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Print View

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E-Publishing: Prospects, Promises, and Pitfalls

By James William Brodman

While e-publishing lacks the visibility of e-trading and e-commerce, nonetheless it has garnered a great deal of attention among academics and gained substantial financial backing from organizations like the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. As a consequence, there are numerous projects underway to digitize text and make it available through the Internet. My own project, the Library of Iberian Resources Online (LIBRO) at http://libro.uca.edu, is but one example of this effort. Because the electronic information revolution is quickly becoming an established reality, perhaps this is an appropriate moment to reflect upon where we are and where we might go with this new technology.

There is an element to this revolution that is very exciting and which must rank it, alongside the development of paper technology and the printing press, as a true milestone in the dissemination of knowledge. For the first time, with the role of libraries as warehouses of information diminishing, information can become universally accessible and cease to be the preserve of the privileged. Books are becoming international artifacts, as easily read in Afghanistan as in Alaska or Zimbabwe. Multiple users are freed from the constraints that grow from the need to share single copies. Authors not only can revise their works freely but also experiment with new styles of books, as envisioned by Robert Darnton. In short, cyberspace liberates the text from the library and creates possibilities for its use that we are only beginning to appreciate.

Our enthusiasm should, however, be restrained as we attempt to solve a number of real problems associated with the electronic publication of academic materials. The first of these is legitimacy. However progressive innovative professors are, academe is notoriously conservative in its own internal values. The simple truth is that university faculty who sit on hiring, promotion, and tenure committees do not yet consider digital text the equal of printed text. There are undoubtedly a number of reasons for this. Much of the material that students (who are bound by no such inhibitions with regard to the Internet) unearth in cyberspace is of uneven character—juvenile, inaccurate, or sometimes simply wrong. An intellectual wild west that knows no peer review, this medium is as open to the zany and the zealous as it is to serious scholars. In addition, the weight of tradition favors the printed text. LIBRO, for instance, deals only with works that have already been through a print edition, but even here many authors consent to an electronic version only after they have exhausted any possibility of a reprint edition. Those scholars who are daring enough to publish solely in an electronic form will bear the weight of this prejudice for some time to come. Only over time will the digital edition gain parity with print equivalents.

What can be done to overcome this prejudice? The answer is at once obvious and difficult. It is to demonstrate through content and usage that the Internet is a legitimate tool. Given the current bias, I believe that the way to begin is to use the Internet first as a reprint medium, rather than a place of original publication. This approach, which I am testing with the LIBRO project, has two advantages. First, material that exists in both print and electronic form can bear no stain of illegitimacy because its original publication underwent two peer reviews, one by the university press and the other through reviews in professional journals. Second, this approach better

accords with current publication realities. While the number of academic monographs published by university presses has increased substantially during the past 20 years, the number of copies sold to academic libraries has steadily declined and currently averages fewer than 300. Thus, the current system seems to be doing a much better job of reviewing scholarship than of disseminating it. It seems to me that the Internet, as a lower-cost mass medium, can be a valuable tool to keep these monographs alive, beyond the short term afforded by small press runs, and to bring them to unserved and underserved audiences. In this scenario, chapters from monographs could be assigned as class readings even to students who have never darkened the door of a reserve reading room. As the Internet becomes established as a medium for already printed materials, it will also become friendlier to the author looking for a legitimate outlet for new work.

While the Internet can help solve one problem of dissemination, it creates another. Currently there is no central "card catalogue" to track and organize the several individual projects that are creating content. Internet search engines, only marginally useful for locating materials, lack any ability to screen or discriminate among results. Subject sites, such as ORB and LABYRINTH for medieval history, are much more useful but still fall short of the need. As volunteer operations, they lack staff to maintain and update links. Furthermore, targeted as they are toward the interests of their founders or sponsoring organizations, they lack breadth and are scattered through cyberspace. The solution would be some sort of union catalogue, but this would require an organizational framework. Conceivably, learned societies like the AHA or university presses could help create a nonprofit umbrella agency to undertake this work or this could be accomplished privately as a for-profit enterprise.

A third problem is the instability of content. For the most part, serious content has been placed on the Internet by individuals who have convinced university web sites to host this material as a professional courtesy. Courtesies, however, can be terminated and individuals can pass on to new jobs or to different interests, or just retire. Just because a resource is on the Internet today is no guarantee that it will be there tomorrow. Two years ago, for instance, I used the Rule of the medieval military order of St. John, located on a server in Zimbabwe, as a class reading; last year when I attempted to place it on a new syllabus, the Rule had disappeared. This happens all the time and will continue to do so until the more valuable resources find a permanent home, which will be maintained without regard to particular individuals or the passing charity of institutions. Like the union catalogue, such permanent databases could be projects of nonprofit learned or academic institutions, or be products of the marketplace.

The fourth area of concern is allied to the previous two and concerns establishing e-publishing on a sustainable economic footing. Grants from foundations like Mellon support projects that explore possibilities. Once those possibilities are identified and defined, sources of ongoing revenue must still be found. While some revenue might be secured from individual readers, continued institutional support will be needed. Could libraries, whose acquisition budgets are already tight, be convinced to subscribe to electronic databases in lieu of traditional book purchases? To be feasible, the cost would have to be reasonable. For this to be achieved, the expense would have to be spread among a large number of users, implying a major shift for libraries away from the book warehouse model to a new information access model. If this is the future, then it argues even more strongly for the consolidation of web resources into large data alliances. Libraries might be willing to contract with a handful of electronic suppliers; it is unlikely that most would want to deal with very small and specialized sources. Would academic integrity be better served by nonprofit or for-profit suppliers? As in health care, this is and will remain an important question.

A final issue is worth citing, but only time will tell whether it is a legitimate concern. Will people actually read e-books and, if so, in what way? My print editor, a literature person, cannot see himself curling up in a comfortable chair with an electronic text, and perhaps this is a strong argument for the future endurance of printed texts. E-texts, on the other hand, may be better as tools of research where the reader is scrolling through looking for specific information or for specific words. It will be difficult to design the paradigmatic e-text until we fully understand how people will use or want to use the e-text. Are users interested in a traditional book that is more easily searched? Is the future to be found in the multilayered text that will let the reader decide where to go next? Or will the multiplication of hyperlinks destroy any sort of sequential knowledge and become more disorientating than enlightening? The LIBRO project, for example, has begun to assemble data on the patterns of usage exhibited by its readers. Perhaps the market will tell us where we can and should go.

It will take a while for historians and others to sort these issues out. In the meanwhile, all of us who are involved in particular experiments need suggestions from colleagues, students, and other users.

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