



## Profile Stephen Barr

**In this issue we chat to Stephen Barr, Managing Director of SAGE UK. Having been with SAGE since 1986, Stephen is also now Global Sales Director and President of SAGE International. Juggling three roles is no mean feat, and so our conversation began with a look back over his career journey and, ultimately, what has led Stephen to his current role.**

Stephen recalled his earliest role, at Europa Publications, which "... had a distinctive editorial model in which the editorial staff were partly assembling content and information, and partly generating it. I ended up with a range of interesting challenges, from writing the recent history of Danish politics through to compiling a Who's Who of Africa south of the Sahara".

A move to Cambridge University Press (CUP) followed, where Stephen was involved in an academic monograph publishing programme, mainly focused on history and politics – a role which shaped much of his later career. "I was a member of the social science team at CUP, headed up by the remarkable Patricia Williams, and this period was really when I started to identify myself with social science publishing as an identity and a project."

The Open University (OU) Press provided Stephen with his next career move. "CUP obviously had the advantages of a big, prestigious, established publishing company, but I felt that I would learn more from working in a smaller, newer and more nimble business." At that stage the press had just started moving into publishing independent books, not tied to any OU course. Stephen remembers, "The great thing about the OU Press experience was the immediacy: as a small start-up company, its very survival depended on the decisions we were taking on a daily basis about which books we published and how we published them."

10 In 1986, Stephen decided to forego his life at the OU in favour of a move to SAGE to become senior commissioning editor.

“SAGE’s plans for growth offered opportunities for development which did not seem likely to arise at the OU Press ... I was covering very similar publishing lists to those I had handled at the OU, centred around sociology, social policy, communications, media studies, organization studies and related fields. The shift to SAGE brought two immediate major changes for me. First, it brought me into a much more internationally minded company. And second, it expanded my focus, which had hitherto been entirely within the book publishing business, to include journals.”

Stephen’s role at SAGE developed rapidly. In 1988, he became editorial director, responsible for all of the UK-based book and journal publishing; in 1996, managing director, overseeing the whole UK company. Since 2006 he has also managed the international business of SAGE India and SAGE Asia Pacific, and, most recently took on overseeing SAGE’s sales forces globally. It is obviously a role he cherishes. “There is so much I could say about how exciting and creative SAGE has been as a place in which to do good publishing. There was a real sense of impetus as we took the UK publishing programme from small beginnings and developed ourselves into a major presence on the UK and international social science publishing space.”

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When asked about career highlights, Stephen said, “The highlights in publishing tend to relate to two areas: doing good publishing, and working with inspiring people ...”, but went on to say that “...publishing is a great environment and it is invidious to single out individuals when there are so many inspiring people around ...”. However, when pushed, he mentioned his former OU editorial director and mentor, John Skelton, along with Mike Featherstone and the *Theory, Culture & Society* team at SAGE. “This was an exciting publishing programme in its own right, but it was also a fundamentally strategic shift for SAGE, repositioning us as a major creative publisher in sociology and social theory in the UK and European markets.” Stephen also included Stuart Hall, the representative of the social sciences faculty at the OU, of whom he said, “I could not have had a more inspiring person to guide me. I remain permanently in debt to Stuart, to John Skelton and to many others who I worked with at that time”.

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Unsurprisingly, Stephen talked about the inspiration he gets from SAGE’s founders, George and Sara McCune. “Sara’s intelligence, drive, passion and vision have been fundamental to the growth of the business. Equally important has been her iron resolve that SAGE will remain independent not only for her lifetime, but for the indefinite future; she has enshrined this commitment in the creation of a trust which will manage SAGE after her death. The

11 certainty of our long-term independence has been central to our ability to continually think for the long term and to grow our business.”

“Although independence does not necessarily or automatically indicate that a company can offer something different to the academic community, I believe that SAGE’s independence *does* support our ability to offer a genuinely different option.” He believes that this is for two key reasons: firstly, “SAGE’s independence is not just a temporary status, it is integral to the identity of the company and has been built into its DNA for the long-term future ...”, and, secondly, that “Sara’s own interest is in publishing for a purpose, not publishing just as a commercial business. SAGE was set up to support the dissemination of useful knowledge. Sara believes passionately in the value of scholarship, research and education. In particular she is passionate about knowledge in the social sciences and the part that that knowledge can play in helping to address social problems of all kinds. Her commitment to causes of social justice extends beyond supporting good publishing, and includes direct involvement in many social causes as a philanthropist. What all this means is that, as a publisher, SAGE is accountable to someone whose interest is in what we are achieving in the world. We still face all the normal challenges of any business; we still have to generate more revenues than our costs. But we can compete successfully against businesses many times our size because our founder is prepared to face the risks which come with that competition.” This determination to succeed was reflected recently by the Independent Publishers Guild who awarded SAGE their accolade as Academic and Professional Publisher of the Year 2012, an achievement that Stephen is rightly proud of.

But, it hasn’t all been plain sailing for Stephen. “Building business involves taking risks, and so inevitably there are low points and things which don’t work out.” He recollected SAGE’s entry into software publishing under the Scolari imprint, which proved to be a hard learning experience. “We discovered that while we could sell a lot of software, the costs we incurred in doing so were consistently higher than the revenue we generated. We just could not make it work. In the end, we had to unravel the organization we had put together to support our software publishing, transfer as many people as we could into other roles, and bring our software authors’ contracts to an end – all things we seek to avoid.”

He concluded on a philosophical note: “Though this didn’t work out, I don’t regret the decisions we took. Publishing involves taking risks. Sara and George were risk takers, and that willingness to take risks is part of what has enabled SAGE to grow and succeed. If you are going to take risks, you have to accept that sometimes you will try things which don’t work out. Every experience can be learnt from, every opportunity will teach you a new lesson which can be implemented and built from moving forwards.”

But, in case you were thinking it is all hard work, Stephen added that “There has always been a big role in publishing for food, epitomized by the author lunch. The importance of breaking bread to publishing is all part of the way relationships are at the heart of the business”. He remembered fondly a dinner at a Chinese restaurant in Singapore which was held to celebrate the launch of SAGE Asia Pacific. “The last course was a sweet red bean soup with some gelatinous stuff floating in it; perfectly palatable, though rather different from western ideas of how to end a meal ... ” and, after questioning the waiter, the diners discovered that “... the soup contained *hasma*, a substance made from the dried fallopian tubes of frogs!”

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Stephen sees SAGE’s move into Asia as key to their vision that ‘academic knowledge is universal in its potential impact’. Following the creation of SAGE London in 1971, he remembers that “Even more remarkable was their decision to establish SAGE India in 1981, when SAGE was still young and few publishers had yet ventured into Asian markets in any substantial way. SAGE India was founded with a vision for two-way dissemination of knowledge. Its purpose was not just to sell US and European scholarship into India; it was also to publish Indian authors, whose work would be made available outside India through

12 SAGE's marketing". Since then, offices have opened in Singapore, Beijing, Kyoto, Kuala Lumpur and elsewhere, which Stephen has responsibility for.

As if this didn't keep him busy enough, Stephen also sits on the industry panels for the publishing courses at City University and the University of the Arts in the UK, and has "given occasional talks (to which they very generously, but quite misleadingly, ascribe the title of a visiting professorship) at the publishing course at Beijing Normal University". But, he added modestly, "I would not claim that these connections give me any special insight into the university systems either in the UK or internationally". He is, however, very aware that the link between publishers and universities is an essential one: "Universities are the main base for our authors; they are also the primary market for our textbooks and our journals."



He continued, "Relationships between librarians and publishers have long been in an uneasy balance. On the one side, issues of pricing and the pressure on library budgets mean that there is tension and conflict; on the other, there is a strong mutual dependency, and recognition that we are tied together in serving the needs of the academic and student communities. The origins of the conflict are deep and systemic, and it is too simplistic to see it in terms of good and bad behaviour by publishers. It may be that a shift to open access models for journal publishing will over time diminish that conflict, but that remains to be seen." He recognizes that "... both universities and publishers are grappling with massive systemic changes driven by a mix of different factors – the digital revolution, globalization, changing economic environments and so on. The role of publishers in this environment has become contested, particularly around the issues of open access and journal publishing. I think it is perfectly reasonable for people to ask how publishers add value in a changing world, and publishers need to find ways of responding to these challenges."

Stephen continued, "... there is a clear common interest for publishers and librarians in demonstrating that the work they do as under-labourers in the world of knowledge, research and education is delivering value. I can see many opportunities for further information and research helping to provide an evidential base for demonstrating how information adds value", and went on to say that "there are already lots of good examples, including, for example, the CIBER research which demonstrated that spending on e-journals drives not only usage but also research outcomes<sup>1</sup>". He noted also other projects that SAGE have been involved in with LISU on how libraries can add value<sup>2</sup>, and with the British Library on the role of the library in an open access world<sup>3</sup>, saying, "We see this kind of collaboration as key at a point where both publishers and libraries are trying to adapt to a dramatically changing world".

It is this kind of adaptation that Stephen sees as key to the continued success of SAGE. "We have always liked to grow. The reasons are more existential than commercial. If our purpose

13 is the dissemination of knowledge, why not do as much of it as our finances will support? During the 26 years I have worked in SAGE London it has grown by a factor of around 50 times, and our ability to publish good content, and to reach more people with that content, has expanded with the growth of the company."

"I have long felt that the ideal is to combine the effectiveness and reach of a major commercial publisher with the passion and values of a university press, and my ambition for SAGE is to build a publishing company which can match that ideal."

"The next 15 years are likely to see changes even more dramatic than those of the last 15 years ..." he added, "... and no company can predict or guarantee what the future holds. If SAGE is to continue to grow, we will have to do so by continuing to meet the changing expectations of the role of a publisher, and continuing to deliver something distinctive and valuable for our authors and for the academic community as a whole", and that "... if we are still flourishing in 15 years, we may well be doing very different tasks to those which we currently undertake". What is clear in his mind is that "... there is no room for complacency, and the world will not guarantee survival for any company which fails to respond to the changing environment".

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This is quite a daunting thought, so your Editor finished by asking Stephen how he manages to relax. "With a job which keeps me travelling for nearly half of the typical year, and with four children at various stages of the educational life course, I don't do that much relaxing ... [but] when I do have time, I like to cook." He also chairs the board of trustees of a local community arthouse cinema, but, he noted, "... alas, this means I spend more time in committee meetings than actually watching the films". He added wistfully, "... my most treasured time is any time I can get to Italy, ideally with the whole family. I went to Italy between leaving school and starting university, and have tried to get back when I can ever since. I like E M Forster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread* in which the uptight Brits are transformed by exposure to the warmth of Italian culture and lifestyle. I'm definitely up for experiencing that transformation!"

#### References:

1. Evaluating the usage and impact of e-journals in the UK. Research Information Network, 2011.
2. <http://libraryvalue.wordpress.com/report/> (accessed 20 December 2012).
3. <http://www.uk.sagepub.com/repository/binaries/pdf/Library-OAReport.pdf> (accessed 20 December 2012).