

## ◆ Keynote Address: *These Are the Worst of Times, These Are the Best of Times*

Speaker:

**Vitek Tracz**  
Current Science Group  
London, England

Reporter:

**Margaret Ring Gillock**  
*Annals of Internal Medicine*  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

In his keynote address, Vitek Tracz explained why he sees the current situation in science publishing as both the worst of times and the best of times. He noted that because science publishing is in flux and an outdated system is giving way to what he sees as a new and better system, new opportunities exist. Gone are the days when the market that was created by the need for science literature resulted in “magical incomes” for science publishers; a new model of partnerships is on the horizon.

As evidence that change is already taking place, Tracz reminded us of the days when typesetting was a thriving business. Juggling hot type gave way to more sophisticated typesetting systems, which gave way to desktop publishing for many publications. He sees the same type of thing happening in publishing in general. Publishing is changing from a paper-based practice to an electronic one. With that come changes in how information is distributed and how it is accessed. Tracz

mentioned that with Web technology, there is no longer a need for such artificial restrictions as limits on numbers of words, tables, or references in articles.

Because this is a time to consider avenues for change, Tracz suggested that the new systems should include improvements for publishers, authors, and readers alike. He sees the advent of PubMed Central (PMC) as the answer to many problems. It constitutes a central repository for original research reports, can be used in conjunction with publishers’ Web sites, and obviates government control of access. Even though only 15 journals now participate in PMC, Tracz sees participation growing as the system proves to be a success.

Another possible avenue to satisfy the needs of the scientific publishing community is BioMed Central (BMC). Its mission is to provide peer-reviewed original research reports electronically. It allows libraries to access research papers immediately after their release. Unlike PMC, BMC allows preprints; Tracz admonished that this should be seen as a blessing—“not an original sin”. About 54 journals participate in BMC. Authors decide how the selections will be managed, and BMC chooses referees for peer review. However, BMC does not copyedit papers. This process is a departure from “business as usual”, but Tracz offered his opinion on why and how BMC will survive and prosper. He said that “something is changing,

and BMC will do what is now needed”, including provision of review services and creation of editorial databases. He added that real dangers are associated with BMC, but new answers may open new avenues to success, and publishers and authors may even become partners.

In the question-and-answer session that followed, Richard Horton, editor of *The Lancet*, noted that the advent of PMC and BMC could compromise the role that journals have played traditionally. Results, he suggested, could be a change in the scale of medical literature, the dissolution of professional societies that had depended on revenue from publishing to support their existence, the end of manuscript editing as we know it, and loss of a forum for journals to fulfill charges that extend beyond publishing. Tracz responded that the new scale will be the scale of the Web (to which the scientific community is becoming accustomed), that the fate of societies depends on the model that they adopt (for some, no longer constrained by cost, it may mean the first opportunity to publish), that manuscript editing will be more tightly focused on selection of the best articles, and that major journals will continue to be active in issues that concern the medical community.

Only time will tell whether these are the worst of times, the best of times, or both.

