2009

People Profile: Vic Elliott

Editor
publishers and libraries was formed in 2006 to develop the concept. CLOCKSS remains the software platform, at the core of the network, but the business model is quite different in several important respects.

CLOCKSS is indisputably a dark archive. Decisions on whether to provide access to archival content, to open up part of the archive, are taken not by individual institutions but by the CLOCKSS Board itself. Such decisions will be prompted by major trigger events such as the corporate failure of a publisher, the catastrophic and sustained failure of a publisher’s delivery platform, the cessation of publication of a particular title, or a publisher’s decision no longer to offer back issues. And when access is opened to endangered content, that access is not limited to CLOCKSS participants, or to current or former subscribers to that licensed content, but to everyone throughout the world. In effect, the content is made available under open-access conditions.

The first of two such trigger events occurred in late 2007. It arose from the intention of SAGE Publications to discontinue the provision of online access to the journal Graft: Organ and Cell Transplantation. Following a decision by the CLOCKSS Board, the three volumes of Graft published by SAGE were copied from the seven archive nodes or servers within the pilot system and in early 2008 made available to the world free of charge through two hosting platforms at Stanford and Edinburgh Universities. Although the hosting platforms are strategically positioned, in the United States and Europe, access is available worldwide to either platform. The Graft (and subsequent Auto/Biography) experience is a good example of what can happen in the world of proprietary digital resources and a timely demonstration of the ability of e-archiving systems like CLOCKSS to respond effectively.

It would be wrong to see CLOCKSS as a successor to LOCKSS, as somehow superseding a precursor system. In fact, they are complementary systems. It is a matter of focus, a concentration in the case of LOCKSS on the local community, and in the case of CLOCKSS, on the global community. A reliance on CLOCKSS as the global archive of last resort does not preclude working with LOCKSS to meet local community archiving needs.

Why CLOCKSS?

The question whether or not to choose CLOCKSS is in some ways redundant. You don’t choose CLOCKSS. It chooses you. For whether you support the initiative or not, it will be there to support you, should a trigger event occur and access to subscribed (or un-subscribed) scholarly content be denied. That this is so is evidenced by the Graft example or experience.

Perhaps I should try to answer a different question — why is my university willing to act as a host library, to operate a CLOCKSS box and seek to attract Australian and New Zealand content into the CLOCKSS dark archive?

The argument is philosophical and professional. In moving to a digital environment, libraries have largely outsourced the management and curation of electronic information resources to the content providers. The archiving of these same electronic resources offers us an opportunity to reclaim that role, not alone but in partnership with publishers. For one am not willing to outsource that role again, to spurn the chance to exercise stewardship over critical information resources in the interests of our academic community. I didn’t join the profession to be a retailer, a purveyor of commodities. And it does not appear to me to be in the interest of libraries in these professionally perilous times to abdicate the stewardship role when it lies there for the taking.

It seemed to me CLOCKSS offered us that rare chance, that unusual opportunity. It is a community-governed partnership in which libraries and publishers together determine strategy and policies within a transparent governance structure. We decide our own future — it is not decided for us.

The technology is proven. The risk management strategy is robust, and acceptable to both partner communities, libraries and publishers. And the geographical spread of host institutions ensures that the CLOCKSS archive will be representative of global scholarly output, not simply that of Europe and North America.

I can’t resist adding that for someone like me, who after all these years remains uncomfortable with the idea that scholarly information should be traded as a commodity, the CLOCKSS policy that after a trigger event endangered content should be released to everyone, not simply current or former subscribers, is a return to reason and sane public policy.

It is evident that the case for CLOCKSS is rapidly gaining acceptance. In addition to the decision of the Australian National University to act as a CLOCKSS archive node, seven university libraries in Australia and three in New Zealand have signed supporting library agreements with effect from 2009. Given that collaborative electronic archiving within a community-governed partnership remains novel to many, this is an encouraging result. CLOCKSS is just one approach to electronic archiving but it is the approach to which my university is committed. For us, the case is conclusive.

Endnotes


Rumors from page 16

At ALA in Denver, I also attended the Academic Services Managers in Academic Libraries Interest Group discussion early on Saturday morning. Most of the discussions focused on budgeting, staffing and cataloging issues. Participants compared experiences with staffing cuts, reassigning staff as library priorities change or staffing is cut, the necessity for layoffs or furloughs and other budgeting and staffing issues.