“A Gutenberg Moment”: The Do-It-Yourself World of Online Literary Publishing

Rachel A. Fleming-May
School of Information Sciences,
The University of Tennessee
424 Communications Building
1345 Circle Park Drive
Knoxville, TN 37996
Rf-m@utk.edu

Harriett Green
Literatures and Languages Library
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
225 Library, MC-522
1408 W. Gregory Dr.
Urbana, IL 61801
green19@illinois.edu

ABSTRACT
The Internet has changed the publishing industry irrevocably; this phenomenon has affected the print-centric sphere of literary publishing as well as those fields that have typically accepted change more readily. This poster presents findings from a study of the opinions and practices of editors and publishers of literary journals published online either in part or exclusively. In a survey and follow-up interviews, we asked respondents to describe the benefits and drawbacks of publishing literature using web-based platforms as well as their perceptions of the larger impact online publishing is having on literature. This study represents a unique attempt to explore the creative field of literature through the theoretical lens of information science.

Keywords

INTRODUCTION
In a 2009 issue of Poets & Writers, poet Sandra Beasley observed, “as glossy magazines die by the dozen and blogs become increasingly influential, we face the reality that print venues...are rapidly ceding ground to Web-based publishing.” (unpaged) This growth in online literary publishing has expanded the number of venues for literary expression and suggests a growing democratization of literary culture. Online literary journals, e-zines, and print publications’ websites have enabled more extensive dissemination of literary works than ever before, and have broadened the possibilities for incorporating these works into the classroom and other public venues.

While several Library and Information Science researchers have explored issues related to online publication of scholarly research, few researchers to date have examined the impact of the web on literary publishing.¹ This poster will report findings from a study of opinions and practices of editors and publishers of literary journals with an online component.

RESEARCH DESIGN
As part of a larger project to explore the impact of the web on the somewhat traditional world of literary publishing, we consulted the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses publication directory (https://www.clmp.org/directory/) to collect contact information for 945 editors and publishers of literary publications with significant web presence. Subsequently, we distributed a survey to these individuals. Of the 945 contacts, 245 participated in the survey for a response rate of 26 percent.

The survey asked respondents to report on the extent and duration of their involvement with literary publishing, both in print and online. They were also asked to describe their opinions of and practices related to online literary publishing, with a particular emphasis on the benefits and drawbacks of utilizing web-based platforms. The

researchers and project graduate assistants coded open-ended survey responses.

We used survey findings to develop a protocol for in-depth interviews, which we conducted with four survey respondents via telephone and Skype. The semi-structured interviews, which were transcribed and coded by both authors for inter-coder reliability, helped us better understand themes introduced in survey responses.

FINDINGS

Benefits of Online Literary Publishing
Overall, survey and interview respondents indicated that online publishing represents a major advance in literary publishing.

Accessibility
A significant number of responses observed that web-based publications had far broader accessibility, exposure, and impact than those published in print. As one publisher noted, “Publishing online permits greater access to, and for, a reading and writing audience. Not only due to the immediacy of publication release, but to the global nature of the Internet itself.” Many respondents also perceived web-based literary publishing to be more egalitarian than print, and considered this to be one of the most important benefits of publishing online.

Community
The related benefit of a more open community network for authors and readers was also seen as important. In the words of one respondent, “readership is open to everyone and grows quickly. We have readers and submitters from all over the world. It really is a global community.”

Respondents frequently identified their desire to participate in and/or contribute to a community as a primary motivator for publishing literature online. For some, this aspiration was closely connected to a commitment to a platform for writers and genres of literature they felt had not received sufficient exposure in more traditional venues. Others noted the inclusivity of online publications due to fewer length limitations, compared to print journals’ constraints of only specific number of pages per issue or issues per year. In turn, the online platform allowed editors and publishers to turn submissions around much more quickly.

Cost
While some respondents had never been involved in traditional print literary publishing, the high cost of print publishing was most frequently cited as the most significant motivator for those respondents who had transitioned to online formats. Other respondents referenced the “technological imperative” that made digital formatting inherent to all aspects of today’s publishing industry. In one editor’s words, “the future is now, and it is online—whether to be browsed, downloaded, or archived.”

Challenges Presented by Online Literary Publishing
While respondents seemed to agree that web-based literary publishing presents a net benefit, many of them highlighted several prominent issues related to supporting the creation, access, and use of online-only literature.

Misperceptions regarding quality and operations
Some indicated that the comparatively low cost of online publishing, while primarily beneficial, can be misconstrued as “no cost.” While consumers are “conditioned to pay” for print publications, “the ethos of the web is that content should be free.” Echoing the concern about Open Access scholarly publishing that has been raised in many academic fields, one respondent pointed to the “lingering sense in some quarters that print is somehow for work of better quality.”

Visibility and print culture
Although web-based literary publishing has made poetry more available, raising one’s visibility is still a challenge, causing some publishers to face “needle in a haystack syndrome.” In addition to getting lost in the sheer abundance of literary works published online, these journals face structural challenges from indexing and abstracting venues as well, as most online-only poetry is not indexed in standard resources such as Humanities International Complete. While the web presents remarkable opportunity for publishing hybrid and multimedia literary content, respondents discussed the challenge of truly leveraging the potential of online publishing while maintaining accessibility and other standards. Some discussed the strong traditional affinity between literature and the print medium, calling themselves “bibliophiles; while we admire the internet and online publishing—and frequent all sorts of online venues—we like the feel of an old-fashioned book.” For some, this seemed to indicate a reluctance to fully embrace online literary publishing.

Study Outcomes
Potential Solutions
In the interest of improving discoverability, we asked respondents to describe resources that might make online-only poetry more accessible. This poster will also share our respondents’ aggregated “wish list” of features for such a tool. One was a need to curate poetry online to indicate quality and peer review. Another major identified need was for features and functionality that would enable users to find and collected works by various criteria. Respondents suggested metadata fields for categories such as genre, geographic location, and time period written, and they also wanted the capabilities to create and curate their own collections of digital poetry. Another notable need was for digital preservation of the online-only poetry. Discovery solutions suggested by the respondents included a searchable index of online-only poetry, mobile phone apps, and an API feed of metadata.
Looking Ahead

Sukovic (2008) argues “the way in which electronic technology enables the use of primary materials and the way in which scholars engage with primary sources in electronic form are the central issues in the employment of electronic technologies in the humanities.” (p.264) The discoverability and access of web-based literature will be of importance not only to poets and literary scholars, but also to students and the general public. Web-based literary publishing allows anyone with an Internet connection to experience the power of a literary creation visually, aurally, and textually.

Past research has demonstrated that publication practices and patterns of literary e-Zines lack stability (Stevens, 2004; Stevens & McCord, 2005), and this is also the case in online literary publishing.

This project represents an attempt to apply theoretical and practical principles of LIS to a creative field: literary publishing. Findings from the study indicate this is a field worthy of further research.

REFERENCES


