What do you mean by born digital?

AM: Absolutely. Although the market for enhanced eBooks is currently a relatively small part of this rapidly growing market, we’re experimenting with a few different models at UC Press so that we are ready as and when these start to take off. One great example is our enhanced digital version of the 2nd edition of The Jepson Manual — the most authoritative and comprehensive identification guide devoted to California plants. This 1,600 page behemoth is “the plant bible of California” — for both expert and amateur alike. Extensive linking and eBook-friendly illustrations will make it easier for users to learn about plant characteristics and identify all the plants of California, all in a much more field-portable package than the printed book. Using readily available eBook readers, field researchers, students, and amateurs will be able to click on links allowing rapid navigation through keys to families, genera, species, and subspecies or varieties.

ATG: In another interview you mentioned that the University of California Press would be developing two pilot “born-digital” products. What do you mean by born digital? What will these products be like?

AM: I’m talking about products that are not simply online versions of previous print products — those that could not have existed in a print world. In many cases, these will draw on the deep and rich content archive we have at UC Press, but will augment this material with new content and tools. One example about which we’ve been thinking is the California Natural History Guides. We own an incredible wealth of content in this area that is currently “locked up” in set-format print books. There are many ways in which this content could be updated, repackaged, and augmented to create a much more flexible and interactive user experience in digital form.

ATG: With the market for scholarly books continuing to shrink, what can be done to spur growth or at least stop the shrinkage? Are there any innovative outlets that university presses can take advantage of for their eBooks that will help create new revenue streams? Does print play any role in the future of a university press?

AM: The shrinking market for scholarly monographs was initially driven by skyrocketing serials pricing, which has then been exacerbated by the dramatic technological and cultural shifts as information has moved to an online, decentralized, and abundant environment. In this world, the largely static, often print-only, scholarly monograph seems both isolated and out-of-date. While print is undeniably in decline, I think it will always have a role at UC Press. Like many others, I envisage a future in which the electronic version becomes the standard, and print becomes a less frequently produced luxury item. There will always be those of us who want and are prepared to pay a premium for a beautifully crafted print book — such as Rebecca Solnit’s Infinite City, in my view one of the most original and beautiful books UC Press has published — but the transition to a digital-first world is inevitable.

There is much to be optimistic about in this brave new world. The new eBook collaborations among university presses — such as Books@JSTOR, University Press Scholarship Online through OUP and Project MUSE — provide a great opportunity for presses and their readers, as well as for our library customers. UC Press is partnering with OUP to launch California Scholarship Online...