

# Librarians as publishers

## Is the digital library an electronic publisher?

by Gail McMillan

Did you see the advertisement in *C&RL News* for the director of publishing? No? Of course not. Librarians are not usually thought of as publishers, so these positions are not advertised in library journals. My job, however, is to make journals, theses, dissertations, images, and more original and derivative works available online. *Am I a publisher?*

Prior to the advent of electronic theses and dissertations (EDTs) on the Web five years ago, a small number of libraries that were putting electronic journals on the Internet were considered publishers. These institutions, often linked with university presses such as Project Muse at Johns Hopkins University and HighWire Press at Stanford University, were also involved in most of the traditional activities of publishers such as copyediting, layout/design, and marketing. Some had, indeed, replaced paper and presses with computers and file transfer protocols.

But that is not what I do. I wish that I could find another word in our vocabulary or coin a word to describe the process of storing original works on a computer server and making them available to library and Internet users. This is where I have the hardest time putting my digital library resources and services in the same category as publishers and university presses. To me it is the library on the Internet; it is not the library as publisher. Libraries make theses and dissertations more accessible; before libraries stored

and provided access to them electronically, they received very little use. Should increasing availability be considered publishing? Or is it just that we haven't found a better word yet? Perhaps someone who reads this column will point out a more descriptive word or create a new one for us.

### Digital library vs. electronic publisher

Must the digital library also be an electronic publisher? Can it continue to be a library providing unique online resources to a huge community of potential users without being a publisher?

To get access to a library resource that is digital requires the user to take action, to come and get it online through the Internet. This is analogous to pulling a library resource off the shelf. In the case of EDTs, what the reader gets is exactly what the author prepared. Just because more readers can access the resource, should we change the name of the library service to publishing?

As a public institution, my library resources are available to any citizen of the state, so my university library's normal potential user population far exceeds the population of the university community. If the library doesn't take any extraordinary measures to inform its community of an available title (i.e., does not market it; does not advertise it, does not publicize it), why is it called publishing?

If the digital library (without established presses like Muse and HighWire) does not

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## Editors' introduction

Librarians' roles are changing, and we are supporting research and learning in new ways. The emergence of librarians as "publishers" is an important part of this evolution in our roles.

Since Gail McMillan has been active in changing and expanding the role of the library at Virginia Tech for more than ten years, we decided that we didn't need to look outside our ranks for an author of this issue's "Scholarly Communication" column.

In thinking about the issue of librarians as publishers, Gail has invited many of her colleagues in the Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (NDLTD) to share their thoughts. There is a significant group of librarians (the NDLTD has more than 100 institutional members) that some might categorize as library publishers.

We hope that you will find their thoughts as stimulating as we did in thinking about the changing roles of librarians and publishers.—  
*Ivy Anderson and Ann Schaffner*

provide services such as editing, does not critique the content, does not fix spelling, does not correct grammar, and does not establish and impose a certain layout or design, how is it like a publisher? And are we prepared to take on the role of providing this "added value"?

### Feedback from colleagues

I asked my colleagues in the Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations (NDLTD) to share their thoughts on this topic. Some saw a clear distinction between the role of libraries and publishers. A colleague in New York, S. Y. Hwang, commented that librarians lack training in editing. "When it comes to play[ing] the role of publishers, we don't have the time and skills to maintain the [content] quality of the collected documents. But some theses authors do expect us to revise their theses as traditional publishers do."

Publishers also provide advice about content and review the works being published. Libraries do not do this. As Christine Jewell wrote from Canada, "I do absolutely nothing to the theses except process them for access. I don't proof-read, edit, evaluate, or correspond with the author. I don't even read them (sometimes I read the abstracts!). It's true that the grad office does some checking for formatting standards, and the supervisors and examining committee evaluate, etc. But they do this in any case, regardless of how the library makes the theses accessible" (i.e., whether in paper or online).

Jewell also pointed out that the value-added component of publishing is not part of the [library's] procedure. Another colleague, Jane Kleiner wrote from Louisiana, "Publishers are usually involved in the preparation of material as well as the distribution. Libraries, on the other hand, collect information products and make them accessible. To my way of thinking, hosting EDTs does not mean that libraries are publishers any more than microfilm vendors are publishers." (Bell & Howell, formerly UMI, might disagree.)

At the Virginia Tech Digital Library and Archives, the editor of the journal or the author of the ETD (with some influence by the committee, no doubt) is responsible for the readability, the look, and the feel of the work. The library has no part in these activities, so why should the library be credited with publishing these works?

Unlike publishers, libraries that provide access to the unique works of their authors and students also do not ask for transfer of copyright from author to library or to the university, as many university presses do.

At Virginia Tech, ETD authors share their copyrights with the library so that their works can be stored and made available. E-journal editors and their sponsors decide whether the author or the journal will get the author's copyright, or if the author will share copyright with the journal. Does this sound like a typical publisher?

### About the editors

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Another way that libraries and publishers differ is that academic libraries promise to make ETDs available permanently, that is, they archive and preserve them. Conservation is part of the mission of many libraries. This is not what publishers typically promise to do. In fact, the commercial motivation of publishers makes it difficult to believe those who tell us that they are archiving their publications. Are publishers storing their publications? Of course, but only for as long as there is a commercial, that is, a profitable, reason for doing so. Juxtaposed to this is the library, providing long-term access to information for the potential intellectual profitability of our clients.

### **Making scholarly information "public"**

But other colleagues are finding these roles less distinct as the very definition of what it means to publish is changing.

My colleague in Perth, Australia, Peter Green, pointed out, "We have a role in educating the academic community through providing access and information to new forms of publishing."

Felix Ubogu wrote from South Africa, "The library would become the natural place for people to turn to for advice, support, and practical training. This is happening here infrequently, but could become more frequent if the campus becomes aware that the library has the capability.

"I agree with the view that the library has to be equipped to assist with the processing of electronic materials, help academics publish and archive electronic documents, and produce original electronic publications that improve information. Libraries will thus be seizing the opportunity to participate in the creation of knowledge. The library will be playing a significant role in training and retraining, and staff should be equipped for this."

From the other side of Australia, Kate Sexton at the University of Sydney pointed out that "Teaching staff look to the library quite naturally as a source for advice on issues such as file organisation [sic], presentation, and archiving."

She continued, "Librarians should take an active role in raising consciousness of the issues associated with electronic publishing and in providing training and guidance to the university community."

Like Ubogu, many of the comments that I received suggested that the future of libraries is not in publishing per se but in working within our communities in the full information cycle, from creating to accessing and archiving. Green also pointed out that libraries might be able to have a role in adding value to university publications by assisting with adherence to standards, indexing, and abstracting, etc.

From Tennessee, Paul Gherman wrote, "I feel that increasingly the future of academic research libraries is to become the publishing arm of their university." He said that libraries with university presses should become partners, with the press offering editorial, marketing, and fulfillment services, and that "The library building has the technical infrastructure to both offer access and long-term preservation to the content."

Partners, yes; separate and different roles, yes. Libraries as publishers? I'm still not convinced, but there are reasons libraries would benefit from closer cooperation with areas of the university that have publisher-like skills and services. If libraries could influence authors to adhere to standards, it might improve libraries' roles in archiving and the future migration to new online formats. However, increased staffing is not likely at most libraries, so collaborating with other university units offers another strategy for fulfilling and expanding our mission.

My query got a few responses similar to that from Eric Van de Velde at Cal Tech, who wrote that two different groups had approached the library to start electronic journals. He envisions the library having the goal to create self-supporting organizations under a different business model.

He suggested that "E-journals can be self-supporting organizations and provide low-cost access by charging authors a service [fee] for the administrative overhead of refereeing, copyediting, and formatting, and [charging] readers/institutions a small access fee to maintain the computers and databases." Libraries charging for information access!

He also wrote, "We want free unlimited distribution of journals. . . . The only crucial issue is to free the literature from artificial copyright restrictions." The "traditional publisher is controlling the copyright of creative works and what is needed instead is a service agent who provides a set of services at reasonable rates.

Libraries should play a key role in causing this transition from publisher to service agent."

### Librarian or publisher?

Libraries are reconceptualizing what it is that they are, and they are pushing the boundaries of service. They question whether it is enough to assert that their role is to manage, maintain over the long term, and make accessible the digital content produced by scholarly communities. Has it become necessary to call the maintenance of digital collections "publishing" in order to enhance the value of the libraries?

Several colleagues stated that the question of whether libraries are publishers is more an issue of definition than practice. Sexton wrote, "Getting involved in publishing also seems a useful self-preservation measure—we need to ensure that we remain a relevant profession, and getting in on the e-publishing ground floor seems a good way to ensure this."

And, from Florida, Monica Metz-Wiseman agreed with Green that "Publication allows libraries to control the process and delivery, raises awareness/visibility for libraries, delivers a 'product' more quickly than the commercial world, and improves the image of the library."

If academic libraries are to be publishers, we should publish the work of our faculty. We would invest in our authors' books that would not necessarily make a profit and not in the potential popularity of the titles. Is it someone's goal to make the library a commercial business with a respectable profit margin?

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If libraries are to truly be publishers, are we to spread ourselves even thinner and assume responsibilities for peer-review and quality assessment? Should the reputation of the library evolve to denote something about the title or the author of its publication? Will libraries evolve into commercial services, profit-making services? Will library publishers manage copyright and pay royalties? Is this the best way for limited library resources and time to be spent? Our unique mission is one of service—to help our users in our communities find information resources, and use them to good purposes, whether a publication results or not.

Metz-Wiseman described the dilemma well. "From ETD's to the digitizing of special collections materials, libraries should engage in publication. Publication allows libraries to control the process and delivery, raises awareness/visibility for libraries, delivers a 'product' more quickly than the commercial world, and improves the image of the library as a traditional, sometimes reactive repository of knowledge. Plus, when libraries are publishers they are free from market considerations that can adversely shape a 'product' by playing safe. Academic libraries may find themselves alone however when embarking on publication within their university. Faculty are comfortable in the role of author/creator/editor but full-scale publication production expertise is often not a commodity to be found on a U.S. campus."

So, am I a librarian or am I a publisher? Should you find the advertisement for my job in *CG&R News* or in the Society for Scholarly Publishing's job bank? What will the answer be five years from now? ■

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