

STAFF PAPER



Copyright in the Digital Age

A paper presented at the seminar, 'Copyright in the Digital Age: Challenges and Opportunities for Offering Creative Work in the Digital Environment', Wednesday, 17 May 2006, National Library of Australia

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Clearly issues associated with digital publishing are complex and I cannot begin to summarise them in five minutes. However, I would like to make the following brief observations.

- Digital publishing offers a wide variety of opportunities for authors and is significantly changing the relationships that have existed in the print publishing world between authors and publishers.
- This is partly because authors can fairly easily become their own publishers in the digital world, without the same stigma that used to attach to so-called 'vanity' or self-publishing'. The rapid increase in blogs in recent years is one example of this kind of digital self-publishing.
- Digital publishing also offers creative possibilities that extend the possibilities offered by the print publishing world; the possibility, for example, to mix and match material in a way that is not easily possible with print publishing. Sound and images can be married to text, and links to associated sites can be readily incorporated. For the National Library, for example, digital publishing provides a marvellous opportunity to widely disseminate digital versions of key collection material.
- This means that digital publishing tends, inherently, to be more fluid and more multidimensional than print publishing. Some digital publishing also tends to be more changeable and unstable.
- Certainly the idea of a stable 'text' is increasingly under challenge in the digital publishing world. This can be an issue for libraries and archives, who may wish to archive a digital publication. Which version do they choose—yesterday's, today's or tomorrow's?

- What is and is not authoritative is increasingly being questioned. One example of a digital publication where changeability is promoted as part of its virtue is the online encyclopaedia, Wikipedia. In Wikipedia the capacity to add to entries and to modify them progressively, using what is in part a self-regulating quality control process, have been argued by some people to be publishing virtues and have been criticised by others
- The difficulty in such environments is that it is not always clear what information can be trusted. While traditional book publication processes have also been criticised by some as inflexible and imperfect, they do tend to ensure certain standards of editorial and content checking and control. A challenge in the digital environment is to ensure that there are appropriate editorial and quality control processes.
- The word ‘appropriate’ is crucial here. Blogs do not necessarily need such control because they are much like interactive online diaries or journals. But many online dictionaries, databases and encyclopaedias will eventually stand or fall partly according to whether the information that they provide is reasonably accurate and comprehensive.
- Digital publishing offers new and exciting opportunities for scholarly publishing, where relatively small constituencies of scholars and researchers can publish online journals that have become unviable in print form. These journals can be enhanced in the process, providing spaces for contributors and readers to exchange views quickly and easily.
- Online publication also suits databases and other kinds of information-focused text which benefits from being easily searchable. It also encourages new print publishing models, such as the developing print-on-demand processes.
- However, many issues involving digital publishing remain unresolved, and copyright issues and moral rights issues are perhaps even more important in the online environment than for the print publishing world. Different assumptions have tended to apply to the online world, where text and images can easily be cut and pasted from one document to another and even where copyright is asserted on web sites it is not always possible to ensure that all users have complied.
- But digital publishing is opening up exciting new possibilities for everyone, and that is the note on which I would like to conclude these remarks.