E-publishing in libraries: the [Digital] preservation imperative

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to, through an analysis of the current literature, explore the current state of the library e-publishing community and its approach to preservation. Libraries are increasingly proposing publishing services as part of their work with their communities, and recently, there has been a pronounced interest in providing electronic publishing (e-publishing) services. The library e-publishing community, however, has not systematically studied the need for the long-term preservation of the digital content they help create.

Design/methodology/approach – Through a reflective analysis of the literature, this paper explores the context and the evolution of e-publishing as a trend that aligns with public library missions; in doing so, it also explores implications for digital preservation in the context of these new services and identifies gaps in the literature.

Findings – Digital preservation is an important and worthwhile activity for library e-publishers; preservation of community-based author content cannot, however, be an afterthought and should be planned from the beginning. Future study should take into consideration the needs and expectations of community-based authors. Existing digital preservation guidelines also provide a point of reference for the community and researchers.

Originality/value – This paper addresses the understudied area of the importance of digital preservation to library e-publishing. In doing so, it also investigates the role of the library in supporting community-based authors when e-publishing through the library.

Keywords Public libraries, Library publishing, Digital preservation, Community-based authors, Library e-publishing

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Libraries are increasingly proposing publishing services as part of their work with their communities. Recently, there has also been a pronounced interest in providing electronic publishing (e-publishing) services (LaRue, 2012). E-publishing has the potential to provide a valuable service to community-based authors, who, in turn, enrich the community through their work. By sponsoring e-publication services, libraries are not only being faithful to their missions but also working to provide access to valuable material that, whatever the content or approach, is an important and irreplaceable part of the cultural heritage of the community.

This conceptual paper argues that the digital preservation of unique, community-based content is also part of the mission of the library due to its interest in providing democratic access to content. Yet, cultural heritage content available in digital formats is vulnerable and, for this reason, must be a focus of particular attention. The library e-publishing community has not systematically addressed its role in the long-term preservation of digital content that it helps to create. Thorough an analysis of the current literature, this study demonstrates the need for reflective and systematic

consideration for digital preservation in library e-publishing initiatives. We begin by exploring the context and the evolution of e-publishing as a trajectory for the library; in doing so, we also identify implications of these new services and gaps in the literature. Next, we describe the necessity of digital preservation, giving examples and identifying caveats. After a discussion based on the literature, we recommend both future courses of action for libraries to take to safeguard e-published content and future study to support that work.

The library and democratic access to information
Libraries have a mission to provide access to information to their user communities. Since the emergence of the World Wide Web, libraries have been challenged by the high prices publishers are charging for electronic materials. In academic libraries, an "increasing portion of a library collection […] is now comprised of licensed, not owned, electronic materials" (Fenton, 2008, p. 32). One recent way to promote equitable access to a broad cross-section of content is for libraries to become publishers in an attempt to control costs and access. The 2013 *Library Publishing Toolkit* (Brown, 2013) provides a collection of in-depth chapters for libraries interested in publishing. Since the turn of the millennium, university libraries have primarily expressed an interest in self-publishing; public libraries, however, were first interested in self-publishing as early as the 1970s (Perkins, 1978). Although vanity presses may have wielded the fatal blow to academic careers in the past (Savage, 2008), the broad value of self-publishing is increasingly being acknowledged.

The evolution of self-publishing
As an alternative to traditional publishing, self-publishing in the form of subsidy or vanity presses has been active for a number of years. Printing a run of books through vanity presses is an expensive proposition, however, and the Web now permits other, less-expensive models for self-publishing. *Author services* models, using print on demand, became popular in the early 2000s (Dilevko and Dali, 2006) and have provided a venue for self-publishers to print smaller runs of books successfully, allowing authors to "dispense with publishers in the traditional sense and become their own publishers" (Jobson, 2003, p. 20). Even more economical up-front are services like Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing (https://kdp.amazon.com) where e-books are published directly to the Amazon Kindle Store and authors retain 70 per cent of the royalties their books earn. These initiatives yield physical volumes that can be stored, under good conditions, for generations.

Products of self-publishing have been generally considered to be inferior to traditionally published works due to the low quality of the content and the niche subject matter discussed (Dawson, 2008). The self-publishing model does not include some of the elements of traditional publishing, and, for example, would not necessarily support authors in the creation or editing of their work or in its subsequent marketing or distribution. Whereas traditional publishing vets authors, selecting only those with a proven track record and whose work is recognized to be of high quality, self-publishing has a low barrier to access. Huffman (2013) concedes that self-publishing may, under some circumstances, be like blogging or other Web-based publishing; the purpose of the publication, according to him, is what makes the difference. In terms of the subject matter, concern about the value of self-published books has also been voiced:

services to individuals who are disillusioned with the publishing industry but still want to publish their work in some form. Ultimately, more research will need to be done in this area, but based on this article's analysis, a series of recommendations, both theoretical and practical, can be made in support of public libraries wishing to explore an e-publishing service while also preserving content.

Libraries are not alone in considering unpublished works for inclusion in their collections. Archives have been addressing related notions for centuries in their work with unique manuscripts. Although libraries are well-schooled in collection development, library-published e-books may not be as readily evaluated for selection as traditionally published materials. Accordingly, the archival notion of appraisal, a notion associated with managing records (Craig, 2004), is a useful and relevant concept to explore in the library e-publishing context. Appraisal is the:

> […] process of establishing the value of documents made or received in the course of the conduct of affairs, qualifying that value, and determining its duration. The primary objective of appraisal is to identify the documents to be continuously preserved for an unlimited period of time (Duranti, 1994, p. 329).

The question of appraisal ties in to the assessment of content for digital preservation since not everything can or should be saved (Harvey, 2007). Selection, a related idea necessary for assessment, is "the process of deciding what items or resources will be added to a library's collection" (Harvey, 2007, p. 31). Combined, appraisal and selection work will determine which content should be preserved for use by the repository's end-user and for how long that content should be made available.

Discussion: the preservation imperative

This article contends that digital preservation needs to be planned up-front as library e-publishing initiatives are being explored. Digital preservation is an ongoing effort, not a one-time concern. For it to be effective into the future, there needs to be advance considerations for sustainability. Based on the review of the literature, two primary sustainability-related concerns are the following:

(1) the required infrastructure in the library to manage the technology in terms of human resources and technological resources; and

(2) the rights of community-based authors.

We explore each below in turn, and then situate the importance of digital preservation of e-publications within the mission of the library.

Digital preservation is complex, and a one-size-fits-all solution is not available due to the uniqueness of each organization, community of users, staff and technology. Although best practices have been developed around some of the routine aspects of digital preservation, including the selection of file formats, other elements remain unexplored or understudied. As library e-publishers move forward, they will need to consider issues of sustainability that will drive both human resources and technological resources. Libraries will have to consider whether, for example, they will charge a fee for e-publishing initiatives. Fees could defray future preservation costs if the digital objects are selected to be maintained on-site, or could support outsourcing the digital preservation to a third-party vendor.

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Further reading

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