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'Digital publishing options'

You've heard a lot today about recent developments in digital publishing, and some attempts at predicting what will happen in the next months and years. The truth is that nobody really knows what the 'next big thing' will be. At the moment, community-generated content is leading the way – wikipedia, MySpace, blogs – collectively known as Web 2.0. It's a fashionable concept in early 2007, and there is growing interest in its academic applications, but who's to say what form it will take, or indeed what will have replaced it, by this time next year? A salutary example of how quickly both technology and user expectations can change is the CD-Rom. It is not so long ago that the CD-Rom was held out as the future for digital publishing, particularly for reference works, editions of texts and so on. Today it is rarely considered as the primary means of dissemination for academic research. Just to take one example, the Royal Historical Society Bibliography of British and Irish History was published by Oxford University Press on CD-Rom in 1998 (individual version price £299 plus VAT). By 2002, when an application for funding was made to the Arts and Humanities Research Council, it was for an online version. It had taken more than 70 years for the book to be replaced as the optimum method of delivery – it took only four to realise the limitations of the CD-Rom.

Given that digital technology is changing so much and so quickly, how can small publishers keep track of developments and ensure that they don't get left behind? Is it better just to carry on publishing in the traditional manner, distributing a limited number of printed volumes to an interested membership, supplemented by some one-off and library sales? There is a certain attraction to this: people still like books as physical objects, and find them easier to read than text on a screen; printing costs, for the time being at least, decrease from year to year, seemingly immune from inflation; there are no concerns about 'future-proofing' the technology of a book. There are, of course, other costs to

be considered, but with the exception of storage, for the most part these are also incurred in digital publishing.

Against this, there is the fact that libraries are increasingly geared up to digital purchasing, while users (or readers) have certain expectations about the availability of material online – if students, even at the postgraduate level, cannot locate a text online and in full, there is a chance that they will overlook it. This is particularly the case as more and more primary sources are made available to them, through projects such as Early English Books Online. In addition the Google Library Project is going to have a huge impact – where record and learned society volumes are out of copyright, more than likely they will soon be available to everyone at no charge.

The Google Library Project deals exclusively with titles which are out of copyright, working with organisations such as Oxford and Harvard Universities. It also, however, offers solutions for publishers wishing to make more recent back catalogue titles available, through its Partner Program. The aim of the programme is not to create a virtual library, rather to act as a shop window for those publishers without market reach – allowing them to sell titles either directly or through a third party such as Amazon. It is extremely easy to sign up, and Google does all of the work for you – scanning and indexing your books and then making selected details available through Google Book Search. Although the entire content of a book is indexed, and users can search the full text, they are usually only able to see a handful of pages.

This is clearly an attractive option, but if you are primarily concerned to increase access to your society's publications, and perhaps to allow them to be searched and used in new ways, it is worth considering alternatives. Google is far from being the only outlet available. There are projects working on similar principles, including the Carnegie Mellon-funded Universal Library (which started life as the Million Book project), and in some cases there are deals to be struck with larger academic or commercial publishers. Just as publishers have paid for the digitisation of journal back catalogues, so too

might they be prepared to digitise and disseminate society back catalogues – providing, of course, that demand can be demonstrated.

It is also worth thinking about how closely you want any published material to be associated with your society. Some learned societies are already publishing material on their own web pages – although inevitably only those with sufficient resources at their disposal. It's difficult to think of a successful example from the arts and humanities, but the Royal Society has its own publishing site, which offers a subscriber gateway for its members, as well as the facility to make one-off purchases. A site such as this is beyond the means of most, but it is possible to envisage collaborations between a number of societies, perhaps on a regional basis. There are also funding opportunities for initiatives of this sort – witness the success of the Victoria County History in attracting support from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Another alternative is to work with a not-for-profit service such as the IHR's British History Online (BHO). BHO has already worked in partnership with a number of organisations – including the London Record Society, the Survey of London and the Victoria County History. There are a number of benefits to a collaboration of this type. In the case of BHO, generous initial funding from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation allowed it to adopt a policy of double rekeying rather than OCRing all of the material that it publishes – this guarantees a 99.9% degree of accuracy, with consequent benefits for academic users in particular. The ethos of projects such as BHO is also very different from the more commercially-driven alternatives. The main concern is to make high quality academic research available to the widest possible audience, bringing together disparate resources and allowing users to search them in new ways. BHO offers a high profile – more than a million page views per month – but also a degree of authority that comes from association with academic partners.

Something similar can be seen at work in a project such as Early English Books Online (EEBO), a joint initiative of the Universities of Oxford and Michigan, and ProQuest Information and Learning. Unlike BHO, EEBO was

always viewed as a subscription service, but its Text Creation Partnership has allowed libraries to shape the scope and direction of the collections. Partners agree to invest annually over a period of five years, and in return they can influence the choice of texts to be digitised, including their own collections, and the standards and guidelines that are adopted. While not operating on this scale, BHO offers small bursaries to potential partners to allow them at least to put a toe into the water of digitisation.

There are fewer opportunities for those interested in publishing new material on the web, particularly if there is any requirement to generate income. As you heard this morning, the Victoria County History is experimenting with the publication of draft text online, but for the time being at least this is not intended to replace traditional print publication. It is possible to conceive of a subscription model which associates new content with back catalogue material. Oxford Scholarship Online, for example, initially concentrated on the publication of its extensive back catalogue of monographs – in the four areas of 'Economics and finance', 'Philosophy', 'Political science' and 'Religion'. As of September 2007, however, it will be adding nine new subject areas, including history, and perhaps even more significantly new titles will be published online almost simultaneously with print release. Print publication is still viable, but alternatives are being pursued.

More significant for smaller publishers is the growing interest in print-on-demand, which applies digital technology to enhance traditional print publication. There are a growing number of companies which offer print-on-demand services, using a variety of models. Some require an upfront payment, and thereafter deduct only printing costs, others take a percentage of profit. One of the most popular of the new services is Lightning Source, which has the added benefit of a US distribution arm, but many established printers who specialise in short-run publication are moving into this area. There are a number of advantages to print on demand, not least the degree of flexibility that it offers. If you usually sell 300 copies of a particular title to subscribers in the first couple of months after publication, but thereafter fewer than ten per year, this can be accommodated. So too can a title which sells at

the rate of 40 or 50 a year over five years. It's also possible to make use of print-on-demand for out-of-print titles, providing a digital copy has been retained, or a scan can be produced. The IHR, for example, has recently decided to do this for the single volume of the Fasti Ecclesiae Anglicanae series that is no longer available.

A word of caution, though. Some companies are only able to keep their costs down by applying some limitations, notably with regard to format. It is, for example, prohibitively expensive to publish case-bound volumes on a print-on-demand basis – it can add as much as £9 per volume to the printing costs, which either has to be absorbed by the publisher or passed on to the user. Similarly, a limited number of page sizes and paper types can be accommodated – anything non-standard will not be accepted. Quality also has to be monitored carefully. As print-on-demand becomes more common, this will change – but in the meantime it is always worth requesting a sample copy before committing.

This has been a very quick, and inevitably subjective, overview. These are the options available at the moment, but they may well not be the options available in six months – they certainly won't be the only possibilities open to publishers in two years' time. We should not, however, be afraid of change. Rather it is incumbent on academic and research organisations to attempt to shape the developing publishing environment in such a way that it both supports continued research financially, and preserves academic integrity. We need to make the new technologies work for us.