

Digital Media and the Future of Academic Publishing in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

This paper describes the role of academic publishers in producing information on digital media and seeks to address the broad principles on which any enduring system for electronic information must be based. The author emphasises that a partnership between publishers, authors, booksellers and librarians is needed for electronic delivery of information to users effectively and efficiently.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most abiding definitions of publishers was produced by that old-time guru of our industry, Sir Stanley Unwin, writing in *The Truth about Publishing* over 70 years ago:

"Publishers are neither philanthropists nor rogues. Nor are they usually lordly magnates or cringeing beggars. As a general rule, regard them as ordinary people trying to follow an unusually difficult occupation. It is easy to become a publisher but difficult to remain one".

Digital media were unheard of when Sir Stanley wrote this passage. He would not have recognised the phrase and it would have seemed to him to be the alien language of another planet, as in a sense it is. Nonetheless, the basics of his definition remain as true and relevant today as they were then. In the digital world, it is extremely easy to become a publisher and even more difficult to remain one in the meaningful sense.

In meeting the challenges and opportunities presented by the new technologies, the Council of Academic and Professional Publishers brings together those most skilled and experienced in the art of successful publishing, most of the

major scholarly publishers based in the United Kingdom. This representative Council has developed its own fund of knowledge on the most pertinent issues in the area of digital publishing such as copyright management, trading practice, collective licensing, marketing and systems of content organisations. Specialist groups have been developed over various disciplines and areas of activity like law, medical, college and journal publishing. The Council is the obvious interface for those within universities who wish to use published material in electronic form.

Much has been written and spoken on the technical detail of electronic systems for operation—perhaps too much, as one *modus operandi* follows another and few become established. This paper seeks to address the broad principles on which any enduring system for electronic information must be based.

It is very important from the outset that academic institutions regard commercial publishers as contributing partners to higher education and not as adversaries. Without such a sense of partnership, no system is likely to succeed. This is emphasised in the recent report produced by Sir Ron Dearing's Committee for

the British Government on *Higher Education in the Learning Society*.

Traditional academic and professional publishing of books and journals in the United Kingdom amount to £458 million each year, with a very creditable export turnover of £236 million (over half of product). Western Europe is the largest purchaser, followed by the United States. Total sales of academic and professional journals are £326 million of which £228 million (over two thirds of product) are exported. 47,000 book titles and 3,000 journal titles are printed each year. The academic market in the United Kingdom with purchases of £231 million is a significant element.

2. ROLE OF PUBLISHERS

It is clear from the above that the publishers know the markets and the markets know the publishers. Given such a firm and well-developed home and export base for print publications, there would seem to be no reason why a bright future should not lie ahead for the parallel publication of similar material in electronic form.

A fair observation is, however, made by Electronic Publishing Services in their statement in 'The Changing Structure of the Information Market Place':

"Many publishers in this sector are well aware of the fact that they must clearly demonstrate the value they add to the process if they wish to remain a part of the process."

The value that publishers aim to add to the published product may be summarised as follows:

- They provide quality control, through selection of the best and most suitable material.
- They co-ordinate the inputs of material.
- They design and prepare the text and illustrations and bring editing skills to the text.
- They create navigational tools for the use of the publication.
- They research and develop the market.
- They promote and sell the publication.
- They disseminate, distribute it and make it available.

- They raise awareness of the material and provide bibliographic controls.
- Above all, they provide that substantial, ongoing financial investment that enables the product to be published and disseminated.

These elements of high investment and quality control provided by academic publishers are clearly seen as of considerable importance by the Universities' Funding Councils. This is evidenced by the statement in their Annual Report where they say of their electronic libraries programme that "the involvement of publishers is critical to success." They add that they are pleased with the positive response from publishers to this programme, a sentiment echoed in Sir Ron Dearing's report.

The major part of the material required for such electronic systems currently resides in traditional publications and has commensurate status. The publishers will continue to handle this material.

3. ISSUES CONCERNED WITH ELECTRONIC AND DIGITAL DEVELOPMENTS

It must be underlined, however, that publishers would wish to respond positively to all digital and electronic developments in universities, including the creation of electronic journals, document delivery services, customised publishing, on demand publishing, subject databases, site licences.

For this reason, the Publishers Association Ltd., UK participated in a series of Working Parties with the Universities' Joint Information Systems Committee to investigate the key issues concerned with electronic and digital developments and to try to offer practical solutions. The main issues established in the first instance were:

- creation of framework licensing agreements for use of material in electronic form;
- development of co-ordinated clearance and charging mechanisms;
- interpretation of 'fair dealing' in the electronic context;
- definition of a public/private sector partnership on networking and access;

- arrangements for archiving and retention of electronically stored material.

Consensus has been reached on these matters. Consultation documents have been issued both to the universities and to the publishing industry after a series of meetings and seminars. The Publishers Association has also been a leading contributor to the monitoring exercise on the pilot site licence initiative in universities.

4. COPYRIGHT MANAGEMENT

Copyright management is a theme which underpins much of these discussions. The protection and enhancement of copyright is clearly essential to the well-being of all types of publishing and the importance of the copyright industries to Gross Domestic Product is firmly recognised by governments. There must be adequate control and proper remuneration for use of copyright material. The Standing Conference of National and University Libraries recognised this in its submission to Sir Ron Dearing's National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education. Publishers would, however, wish the universities to have the opportunity to use their material in the easiest and most appropriate way and will continue to pursue this through vehicles such as the Copyright Licensing Agency.

5. ELECTRONIC DELIVERY AND FUNDS

Electronic systems have proved much easier to develop in the professional and commercial sector than in universities. In front line areas like law and medicine, where the value of the enhanced currency of information given by electronic delivery is obvious, the value of the service is clearly seen and funds are made available to pay for it.

Funding is, however, clearly a major problem in universities. Students currently obtain only half of the material essential to their courses. Library book and materials provision for per student has been cut by 50 per cent in the last 15 years. The Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals has said that new electronic systems will require huge investment. The proposals of Sir Ron Dearing's Committee

about funding, as interpreted by the British Government, may put some additional money into universities but whether this will be adequate or properly directed remains to be seen.

A valid point is made by the university libraries that electronic provision should not necessarily be seen as a cheaper alternative to print. This remains valuable quality information that requires investment, time and effort for its production, and it will continue to have a significant cost. The Funding Councils add the important rider that electronic systems should always be scrutinised for cost-effectiveness as against print.

6. SUGGESTIONS

It has been suggested that academic authors might retain their copyrights and that these should be transferred to the universities who would themselves operate the electronic systems. Copyright resides by law in the author and can only be transferred by consent and in contract to another party. Such transfers are made to publishers in return for the investment and support publishers can bring to authors' work, but it remains the author's option.

Where a work is clearly produced directly in the course of employment, a university may rightly be able to claim the copyright but this is not to say that the author's every thought on the universe, God, Shakespeare or the quantum reactions in atoms belong to the employer. It is unlikely that Umberto Eco or Iris Murdoch would be prepared to concede that their noted works belonged to the institutions of higher education where they worked. I testified in a case where an author contested such an assertion and the university withdrew. Sir Ron Dearing's report touches on the issue of university copyright but does not advance it.

Many notable publishing enterprises have had their origins in the world of academe, like the university presses and the learned societies. Those that have succeeded have recognised that they have to work to the same standards and financial benchmarks as commercial publishers. They are recognised as such, and many of them are important members of the Publishers Association.

A noted academic publisher of modern times, Gordon Graham, writes in *What Publishers Do*:

"Publishers can never function alone. It works only in partnership with authors, printers, booksellers, librarians, all of whom are just as subject to the disturbing pressures

of our information-glutted, technology-led phase of history."

It is very much to be hoped that this partnership, which has made the United Kingdom one of the great academic publishing centres of the world, will continue into the era of digital technology and into the new Millennium.

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