



"OK, get your things. You're being transferred to CD-ROM"



Margaret Phillips

National Library of
Australia

THE IMPACT OF ELECTRONIC PUBLISHING

Electronic publications are having a profound effect on the way that libraries acquire and provide access to information. They seem to offer enormous potential for libraries to offer better services to readers and to restructure organisations to achieve greater efficiencies of operation.

There are two types of electronic publications (physical format and on-line publications) each with quite different control and access requirements. On the whole, physical format floppy disks and CD-ROMs more easily fit the acquisition and cataloguing procedures established for print materials. On-line documents, however, are presenting libraries with a completely new scenario in terms of collection development and management, acquisitions and cataloguing. There are two types of on-line publications: those, usually free-of-charge, that are available via the World Wide Web, gophers and ftp on the Internet, and those purchased through commercial publishers.

While electronic publications impact on all libraries, there are some differences according to the type of library involved. For national and state libraries (deposit libraries), the key issue is how to fulfil their role of preserving the publishing output of the geographic jurisdiction for which they are responsible, often in the absence of legal deposit provisions for electronic publications. Access is an important issue too for these libraries, but becomes the central issue for academic, special and public libraries.

ACQUIRING ELECTRONIC DOCUMENTS

What does it mean to acquire an electronic document? Certainly, some of the traditional acquisitions functions of identification and se-

lection still take place. In the case of a CD-ROM or a floppy disk, there is still an artefact to hold in the hand, but the licence agreement covering its use may well require its return to the supplier if the subscription is discontinued. In this situation, libraries are paying, not for ownership of an item and for the right to keep it on its shelves in perpetuity, but for the temporary use of the information it contains.

The concept of ownership is even more tenuous in the case of networked publications. A library may catalogue an on-line publication and add its holdings to the record, but never actually have the publication on the premises. It may do nothing more than facilitate access to its readers by pointing to the publication via its World Wide Web server. The library no longer has control of what happens to the title — by whim or by accident, publications on the Internet disappear.

Some publications are now produced in print, physical format and networked versions and libraries must make decisions about which is the most suitable version to meet the needs of its users. Which provides the best access to the information? Which is the easiest to use? Which will last the longest? In some cases it may be considered necessary to acquire more than one format and this, of course, entails greater costs.

Contrary to initial expectations, electronic publications are generally not enabling libraries to reduce staffing or acquisitions costs at this stage. The effort involved in acquiring them is greater and a multiplicity of licence agreements may have to be administered. The electronic version can offer the benefit of

greater flexibility, but the guaranteed long-term access to back issues is lost.

CATALOGUING NETWORKED PUBLICATIONS

Except that additional equipment and training is required to access them, the cataloguing of CD-ROMs and floppy disks does not differ markedly from that of a printed book or a serial. The real challenge for the cataloguer comes with networked publications. Existing MARC fields, cataloguing rules and ABN standards do not adequately cover the wide range of situations encountered. Is a home page that is continually changing a serial or a monograph? How should a serial with no designation or regular issues be dealt with? Where there are both print and electronic versions of the same title, should separate catalogue records be created for each or is the one record approach preferable? These and other questions are the subject of experimentation and international debate. Changing URLs (Uniform Resource Locator), the Internet address at which the document is found, are a potential additional workload for cataloguers.

FUTURE ACCESS PROBLEMS

Providing access to electronic publications means maintaining and regularly upgrading the equipment required to access them. Guar-

anteeing long-term access to publications considered to be part of the nation's documentary heritage will involve the migration of the information from an obsolete technology to the one which has replaced it.

The greater ease with which electronic publications can be copied and disseminated has caused publishers and authors to be more concerned about the protection of copyright than has been the case with print. Ironically, when it is technically possible to serve more readers more efficiently, it has become necessary to limit access. It has been suggested that on-screen browsing could in some cases attract a charge, because of the concerns of copyright owners about protecting their investments. This would be similar to imposing a cost for simply taking a book off the shelf and opening it.

Printed books and serials will not be universally replaced by electronic publications in the foreseeable future: some types of information are better-suited to one format than the other. Libraries are therefore in the position of having to accommodate both formats at a time when budgets and staff numbers are shrinking. There is no doubt, despite the immediate obstacles, that electronic formats offer libraries as yet unrealised opportunities to enhance the provision of information to readers. ■

THERE IS NO DOUBT, DESPITE THE IMMEDIATE OBSTACLES, THAT ELECTRONIC FORMATS OFFER LIBRARIES AS YET UNREALISED OPPORTUNITIES TO ENHANCE THE PROVISION OF INFORMATION TO READERS.

The one stop shop for all your document supply needs

THE BRITISH LIBRARY
DOCUMENT SUPPLY CENTRE

The international document delivery service

Want to know more?

Contact your local agent – DA Information Services



+61 3 9210 7777



+61 3 9210 7788



PO Box 163 Mitcham
Vic 3132 Australia



service@
dadirect.com.au

Come and visit DA Information Services and Ian Leadley of BLDSC at

A L I A 1 9 9 6

6-11 October, World Congress Centre
Melbourne, Australia
Stands 51, 53, 55, 56



INFORMATION SERVICES



Free
giveaway at our
stands