Managing Our Collections in a Digital Age

Roger C. Schonfeld
Ithaca, roger.schonfeld@ithaca.org

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Managing Our Collections in a Digital Age
by Roger C. Schonfeld (Manager of Research, Ithaka S+R; Phone: 212-500-2338) <roger.schonfeld@ithaka.org>

This issue focuses on print collections management in a digital age. While numerous libraries are rethinking print collections as a result of their digital availability, actions at individual libraries aggregate into broad questions about the future need for access to print materials. Even as libraries seek additional flexibility in collections management, this critical concern about access and preservation is faced by all types of libraries, from those that traditionally maintained working collections to those that have made significant investments in preservation.

My objective for this issue is to highlight some key initiatives that collectively provide a broad overview of community directions for print collections management and preservation. Each of the initiatives reviewed is grappling with complexity in an environment of reduced resources for libraries and growing pressure on their print collections in particular. One common theme is the importance of collaborating across institutions to build sustainable trust networks to ensure that preservation and access to materials are not threatened during this format transition.

Two pieces provide overviews of projects being developed to collectively manage journal collections. Emily Stambaugh of the University of California describes WEST, which is constructing a trust model and sustainability plan across multiple consortia and individual libraries to ensure that print materials are accessible and preserved while vastly increasing flexibility at the local level. Frances Boyle, project manager of the UK Research Reserve, describes this national-level initiative to build a shared research infrastructure for higher education, including assured preservation and access, in partnership with the British Library. The vast differences between the approaches being spearheaded by each, in pursuit of fundamentally the same objective, suggests that choices about the design of trust networks are often contingent on time and place.

But journals are by no means the only content type having their print versions called into question, and these issues face small college libraries and large research institutions alike. Bob Kieft, library director at Occidental College, describes innovative approaches to the development and management of monograph collections, including (at least) one year of patron-driven acquisitions as well as a strategic drawdown in holdings in collaboration with neighbors. Judy Russell, dean of libraries at the University of Florida and former Superintendent of Documents, reviews some of the challenges faced by Regional Federal Depository Libraries as well as opportunities for collaboration that have been identified by ASERL member institutions. It is noteworthy that both are looking to regional collaborative trust networks for collections management and preservation.

Finally, my colleague Ross Housewright of Ithaka S+R describes the challenges that some libraries face in strategic planning around print continued on page 16

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Is the World Wide Web Dying? And Where Are the Standards for “Apps”?  

by Todd Carpenter (Managing Director, NISO, One North Charles Street, Suite 1905, Baltimore, MD 21201; Phone: 301-654-2512; Fax: 410-685-5278) <tcarpenter@niso.org> www.niso.org

The print copy of Wired magazine’s September issue arrived in my mailbox with an eye-catching orange cover proclaiming the death of the Web. This article by Chris Anderson and Michael Wolff (http://www.wired.com/magazine/2010/08/ff_webdead/) points out with a colorful graphic that while we may be spending a great deal of time sharing information over the Internet, we are increasingly not using the World Wide Web as our primary interface. We are entering a world where devices, applications, and services are our entry point to content on the Internet.

I am probably a typical example of the behavior described by Anderson. Instead of reading the New York Times or the Baltimore Sun, I stream Netflix either through an application or via my Wii. iTunes, LastFM, and Pandora are my music portals, as well as where I stream many podcasts and radio shows. Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Skype, where I carry on a fair amount of my communications, are all applications, not plain vanilla browser interfaces. Most, if not all of these, do have dedicated browser interfaces that I could use but they lack some of the functionality I have come to expect. Although, Anderson’s article was pilloried in some tech circles for its misleading use of graphics (http://www.boingboing.net/2010/08/17/is-the-web-dead.html), and overstating known trends (http://techcrunch.com/2010/08/17/wired-web-dead/), his article and post highlighted a growing problem with our interactions online, not just for users, but also for content creators, aggregators, and libraries.

Back in the mid to late 1990s, development of online journal platforms was challenged by the need to test out the various browsers (http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/74/Timeline_of_web_browsers.svg) to see how a site would render. This was especially true for Netscape, Internet Explorer, Mosaic, or Opera — a critical component of pre-launch work to ensure that the coding was appropriate for the rendering. This is less the case now, although some variations remain.

Today, we’re stepping back to those days of needing a proprietary software application and perhaps losing the interoperability we’ve come to take for granted with the Web. Jonathan Zittrain (http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/people/zittrain) at the Harvard Berkmen Center for Internet and Society (http://cyber.law.harvard.edu) is one of those watching the trend and who decries the move away from open standards and integrated technology, which he argues drove the success of the Web.

If we are indeed moving to the “Age of the App” where Internet users have to interact with content via some interface that is not a browser, this will have significant implications for publishers. While I am a big fan of publication-specific apps, such as Slate, the NY Times, the Wall Street Journal, Wired and others, not every publisher — indeed most publishers — are not in a position to build and maintain such an app. They’d also have to modify the app for the iPad platform, the Android platform, the BlackBerry platform, various e-readers, etc. Plus there are all the devices that may develop next year or three years from now and the device’s software upgrades that go on continuously. A figure quoted frequently earlier this year during the American Association of Publishers/Professional Scholarly Publishing meeting was that if a good custom-built app cost could upwards of $50,000, not counting the cost of the post-release support and tweaking. A publisher’s $50,000 development investment might have a shelf life of 12-18 months because of upgrades to the platform operating system that require an app upgrade or complete redesign. If building one $50,000 application is on the verge of being too expensive for your organization, building three or four is simply not an option.

The single biggest impediment for many smaller publishers is not even more critical problem is that the publisher now has an application that works on selected devices but not on others, resulting in only partial penetration within the community for the publisher. The user is also affected by having to install (and possibly purchase) a different app for every publication and launch a new app when switching publications. Clicking on links within the publication can launch yet another app (or in some cases, a link to a Web page). The library community is further challenged by serving diverse communities only some of whom may access a portion of the licensed content.

Operating system changes, platform dependencies, and user demands for increased functionality has led to the proliferation of electronic publishing. But the World Wide Web’s success, especially as an information distribution platform, was due to its ability to circumvent most of these issues and that ability was due to the underlying standards infrastructure. The way we seem to be entering is taking us back to those earlier problems, multiplied by a much larger variety of devices to support. In an App world, the only standards are those found on any platform being used by each device. Although there is some advocacy for standards, such as EPUB for eBooks, most eBooks and apps are still issued in the proprietary format of each e-reader usually wrapped by some form of DRM, making them useless for any other platform. Just like publisher published with the publisher’s navigation app. From a user perspective, interoperability is even more critical than ever, because few people have only one device and they need to be able to move their content between their smartphone and laptop, or their PDA and their organization’s file server. This is exactly the kind of interoperability that requires the use of common standards, not proprietary applications.

Smaller publishers will likely have to partner with aggregators to deliver their content to their users. Some aggregators have pooling resources for Web-based distribution platforms, including HighWire, Project Muse, or BioOne. As yet such aggregators do not have launched device specific applications. For the moment only larger publishers can venture into developing native apps with their own resources. Applying American Institute of Physics with their iResearch iPhone App (http://scitation.aip.org/content/aip/journal/09_iresearch_iphone_app) recently released last year or the Nature Publishing Group’s mobile platform, the Apple iPhone App (http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/plos-medicine/id362137769?mt=8) and Public Library of Science (PLOS) (http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/plos-medicine/id362137769?mt=8), each with multiple apps distributed through the iTunes store. Highlighting the underlying problem, though, is the fact that all of these applications are for the Apple iPhone or iPad, not for other platforms. Although OCLC has allowed its WorldCat data to be served up via third-party applications on a range of platforms, OCLC itself has also only developed for the Apple suite of products.

And where are libraries in this new app world? With ever-shrinking budgets, libraries can’t afford to manage a digital collection with multiple proprietary formats for each content item as well as the time required to run them. If a library chooses (or is forced through budget constraints) to “standardize” on one or a few devices and platforms, they are then limiting the availability of content to what has been developed for those platforms. Just linking to native apps, publishers, libraries will likely need to work with one or more aggregators to ensure access to all the desired content — when or if such aggregators are available at an affordable price. The preservation issues will get even more complicated than they currently are in the browser-based environment, where libraries are still struggling with how to preserve content. As if preservation of digital content alone were not difficult enough, there is ample proof of this difficulty continued on page 18