bit. First we had technology, but technology has become standardized. Five years ago we had the platform wars, but platforms are the printing presses of the 21st century. The only real economies of scale I see are with the sales force. Our products have become more complicated, you have to slice and dice and combine, and explain them to customers. Preferably, you want to do this yourself and not leave it to a middleman. This is where the economies of scale are. If you have hundreds of your own salespeople covering the world, this is where there are benefits to being big.

Worlock. Five years ago Springer Verlag was not a very innovative company, but today it is a very innovative company.

How do you create a culture of innovation? How do you maintain it?

Haank. It is true that we have tried to be innovative despite our size. Size quite often is a blockage for innovation. We realize internally that you are never as innovative as someone in their garage, but we want to be more innovative than companies our size. This means there has to be room for initiatives, but it does not mean if it is new or it is complicated, it is innovative. You should never throw common sense out of the window. Innovation is not always a big technological breakthrough; it can be experimenting with new ideas and business models. Employees need to be taken seriously when they have an idea. Create an environment of trust, not fear. The biggest problem with innovation is top management defending internal positions. If you have a really good idea, you should be prepared to cannibalize your own products. If you don't do it, someone else will.

Audience Questions

Mark Seeley (Elsevier) asked if informal communication is gaining ascendancy, Haank responded yes and added that, maybe, publishers should become more active in these areas- we should not be religious about this.

Marc Brodsky (American Institute of Physics) asked about what government mandates might do for publishers. Haank felt it was a big issue - anything less than one year embargo should not be acceptable and publishers should oppose it with all means. He went on to talk about latest pressures on publishers to hold or reduce prices. He said that he was a little tired of librarians asking publishers to reduce pricing because their budgets had been cut. He felt that publisher prices in recent years have been reasonable, particularly when one considers the 3-4% volume increase and inflation.

Tim Ingoldby (American Institute of Physics) asked for Haank's advice for society publishers. His advice to society publishers and university presses, who are not big enough to survive: work with commercial publishers.

David Worlock asked if the ebooks are going to evolve - much like journal articles - where they have other media, evidentiary data, and software packaged in the book. Haank felt it is bound to happen; it is nice to have but should not be overdone. He expressed that both a journal article and book should become more interactive in the electronic world, where reading marks the start of a debate.

Report by Nawin Gupta, Informed Publishing Solutions, Inc.