People Profile: Peter Burnhill

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Tracking E-journal Preservation
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A workflow is being devised for e-journals that come to notice as having been assigned an ISSN, and to cater for use of the print ISSN using the new linking identifier, the ISSN-L. Our initial intention was to follow ISSN rules and only include as e-journals those serials that were issued in digital format (i.e. “born” digital), and not “digitised journals” which were originally issued in print format, although this is now being actively reviewed for the purpose of this project.

Title-level metadata on serials is essential but it is the article that is the information object of desire. Libraries will want to know the extent of preserved content for a given title, in order therefore to know which articles are preserved. This is more complex and, as such, has been deferred to the second phase of the PEPRS project. Provisional thinking is to create four date fields for each e-journal: earliest and latest known date of issue in digital format; earliest and latest known date of issue archived.

(2) Metadata on preservation agencies and archiving action on each e-journal

Another key question is which archiving agencies to include in PEPRS project activity and over the longer term in the registry. The term “archiving” signals a potential widening of scope beyond that of digital preservation alone, to include “access continuity”: continuity of access to back content. This is triggered by a more recent UK report commissioned by JISC in which Morrow et al (2008) reviewed the policies and practices of six digital preservation agencies. It noted that some agencies focused primarily upon long-term preservation of the scholarly record, while the main emphasis for others was on “perpetual access” — the latter phrase used to refer to “continuity of access” to back content in an e-journal after the cancellation of a current subscription (“post-cancellation”) or as back-up for short-term failure.

Dependence upon leased access to content hosted at remote servers beyond the academy threatens continuity of access for researchers and students via their library. Challenging the very reasons for a library, this has become acute in the near term as financial pressures upon budgets for library materials lead to cancellations of subscriptions.

The main areas of policy interest need to be resolved into agreed, standard fields of information. Examples include title identifiers such as ISSN and title, date ranges, status of preservation, and access conditions. The next step would be the development of a common vocabulary for entries to assist users of the registry service who will want to compare attributes of preservation actions and summary descriptions of the agencies themselves.

Initially the plan for the initial phase of the PEPRS project was to limit activity to three types of digital preservation agency: organizations operating at the international level (e.g., CLOCKSS and Portico); national libraries (e.g., British Library); and library consortia (e.g., UK LOCKSS Alliance). Were the scope of the registry to widen then the list might have to be revisited.

This and the diversity of use communities for the registry imply need and opportunity for cooperative inter-working, via interoperability, with third-party services providing information subscription status, likely organized on a territorial/nation-state basis rather than a global basis.

(3) Data model and architecture

The registry service needs to support machine-to-machine use as well as a Web-based user interface. Responsibility for specific fields of information is placed with the source best placed to deliver up-to-date information. A key feature of the data model is to establish dependence upon information sourced from the ISSN Register and from self-statement by the digital preservation (and archiving) agencies. This exploits the “always on” presumption about the Internet in order to ensure up-to-date report by the preservation agencies, and also to keep an historic record of the statements made.

There is likely to be a range of different types of user for the registry service, most of whose needs we hope to meet through a Web interface. However, especially with international use, there may be other communities of users to cater for. One way to address this is to give equal priority to indirect access: that is, to the provision of a programming interface (API) that would provide interoperability to third-party facilities geared to serve specific-use communities across multiple locales and languages.

(4) Business model and sustainability for the registry and its services

This registry and provision of its basic services must be for the long run, like its subject matter, digital preservation. An important part of the PEPRS project therefore is to identify costs and propose a business model for the registry service. It may also be necessary to propose a form of governance.

Not surprisingly, the JISC-funded Scoping Report for this registry service touched on the matter of sustainability: “The archives themselves have to be sustainable over the long-term and to be of any use whatever, the registry must be equally long-lived.” Discussion of this recommendation may seem premature, but the PEPRS project will be reviewed in 2009/2010 to assess whether the results of the project activity thus far and its business plan would justify the transition into service.

That might seem an appropriate open issue on which to end but perhaps this conclusion from the Scoping Report is more upbeat: “It seems to us that in order to gain the co-operation of the archiving organisations based around the world, which would be vital to its utility, the registry would have to be conceived as something which would serve the whole international scholarly community.” The Report continues that the registry should be managed and governed “in such a way as to secure and maintain trust of both the library community and publishers.”

Request for Comment

PEPRS is a UK-funded project being carried out by a national academic data centre in partnership with an international standards body. In light of its potential to be international in scope and operation, and that any resultant registry service needs to exist over the long-run and to be of benefit across many sectors of the scholarly community, comments on issues raised, including governance and sustainability, are gratefully requested. endnotes on page 36

people profile

Director, EDINA National Academic Data Centre
Causewayside House, 160 Causewayside, University of Edinburgh
Edinburgh, EH9 1PR, Scotland, UK
Phone: +44 131 650 3301/2 • Fax: +44 131 650 3308
<p.burnhill@ed.ac.uk> edina.ac.uk

BORN & LIVED: United Kingdom.
EARLY LIFE: Economics/statistician, research into schooling, university lecturer.
PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: Edinburgh University Data Library (1984), EDINA (1995/96); Director & Methodologist.
HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: I think we will all look back in five years time and accept that what seemed alternative and informal as means of scholarly communication has become recognised as mainstream record. That’s the way with science fiction.

Peter Burnhill

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