

Interview with David G. Nicholls, Modern Language Association (MLA)

David G. Nicholls was intervjued by Catta Torhell, Senior Librarian at the Library of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Lund University

"I am writing to you on behalf of the MLA Executive Council about a serious problem in the publishing of scholarly books. We seek your assistance." This is the beginning of a special letter from then-President Stephen Greenblatt to the members on May 28th 2002.

http://www.mla.org/resources/documents/rep_scholarly_pub/scholarly_pub

The background to this "serious problem" is a report from the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on the Future of Scholarly Publishing. The committee was appointed in 1999 and the report was presented to the Executive Council in the beginning of 2002. As director of book publications at MLA, David G. Nicholls was very involved in the work with the report and, together with other colleagues at MLA, assisted the committee as an expert on publishing.

Nicholls was also one of the invited speakers to the Second Nordic Conference in Lund April 26th – 28th this year and the title of his paper was "Problems and Prospects for Scholarly Communication in the Modern Languages." On the sunny afternoon after the conference I met David over a cup of coffee and I was very curious to find out how the scholarly community within modern languages had reacted to the recommendations given by the committee.

The report discusses the increasing problems for junior scholars in humanities to get scholarly books published by a reputable press in order to be promoted to tenure. The report analyzes how diminished library acquisitions budgets and reduced press subsidies make it difficult for university presses to publish scholarly monographs in the humanities. In his letter Stephen Greenblatt urged the departments to seriously consider if books should really

be the only way to judge scholarly achievement. David tells me that the debate about this started immediately after the letter was sent out to the MLA members. In October 2002, the MLA Executive Council invited representatives of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) and hearing arranged by the Association of American University Presses (AAUP) to a joint meeting to discuss the problem.

MLA is with its more than 30 000 members the largest scholarly society in humanities in the US and its discussions of a new publishing environment will likely have great impact also outside the field of modern language. When the report finally was published in the December issue of *Profession* 2002 the results were spread and discussed widely. http://www.mla.org/resources/documents/issues_scholarly_pub

So what happened? Has anything changed? No perfect solution has been found. David reports that the current MLA president fears that departments have put even more emphasis on the requirement of scholarly books in the discussions following the report. The good thing though is that the awareness about the problems within scholarly communication has increased. MLA member John M. Unsworth, a respected scholar with a background in English Studies, has addressed the Open Access discussions in a recently published article in *The Chronicle Review* (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 30, 2004). Nicholls see this as a sign that the discussions are very wide ranging.

David is working on several projects at MLA concerning new standards for electronic textual editing. He also follows the developments within different e-publishing projects such as Gutenberg-e at Columbia University Press but is very concerned about the enormous amount of money that is needed to run this kind of service. The MLA continues to seek out good alternatives to the current system. But his interest and knowledge is great and I am convinced that with him in charge of the book publications at MLA things will happen in a not too distant a future.

Svenskt Resurscentrum för vetenskaplig kommunikation

Box 134, 221 00 Lund

Telefon: 046-222 00 00 (vx), Fax: 046-222 36 82

www.sciecom.org

Ansvarig utgivare: Ingegerd Rabow, sciecom@sciecom.org