

# Interview with Matthew Cockerill, Publisher, BioMed Central

---

*Richard Poynder, 4<sup>th</sup> October 2009*

The growing success of Open Access ([OA](#)) publishing has raised a number of issues. Perhaps one of the more contentious issues is how OA publishers ought to market their journals.

Under a subscription model, publishers sell subscriptions to libraries; with OA journals, by contrast, publishers sell a publishing service to researchers. This change has implications for the relationship between publishers and researchers, which surely becomes more complicated. And it is not entirely clear that everyone has fully thought through the implications.

To get ahead of the competition, for instance, some OA publishers are launching hundreds of new journals in a relatively short space of time. And the number of OA publishers continues to grow. As a result, it is estimated that [two new titles](#) are added to the Directory of Open Access Journals ([DOAJ](#)) each day.

Clearly these programmes require that publishers recruit editorial boards, reviewers, and author submissions quickly, and in large numbers. This has seen OA publishers engaging in large-scale bulk emailing programmes, with researchers often receiving multiple invitations.

The practice has angered some of the recipients. In March last year, for instance, one researcher — [Gunther Eysenbach](#) — became sufficiently angry about the flood of invitations he was receiving that he began posting them on his blog (e.g. [here](#) and [here](#)) in an attempt to name and shame the publishers concerned. At one point he also [threatened to sue](#) one publisher for "spamming" him, arguing that its activities were both unethical and illegal.

And as the publisher of his own journal ([The Journal of Medical Internet Research](#)), Eysenbach also played a leading part in the founding of the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association ([OASPA](#)).

When OASPA was launched Eysenbach [commented](#) on his blog: "OASPA has some important missions. One is to set standards and keeping the standard of OA publishing high (e.g. by creating and enforcing a code of conduct, which includes for example standards against spamming)."

Other co-founders of OASPA (which recently held its [first conference](#)) include OA publishers [Public Library of Science](#), [Hindawi](#) and BioMed Central ([BMC](#)).

Since BMC is a founder member of OASPA I was surprised when, on 16<sup>th</sup> July, I received an email from one of its journals — [Theoretical Biology and Medical Modelling](#) — inviting me (a journalist) to submit a paper.

When I contacted BMC's publisher — Matthew Cockerill — he said that I had received the message because, in 2002, I had signed up to receive updates from BMC. During the registration process, he added, I had expressed an interest in biotechnology.

I was not myself conscious of ever having opted in to receive invitations to submit papers, although I had signed up for the BMC Update, and I had signed on to its journalist list. I was also intrigued that

— out of the blue and seven years after I had first registered my name on the BMC site — I should suddenly receive this invitation.

So I suggested to Cockerill that we do a formal Q&A interview. He agreed, and we began to swap questions and answers by email. With the summer holiday period intervening this proved a somewhat protracted process, but I am now able to publish the interview.

While Cockerill was away on his summer break I received two more email invitations from BMC. On 17<sup>th</sup> August I received an invitation to submit a paper to [Microbial Cell Factories](#), and on 4<sup>th</sup> September I received one inviting me to submit a paper to [Biotechnology for Biofuels](#). These messages were not sent to my current email address, but to one I rarely use now, an address Cockerill subsequently told me that I had used in 2005 when registering with another publisher altogether — [The Scientist](#).

"At that time," explained Cockerill, "BioMed Central and *The Scientist* were part of the same group of companies and shared website systems, and a registration was valid across the entire BioMed Central and *The Scientist* network."

There is no suggestion that BMC is doing anything improper, or unethical. But one does wonder whether the email invitations being sent out by OA publishers are not in danger of proving counter-productive. After all, researchers have shown themselves to be somewhat sensitive to email solicitations from publishers (e.g. [here](#)).

What also seems evident is that the bulk emailing activities of OA publishers inevitably lead to a number of other questions: questions (as I said) about the relationship between publisher and author in an OA environment, but also questions about the relationship between editorial decisions and commercial decisions, and indeed questions about the relevance of the traditional journal format on the Web, and the role of commercial publishers in this brave new world.

I explored some of these wider issues in the interview with Cockerill. In doing so I was struck by one thing in particular that he said: "OA is not a religion. It's not just a 'movement' any more, either. It is a working, legitimate and sustainable business model for publishing."

Would everyone would agree with that definition of OA I wonder?

The interview with Matthew Cockerill follows below.

---



Matthew Cockerill

## The interview begins...

**RP:** Bulk email campaigns intended to recruit authors to submit papers to Open Access journals have proved somewhat controversial over the past year or so, with claims that publishers have been spamming researchers. Amongst other things researchers have complained that they cannot get off mailing lists, and that they are **badly-targetted**. On July 16<sup>th</sup> this year I received an invitation to submit a paper to the BMC journal Theoretical Biology & Medical Modelling. (**TBioMed**) I am a journalist. Is BMC guilty of spamming all and sundry?

You forwarded this message on 16/07/2009 14:50.

From: bmcupdate\_journals@news.biomedcentral.com on behalf of Theoretical Biology and Medical Modelling [mailto:info@biomedcentral.com]  
To: richard.poynder@journalist.co.uk  
Cc:  
Subject: Invitation to submit

---



**THEORETICAL BIOLOGY  
& MEDICAL MODELLING**

PERIODIC  
IMPACT  
FACTOR  
**1.26**

Dear Richard Poynder,

Did you know that [Theoretical Biology and Medical Modelling](#) is advised by a highly experienced Editorial Board?

[Theoretical Biology and Medical Modelling's](#) international [Editorial Board](#) help with policy and decision-making, and choosing referees and reviewing manuscripts.

The experience of the Editorial Board members adds to the quality, reputation and high standard set out by the journal. To benefit from the specialist advice and support from these internationally recognized experts publish your next article with [Theoretical Biology and Medical Modelling](#).

Online submission is quick and easy to follow, [submit your manuscript](#) now.

With all best wishes,

The Theoretical Biology and Medical Modelling Team

---

You have received this message because you have asked for news and updates from BioMed Central.  
Your registered email address is: [richard.poynder@journalist.co.uk](mailto:richard.poynder@journalist.co.uk)  
If you do not wish to receive further updates about BioMed Central journals, you can unsubscribe by sending a blank email to: [info@biomedcentral.com](mailto:info@biomedcentral.com)  
For further information or enquiries please contact Customer Services at: [info@biomedcentral.com](mailto:info@biomedcentral.com)

---

BioMed Central Ltd, 230 Queen's Lane, London, WC1X 3BH, United Kingdom.

**MC:** You registered with us (on 8th May 2002), using the email address: [richard.poynder@journalist.co.uk](mailto:richard.poynder@journalist.co.uk). During the registration process you signed up to receive:

"BioMed Central updates, Periodic news and updates relating to BioMed Central". It looks as though you also listed subject areas of interest as being, "Bioinformatics; Books/journals/information services; Ear, nose and throat disorders."

**RP:** *I assume your point is that seven years ago I opted to receive such invitations. What I opted to receive, however, was the BioMed Central Update. While I don't recall the precise details of the registration process I am confident that at no point was I told that by signing up to the Biomed Central Update I was agreeing to receive invitations to submit papers. I simply wanted to be alerted to recently published BMC papers and to receive updates about the company's activities. My mistake, you are implying, is that I should not have ticked any subject boxes?*

**MC:** Since the early days of BioMed Central there has been a prominent box on the home page allowing interested parties to sign up for updates from BioMed Central by providing an email address, without needing to provide any further information. This "update list" (also available as a check box when you register on the site) is a general "I'm interested in BioMed Central, keep me informed" list, and we have always emphasised our offering to authors in these emails, which include, but are not limited to, a regular fortnightly newsletter, the "BMC Update".

If you would like to receive notifications of the latest articles, we do offer a variety of other specific tools designed to alert you to exactly the articles which are of interest to you. These include article alert emails (and RSS feeds) for specific journals, stored search email alerts for your keywords of interest, and "My BioMed Central" emails which alert you to articles relevant to your subject areas.

**RP:** *I think you are saying that I subscribed to the wrong service, or in the wrong way. But it's not clear from BMC's front page what the difference is between the various registration methods, and I am not sure I am any clearer now. I certainly didn't sign up expecting to submit papers. Clearly there is a difference between asking to be informed about new articles and asking to be sold a publishing service, and one would not expect a journalist to want to submit a paper to a scholarly journal. What level of scrutiny do your mailing lists receive before you use them to send out unsolicited bulk emails inviting people to submit papers?*

**MC:** Unfortunately, customising appropriate information is an art, not an exact science. You are a journalist. We have distribution lists for journalists, which you are on. The other information you have subscribed to is primarily geared towards researchers/potential authors, so it only follows that you might receive information you do not need, or which is not appropriate for you as a journalist.

You have two options: either unsubscribe to one of the services, perhaps at the risk of receiving less or too little information, or stay signed up and accept that you need to spend more time with your finger on the "delete button".

## Reader or author?

**RP:** *You are correct: I am also on BioMed Central's journalist list which, as you say, is a separate list (that I have opted into) and my questions are unconnected with that list. I am, however, still puzzled: I opted to receive the BMC Update list, not a list requesting invitations to contribute to BMC journals. I must assume that you created a specific list for TBioMed and seeded it with names from the BMC Update list. In other words, presumably at least some of the people who received the TBioMed mailing had, like me, not opted to receive such emails, but had simply signed up to the Biomed Central Update.*

**MC:** When someone signs up and asks to be kept informed about BioMed Central, we periodically send emails to them noting the BioMed Central conference and journal activities that are relevant to them, based on their interests. At all times, if the user decides that the material they are being sent is not relevant, they can unsubscribe easily.

The key point is that the vast majority of people who receive updates from BioMed Central appreciate and find useful both the general updates *\*and\** the more focussed journal-, and conference-, specific updates, and opt to continue to receive them.

If we were ever to find that a large number of recipients were complaining or unsubscribing because of the updates being sent, we would know that we had a problem, and we monitor this very carefully.

**RP:** *Are you not conflating readers with potential authors? When I looked I could see nothing on the My BioMed Central page indicating that users have opted-in to these kinds of mailings; the emphasis appears to be on customising the kind of papers they are alerted to, not on signalling which journals they want to contribute to. In short, I signed up as a reader, not a potential author, and nothing I saw suggested that I had agreed to anything else. Presumably others who have signed up the BioMed Central Update have done so on the same basis.*

**MC:** Most of our readers *are* potential authors. As I mentioned, we do offer extensive email alerting services for readers interested specifically in staying up to date with the latest research articles.

Since the launch of BioMed Central, we have also sought to spread the word about the benefits to authors of publishing in BioMed Central's open access journals, and our communication with those who sign up on our updates list has always heavily focused on the benefits of open access publishing for authors.

The "BMC Update" newsletter itself includes notes about the benefits of publishing in open access journals, announcements of our new open access journals and encouragement to publish in our existing journals. The more targeted updates we send are arguably more relevant for most recipients than the generic BMC Update, and have been exceptionally well received.

**RP:** *How — apart from seeding them with the names of people who register on your site — do you source the names and email addresses for your bulk email campaigns?*

**MC:** All mailings sent by BioMed Central are carefully targeted and sent in full compliance with applicable law and ethical practices. They are sent either to our own opt-in lists, or on our behalf by responsible companies such as [Thomson Reuters](#), whose own use of lists complies fully with applicable law.

**RP:** *Leaving aside the issue of who opted-in to what, do you think it good enough for a publisher seeking submissions to a peer-reviewed journal to target everyone who has expressed an interest in reading articles on related topics, and using contact data that in some cases may be up to seven years old?*

**MC:** The list is actively maintained. Some recipients — perhaps the most passionate advocates of Open Access — did indeed sign up several years ago, and we are pleased that they are obviously still interested in receiving information from us. Any email address which bounces is automatically removed, and anyone that wishes to unsubscribe to all or some of the information they receive can do so easily.

**RP:** *I note that last year Gunther Eysenbach [complained](#) about [bulk email messages](#) BMC had sent out in 2004 (which he described as spam). He was primarily complaining about the activities of [Bentham Open](#), but on his blog he said, "A couple of years ago, Biomed Central also engaged in quite aggressive marketing techniques, including spam emails (and even sending out emails which*

*contained a preformulated praise of BMC, asking the recipient to send this email to colleagues). After I pointed out the (questionable) ethics of this to them (that was back in 2004), they seem to have stopped it — or was I only put on a blacklist, and others still receive this?" Did BMC's policy on email marketing change at some point? If so, why and how?*

**MC:** All subscribers are free to opt-in or opt-out of receiving email from BioMed Central whenever they see fit.

**RP:** *You don't say if BMC changed its policy on direct mailing at some point between 2004 and today.*

**MC:** BioMed Central is continuously refining and improving its journal marketing activity, including our email communications, but our underlying policies in this area have not changed at all.

**RP:** *Something must have changed with regard to BMC's emailing activities: My details have been on your database for seven years but only now do I start to receive invitations to submit papers to its journals.*

**MC:** BioMed Central's marketing activities are evolving all the time. For example, earlier this week we hosted our first scientific conference, in association with the journal [Retrovirology](#) and its editor [Kuan-Teh Jeang](#). This was just an [initial experiment](#), but with more than 200 attendees, it was a major success. We've become active on Twitter and Facebook, etc etc.

Similarly, we evolve and improve our email marketing, always trying to maximise the relevance and usefulness of what we send to those who have opted to receive updates from us.

To give one example: we update recipients at a given institution (as denoted by their email address stem) if that institution becomes a BioMed Central institutional member, or sets up a central fund to cover open access publication fees in journals such as those published by BMC.

More recently we introduced emails to update recipients from time to time alerting them to particular BioMed Central journals relevant to their subject areas. Because you signed up at various points in the past with multiple email addresses, in each case specifying different subject areas of interest, you then received different updates to each of those email addresses.

[You may have received multiple copies of the fortnightly BMC Update newsletter email, given that you were signed up multiple times under those different addresses, but your mail system may be smart enough to know that the two copies of the BMC Update newsletter were one and the same message, and so only showed you one of them.]

**RP:** *Actually, I have only registered with BMC once, not multiple times. I believe you "acquired" my other email addresses from The Scientist. Moreover, the only area of interest I would have ticked when registering with both publishers was biotechnology. I have, by the way, also signed up for a bunch of Public Library of Science ([PLOS](#)) updates, but I have never been asked to submit a paper to any of its journals: I just get a list of recently-published papers every week or so.*

**MC:** Really? That's surprising — I receive email from many other publishers, including PLoS and the [AAAS](#), to name just a couple, encouraging me to submit my research, and to get the benefit of discounts.

I also receive emails from all sorts of respectable scientific (and governmental) organisations, inviting me to participate in scientific conferences of varying degrees of relevance to my interest. That is part of the normal scientific process.

**RP: BMC is a member of the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association (OASPA). As I understand it, OASPA has agreed a [code of conduct](#) that, amongst other things, states that direct mailing should be "appropriate and unobtrusive"?**

**MC:** BioMed Central is a founder member of OASPA, and takes ethical email marketing policy extremely seriously.

**RP: Eysenbach is also a founder member of OASPA. He [says](#) that OASPA was created partly as a result of the bulk emailing activities that some OA publishers have been engaged in. Presumably the 2004 BMC messages ([1](#), [2](#)) highlighted by Eysenbach last year (where in one case the recipient appears to have been targeted on the basis simply that he had been published in one of BMC's competitor journals) would have fallen foul of OASPA's rules?**

**MC:** OASPA is a group of publishers, rather than one individual, but I believe that all the founders of OASPA agreed when setting up OASPA that responsible email communication has a role to play in the marketing of journals and conferences, and what is important is that it should be ethically practised.

**RP: Do you agree with Gunther Eysenbach's [claim](#) (as I understand it) that a scholarly publisher who emails researchers with invitations to submit papers when it has no prior business relationship with the individuals concerned is acting illegally?**

**MC:** BioMed Central takes care to ensure that its email communications are fully in compliance with applicable laws.

## More harm than good?

**RP: You said that BioMed Central's mailings have been exceptionally well received. I referred to Eysenbach's comments of last year. There have been more recent complaints. For instance, four days after I received your message [Lars Jensen](#), a research professor at the [Novo Nordisk Foundation Center for Protein Research](#) at the [University of Copenhagen](#), [complained](#) on Twitter about mailings he had been receiving from BMC.**

**MC:** Lars Jensen's tweet implies that while he appreciates and wishes to continue to receive email updates from BioMed Central, he does not want to receive updates relating to BioMed Central's conference activity such as the [ISMB](#)-related mailing.

We immediately spotted that via Twitter and updated his preferences to ensure that he will not receive conference-specific update mailings.

**RP: Yes indeed; and a week after I alerted you to Lars Jensen's complaint he posted a [new message](#) saying that you had contacted him. One can, of course, take two views on bulk emailing: that it is simply part of the Web — or, as you put it, part of the normal scientific process where recipients are free to hit the delete key — or that it is a modern-day plague. In the end, of course, what counts is the way in which these messages are perceived by the recipients. Lars Jensen said this to me about the messages he was receiving from BMC: "I had been through something like a week with 1-2 conference-related emails per day (from lots of sources). I had also been receiving enough**

***of journal-related spam, in particular from Bentham, to make a brutal filter that trashes any email that talks about them ([see my tweet](#) just prior to the one about BMC). My tweet should thus mostly be seen as an 'Oh come on BMC, you really don't want me to classify you as a publisher similar to Bentham'.***

**MC:** This is a situation very unlike the Bentham case, where never having signed up for any kind of update, it was impossible to unsubscribe. So the comparison with Bentham is inappropriate because of the opt-in nature of our mailings, which are directly comparable to similar opt-in targeted mailings sent by BioMed Central and other reputable companies.

***RP: Certainly Bentham has been widely criticised for its emailing activities. Do you deprecate Bentham's business practices?***

**MC:** I don't have any comment to make on specific publishers, other than to note that Bentham is not a member of OASPA and that OASPA issued a [statement](#) following the controversy relating to a computer-generated article submitted to a Bentham journal.

***RP: Although you say that bulk email is all part of the normal scientific process, others appear to disagree, often quite vigorously. Lars Jensen put it this way to me, "I am strongly opposed to unsolicited emails. It really does not matter if is conference registrations, journal subscriptions, books, lab equipment, or penis enlargements that someone wants to sell me. To me it is spam." This is noteworthy not least because Lars Jensen is himself a [BMC author](#). Perhaps therefore it raises a bigger question: In today's environment is email marketing likely to do more harm than good to a company's reputation? Might it be that there are just so many electronic sales messages circulating on the Internet today that bulk email is fast becoming counter-productive?***

**MC:** No. Responsible email marketing at the one end, and spam at the other, are here to stay, for better or worse. How you deal with it is like how you choose to deal with traffic. Some people sit quietly in their cars and wait for the traffic to move. Others find a different route. A small minority succumb to road rage.

As you say, spam is often in the eye of the beholder. For those who view *all* marketing email as spam, it is easy enough to change your email settings to allow only email from people you know to end up in your in-box. Most of us seek to get a balance, via the email lists we sign up to and the spam filters we use, so that we mostly receive emails that are of interest to us.

***RP: Nevertheless, perhaps your email marketing activities are causing you more harm than good in terms of customer perception. Is that not a concern for you?***

**MC:** Email (in both directions) continues to be a vitally important form of communication between BioMed Central and the full spectrum of its stakeholders. BioMed Central, like all other responsible Internet-era companies, therefore, makes extensive use of email, while being very careful to respect the wishes of its email recipients.

***RP: If Lars Jensen has such a strong objection to receiving unsolicited email marketing messages, one wonders how he ended up on BMC's mailing list in the first place. Did he opt in? If so, when and how?***

**MC:** Lars had been on that list because he gave us his email address at the same conference last year. His Twitter message noted that he didn't want to have to add BioMed Central to his spam

filter. I.e. he values the email communications he receives from us in general, but didn't wish to receive conference-related email. That's fine.

Many conference attendees who visit our stand provide their emails in order to allow us to send them relevant follow-up information. In this case, the relevant follow-up was to email attendees from the previous year's show to let them know that we would be attending once again this year, and inviting them to come and see us again at our stand, as we really value the opportunity to meet with our authors, peer reviewers and editors.

**RP: Fair enough, but given the frequent complaints we have seen about the bulk emailing activities of some OA publishers (which you personally have complained about too), and the obvious sensitivity that researchers have to the practice, do you not think that BMC ought to seek to target its mailings better than it currently appears to be doing?**

**MC:** We do everything we can to ensure that those who sign up for emails receive only emails that are going to be of interest to them, but sometimes inevitably people will decide that they are in fact not interested in what we send, and in those cases they can easily unsubscribe.

**RP: Is your policy regarding bulk email different during a journal's start-up phase compared to when it has established a track-record? If so, how long is the start-up phase?**

**MC:** BioMed Central's publishing activity does not stand still. We are continually developing our portfolio of journals and so we communicate the latest information about relevant journals, and the benefits they offer to authors, to those who have opted in to receive updates from us.

At a risk of repeating myself: those who opt in to receive email from BioMed Central can easily unsubscribe from all or part of the information they receive from us, at any time. Can we guarantee that those who sign up for updates from BioMed Central will receive infallibly personalised material that is 100% of interest to them? No — we don't live in a perfect world, and we have to work with what is possible.

**RP: It's true: you have said several times that people can unsubscribe. But I have been told that requests to be removed from BMC's mailing lists are not always successful. As one researcher put it to me, "I did try to unsubscribe from BMC at one point, but it didn't work. The reason is likely that they emailed me at some address that then forwards it to a different account; the automatic unsubscribe system then fails to work. The time and effort that it takes to find out whom to email plus writing the email is simply too large compared to the alternative, which is to create an email filter that automatically deletes everything sent from a certain account or domain." Perhaps a lot of your emails end up in spam folders, and you are simply unaware of it. And maybe a lot of people are frustrated with BMC mailing them, but cannot be bothered to contact you to tell you?**

**MC:** As noted, we are very careful to monitor the response to our emails. If someone signs up for updates from BioMed Central, we send them updates. If they ask to not receive any more emails, we stop sending them.

Our unsubscribe mechanism is robust — so much so that even if the email is forwarded to a new address, it is still straightforward to unsubscribe. In the event of a user having any problems in this regard, our customer service team are happy to help.

**RP: When I [interviewed Dove Medical's Publisher Tim Hill](#) he said the company had discontinued its bulk emailing activities and suggested that it is no longer necessary once a journal is established.**

***He put it to me this way, "Our journals are now at the stage where we no longer need to issue general calls for papers. Obtaining manuscripts from authors is now via returning authors and new authors visiting our website and volunteering their papers." Has BMC not yet reached that point?***

**MC:** Obviously, the job of attracting authors to publish in journals gets easier as the journals become more established — but marketing continues to play a critically important role and BioMed Central has a duty to its editors and to its authors to market its journals on an ongoing basis to maintain their visibility and to attract the high quality research article submissions that any journal needs in order to thrive.

We're like any other publisher in this respect — *Nature*, for example, has been around for 150+ years but they still market very actively to attract authors to submit their best research articles, as well as to attract readers and subscribers.

### **Insurmountable structural problem?**

***RP: I'd like to move to another issue that follows from our discussion. I'm told that the editor of TBioMed was unaware of the email campaign that I was included in. Do you think a specific journal's calls for papers and author — and referee — recruitment is a journal editorial matter or a publisher matter?***

**MC:** An extremely important point to make is that we collaborate with the editors-in-chief to market the journal to authors (and where appropriate, to librarians too), and to attract submissions. That is very much a joint effort. But the decision as to *which* articles to publish (which is the decision that actually determines whether or not an APC will be payable) is made solely by the editor(s)-in-chief.

When editors and/or societies approach us about starting a scientific journal (or transferring an existing one to us), one of the key things they are looking to us for is to help market their journal, make it visible, attract more *and* better submissions to it. Many societies and journal editors who have tried self-publishing their own journal have realised that getting visibility and awareness of a journal is no small task, and that is where a publisher can help.

For example, BioMed Central attends dozens of conferences each year to promote our various journals to the appropriate researchers. We also send "call for papers" emails from time to time, in close consultation with editors and paying rigorous attention to email marketing ethics.

***RP: Let me ask my question more directly: I am told that the editor-in-chief of TBioMed Paul Agutter was not aware of the email campaign I was included in. Is it normal to send out mailings to prospective authors without the agreement, or even knowledge of, the editor? As I understand it, this is not the practice with traditional subscription journals?***

**MC:** In the case of the email you received — all editors-in-chief of BioMed Central journals were made aware in April by email of the plans relating to these journal-focused "call for papers" emails, which are sent only to users who signed up for our opt-in updates list (and are carefully managed to avoid too many updates being sent to any one individual).

***RP: I have been categorically told that the editor-in-chief of TBioMed Paul Agutter was not aware of your mailing. Indeed, I am told that he only found out about it on 16<sup>th</sup> July — two days after I received the message — when one of the journal's own editorial members contacted him in surprise to say that he had received a copy of the mailing himself. Did the BMC email informing***

***Agutter about the campaign go astray? Did BMC forgot to add him to the email message it sent alerting editors? Or perhaps it ended up in Agutter's spam folder?***

**MC:** Our mail server logs confirm that the relevant email notification was indeed sent to the Gmail address used by Dr Agutter for communication with BioMed Central. Dr Agutter has indicated to us that over the time period concerned, Gmail outages caused him problems and led to mislaid email. He suggests that this is the most likely explanation for the communication problem in this case. We have since discussed the details of our journal-focused email activity with Dr Agutter, and he has confirmed to us that, far from opposing it, he supports it and would like it to continue.

***RP: When I contacted some of the TBioMed editorial board members one emailed me: "I'm less than happy about the way they [BMC] conduct some aspects of their business. For example, scattergun e-mails such as the one that reached you strike me as ethically dubious." It would seem that some of BMC's editorial board members have not bought into BMC's emailing activities doesn't it?***

**MC:** BioMed Central's emailing activity is anything but scattergun. The emails you refer to are sent to those who have opted in to receive updates from BioMed Central and who have expressed an interest in the scientific discipline concerned. Recipients are prominently offered the ability to opt-out if they are no longer find our email updates of interest. Our experience has been that Editors-in-Chief and Editorial Board Members are overwhelmingly supportive of our activities in this area.

***RP: We discussed whether BMC might be inappropriately conflating readers with authors. I'd like to look at this from a different perspective: Under the traditional scholarly journal model publishers market subscriptions to librarians (who in buying them act on behalf of readers). The Open Access model involves publishers marketing publishing services to authors. Does the fact that the payers and the content providers are the same person (and that peer review rejects papers whereas payer-recruitment tries to attract them) pose an insurmountable structural problem to OA publishing? Has the relationship between author and reader become dangerously confused in the OA environment?***

**MC:** Firstly, there are no "insurmountable structural problems" to OA publishing. OA is a publishing business model which works. The success of journals from BioMed Central, PLoS and other open access publishers would seem to demonstrate the success of the business model.

Secondly, users who sign up for updates to BioMed Central may be "readers" or "authors" or more commonly, both, and our communications reflect that. Most researchers wear both hats, so to speak.

Subscription-based scientific journals also depend on attracting high-quality research submissions — without them journals (and the associated subscription revenue) would cease to exist. So they, too, devote significant resources to marketing to authors and attracting them to submit research to their journals. Open access publications are no different in this respect.

***RP: You say that OA is a business model that works. One might want to ask for whom it works and how, but let me put my question another way: Is there a danger that the business side of BMC's publishing operation is taking too dominant a role, with the editorial side being pushed aside in pursuit of APC revenues?***

**MC:** Absolutely not. BioMed Central shares a common interest with its academic editors-in-chief. We want to attract more research and better quality research to our open access journals so that we can

maximise the fraction of scientific literature which is available free to the reader and to develop a portfolio of well known, successful, prestigious and financially sustainable journals with a good reputation in their field.

We are very proud of what we have achieved to date, on both fronts, but there is a long way still to go — only a small fraction of the literature is currently accessible at no cost to the reader.

## Quality

**RP:** *We are currently seeing publishers like BMC, Bentham, Dove Medical, [Libertas Academica](#), [Scientific Journals International](#) etc. creating hundreds of new journals. Does the world really need all these new journals? We already have 24,000 journals (and some [suggest](#) there are more than 24,000). Why would these commercial publishers be constantly launching more journals, other than in the hope that by doing so they can increase their profits?*

**MC:** The general implication that open access journals are of low quality is without foundation. To give just a couple of examples: two of the top three journals in the Thomson Reuters JCR Mathematical & Computational Biology category are open access journals launched in the past decade. So are both the top two journals in the Tropical Medicine category.

**RP:** *Can you say which journals you are referring to?*

**MC:** [PLoS Computational Biology](#) and [BMC Bioinformatics](#) in the Mathematical and Computational Biology category, [Malaria Journal](#) and [PLoS Neglected Tropical Diseases](#) in the Tropical Medicine category.

New open access journals are helping to transform how science is communicated and so it would be a terrible obstacle to innovation to decide that researchers should just live with the existing titles, irrespective of their fitness for purpose, and avoid starting any new ones. Over time, some of these 24,000 journals will adapt, and grow, others will no doubt cease to exist and new ones will take their place.

Scholarly publishing, like other areas of activity, should evolve, not stand still. Longer term, whether the overall number of journals can be expected to increase or decrease is far from clear.

So far as BioMed Central is concerned, its latest [Impact Factors](#) confirm that *both* the quality and quantity of the research we publish continues to increase.

**RP:** *Do journal impact factors (JIFs) actually measure quality? Certainly many question whether they do so with any accuracy, and the JIF is widely criticised today. You yourself have [cast doubt](#) on the extent to which JIFs measure quality, as has PLoS, which in an editorial in 2006 [said](#), "Because a journal's impact factor is derived from citations to all articles in a journal, this number cannot tell us anything about the quality of any specific research article in that journal, nor of the quality of the work of any specific author." As a result, I understand, PLoS has announced its intention to [discontinue](#) paying any regard to JIFs, and it [recently launched](#) its article-level metrics system.*

**MC:** BioMed Central has frequently noted that the picture provided by Impact Factors is partial, due to the limited journal coverage of the [JCR](#), and moreover it would clearly be ridiculous to think that any one number could act as a perfect measure of "quality".

But Impact Factors do provide objective and quantifiable data on the average extent to which research in a given journal is being cited and the academic community finds this useful. They should not be the only indicator, but they do have a role and few would disagree that there is *some* degree of correlation, within a given field, between a journal's Impact Factor and the level of interest of the research articles within it.

**RP:** *That could perhaps be a case of chicken and egg. You mentioned earlier the [computer-generated paper](#) submitted to a Bentham journal earlier this year — a paper created using the [computer program SCIGen](#). We should note that Bentham's Mahmood Alam has [denied](#) that it accepted the paper, but what do we learn from the incident, what does it tell us about the quality of OA journals, and can you be confident that BMC would never accept a fake paper?*

**MC:** All scholarly publishers, regardless of the business model they use, face the challenge of not only ensuring that they do not publish libellous, unethical or fake material, but also ensuring that academic editors are free to use their editorial discretion.

This is a delicate balancing act, and organisations such as the [World Association of Medical Editors](#) and the [Committee on Publication Ethics](#), both of which BioMed Central actively participates in and supports, devote a great deal of attention in seeking to define best practice in this area.

A great deal depends on establishing effective trust with responsible academic editors. No system is infallible. BioMed Central makes every effort to guard against any such problems and also seeks to be as transparent as possible about its editorial safeguards and processes.

**RP:** *To go back to the issue of the large number of journals being launched by OA publishers: Could it be that this "[Gold Rush](#)" — as OA advocate [Stevan Harnad](#) calls it — is causing the kind of problems we are discussing: researchers being spammed, peer review standards possibly falling, and growing fears that scholarly communication could end up becoming little more than vanity publishing?*

**MC:** As noted, ethical issues are vitally important in all scholarly publishing, just as in the conduct of research itself. Ethical issues apply both to new and to well-established journals, and they apply whether the journal operates on the open access or subscription model.

By co-founding the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association together with PLoS and other leading open access publishers late last year, BioMed Central has, amongst other things, set out to ensure that open access publishers set an exemplary standard with respect to ethical practices.

**RP:** *Harnad has also coined the term "[fleet publishing](#)" to describe the recent surge in new OA journals. He argues that OA publishers are making the mistake of assuming that the old print model can be simply grafted onto the Web. "The fleetsters", he told me, "are imagining that there is still a fleet-based basis for journal publishing, but it is in reality all based on not having updated to an online-only, OA PostGutenberg refereed-journal. Once they do, they have to see the fleet-justification falling away like the wizard of Oz... The only thing authors need is the service of peer review, and its certification with the journal's name and track-record. That is a (paid) journal function, not a superordinate fleet-publisher function." Do you agree?*

**MC:** There is no question that the role of publishers will continue to change and evolve. But if anything, new technologies *increase* the scope for publishers to assist with the practicalities of scholarly communication, while allowing researchers to focus on the intellectual endeavour of advancing knowledge.

**RP:** *Some would even question the need for publishers at all in an online environment. The only function left to them today, they might argue, is to manage peer review, and peer review is actually done by researchers themselves. Let me put it this way: The relevant entity and unit in refereed journal publication is the journal. The journal provides the peer review. In the print-on-paper era, the publisher also provided the markup, printing and dissemination. Maybe economies of scale warranted one publisher performing that same function for multiple journals in the print-on-paper era. But in the online era, what does a publisher provide, over and above funding the peer review? And why would multiple journals want to have their peer review handled by one publisher, instead of each handling their own peer review (and author/ referee contacts, etc.? After all, software is software; and the web is the web. How would you respond to that?*

**MC:** Publishers handle myriad functions relating to the practical aspects of journal publication. While the economics of distribution have changed as a result of the web, the tasks of the publisher remain as complicated as ever, if not more so. It has always been possible for organisations to self-publish journals and the web has opened up new possibilities in this area, but professional publishing organisations have economies of scale and in-house expertise which allows them to offer many benefits and efficiencies. These factors have led a number of formerly self-published journals to move to BioMed Central.

To quote a recent report by publishing consultant [Mary Waltham](#):

*"With the increasing complexity and cost of both online platform development and global sales and marketing activities many society and association publishers are opting for a publishing partnership which brings with it a single online customer platform from the partner, a professional global sales network addressing consortia and site licenses for institutions, and often some guarantee of financial return on the journal."*

This holds equally true for both the subscription and the open access business models.

On your point that 'Software is Software', note that [Salesforce.com](#) has built a highly successful business on the principle that running enterprise software in-house is a needless and expensive administrative burden for many companies, whose needs can better be served by a centrally-managed solution. In an online open access environment, professional publishers such as BioMed Central can be seen as offering a similar 'Software as a Service' model.

**RP:** *When I [spoke to BMC founder Vitek Tracz](#) in 2006 he appeared to me to be implying that there is no future for OA journals, and that publishers will need to focus on becoming database producers. This means, he told me, that "[W]here today you have thousands of journals sold on subscriptions, in ten to twenty years there will be thousands of editorially intensive databases also sold on subscriptions, many of them probably sold by existing science publishers."*

**MC:** As the physicist [Niels Bohr](#) supposedly said: "Prediction is very difficult — especially about the future". Open access journals are thriving.

## A fair price

**RP:** *Tracz also said, "Open Access is a service not a subscription allowing access. Moreover that service will become a smaller and smaller component of the publishing business. More and more of what we do for authors today they will be able to do for themselves in the future, and as we develop more tools to allow them to do it themselves, so what we charge them will be less and*

**less". Do you agree? If so, what are the implications for BMC? Would it not imply, for instance, that APC prices should be falling?**

**MC:** BioMed Central has indeed introduced journals with lower APCs ([BMC Research Notes](#), [Journal of Medical Case Reports](#)) to allow for the communication of short reports via a streamlined process. We continue to look for ways to make the process even more efficient by putting better tools into the hands of authors. Still, the vast majority of authors submit using Microsoft Word which requires expensive conversion to create high quality reusable XML, and expensive layout to create attractive, easy-to-read PDF documents. Creating easy-to-use tools for structured document authoring remains an unsolved challenge, but it is something that BioMed Central is aiming towards.

**RP:** *This takes us naturally to the issue of pricing. When BMC launched it charged \$525 to publish an article. Today its [standard APC](#) is \$1,535, and authors can pay anything up to \$2,365 to publish an article in a BMC journal like the [Journal of Biology](#). And this rate seems to keep going up. When I looked in May, for instance, the standard price was \$1,405, and the cost for Journal of Biology was \$2,165. Have BMC's prices gone up again recently?*

**MC:** The price is set in GBP (most of our costs are in GBP) and has not changed since you checked — but as exchange rates vary, so the US Dollar and Euro equivalent prices will naturally vary too.

Our standard charge of £925 is (currently) not so far off the [\\$1,300](#) fee charged by [PLoS ONE](#), the lowest cost journal in the PLoS stable, and is substantially less than that of PLoS's other titles. It is also much less than [£1,500/£2,600](#) open access fees charged by the not-for-profit [Royal Society](#) journals, for example.

**RP:** *But why has BMC's standard APC risen from \$525 to \$1,525, particularly in light of what Vitek Tracz told me. What additional costs has the company incurred to justify a near threefold increase?*

**MC:** BioMed Central introduced its original article processing charge back in January 2002, at a time when the idea of paying a fee in return for open access publication was quite new, and it was not clear what the overall costs involved in open access publishing would be. As the model has established itself, increasing article processing charges to a more realistic level has allowed BioMed Central to demonstrate that open access can be financially sustainable.

We are confident that BioMed Central's fees offer excellent value in comparison to other open access publishing options, which is why we make an extensive [fee-comparison table](#) available on our website. BioMed Central's author fees remain significantly lower than the open access fees at most other publishers, whether commercial or not-for-profit.

**RP:** *BMC was [acquired by Springer](#) last October. Presumably BMC's standard APC will eventually converge with Springer's Open Choice, which charges \$3,000 per paper.*

**MC:** When Springer acquired BioMed Central, we announced that BioMed Central's pricing policy would not change *as a result of the acquisition*. As a business we must, from time to time, adjust our prices based on the market, which we have done. In fact, as I said, last year we introduced a lower cost publication option with the journal [BMC Research Notes](#) (current APC £575)

**RP:** *So why can BMC Research Notes' APC be set at a lower rate, and why does Springer need to charge \$3,000 when BMC's most expensive journal charges \$2,350?*

**MC:** It's very simple — our costs, and the level of service provided to authors (e.g. whether copy-editing is routinely provided), vary on a journal by journal basis. The variation in our APC prices reflects that.

Technology accounts for a significantly higher proportion of our costs than at most traditional publishers. That's because we've emphasised investment in the development of our own online systems, optimised for efficient online open access publishing. While such systems are expensive to develop, they allow us to keep our costs down and offer a lower price than most traditional publishers (including not-for-profits such as OUP or the Royal Society), which are often more burdened with legacy systems and processes.

**RP:** *As you correctly pointed out, some publishers charge more than BMC. On the other hand, however, Bentham charges [\\$600 and \\$900](#) and Scientific Journals International charges only [\\$99.95 to \\$199.95](#). Does this not suggest that BMC is overpriced? What, in fact, is a fair price for publishing a scholarly paper?*

**MC:** Is an apple overpriced as compared to an orange? "Fair" is a noble word we all love and use, but, first of all, it is very subjective, and secondly, in your question, it should be exchanged with "transparent". The open access publishing model makes pricing far more transparent than the subscription model, and allows authors to decide if the price being charged is "fair"

**RP:** *Transparent is another noble word. But I think it invites another question: What exactly are the costs that BMC incurs, and for what? Would you be willing to break down BMC's costs in the way that APS' Joe Serene [did for me](#) last year? And can you go a step further and justify those costs?*

**MC:** As I've noted in many presentations — e.g. [here](#) Open access publishing has most of the same costs as the traditional system. That is, editorial, technical, production, customer services, marketing (e.g. conference attendance)

**RP:** *You say that prices are more transparent with OA publishing and the user can decide if the price is fair. There has, however, been some [debate](#) as to whether the scholarly publishing market does operate as a true market. I see that Bentham recently [took over](#) publication of the journal [Clinical Practice & Epidemiology in Mental Health](#) from BMC. What's the background to that? Is it evidence that a market does in fact exist, and that lower-cost publishers like Bentham are beginning to poach journals from BioMed Central? Should authors and readers of the journal rejoice at the news?*

**MC:** BioMed Central publishes a number of journals (mainly society titles) on fixed term contracts. At the end of such a contract, these titles are of course free to choose whether to sign a new publishing agreement with BioMed Central or to move to another publisher.

Overall, many more titles are transferring to BioMed Central than away from BioMed Central, and this is contributing to [healthy overall growth](#) in our journal portfolio. We are also seeing strong performance by journals which move to open access with BioMed Central, in terms of increased Impact Factor and an increased number of manuscript submissions, and these results will no doubt encourage more journals to make the switch.

**RP:** *What percentage of papers does BMC allow waivers on today, and to whom?*

**MC:** Between 5 and 10% of articles receive a full waiver, and this percentage has been stable for several years and is, we understand, comparable to other OA publishers. Another 40% or so receive some kind of discount (e.g. via institutional membership).

## Not just a "movement" anymore

**RP:** *I think there is some confusion about the role of BMC in the OA movement. Specifically, where many seem to believe that the company has been driven by an ideological commitment to OA, in fact it is a for-profit company. When I spoke to Vitek Tracz, for instance, he [insisted](#) that BMC's primary objective has always been very definitely that of making money. Do you think this confusion has created a misperception, both about BMC and about OA publishing in general? For instance, one of your associate editors said to me: "One negative thing about BMC, maybe, is that they're not always faithful to Open Access. For example, they handle journals like [Genome Biology](#), which is not fully open access." How would you respond to a comment like this?*

**MC:** OA is not a religion. It's not just a "movement" any more, either. It is a working, legitimate and sustainable business model for publishing. BioMed Central was founded based on the idea that open access via the Internet could create a new more open model for communicating the results of scientific research, and that there was a gap in the market for a publisher that would offer such a service.

Any publisher, commercial or otherwise, must ensure that its financial numbers add up to a sustainable model. One of BioMed Central's key achievements has been to show that it is possible for an open access publisher to achieve this sustainability, despite much scepticism.

In terms of subscription content BioMed Central's policy, which has always been clearly stated, is to make all the *research* articles that we publish fully open access. All our journals, including *Genome Biology*, follow this policy without exception.

We have always offered additional, clearly marked, commissioned non-research content as an added-value service — this can be thought of as a magazine, published alongside the open access research in the journal. It is, we think, unrealistic to expect researchers to pay a publication fee in order to publish a magazine-type article *commissioned* by the publisher, and so subscriptions seem a natural model for this type of non-research content.

A very important point is that if you don't wish to subscribe to the "magazine" content, you can get your news and comment elsewhere. But if you want to read a research article, there is no real substitute for the article itself. That's another reason we think open access is so important for research articles.

**RP:** *Some researchers tell me that there is no longer any role for commercial companies in the scholarly journal business. Undoubtedly the relationship between commercial scholarly journal publishers and the research community has become increasingly troubled since Robert Maxwell entered the market in 1948 with [Pergamon Press](#). It is also widely claimed that society journals are cheaper. Could it be that the pursuit of profit is simply not compatible with the process of scholarly communication? What do commercial publishers bring to the table that would not otherwise exist?*

**MC:** The claim that there is no role for commercial publishers in scholarly publishing runs counter to all real world experience. In research, as in other areas of economic activity, the commercial sector

and the public sector tend to be complementary, and few would wish to see one entirely drive out the other.

Commercial companies such as Google and Apple have radically changed the way we use technology, while in the area of scholarly publishing, journals such as [Cell](#) and *Nature* surely demonstrate that commercial publishers can have an important and positive role. BioMed Central seeks to continue this tradition of positive collaboration between commercial publishing and academic research.

**RP: Finally I wanted to ask you three personal questions if I may. You were a shareholder in BMC. Unlike Vitek Tracz you didn't simply pocket the money and leave, but stayed to become an employee of Springer. Why?**

**MC:** Like Vitek Tracz, I believe passionately that open access offers strong benefits for science, and as an ex-biologist and a "techie", I find it interesting, challenging, and fulfilling to be able to focus on applying technology to help scientists communicate the results of their work more effectively.

Open Access continues to grow rapidly; BioMed Central's journals are becoming more and more established and are proving themselves, not least by achieving excellent Impact Factors. From my point of view there has never been a more exciting time to be involved in open access publishing.

**RP: In the wake of Springer's acquisition of BMC do you have an ownership stake in either company?**

**MC:** No.

**RP: When Vitek Tracz sold his first company he had a bespoke (triangular) house built for himself. Have you used your share of the proceeds from the sale of BMC to Springer to fund a similar personal project, or is the money still sitting in your bank account?**

**MC:** I'm happy to confirm that I have absolutely no plans to build a triangular house!

**RP: Ok. Thanks for agreeing to speak to me.**

---

© 2009 Richard Poynder



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 2.0 UK: England & Wales License](#). This permits you to copy and distribute it as you wish, so long as you credit me as the author, do not alter or transform the text, and do not use it for any commercial purpose. If you would like to republish the interview on a commercial basis, or have any comments on it, please email me at [richard.poynder@btinternet.com](mailto:richard.poynder@btinternet.com).

Please note that while I make this interview freely available to all, I am a freelance journalist by profession, and so make my living from writing. To assist me to continue making my work available in this way I invite anyone who reads this article to make a voluntary contribution. I have in mind a figure of \$8, but whatever anyone felt inspired to contribute would be fine. This can be done quite simply by [sending a payment](#) to my PayPal account quoting the email address [richard.poynder@btinternet.com](mailto:richard.poynder@btinternet.com). It is [not necessary](#) to have a PayPal account to make a payment.