

# Much ado about electronic publishing: MetaPress creates an online future for arts and humanities publications

Today, the humanities-based scholarly journal is in jeopardy, plagued by financial difficulties and low subscription numbers. These factors can hinder publication and keep valuable research from reaching the reading public – which is often specialized and small – in a timely manner. With the advent of the computer age and new electronic publishers flooding the market, publishing online is not only more economically feasible for existing publishers but is also a solution that benefits libraries who are seeking to free themselves from the restrictions of print. This paper illustrates how arts and humanities publications must move forward and embrace new technologies if they are to survive and prosper in the future.



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Understanding William Morris's vision of the Kelmscott Press in the early twentieth century, writer Anthony Powell aptly said that "Books do furnish a room" and, although this is still true, often among the books in a room is a flickering computer screen paying homage to the Internet. Today, the humanities-based scholarly journal is in jeopardy, plagued by financial difficulties and low subscription numbers. The librarians' preference for subscribing to scientific, technical and medical (STM) journals offering an e-only model is often not the most appealing answer for those publishing in the arts and humanities. Monetary concerns, problems with the difference in prestige between print and electronic, the lack of user-friendly access and issues with a small, specialized audience, along with the nagging concern about ownership of intellectual property, tend to discourage the electronic publication of arts and humanities journals. However, publishing online is not only economically feasible but also allows 24/7 access to research and to the criticism that is necessary to ensure progress in the humanities.

Richard A Lanham in his book, *The Electronic Word*, notes that "Humanists are such natural Luddites and have become so used to regarding technology – and especially the computer – as the enemy that it takes some temerity to call the personal computer a friend."<sup>1</sup> Scholarly publishers

are currently addressing these fears by working to make journal web sites, or profile pages, more user-friendly. MetaPress offers a number of features that directly benefit researchers:

- IP authentication that automatically recognizes users as belonging to the institution
- no-fuss search functions that allow the user to enter single words or terms (producing valid results)
- URLs that can be cataloged and link the user directly to the source, and
- reliable assistance available through the support desk located in Birmingham, AL, USA.

Although paper products will continue to be used, e-journals that link to references seem increasingly attractive in the demanding 'publish or perish' world of arts and humanities.

Literary journals are often funded by small societies. With overseas subscribers, the cost of postage and handling for print copies often rivals that of the actual printing cost. Additionally, there is a time lag between rough draft and final print copy, which is significantly reduced with online publishing, as the file is readily converted to PDF and e-mailed to the online host. Publication is often immediate. Christopher McKenzie, in his paper delivered at a 2002 United Kingdom Serials Group (UKSG) seminar, notes that immediate

publication “leads to happy authors, who make better authors; this leads to higher prestige, which in turn leads to higher value of content, which finally leads to happy customers.”<sup>2</sup> With electronic publishing, editors are free to spend more time editing journals that cost less and are published more quickly.

Indeed, not only are publishers increasingly aware of the benefits of publishing in electronic format but libraries are also relying on e-only journal collections for their ease in access, cataloging, use and maintenance. More shelf space is available as content is stored, not between pages that must be shelved, but in publisher files accessible on the World Wide Web. Caroline Vogelzang, formerly of Kluwer Academic, writes that “the possibility to search for and find required information without having to get up from your desk, searching through databases with sophisticated navigation tools [makes e-journals] more efficient than [the] print environment”<sup>3</sup>, and this is precisely what online publishing offers researchers. Additionally, librarians expect to learn more about their users’ needs based on increasingly reliable usage data. Perhaps it is difficult for arts and humanities publishers to understand the value of electronic journals since “compared to other areas of textual communication in the society around us, literary study has felt almost no pressure from changing technology” but Richard Lanham warns that “this grace period has now been ended by the personal computer.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, with libraries turning toward online databases, it is time to consider how e-journals are viewed and received by the arts and humanities community.

The Société Rencesvals’ journal, *Olifant*, presents research on medieval epics. Although a front-runner in its field, *Olifant* may not have been the first choice among scholars to lead the way into the electronic realm. Regardless, *Olifant* has taken on the challenge motivated by monetary limitations, and the continuing need to offer the scholarly community criticism and research on topics that range from *Song of Roland* to *Raoul de Cambrai*. With the help of the electronic publisher MetaPress, the Société Rencesvals is able to offer seamless access to its members with either IP authentication or username and password authentication. Members benefit from:

- new issue alerting that notifies them electronically when a new issue is published online

- favorites-linking that allows them to create a link from their homepage directly to the contents of *Olifant*, and
- knowledgeable and reliable support staff that are available to assist them with access to the contents once a subscription is verified and activated.

MetaPress develops advanced online tools for publishers to manage access, content and usage with ease. One editor, Hillary Englehart, has activated ‘all access’ for members of the Société Rencesvals. The MetaPress support staff trained Hillary to use these tools and, within one day of training, Hillary understood how to activate access for the 300-plus subscribers who were already registered as customers on the MetaPress platform.

Since the publisher controls access to their own online journals at MetaPress, this helps abate concerns regarding the ownership of intellectual property that may make authors reluctant to publish in a journal that is exclusively published online. Lanham writes that “the free marketplace in which arts and letters live and breath is being transformed – the most immediately felt effect of the electronic word has come in the area of intellectual property.”<sup>5</sup> Combining a sophisticated authentication system with publisher-controlled access helps refute the commonly held notion that ‘electronic information seems to resist ownership’. This notion results in a reluctance to publish electronically, which in part helps fuel the problem created by a library’s inability to subscribe to print due to space and monetary restrictions. Considering that The National Enquiry of Scholarly Communications (1979) claims “inadequate library collections [are] the most severe problem faced by scholars,”<sup>6</sup> a solution that allows for the easy access to research must be sought by publisher, librarian and author. By publishing electronically, even if access is not granted to a library or a user, abstracts are still viewable and the option to purchase articles via pay-per-view creates further research possibilities.

The opportunity to advance research, with increased access, searchability and linking, points to a positive new phase for arts and humanities publishing, offering an environment that only serves to better scholarship. Although online journal web sites cannot possibly rival the printing creations of

Morris's Kelmscott Press, an attempt is actively made to appeal to the aesthetic virtues of the arts and humanities. We must work to preserve and make accessible arts and humanities scholarship. Moving toward the progressive realm of online publishing seems to make sense when faced with obstacles that delay the goal of discipline-based research and criticism reaching its intended audience.

## References

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