

The OA Interviews: Libertas Academica

Richard Poynder talks to Tom Hill, Publisher and Managing Director of [Libertas Academica](#), an OA publisher based in Auckland, New Zealand.

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About a year ago people began to contact me to complain about the activities of a number of start-up Open Access ([OA](#)) publishers.

Their first concern was that these companies were bombarding researchers with spam-like messages inviting them to join the editorial boards of hundreds of new journals, and/or to submit papers to these journals, for which researchers were asked to pay [article-processing charges](#).

The second concern was that the quality of the peer review process provided by some of these new publishers appeared as though it might not be adequate.

Why were researchers contacting me about this? Because I write about scholarly publishing, and I specialise in Open Access.

So I began to contact these new companies in order to ask them about their activities. To my surprise, some of those I contacted greeted my enquiry with a variable mixture of silence, stonewalling, criticism, and even threats of legal action.

All of this is most unfortunate, not least because it creates a very poor impression of OA, and of scholarly publishers in general.

I should stress that the more established OA publishers – e.g. Public Library of Science ([PLoS](#)), BioMed Central ([BMC](#)), [Hindawi](#) etc. – have always responded readily to questions about their business practices, and with a good deal of openness.

Similarly, amongst the new crop of OA publishers both [Dove Medical Press](#) and [Libertas Academica](#) replied willingly to my questions when I contacted them. My [interview](#) with Tim Hill was published last November, and below I attach an email interview I undertook recently with the managing director of Libertas Academica, [Tom Hill](#) (Tim Hill's son).

What, if anything, the OA movement decides to do about the small minority of publishers who continue to give OA a bad name remains unclear. In recognition that there is a problem, however, last year a group of OA publishers founded the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association ([OASPA](#)) – with the aim of introducing a degree of self-regulation into the market.

How successful that organisation will prove over time remains unclear. For now both Dove Medical and Libertas Academica have told me that they have no plans to join OASPA.

But whatever happens it seems likely that even those OA publishers who respond openly and willingly to questions from journalists, and who are genuinely committed to providing a valuable service to the research community, will continue to face a degree of suspicion and distrust.

In particular, the quality of the peer review process that OA publishers offer looks set to remain a live issue for some time. This is partly because many believe that in an online OA environment the only significant service that publishers continue to provide is that of organising the peer review process. The nature and value of that service can therefore be expected to come under increasingly critical scrutiny.

Additionally, since fee-based OA journals bill researchers directly for publishing their papers (although in most cases the money will come not from researchers' own pockets, but from the budgets of their funders and/or institutions) the details of the financial transaction are much more visible than in a subscription-based environment – where publication charges are recovered indirectly by means of journal subscriptions. This, not unnaturally, increases expectations about the quality of the service provided in return.

It seems likely, therefore, that – sooner or later – OA publishers are going to have to become much more transparent than traditional subscription publishers ever had to be, both with regard to the process that papers undergo before they are published, and in explaining what the research community is getting for its money.

People are more likely to want to know, for instance, exactly what happens to a paper during the review process, who specifically reviews any given paper (and what qualifications they have for doing so), plus who makes the final decision on whether or not to publish a paper, and how that decision is arrived at.

This transparency will be all the more important given the high degree of automation that OA publishers utilise. A [recent incident](#) in which Libertas Academica mistakenly published a paper that had been rejected by the referees (a consequence [says](#) Tom Hill of a database error) highlights the potential dangers of automation, and the bad press that can circulate in the blogosphere when such an error occurs.

Moreover, with growing scepticism about the [quality](#) and [nature](#) of the peer review process being undertaken by *all* scholarly publishers, the need for greater transparency will surely become ever more pressing for OA publishers as time goes on.

A second issue of transparency relates to the question of ownership. Most of the new crop of OA publishers are privately held companies, and most of them are unforthcoming when asked to divulge ownership details. Since the services they provide are primarily – if not exclusively – paid for out of the public purse some are [beginning to conclude](#) that such secrecy is undesirable, particularly where the quality of the service being provided is also at issue, and particularly where the publishers concerned are selling their services under the banner of "openness".

As I asked when I published the Dove Medical [interview](#), "Is it not reasonable ... for taxpayers to expect to know exactly what is being provided for [their] money, and who will benefit from any profits that are made as a result?"

I discuss these and other issues below with Libertas Academica's managing director Tom Hill.



Tom Hill, Publisher, Libertas Academica

The interview begins ...

RP: What is your background as a publisher, and your position and role at Libertas Academica?

TH: I've been involved in publishing since I was at university, where I was involved in the *Auckland University Law Review* ([AULR](#)) as both an editor and an author. After graduating I wasn't greatly enthused about the prospect of practising law but I wanted to do something at least as intellectually challenging. Publishing still appealed and I heard about Open Access. I researched it and decided it was worth getting involved in, and so LA was established.

My role at LA is essentially to oversee new business development and monitor the existing business.

RP: Can you talk me through the history and background of LA, and describe its *raison d'être* and business objectives?

TH: The history and background of LA has to date been closely aligned with my own, so to some extent I've already answered this question in my previous answer.

LA's *raison d'être* is essentially to advance itself and the OA publishing model through innovation, excellent service to authors and readers, and fair fees.

This translates into the following broad business objectives:

- publishing in the journal must be sustainable for us and the authors: principally meaning that fees must be high enough to allow us to invest in the journals and low enough to provide a good deal for authors
- excellent service to authors which is constantly being analysed and improved
- maintenance of and continual improvement of editorial standards in recognition of the central importance of this to the success of the business

RP: When did LA start operating?

TH: In 2004. I ran the business in my spare time at first, while I worked for a legal publisher as managing editor of a portfolio of databases. In the meantime LA proved itself viable and I moved over to run it full time.

I continue to do some pro bono legal work for a human rights barrister, and I've had some more work published in law journals, but I've never regretted not practising law.

RP: Where is the company headquartered, who owns it, and how many employees does it have?

TH: LA is based in Auckland, New Zealand. We have four full time permanent staff, three part timers and numerous contractors performing various functions, in New Zealand and overseas.

RP: Why can you not say more about the ownership of LA? Most if not all LA's revenues will be coming from the public purse. Does not the public have a right to know to whom that money is going?

TH: Because LA is a privately held company.

RP: Do you personally have an ownership stake in the company? If so, can you say what it is?

TH: Yes, and no.

RP: Your father, Tim Hill, runs Dove Medical Press – which is also based in Auckland. I understand that they are separate companies, but does your father have any ownership stake in LA, or any involvement at all with LA?

TH: No.

Do you have any financial interest in, or involvement with, Dove?

TH: No.

The journals

RP: As I understand it, all your journals are OA, and they specialise in the biological sciences and clinical medicine. How many journals are there in total, how many papers have you published so far, and do you have any other products (e.g. books)?

TH: There are 90 journals, including several which are still under development and not on the website yet.

I looked at Open Access text books when I started LA and I developed what looked like being a viable business model, but it never attracted a great deal of interest and LA now focuses exclusively on Open Access journals.

RP: Can you expand on that last point about OA books?

TH: As of now, I think the academic text book area is more dysfunctional than the journal area but the last time I looked at it I couldn't detect any real consensus on a solution. My opinion is that a wiki with a degree of control over authorship and versioning is the way forward for the academic text book area.

RP: Are there regular publication dates for LA's journals? Are they, say, published once a month on the same date?

TH: Articles are published as they are accepted for publication, as what we term a "Provisional PDF". This is the accepted manuscript, any associated files, and a cover page explaining its status as a provisional PDF. As soon as typesetting is complete the provisional PDF is replaced by the typeset PDF.

RP: What is LA's business model: Are all its revenues earned from article-processing charges (which I believe are \$1,259 per paper), or does the company earn revenue from other sources too?

TH: 100% of our revenues arise from article publishing fees, although LA also sells a tiny number of author reprints of papers where individuals request it.

RP: What professional online services are LA's journals indexed in?

TH: Numerous services including CAS, SCOPUS, Intute, EMBASE, EMBiology, Science Citation Index Expanded, Journal Citation Reports/Science Edition, Current Contents/Agriculture, Biology and Environmental Sciences, Current Contents/Life Sciences, EBSCO Academic Search Complete, and Google Scholar.

RP: Have any of your journals yet earned an impact factor? If not, when do you expect them to start earning IFs?

TH: Several journals are currently in the process of being evaluated pursuant to being granted impact factors.

RP: I do not see any [DOIs](#) in the papers published on the LA web site. Is that something you plan to add?

TH: Yes, it is a near-term priority.

RP: Does LA offer any form of institutional membership scheme such as [the one operated by Biomed Central](#)?

TH: Not at present. When I've looked at it in the past there hasn't seemed to be a great deal of demand for it. However I'm not opposed to the idea and any reasonable proposals put to me will be considered, although I'm wary of any agreements which effectively compel authors to publish with us. I don't regard this as being in the interests of authors and, because LA's interests are aligned with those of authors, not in LA's interests either.

RP: I see you offer fee waivers. Can you give me some idea of the percentage of papers you have published with a waiver to date?

TH: I can't give a precise total but they run at around 15-20% of the monthly total. There are also a number of papers published with partial waivers.

In addition, when new journals are launched LA offers waivers for the first three months after launch.

RP: You didn't say how many papers LA has published to date?

TH: As of today (27/1/09) 1,043.

Peer review

RP: Peer review practices seem to vary a great deal amongst scholarly publishers today. Can you explain how it works at LA?

TH: The basic precepts LA applies to peer review are that:

- Objective and effective peer review is the cornerstone of all credible scholarly publishing, and
- LA is obliged to avoid placing 'road-blocks' in the paths of peer reviewers, in recognition that they undertake their role as an unpaid professional obligation, and

- Authors are entitled to expect that peer review of their paper will be completed promptly, but without compromising editorial standards.

RP: Can you describe the process that papers go through before they are published by LA, and who is involved in that process? Does every journal have an editor-in-chief to make the final decision for instance?

TH: Peer reviewers' reports are sent to the journal's editor-in-chief or associate editor, who makes a publishing decision based on the reviewers' recommendations. The author is then sent the reports and informed of the publishing decision.

In the case of papers which are accepted with modifications the editor-in-chief or associate editor receives the resubmitted manuscript and decides whether to accept it or send it back to the authors for further changes.

RP: Who chooses the reviewers in the first place, and who decides whether they are suitably qualified to review a given paper?

TH: Reviewers volunteer to act as peer-reviewers for our various journals. Their comments are seen by the editor and he/she evaluates the merits or otherwise of their comments and makes a decision on what is communicated to the author.

RP: Is the peer review at LA all done in the traditional manner, or do you have any "community peer review" or "open peer review" processes, which seem to be becoming increasingly popular with OA publishers?

TH: We allow commenting on papers which often manifests some of the features of open peer review. However, I'm very wary of equating this with peer review. While I'm very interested in innovation in other areas, meaningful and credible peer review is the basis of credible scholarly publishing.

If authors demonstrate an interest in it then LA will implement other forms of peer review, but in my opinion this is not an area that should be experimented with readily.

Peer review is an area which I am very conservative about, principally because in my opinion OA publishers need to be seen to be employing procedures which are unambiguously of the same standard of credibility and objectivity as conventional publishers. So this is an area where innovation takes a second place to maintaining quality.

RP: I think you claim to peer review papers in one to three weeks: Many might say that it is not possible to review a paper adequately in that time. Most journals take months, sometimes over a year. How do you manage to get it done so quickly, and how can you ensure that the quality of the reviewing process is adequate with such a short turnaround time?

TH: It's taken a great deal of time and research to bring peer review times down to this level without compromising on quality. We have achieved it primarily by understanding how peer reviewers approach the peer review of a paper (in regard to how they organise the task and how they incorporate it around their other commitments), and by working to ensure that we make it as straight-forward for them to undertake a peer review as possible, again without compromising on quality.

It has been an interesting process: I found that there was no consistently discernable difference between the quality of a report where the reviewer was given three months to respond and where they were given two weeks.

LA's peer review standards are carefully balanced between ensuring a reasonably prompt submission processing turn-around time and allowing reviewers enough time to compose thoughtful and comprehensive reports.

Editors-in-chief see peer review reports before they are sent and can request further reports to be commissioned if they wish.

I read almost all the peer review reports we send and I'm confident that we are achieving very good review quality standards. Completed review reports usually run to between one to two plain text A4 pages, and occasionally run up to around six or seven. Credible peer review is something I take very seriously because it's the basis of our credibility.

RP: I believe LA papers are licensed under Creative Commons licences. Can you specify which licence you use, and say whether the same licence applies to all LA papers?

TH: We use the [Creative Commons Attribution By license](#). The same licence applies to all LA papers. Some of our oldest papers have a slightly different wording, although from recollection it isn't dissimilar to the CC-BY license in its underlying nature.

But irrespective of this, the site states that where the old license appears it should be considered to be invalidated and replaced by the CC-BY license.

RP: Do you have, or plan to introduce, a print option – allowing people to buy print versions of your journals?

TH: This is something that I'm going to offer for some journals in 2009. Owing to the flexibility of modern digital reproduction methods it's relatively inexpensive to undertake small print runs of journals, although the logistics of distributing printed journals is still comparatively expensive.

It will be interesting to see whether there is significant demand for print versions. I can certainly understand from my own experience as an author that there can be real value in printed journals.

Recruitment

RP: Can you tell me how you recruit a) editors and b) article submissions for LA journals?

TH: Editorial board members are generally recruited on the basis of an editor-in-chief's recommendations, by editorial board members recommending people who are then invited to supply a curriculum vitae for the editor in chief to review, or by applications being sent to us without prior invitation. In the latter two instances applicants are screened by the editor-in-chief.

Submissions primarily arise from each journal's alerts opt-in email list. An alert containing a call for papers is sent every three to four months. Frequently these appear to be forwarded by recipients to their colleagues.

We also receive submissions as a result of visits to the site and a gratifyingly high number of previous authors submit new papers to us.

RP: As you will know, there has been some controversy over the way in which some OA publishers have been recruiting editors and papers for their journals. [Dr Gunther Eysenbach](#), for one, has been very vocal about this, and indeed he has specifically criticised LA (amongst others) in the past. On his blog Eysenbach says of LA and your father's company Dove Medical, "some annoying or illegal activities are going on in Auckland, and anybody who receives spam emails from Dove Medical Press, Libertas Academica, Timothy Hill, Tim Hill, or Tom Hill, should submit a complaint to the [New Zealand Spam Complaint System](#)." Were his criticisms justified, or did he misunderstand what LA has been doing?

TH: In terms of general calls for papers, we previously operated on the basis that where authors had published a paper in another journal that was very close in aims and scope to one of our journals then we could legitimately contact them. That served both the authors and us well, and was generally very well received by those potential authors.

However our business has developed rapidly and we now have a very loyal group of former authors and potential authors who are very happy to receive correspondence from us. We ask those people to opt-in to our mailing lists, and respect any decisions that they make to no longer receive emails from us.

We have no plans to resume general calls for papers and find that our opt-in lists allow us to do all that we need to do in order to promote our journals.

RP: *Are you saying that LA never sent out unsolicited mass emails asking researchers to volunteer to be on its journal editorial boards or submit papers?*

TH: I am saying that at the time we considered such invitations to submit papers to be perfectly acceptable. However, on the basis of subsequent feedback received it is clear that a small number consider such invitations in a negative light. It is now no longer done and has not been done for a considerable period.

RP: *Dr Eysenbach appeared to conclude that you and your father were the same person and, presumably, that Dove and LA were both run by the same person. Why has LA not publicly responded to this incorrect inference, and to Dr Eysenbach's complaint that you were spamming researchers?*

TH: If Dr Eysenbach wished to engage constructively with me over these matters he needed only to send me an email and I would have responded in the same fashion. He never attempted to do so and so I assume that this was never his intention.

Since he chose not to take this approach I don't consider it incumbent on me to respond. It should also be noted that Dr Eysenbach publishes a journal which competes with various LA journals; one competitor attacking another isn't new and very few businesses would actively respond to every attack.

Another point to consider is that it simply isn't practical, and probably isn't advisable, for a business to respond to every comment on every blog about their business.

However, I would emphasise that I'm not aware of any publisher where any author, reader, peer reviewer or editorial board member can contact the managing director and receive a direct substantive reply.

RP: *You are saying that you personally reply to all enquiries LA receives?*

TH: Yes. I even send each journal's journal alert email newsletter myself and any replies that subscribers send to it come to me directly. I do this because receiving feedback from LA's audience is the most valuable kind of information I can receive on how we're doing. Even if someone isn't specifically offering feedback, the fact that they're asking a question is a valuable insight.

Quality

RP: *Traditional subscription publishers like [Elsevier](#) have argued in the past that author-pays OA inevitably raises a conflict of interest for OA publishers, and that it could therefore lead to a decline in the quality of published papers. (See for instance Elsevier's [Memorandum to UK politicians in 2004](#)). What would you say to anyone that might make that argument today, and what specifically does LA do in order to avoid such conflicts?*

TH: When I was doing my initial research on Open Access that was something that concerned me too. It seemed that OA could easily be regarded as a form of vanity publishing. However, only in the most superficial respect is this a good argument. The best response to it – and this is something that any responsible OA publisher should make self-evident – is to make clear that the same editorial practices are applied as those used by traditional publishers.

RP: You say that but, as I understand it, LA had to pull a paper from its journal [Theoretical Biology Insights](#) after it had been published. I believe this was done in response to [criticism on the Dechronization](#) blog. Is that correct?

TH: The TBI article was an embarrassing moment for us, and all I can offer is my apologies and an explanation.

RP: What is the explanation?

TH: It was caused by a database error following a server upgrade, which resulted in the paper having its status advanced, and thereby being published.

When the problem was recognised the paper was promptly removed and the database was repaired. We also put in place two layers of additional safeguards to prevent similar problems arising in the future.

As you can probably imagine it's very frustrating that IT issues like this can give rise to concerns about our editorial standards.

RP: Can you clarify what you are saying: Are you saying that the paper should never have been published, or that it was simply published prematurely? If you are saying that it should never have been published, is this because it was rejected by the peer reviewers? (Last time I looked, by the way, the paper was [still online](#)).

TH: To clarify, the paper should never have been published because it was a) rejected by peer reviewers and b) had its status advanced causing it to be published owing to a database error which has since been remedied.

It is also important to note that the paper was removed from the journal table of contents as soon as the database error was identified, months before the blog entry you refer to was brought to my attention.

The link that you provide above, by the way, has not been linked to from anywhere on the website, including the journal's home page, for some time, and the incorrectly published PDF has now been removed.

RP: Another concern raised on [Dechronization](#) was that LA never publicly signalled the withdrawal of the paper. Why is that?

TH: Unfortunately at present we don't have a means to make a statement on the removal of a paper on the journal's home page, but this is being addressed in pending website design changes.

RP: Last year saw the launch of the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association ([OASPA](#)), partly in response to concern about researchers being spammed. Do you think there is a need for the OA publishing industry to engage in this kind of self-regulation? If so, do you think OASPA is the right approach?

TH: Whether it requires self-regulation is moot. Being a capitalist I tend to assume that the market, specifically our editorial boards, authors and readers, provide the regulation.

We actively request, receive, and act on feedback we receive from editorial boards, readers and authors, and I strongly encourage all publishers to constantly and pro-actively do this as the best way to self-regulate.

So I think OA publishers should respond to the needs of the research community, not to the opinions of other publishers as to what constitutes correct practice.

In my opinion, however, there would be great value in an organisation governed by individuals who represent the interests of the research community. These representatives would be required to disclose their conflicts of interest, and publishers and any researcher receiving remuneration from a publisher would automatically be disqualified from being involved in the governance of the organisation. These individuals would need to be replaced at regular intervals through a transparent elective process. The organisation could have similar goals to OASPA.

RP: So you don't anticipate joining OASPA?

TH: I see no benefit in doing so.

The future

RP: What are LA's future plans in the scholarly journal market?

TH: LA will continue to launch new journals but my primary strategic focus for 2009 is to invest in our existing journals by working to align them as closely as possible with the interests of our readers and authors.

RP: Do you think that eventually all peer-reviewed papers will be published on an OA basis?

TH: My expectation of how the STM scholarly journal area will develop is that a great number of the subscription journals in the strata below the leading journals will either disappear or convert to OA.

We've already seen some conventional journals in spaces that LA is well represented in – such as bioinformatics – close down.

In the past we've looked at purchasing print journals and converting them to OA but the licensing arrangements attached to these journals make it prohibitively complex to do so.

RP: What opportunities does OA offer for small publishers? Does it, for instance, level the playing field, and so make it easier for small publishers to compete with large publishers?

TH: The beauty of OA is that it makes it possible for anyone, whether it's an enthusiastic individual or a start-up publishing firm like LA, to compete with the established publishers, and indeed to do so very successfully by being quicker to act and more innovative. Whether it offers benefits to small publishers producing conventional journals is dependent on how well they can adapt to OA.

RP: How do you mean?

TH: Many publishers – large and small – which adopt OA fail to recognise that it demands more than acceptance of a different copyright policy. This is demonstrated by the fact that conventional publishers charge article processing fees which are the same or even a greater amount than they charge for a print journal subscription.

Conspiracy theorists would argue that these publishers are trying to undermine Open Access by charging huge fees, but in this case I'd say that the cause is principally organisational inertia.

RP: *There are an increasing number of OA journals being launched today. What is different, special, and attractive about LA that you would want to highlight to any researcher currently considering joining the editorial board of an OA journal, or submitting a paper to an OA journal?*

TH: LA's principal strength is that it seeks to align what it offers with the needs of authors. And LA seems to be one of the few OA publishers that recognises that there are a lot of researchers yet to be convinced of the merits of OA, and also the only one I know of where anyone who wishes to can send a message to the managing director and receive a reply.

RP: *Thank you for your time*

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