

read:write

Digital Possibilities
for Literature

A report for Arts Council England
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1. Executive Summary

1.1 Brief and Methodology

if:book was commissioned by the literature department of Arts Council England (ACE) to gather an overview of how companies, organisations and individuals in the commercial and funded sectors are using Web 2.0 to market fiction, poetry and live literature; spot writing talent; guide readers and potential readers; create, share and review writing.

In particular we were asked to look at:

- what opportunities digitisation offers to writers, publishers and other literature organisations
- how funded organisations can achieve greater sustainability/self-sufficiency or lower costs by making use of technology
- how organisations can develop audiences and increase participation through use of digital media

The report was commissioned at a formative stage of ACE's digital strategy development, so the research was conducted as an iterative process. The bulk of the research was conducted through interviews and desk research, informed by the experience and expertise of Institute personnel. Interviews informed the desk research and vice versa, and the direction and emphasis of the report evolved in a series of meetings with ACE personnel.

The core of this report lies in the case studies. After an initial period of Web research and informal discussion with key individuals in the sector, we developed a baseline questionnaire covering key areas. These included technology, site maintenance, resourcing and future hopes and needs. Though each organisation interviewed had different needs and priorities, and the interview was adapted accordingly in each case, we used this baseline to identify themes that persisted across different areas. Quotations were checked with the interviewee before the report was finalised.

In addition to the interviews, we conducted extensive Web-based research covering both UK and international literature organisations. This formed the basis of 'subsector overviews' that combine with the case studies.

1.2 Introduction

The report begins by looking at the rapid changes that have taken place since literature organisations first set up websites.

1.3 Web culture

The Web is no longer the playground of the technical elite - it is a fact of everyday life, and an essential tool for any organisation engaged in promoting the word. The explosion of "Web2.0" technologies - the "read/write Web" - has also put online participation in the hands of many people, not just the young, affluent and technically minded.

In the first twenty years of its existence, the Web evolved its own distinct culture. Oriented towards counter-cultural values, peer-to-peer exchange and collaboration, "geek" culture has

evolved in parallel with the ‘offline’ world. But in the era of Web.2.0, we are witnessing a convergence – or collision – of this culture with the multiplicity of voices that have descended upon the formerly exclusive territory of the Web.

This can be seen in the parallels, crossovers and dissonances between the born-digital creative forms discussed in chapter 5, and the activities of creative writers and readers who choose the Web as their medium. New practices are emerging that draw from both spaces; and while questions of access, quality and participation remain central, the landscape in which they are debated has changed irrevocably.

Meanwhile funded literature organisations have always worked in the midst of a network of small magazines and publications, private and public book groups, writers workshops and readings, run for pleasure rather than significant profit, providing opportunities for debate and collaboration.

1.4 New Writing and the Web

While we may applaud the levelling power of the read/write Web, few would argue that it would be appropriate to abandon all critical traditions in pursuit of equality of taste and individualised content consumption. And the question then becomes one of how new writing is best fostered in this space. There are more routes to publication than previously; but there are also many more writers. How can excellence be found and shared?

Literary magazines can be created cheaply on line, some replicate print culture creating a bounded zone to focus attention on a selection of chosen works, others use all the affordances of the web, with plentiful links and a community of unpaid contributors, while writing communities encourage peer review, ranking contributions by popularity.

When new writing can be published for little or no cost online, when does it make sense to fund digital magazines? When much online culture is created by willing unpaid volunteers, where is public subsidy appropriate and valuable?

1.5 Born-digital creative forms

We look at new media writing which incorporates visuals, sound and different delivery platforms; Alternate Reality Games mixing narrative and interactive play; collaborative wkinovels and other kinds of “open source” creativity. These thriving forms expand the possibilities for the written word and so need to feature on Arts Council England’s cultural radar, whether or not they currently require subsidy, if literature is to evolve and thrive in our digital future.

1.6 Reading and writing

The Web makes it possible to create active networks of readers. While many platforms have emerged that enable users to discuss and share book-related information, these are typically oriented toward the mass market and may leave excluded groups untouched. Libraries and reader development agencies can utilise the Web for their own activities and also, in recognition of the widespread adoption of self-funded reader development activity online, focus more on targeted interventions playing to their strengths and making use of existing, widely adopted platforms.

The convergence of cultures has fuelled the development of a peer-to-peer literary conversation that disrupts established critical hierarchies. No longer bound by the opinions of commentators with a radio, newspaper or television voice, we are all free to find the community of literary interest that is right for us. Similarly, we can all publish: every day, new sites emerge where writers can share work, self-publish, discuss, critique and engage with literature.

1.7 Live literature

In the area of live literature, writers can build their audience for themselves, no longer reliant on venues and literary festivals to provide access to a public platform. Much sought after still is critical recognition by organisations whose imprimatur confers status.

And as the number of attendees at literary festivals begins to be overtaken by those who watch events via podcasting, challenging questions arise about the skills and ideas needed for the future. Once seen as a kind of electronic leaflet to promote the real work of an organisation, the website now becomes what an organisation is.

1.8 Publishing

The arrival of the e-reader is imminent with implications for all publishers, including those independent presses using the web to sell paper books, and potential benefits for readers with disabilities. Print on demand machines and metadata systems that allow the remixing of units of text from different publications – all these change the economic relationship of readers and writers. Previously the relatively high marginal costs of print publication meant that few in that system attained the goal of publication, but publication in the read-write Web costs little or nothing: suddenly a chorus of voices can be heard.

But even though new technologies can help writers find their voice and readership, the financial models that underpin writer development online are various and uncertain. This reflects a deeper uncertainty. The Web disrupts many established economic principles – and in this space, the role of writers, artists and their related industries is far from clear. How does a new media writer earn a living? What is the future of print publishing?

How does this affect funding strategies: which areas need additional support, and which can now pursue their aims at little or no cost?

1.9 Technology

Central to strategic development of digital capacity in the literature sector is the need for new skills. Throughout the literature sector, there is widespread recognition of the need to engage with the read/write Web. But the ability of organisations to take advantage of these opportunities varies wildly. Even those with a strong online presence often do not have the resources to keep up with the latest developments, and the anxiety is not whether to engage with the Web but where to go next with it. What technologies are most appropriate? Is there any point in paying for a technology that may be available for free in a year's time?

Another challenge for those whose primary skill-set is literature, not technology, is ensuring that implementations are sustainable. Especially for those who cannot afford to pay a third-party provider to maintain their digital presence, it is key to find technologies that can be easily managed and updated in-house.

Similarly, the explosion in social media platforms such as networking sites, video hosting and podcasting provides many new opportunities for “relationship marketing” ideally suited to the literature sector. But - even in the technology sector - best practice is still emerging. When time is scarce, and a new tool or platform is seemingly launched every week, many feel the need for basic training in how best to leverage these tools.

Using ‘free’ to build community

Those most ahead of the adoption curve are both creatively and critically engaged with social media as a marketing tool. This often takes the form of content – for example uploaded to social networking sites, available through feeds, or hosted on an organisation’s website – given away free in order to promote core products such as live literature events or print books.

Though this practice is most prevalent in live literature and publishing, each area of the literature sector contains strong examples of organisations using free content to build communities of interest around core products. In Chapter 9, we discuss some established best practice for using social media in this way. But further research and experimentation are needed to establish where this provides the best return on the inevitable investment of time and effort.

Portfolio business models

When online content is infinitely reproducible, how are organisations to survive financially? Everyone, from international corporations to individual freelancers, struggles with this question. But in the literature sector as in many other areas, new practices are emerging in response. A key trend is towards hybrid financial models which this sector is already accustomed to: a small literary publisher may combine grant support, direct sales, consultancy and events to make ends meet; one small organisation may produce a magazine, broker print on demand services and develop software.

In the increasingly flat-structured, multi-skilled and flexible world of digitally-enabled cultural production, few individuals will have a single job. Indeed, this is so much the case that one of the greatest obstacles to digital innovation in mainstream publishers is the pervasive presence of functional silos that reflect the cycles of print publishing but hamper digital experimentation.

In addition to providing an overview of current digital practice in the literature sector, and outlining some emerging trends, this report covers some aspects of current Web technology as relevant to the sector. Though Web technology evolves too fast for an exhaustive overview to be possible, Chapter 9 provides an introduction to major types of social media platform, online community-building, metrics, rights, metadata. The aim is less to propose a conclusive set of solutions than outline some of the issues the literature sector needs to consider in tackling the digital realm.

1. 10 Conclusions

ACE supports community focused organisations whose remit is to increase access to the arts, and also has a role in furthering many forms of artistic excellence not readily-funded by the marketplace. The read/write Web disrupts patterns of both access and quality in new ways. ACE's literature strategy will need to consider how best to further the aims of literature in this new era of mass digital creativity.

How can the Web help us support new writing, build lasting and wide-reaching communities of interest, and take advantage of unparalleled access to a global conversation to further the aims of literature? What does the Web offer aspiring writers – and what new creative forms are emerging from this crucible of possibility? And – just as urgently - how does literature survive in the era of free content?

This report provides no conclusive answers to these questions. At this pivotal point in the evolution of networked literary culture, we have sought rather to understand what the questions are, to explore existing activity in the sector and to draw out promising themes and avenues for further exploration.

2. Introduction

Jules Mann, Director of the Poetry Society, originally joined the Poetry Society to oversee its website. These days, the Poetry Society receives the majority of National Poetry Competition entries and payments through the Web. Online samples of *Poetry Review* and *Poetry News* invite readers to buy these magazines, while podcasts, news, a map of Poetry Places and a regularly updated list of events and competitions point the visitor towards the best of the poetry scene.

The Poetry Society is strongly rooted in offline activity: competitions, events, workshops, print publications and the regular activities of its café provide the core of its service to members. So while the website is an important resource, its rapid rise in importance has created challenges.

Staff have different levels of interest in and aptitude for technology, and this limits the number able to update the site and handle changes. And while the site is popular, visitor numbers are not growing. “Maintenance is the biggest problem,” Jules says. But for her it is a vital part of the Poetry Society’s work.

Jules, and the Poetry Society, are typical of a change that has swept through the literature sector. When, in 1997, the Poetry Society launched its website, the Director of Literature at ACE phoned to say, “I hear you’ve got an excellent website – can I come round and see it?” But now, in 2008, every literature organisation has a site, and an awareness that the digital is set to become more and more important in the future. Some have a clear vision of what they want, others feel confused; some are enthusiasts for things digital and some are not, but all recognise that it has become a vital part of how we communicate, interact and find one another.

2.1 Familiar objections

During this period of change, many objections to embracing digital media have become familiar. But many of these no longer hold water. For instance:

“Promoting literature always comes down to envelope stuffing”

Not any more. Email lists and websites have transformed the way we interact with the public.

“Only those with money for computers are on the Web; we produce leaflets to be sure to reach everyone”

In 2007, 15.23 million (61%) UK households had access to the Internet, an increase of 7% since 2006.¹

“Only young people use the Internet, not our target groups”

90% of 16–24 year olds have accessed the Web in the past three months; 71% of the 65-plus age group have never used the Web, but the largest growth in Internet usage is in this age group. Men are still more likely to use the Web than women.

“You can’t trust statistics about Web hits”

There are many different ways of recording Web traffic, but high-quality analysis software is simple to implement and available at no cost from several providers. There would be no significant financial implications to introducing a single agreed method of measurement across all ACE-funded sites.

¹ National Statistics, First Release, Aug 2007

“I never know what to put in the budget for website development”

The boom in social Web applications has provided users with a vast array of free or nearly free Web-based tools for self-promotion, community-building and more. While organisations ruminate over whether to include digital technologies in their three-year plan, others are raising their profile through Facebook pages, Flickr photo pools and mailing lists – for free. The cost is no longer hardware or software, but only time.

“There’s such a lot of rubbish on the Web”

As of December 2007, blog search engine Technorati was tracking more than 112 million blogs. And the Web is a vehicle for much more than writing by those who think of themselves as “authors”: microbloggers with an audience of five, teenagers swapping gossip, corporations presenting their mission statements. But limited bandwidth is increasingly a thing of the past: the Web’s capacity is, to all intents and purposes, infinite. Naturally, not all of the content offered online will appeal to all readers.

2.2 Rapid change

The Web gives us all a platform from which to address the world. The days when publication was the only route to multiple readers are long gone. And this new world of the “read/write Web” is transforming the way that literature finds its audiences – and potentially even what it is.

Literary blogger Mark Thwaite of ReadySteadyBook is a strong advocate of this development: “The best cultural writing I’ve ever read I’ve found on blogs,” he says firmly. But as the journalistic establishment has found to its cost, audiences have an increasing choice of material from which to choose, and reputation and a letterhead are no defence against a nimbler, more responsive competitor. And this is a huge challenge to formal institutions. And even for smaller groups, the pace of technological change has been rapid. Organisations mainly oriented towards the written word can feel left behind by technologies that seem more interested in systems than language.

But literature is more than paper. The current fixation with whether or not the paper book will survive or thrive in the future blinds us to the fascinating and complex interaction in all our lives between words heard, seen and written on word and screen. While businesses based on the sale of paper may or may not be in crisis, those with a wider responsibility for ensuring that our literary culture thrives have many new tools at their disposal.

The literature sector comprises many small, creative teams accustomed to producing quality work with few resources. Where there is a will, a reader and a writer, literature has always found a way. Such teams should be able to thrive in the digital age. As Peter Florence says, “It puts us on our mettle – hooray!”

3. Web culture

3.1 Introduction

Digital media – especially the technologies known as “Web 2.0” – have transformed the cultural landscape in a very short time. This section examines the (relatively short) history of the World Wide Web and some of the tools and approaches that are available to users today, in the light of their existing and potential impact on the literature sector.

The Technology section [page 46] contains a more in-depth discussion of some practical and technical issues around the Web, as relevant to the literature sector.

3.2 Key ideas for the literature sector

These ideas are discussed in greater depth in this section and elsewhere, but inform the entire report and are visible in many of the case studies below. They are summarised here for reference.

3.2.1 The read/write Web

New tools online enable readers to become much more than readers: the Web is now a conversation. Literature organisations must find their place within that conversation – or else give way to new, digitally native players and focus on relevant niches.

3.2.2 Community building strategies

There are many technologies and strategies that can help literature players who are keen to participate in the conversation. Many of these are common to all websites – though some require a slight change in approach in order to adapt to Web forms.

3.2.3 Cultural loss leaders

With the music industry tending rapidly toward unlimited downloads in exchange for subscription fees, the trend online is to view content not as a commodity – something to be bought piecemeal – but as a service.

Alternatively, online operators often give away some parts of their offering – book previews, selected tracks downloadable from a website – in order to build interest in a saleable product such as a CD or print book. These “cultural loss leaders” do not view online content as a commodity but as an opportunity to grow audiences and increase profile.

3.2.4 Convergence and curation

Increasingly, traditional industries are converging. Newspapers produce podcasts, publishers sell downloads, booksellers produce electronic readers. In an increasingly cluttered media space, there remains a strong demand for trusted sources of guidance and creative curators to help readers to navigate the mass of possible reading material.

3.2.5 Opportunities for literature

ACE-funded organisations have never seen literature primarily as a commodity, and many provide most of their services for free. While the Web is full of commercial opportunities, most material is offered by enthusiasts out of the pleasure of sharing. There are many opportunities for literature in this space – the question is simply which ones, and where this huge and growing community of enthusiasts is already achieving what in the past might have needed ACE funding in order to be viable.

3.3 A short history of the network

3.3.1 The network

During the Cold War era, the US military had one great fear: what if a nuclear strike took out central military command, immobilising an entire defence system in one attack? Then scientists hit on the idea of constructing a network of computers, deliberately centreless, that could send messages and information among themselves without relying on a central hub, and in the late 1960s ARPANET was born.

TCP/IP, the protocol used for sending information between computers, was rapidly adopted by other networks. These in turn gradually began to link to one another. The libertarian, bottom-up, distributed philosophy of the Internet originates at least partly in this aspect of its history: different networks organised their own network requirements. Hence, there has never been one single provider of infrastructure for the network, a fact that has encouraged individual enterprise and responsibility, bootstrapping, hacking and free sharing of information and technologies alongside the more proprietary influences of commerce and state.

3.3.2 The World Wide Web

The terms Internet and World Wide Web are generally used interchangeably, but they describe two different things. While the Internet refers to the entire system of computers connected to one another in networks, the World Wide Web describes a system that allows users to display, read and browse content rendered in hypertext transfer protocol (HTTP).

HTTP is the underlying protocol that defines how messages across the network are formatted and transmitted, and how web servers and browsers should respond to various commands.

The release of HTTP in the public domain by Tim Berners-Lee in 1989 is seen by some internet historians as the beginning of the World Wide Web proper. Others date the birth of the World Wide Web from the release of the first mass-adopted web browser, Mosaic, in 1993. Certainly the Internet spread like wildfire as these technologies were combined. Now, users could create their own websites, or 'browse' those of others across the Web. The year Mosaic was released the growth in internet adoption was over 300%.

3.3.3 The first bubble

In the 1990s there was a savage struggle for dominance in web browsers, and a hugely inflated investment bubble. As the World Wide Web's popularity grew, entrepreneurs began exploring business opportunities online: the sudden possibility of using websites to reach millions of customers at little cost drove the first dot.com bubble from the mid-1990s to sudden collapse in 2000.

Arguably, though, for the publishing world the CD-ROM bubble was more significant than the dot.com bubble – and preceded it by a few years. After CD-ROMs failed to become significant sellers for publishers, a widespread cynicism arose about digital publishing, which has continued among publishers into the networked era and has only recently begun to adjust.

3.3.4 Web 2.0: after the dot.com bust

Interestingly, online bookseller Amazon was one of the first dot.coms to float on the stock market (in 1997). And though it has had a rocky ride, being restructured in 2001 and only reaching profitability later still, it is one of the relatively few online retailers to have survived the dot.com bust.

In the funded literature sector, meanwhile, the dot.com bubble had much less direct impact. Organisations steadily began to create websites, catalogues and other online resources for their audiences. These, on the whole, have followed the pattern of a typical website created by an agency or individual whose primary focus is not technology. While some might be updated regularly, many more rely on occasional changes made by a third party and so remain static and frequently out of date. And although visitors might be invited to email comments, which could then be featured, these sites have frequently not been much more interactive than paper newsletters or magazines.

However, a new generation of web technologies has been steadily changing the way we think about what digital technologies can do – and putting those tools in the hands of all.

Since the dot.com bust, much has been made of a new generation of internet technologies – loosely collected under the phrase “Web 2.0”. Driven by new programming standards, notably XML, which enable form to be separated from content, these new technologies have forced a rethink away from simple websites to a much more fluid understanding of what the World Wide Web is, and what it can do. Some commonly mentioned features attributed to Web 2.0 technologies are:

- **Platforms** – Businesses make money from providing platforms for peer production rather than selling services. YouTube, for example, does not charge to host users’ videos.
- **Peer-to-peer networking** – Systems that let users share and exchange among themselves rather than through a mediator. A good example is Zopa, a peer lending business that facilitates loans of money between individuals, as an alternative to loans from banks or building societies.
- **The long tail** – Systems that use the Internet to serve niches otherwise unaddressable due to economies of scale. Amazon’s approach to bookselling is a good example.
- **Network effect** – The service gets better as more people use it, for example eBay.
- **Decentralisation** – Social browsers such as Flock, aggregators such as Netvibes or Pipes, and RSS readers let internet users experience web content on their own terms, organised to suit their needs.
- **Co-creation** – The primary value of a service is created in part if not in whole by its users. Again, YouTube is a good example.
- **Read/write functionality** – Discussed in a separate section. A shift from websites that provide static content to platforms that encourage users to contribute – such as the conversational quality of blogs, encouraging readers to comment on previous posts.
- **Remixability** – Users can aggregate the outputs of multiple services to meet their needs, for example by adding a Twitter microblogging feed to their Facebook profile, or showing a dynamically updating del.icio.us tagroll on a blog home page.
- **Emergent systems** – The system is shaped by the cumulative behaviour of its users. Social bookmarking applications such as Digg let users tag web pages they like, and the more Digg users tag the same page the more its profile is raised and the more people are likely to see it.

3.3.5 Impacts of Web 2.0

Web 2.0 has refocused attention and technical development from top-down provision of products or services to thinking in terms of patterns of behaviour, and cumulative activity by large numbers of people. This has driven the development of large-scale social platforms, and a move away from selling content or products online (boo.com) to selling services that enable users to create their own content or products (YouTube, eBay).

Although this explosion in relatively easy-to-use technologies for creating and sharing content online has opened access to the Web to relatively non-technical users, and provides a mass of new opportunities for organisations and individuals to build community and share their enthusiasms, it has also created challenges.

As the music industry has discovered, selling content is a highly problematic activity, and while some publishers are exploring the distribution of free online content as a marketing tool, others are concerned that online digital rights are unworkable and will spell the end of publishing as a viable industry.

3.3.6 The read/write Web

In *We The Media*,² Dan Gillmor describes his first experience of encountering a blog:

I don't remember what the page contained except for one button. It said, "Edit This Page" – and, for me, nothing was ever the same again.

I clicked the button. Up popped a text box containing plain text and a small amount of Hypertext Markup Language (HTML), the code that tells a browser how to display a given page. Inside the box I saw the words that had been on the page. I made a small change, clicked another button that said, "Save this page" and voilà, the page was saved with the changes. The software, still in prerelease mode, turned out to be one of the earliest weblog, or blog, applications.

Though Web users had been sending emails, conversing on bulletin boards, and collaborating in wikis for some time, the widespread adoption of tools that make these conversations a visible and essential part of online experience has transformed the Web from static pages into a dynamic flow of conversation, comment and debate. From citizen journalists sharing their experiences of major events to communities where writers can share their work and review that of others, the read/write Web is profoundly impacting how we read, write and think.

In *Free Culture*,³ US lawyer Lawrence Lessig argues for a read/write Web, in which the "read-only" formats that must be changed by an authority are replaced by content that all can remix, repurpose, discuss and share.

Tim Berners-Lee always envisioned a read/write Web. But in the early days of the World Wide Web websites were used largely as a medium for presenting information. There might be an email address for contacting the webmaster, but websites themselves could only be changed by programmers with special access.

The spread of easy technologies for publishing and sharing enables even the technically shy to participate in the global conversation of the World Wide Web. This provides opportunities for the literature sector, both in opportunities to promote, develop and discover literature originated elsewhere, and also through the emergence of entirely new forms of creative output.

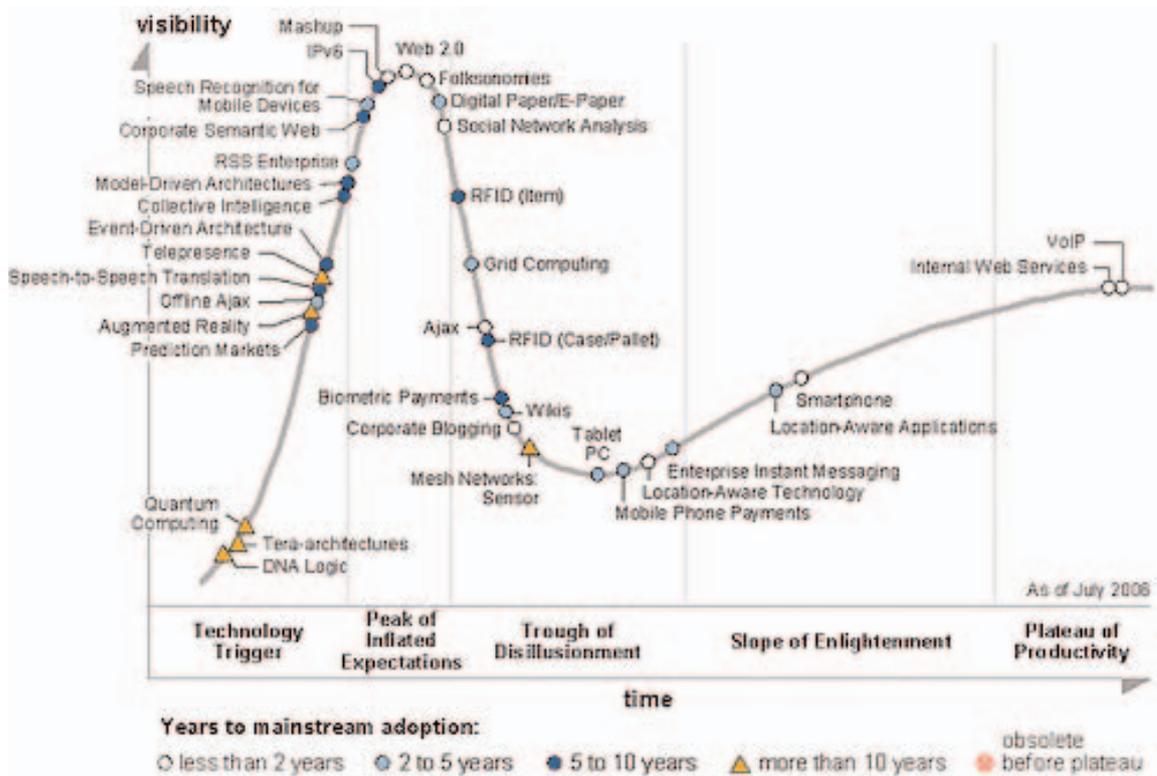
² Dan Gillmor, *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People*. O'Reilly, 2006.

³ L Lessig, *Free Culture: how big media uses technology and the law to lock down culture and control creativity*, New York, Penguin, 2004.

3.3.7 Where next?

The Hype Cycle 2006

Source: Gartner Inc., 2006⁴



Every year, IT research and advisory company Gartner releases its Hype Cycle report, detailing which technologies are currently creating or disappointing commentators' expectations. In 2006, Web 2.0 was at the peak of Gartner's Hype Cycle. And as the consultancy predicted, it has taken less than two years since then to reach the mainstream.

Now, as the mass of user-generated content grows, and the technology blogs announce a hundred new wonder widgets every day, the challenge is less about adopting the latest "squidgy" gimmick than maintaining simplicity and focus in the face of an impossible choice of tools. The struggle is both to keep up with technological advances, finding and deploying those that are genuinely useful, and supporting users in finding what they want, interacting and forming communities where appropriate, and filtering out irrelevant or intrusive content otherwise.

The hype cycle keeps cycling, and newest is not always best. While there are great opportunities for increased reach, new creativity and improved access to be gained through improved use of digital media, there are many contexts where new technologies simply do not add much value.

But this is an important moment for organisations to review their needs and ensure they are making the most appropriate and effective use of what is available now.

⁴ Gartner Inc., 2006

4. New writing and the Web

4.1 Literary magazines online

4.1.1 Overview

What has always fascinated me about the Internet and World Wide Web is how like, rather than unlike, print it is in so many ways that matter to me... and to poetry.

William Slaughter, editor, *Mudlark e-journal*

Literary magazines have benefited considerably from the growth of the Web, but remain largely defined in relation to the culture of print literature.

From painstakingly laid-out and photocopied A5 “distros” to literary reviews with a century of history, new writing magazines reflect an energetic culture of writers aspiring to share their work. Much as Xerox technology spurred a boom in zine culture, the Web’s promise of low-cost publication and theoretically infinite audiences has made it a natural home for much of this activity.

Today, there are countless literary magazines with an online presence. These fall into two broad categories: magazines that produce a paper publication, and those that publish on the Web only. In both cases, they vary widely in readership, reputation and outlook, from the online offerings of established publications such as *Poetry Review*, which puts a sampler from each issue on the Poetry Society website, to niche efforts focusing on a subgenre or region.

Whether providing a low-cost means of publication for writing created primarily for pleasure, or acting as a first step for emerging writers on the road to renown, such magazines work on the frontline of the writerly world.

4.1.2 A first filter of quality

The participatory culture of the read/write Web has spurred a parallel boom in individuals writing and sharing their work. In this dynamic culture of aspiring writers, literary magazines of all kinds act as a front-line filter for new writing. Increasingly replacing the older culture of hand-photocopied, A5 magazines, the multiplicity of committed ezines often provide a new writer’s first experience of publishing. In the case of magazines with ISSN numbers, it can be the first stepping stone to competition entry and further exposure.

This is the defining characteristic of both print and digital literary journals: without exception, they are oriented towards participation in the hierarchical world of ‘literary’ values – poised, as it were, on the threshold between accessibility and quality. As William Slaughter puts it:

I am committed to the old high tradition of the one-man or one-woman poetry press... And I am committed to running an open shop at Mudlark. There will be no soliciting at Mudlark, no members only sign hanging over the entryway.

Anyone can have a go, but the aim is to filter good work on behalf of the readership. For writers, publication represents another step on the road – it is hoped – to wider recognition and selection for further publication. And while this promises to ensure widespread continued activity around new writing, in some cases the close formal relationship with print publications leads ezines to ignore common web-based revenue streams and publicity strategies such as affiliate schemes, advertising and links pages.

4.1.3 Technology

Magazines have relatively simple requirements and often simply use out-of-the-box blog software or flat HTML coding. An increasing number are looking to content management

platforms to help handle growing archives of articles, and to simplify the updating process. Some offer content in the form of downloadable PDFs.

As most of these are, in effect, mostly a broadcast-only delivery model with limited space for feedback, technical form is largely a matter of taste and/or technical skill. Some of the most reputable poetry publications are simple pages of unstyled text, and others “a real mess of flat HTML files and various botched CMSs [content management systems]”, as one editor described his ezine’s archive. But as reputation is built more through persistence and strong editorial policy than site design, so simple navigation and uncluttered pages carry more weight than technical innovation in this space.

4.1.4 Print magazines online

Literary magazines that publish in print tend to treat the Web as a showcase and sometimes a shop window. This means they largely limit the content available online in an effort to drive up readership of the print magazine. All provide submission guidelines, and a large proportion accept submissions by email.

Some – such as San Francisco-based *Narrative* – provide Amazon ordering links for their magazines. Others use Paypal for sales, such as New York-based *Lungfull!*, while UK-based *Ambit* handles online sales via UK writers’ resource website Firstwriter.com.

4.1.5 Case study: Pen Pusher

4.1.5.i 21st-century literary endeavour

In the wake of the digital revolution, more and more sectors become aware of the opportunities the Web creates to reduce fixed costs, build audiences and alternate revenue streams through cross-subsidy. Magazines are no exception.

Pen Pusher is a London-based literary magazine run by three voluntary, unpaid staff (two editors and a designer). It is printed quarterly and distributed through around 20 booksellers and other outlets in London and beyond. *Pen Pusher* has a print run of 1,200 per issue, and the website receives around 900 visits a month, with a bounce rate of around 40%. Its mailing list reaches about 1,000 people.

Some of the magazine content is published online as a “teaser” for the print magazine, though Hape Mueller, lead designer at *Pen Pusher*, is keen to develop the online infrastructure to the point where this can be reversed:

We can only publish a tiny proportion at the moment, but we could build a great community by publishing a wider selection online – where it costs nothing – and selecting from this for a print magazine.

4.1.5.ii Using digital technologies to build community

Though the core output is currently a print magazine, the team is proactive about using the Web to promote *Pen Pusher*. Hape acknowledges that there is much development to do – currently the site is built in flat HTML pages, which makes updating the content time-consuming. But with a funding application in the pipeline for a major site development, that could all change soon.

As a web designer, Hape is keen to ensure that *Pen Pusher*’s online visibility is good:

We’re very proactive about cultivating inbound links. Every time we find a site or organisation that might be interested in us we send them an email so that hopefully they’ll link to us. We also get a fair amount of blog coverage, especially when we publish people – they put a note and a link in their own blogs.

Pen Pusher is also organised about maintaining contact with its community, thanks to Hape building a simple CRM (customer relationship management) system for the magazine:

We have around 300 contributors in the database at the moment. Each email we receive is added to it along with any relevant information. I’m a bit of a statistics obsessive so I pay lots of attention to this data.

Using this system, Hape can pull up lists of advertisers, the subscribers, contributors or maillist subscriptions. This is used to run the mailing list. Hape explains:

I extract a list of subscribers from our database, reformat it and send it out by mail. It's a bit fiddly and time-consuming – especially keeping tabs on who's unsubscribed and so on – but it's okay for now.

As well as announcing new magazines, the team uses the maillist to do market research. Hape has found this valuable:

I created an online questionnaire to find out a bit more about our readers. It turned out that 70% of our readers are between 18 and 34, which is a great sell to advertisers.

The team also sends out emails announcing each party:

We throw a party for the launch of every issue. It's an opportunity to get the contributors together, and also the wider readership. It's pretty low-cost and a great opportunity to network and grow the community.

4.1.5.iii Ad-supported

Pen Pusher is distributed for free and is currently funded through advertising, subscriptions and its makers' own resources, though the team is currently applying for an ACE grant to develop the web presence.

For Hape, developing a community is key to the future, and he sees the proposed funding grant as seed money rather than subsidy:

We want to look at how to promote ourselves nationwide – viral marketing tools, getting people to write short things and post them on YouTube, that kind of thing. The Web is full of possibilities for widening recognition, and we'd like to be able to go to literary festivals, make some mailouts and so on. But it all takes resources.

Hape aims to become financially self-sustaining as soon as possible:

It made more sense to set ourselves up as a company than a charity. Of course we want to have fun, but we don't want to be dependent on grant handouts. It's about becoming independent and self-sustaining.

Pen Pusher's research shows they are reaching a cultured, switched on, high spending audience – 80% eat out once a week, 58% visit a bookshop weekly, 88% attend cultural events at least once a month – attractive to advertisers. Hape is optimistic:

No one's cracked creative writing online yet – we think there's a real opportunity there. There are great opportunities for a product that gives the core offering – the literary magazine – away for free, but takes advantage of opportunities for mixed peripheral revenues such as consulting, advertising and so on, using *Pen Pusher* as our flagship. Where we create value is in the relationships around the magazine.

4.2 Online-only (ezines)

There is little difference in format between ezines and their printed sisters, other than that ezine content is all available online. Thus there is no sense of a 'tiered' content offering, with the printed content implicitly superior.

The key difference between ezines and the online presence of print magazines is in the financial models employed. The fixed costs of printing require some financial outlay, whereas, providing the labour is voluntary and submissions are unpaid, ezines can deliver regular, high-quality content for next to no money.

Nonetheless, ezines are frequently much more proactive than their print siblings in leveraging the Internet for revenue, whether this is through Amazon links, AdSense or being included in advertising. Other financial models include support from literary agencies (*Jacket*), hosting by universities (*Mudlark*) and public or philanthropic subsidy (*Slope*, *Pulp*). It should be noted that

these examples are mainly international – but their online nature means that their audiences could come from anywhere, and they cannot be discounted.

4.2.1 Case study: Pulp.net and 3:AM

4.2.1.i Book as ezine, ezine about books

Pulp.net describes itself as “a webspace that feels like a book. It’s also a headspace where anyone can write, if they want to.” Its founder, award-winning short story writer Lane Ashfeldt, has a background in publishing and previously worked at Guardian Online. *Pulp* aims to publish high-quality fiction, poetry and reviews.

Comparing Google Analytics statistics with data from her ISP (internet service provider), Lane estimates that the Pulp site receives between 20,000 and 30,000 unique visits a month, though this may drop if the site is not updated monthly. Pulp.net pages are built by editors using a content management system or ‘back end’ supplied by one third party company and visual design ‘front end’ supplied by a different company. Editors thus create new pages on pre-approved page templates, much the same way that *The Guardian* or *Independent* are produced on a set of matching templates.

Although the process to commission new *templates* is a little cumbersome when implementing new editorial concepts, the site receives positive comments from users about its look and feel and easy navigation. The major constraint on setting up new page templates is financial, i.e. does Pulp.net have the resources to pay contributors for a new section and fill it regularly?

3:AM is, in the words of former associate editor James Bridle, a “defiantly countercultural” ezine incorporating Buzzwords, according to James arguably “the first litblog”. Established in 1999, 3:AM has a solid reputation for covering niche interests, as James reports:

The largest traffic source after Google is Wikipedia. 3:AM has covered so much over the year that hasn’t been covered anywhere else in detail, that it’s become the default reference for a whole range of artists, musicians and writers.

Money, technology, independence

“Literary magazines (paper or online) based on volunteer effort and barter can end up owing a lot of favours,” Lane says. “Running a site based entirely on volunteer effort could, I imagine, compromise editorial integrity and become cliquish. Pulp.net attracted Arts Council support for various projects in the period 2003 to 2007, and it is this that enabled it to review submissions professionally and apply a consistent editorial policy. There is a definite preference within Pulp.net for projects that pay editorial contributors (writers, reviewers, editors) for their work.”

The downside, of course, is that money is in short supply – and though Pulp.net has been running workshops to help meet costs, it is currently almost entirely dependent on grant funding. In contrast, 3:AM “receives absolutely no funding”, James says, “and is run on the blood and sweat of several loyal editors, and a shifting set of occasional writers.” Contributors are unpaid. But James does not consider 3:AM editorially compromised by its unfunded status: “3:AM is very uninterested in trends, and pretty much ignores most ‘commercial’ fiction”, he says. “3:AM has never wanted to be liked.”

The technical challenges are different for the two sites. As is often the case with unfunded, bootstrapped online activities, 3:AM’s site has been through a number of changes, with a major revamp in 2005 and a mixture of flat HTML and CMS systems before that. The various updates have used free, open-source software, vital in keeping a site maintainable and affordable over long periods of time. Older pages carry AdSense advertisements that generate some revenue, but the various legacy systems have left the magazine vulnerable to data loss.

But while the infrastructure suffers from being hastily assembled by volunteers with variable technical skills, 3:AM’s site has the advantage of remaining within the editors’ control. James is

technically adept enough to perform most technical maintenance himself. In contrast, Pulp's site was built by a third-party company, and while stylistically more consistent and technically more robust, the magazine would need to move to a CMS if it wished to instigate an editorial shift away from its current format in the future.

4.3 Words are cheap

When new writing can be published for little or no cost online, when does it make sense to fund digital magazines? When much online culture is created by willing, unpaid volunteers, where is public subsidy appropriate and valuable?

A brief google through the panoply of online literary magazines makes it clear that new writing is a lively subculture on the Web. Writers can self-publish for little – web-based free blogging software means that even hosting and domain registry can cost nothing – and the boom in new writing has spurred the growth of ezines selecting the best of this work for their readerships. And when this activity seems content to self-organise and self-publish for love, with no fixed overheads, there is arguably less of a need for funding interventions.

The self-starting ethos that underpins much of Web culture would argue that in most cases funding for online literary magazines is inappropriate. Near-future science fiction blog and short fiction ezine *Futurismic* (www.futurismic.com), which pays \$200 for each short story it publishes, is entirely funded by advertising. Indeed, most professional writers engaged in the online space are open about the fact that while it is possible to make a living, few are paid directly for their writing, relying instead on public speaking, consultancy opportunities, and other indirect career-boosting benefits received through the publicity generated by well-received online writing.

But there are counter-arguments against this survival-of-the-fittest view of online writing. Clearly in some cases it is appropriate to provide funding in order to encourage less technically confident communities to explore the medium; and there is an argument in favour of using funding to attract established print writers into the online space.

While it is debatable whether funding ezines always ensures better output, there is only so much that can be achieved technically with amateur skillsets and limited time. Funding interventions in the online magazine space could be oriented towards improving technical know-how and implementing robust infrastructures in publications, funded or unfunded, with an existing track record of “making it work” and delivering quality content using the free tools and DIY ethos of the Web. ACE could also provide expertise in generating income through the Web.

4.4 Writers' communities

4.4.1 Overview

Writers' communities are websites where users can publish their own writing and read that of others. Beyond that, they vary enormously both in quality and in execution. There are countless writers' communities on the Internet, and this article is not intended as a comprehensive review – readers will doubtless have their favourite – but rather as a brief guide to the commonest types.

Broadly, writers' communities divide into those that – like ezines – presuppose the existence of a hierarchy of publication, and those for which the writing on the site is posted for its own sake.

4.4.2 Writing for publication

Peer review and work in progress: writers' communities with a publishing focus

Some writers' communities are explicitly oriented towards peer critique, writers' development and career writers.

Of this category, many take a "forum" structure or similar: users post their writing in new "threads" and others are invited to respond. This makes for a welcoming space, but can also result in a site full of writers keen to publish their own work but less keen to review that of others. (For example, ABCTales.com has recently implemented an informal rule asking members to review another's work for every piece posted.) Other sites, such as YouWriteOn.com, force a more even balance of review and posting by requiring users to review before they are permitted to publish. Sites that enforce rules of this sort tend to have greater longevity.

Frances Ford Coppola's Zoetrope.com is one of the larger examples of this. Initially a site for screenwriters, it boasts over 96,000 members and covers many aspects of writing. In order to moderate the desire of writers to transmit only, the site requires users to build up credits by reviewing significantly more texts than they submit. Though not particularly attractive, the Zoetrope site is relatively easy to navigate, successfully sets a tone of "serious" writing, and backs that tone up with the site architecture. The guidelines are thorough and the site feels professional. On joining, new members are "assigned" a clutch of poems and asked to review five of them before they can access the rest of the content on the site. Far more than the sites which charge for membership, this feels like a genuinely inviting process: drawing the user in slowly, requiring "honest" presence there.

Zoetrope.com is part of American Zoetrope, a Californian studio with over three decades of history providing studio, production and post-production services to the film industry. Thus Zoetrope is part of a much larger economic system that connects writers to the US entertainment industry; the creative, poetic and short fiction sections are more readily economically sustainable in that structure, without being required to create direct revenue themselves.

Elsewhere, writers' communities usually charge for at least part of the membership functionality. Often it is not possible to view writing without paying for membership (WriteWords, for example), or not possible to post without paying. Others offer a free trial followed by a subscription, or a one-off payment – this typically is anywhere between £10 and £40 per year. It is not clear whether this represents value for money – certainly some sites, notably WriteWords.com, appear to support a reasonable calibre of writer and to field a "Jobs" section that might justify paying for membership.

4.4.3 User case study: Joe Dunthorne

Joe Dunthorne is a graduate of the Creative Writing Masters at the University of East Anglia. He is also seen as a rising literary star, with a first novel, *Submarines*, recently published by Penguin. He discovered ABCTales while studying his creative writing MA:

I joined because lots of my friends posted there, and I liked being able to share work in progress with them instantly rather than having to mail or email things round for comments.

Joe has been a member of ABCTales since 2001, and likes the community's broad range of approaches and writing standards: "I treat it like a backup system – if ever I lost my own archive, at least I'd know it was all there." Joe's experience of ABCTales has had its ups and downs, but on the whole he finds the community friendly and supportive.

The standard varies a lot, but I like that. Some of the other communities felt a bit snobby – it's nice to get a response from someone normal. Often it feels as though critiques from working writers aren't really for your benefit at all but just to tell you something about them.

But it is unpredictable whether a posting will generate a response or not. It is considered bad form to start a forum thread about your own work, but there is no way of forcing another community member to do so. Joe reflects:

Some stuff I think is terrible has gotten lots of love, and some good stuff has just vanished without trace. But that's half the fun – you never know how people are going to react.

ABCTales has played a major role in Joe's development as a writer:

When I started, it was mostly about support. You're not very good to begin with, but it makes a real difference to see things out there with people reacting to them. And then when I put up the stories that eventually became my first novel, the response was so overwhelming that it inspired me to finish it and look for a publisher.

4.4.4 Case study: YouWriteOn.com

Between publishers and aspiring writers

YouWriteOn.com sits more explicitly than most writers' communities between the world of print publishing and that of aspiring writers. Writers submit first chapters of their novels to the site, and others review and rate them. The site forces a balance between writing and reviewing by giving readers credits for reviewing: once a member has reviewed five texts she can upload one of her own.

The site aims to help writers to develop and publishers to find good work and potentially build a pre-prepared market for books that are eventually found and published through the system. This is achieved by forming relationships with the publishing industry so as to act as a feeder for promising work. This year, for instance, the ten top-rated works on YouWriteOn will be read and considered by Random House. Alison Hennessey, an editor at Random House, described such sites as "hugely beneficial for both author and publisher...", encouraging writers to self-edit and resulting in final work "of a much higher standard than an unsolicited submission". However, she added that this would not spell an end to the conventional slush pile at Random House.⁵

Edward Smith, YouWriteOn's director, provided the design spec for the site, and manages it from day to day, with some support from web company ZARR. In terms of user experience, the site is clunky, full of broken links and difficult to navigate, with forums that mysteriously open at particular hours only. Nonetheless, YouWriteOn.com has 6,000 members, and receives millions of page views a month. There is clearly a hunger for these services. (Edward used to work in a Citizens Advice Bureau and sees his work as being about information and empowerment.)

A developing field

These services offer an appealing promise of support for aspiring writers, and also for publishers struggling with overflowing slush piles. With other similar sites in the pipeline, in some cases – such as Authonomy, soon to be launched by HarperCollins – backed by major players in the publishing world, it is clear that peer review and bottom-up selection is increasingly being perceived by the publishing world as a valid means of supporting the search for good material.

But with major players entering the space, smaller, technically unskilled and non-commercially driven enterprises such as YouWriteOn may struggle to survive. "I wouldn't have got this off the ground without the Arts Council," Edward says. "But on the other hand I can't compete with commercial money." Edward would certainly not be averse to commercial backing, and has introduced income streams like a paid-for critiquing service. The question is whether

⁵ *Publishing News*, 27 March 2008.

small, independent sites like this will be blown out of the water by major companies, or develop their own niche, concentrating on less commercial forms or different kinds of writers from mainstream sites.

4.4.5 Writing for fun

Many writers' communities use the Web effectively to continue the kinds of practices available in writing workshops that are not intrinsically digital. Some individuals are actively pursuing careers as writers; others are more oriented towards sharing work and enjoying the practice of writing.

A second kind of writers' community relies on the Web for its very form. Their sites enable users to write multidirectional stories, collaborate on texts and pursue other kinds of literary experimentation not easily supported in a non-digital environment. Unlike the communities discussed above, these are rarely oriented towards supporting writers towards print publication.

Such sites are frequently self-supporting financially through donations, advertising or small revenue streams, and in some cases are generating entirely new writing cultures such as fanfic (discussed in section 5.4.1), or the open source comic character Jenny Everywhere (discussed in section 5.4.2).

5 Born-digital creative forms

5.1 A wide-open field

What the future of literary forms online will be is much debated. Are we witnessing the evolution of an online literary culture that develops existing forms in new ways that are impossible offline? Or will web cultures evolve creative rules so different as to escape description as literature?

5.2 New media writing

Many writers and artists are experimenting with creative authorship in the networked space: curated collaborations between writers and digital artists, such as Sukdhev Sandhu's *Night Haunts*, Kate Pullinger and Chris Joseph's *Flight Paths*, and rich multimedia concoctions like the French online graphic novel *Le Reprobateur*, point to a vibrant culture of serious art created for the Web. However the jury is out over which of these experiments are short-term hybrids, and which thrilling new genres capable of attracting a significant readership.

The Web is a relatively young medium, and it remains to be seen which forms will thrive in the online space. But the diversity of creative forms on the Web is undeniable, and digital culture will – or perhaps already has – evolved cultural forms appropriate to its structures.

Debate continues about the pros and cons of hypertext poetry, wiki fictions or networked books, and about whether it is feasible, in this media-saturated world, for any writer in the hyperactive and ephemeral online space to achieve the kind of profile and lasting stature achieved by a Dickens or Austen. But there's a new breed of writer for whom the Web is central to the creative process. ACE can play a role in fostering talent and promoting quality as the search for the Dickens of digital literature unfolds.

5.2.1 ARGs: net-native storytelling

ARGs (alternate reality games, sometimes called interactive dramas) are a new form of storytelling. Somewhere between fiction and game, they tell stories by creating fictional evidence of their characters' existence, and activities – usually, but not exclusively, online – that players must unravel in order to follow the story.

The first high-impact ARG was *The Beast*, created by a Microsoft team in early 2001 to promote the Spielberg film *AI*, but recently the form has grown considerably in popularity, with three ARGs commissioned by Channel 4 Education for release in 2008.

5.2.2 Characteristics

ARGs are highly inventive in their use of multiple platforms: a single ARG might tell its story through a blend of video, instant messaging (IM), email, telephone, websites, forums, wikis and other media.

The ARG creators – known as “puppetmasters” – create a trail of story and puzzle elements that the participants must unravel, for example by cracking a code to access a story character's email account, read messages, and contact the email addressee for information that then advances the story. Participants typically collaborate with one another, either through forums – pre-existing or in-game – or by establishing a wiki in which to share information.

5.2.3 Literature?

It is debatable whether ARGs can be included in any meaningful definition of “literature” – arguably they are closer cousins of gaming. However, as generations grow up increasingly net-native, and accustomed to the fragmentary, boundless and unreal quality of much Internet interaction, ARGs will grow in popularity as a storytelling medium as they reflect the reality that born-digital generations inhabit. Their approach may have a wider influence on how writers and curators of literature engage with the reader.

ARGs also require a broad technical skillset that could cover anything from web design through Flash animation, video editing, cryptography, writing, interactive narrative design and project management. In contrast to older generations experimenting with interactive narrative in the form of “hyperfiction”, who were frequently writers only, and needed technical support to develop their work, increasingly born-digital generations are more likely to possess these skills.

Young would-be ARG creators combine writing skills with technical ability. Though very different from traditional literary production, these new kinds of creative storytelling hint at the possibility of a new generation of “post-literary” writer-technicians who may yet transform online entertainment.

5.2.4 Money

Successful ARGs require multiple skills, from web design through cryptography to skilled writing and role-playing. Thus, the more successful ones tend to be those with a higher budget and production values. Hence, the most successful to date have usually been designed as promotional activity for other media artefacts (e.g. Heroes 360, The Beast, Year Zero) or other products (Edoc Laundry, WeTellStories). Some “indie” ARGs have been produced (Chasing the Wish, Human Pet) on lower budgets, by volunteer enthusiasts.

Unlike traditional publishing, which aims to support itself financially through book sales, ARGs are difficult to monetise directly. Only one (Perplex City) has yet come close to being financially self-sustaining. But unlike film or print literature, where product placement is generally frowned upon, ARG players are on the whole unperturbed by the fusion of entertainment and marketing, and generally accept this as a necessary part of the ARG ecology. Therefore, corporate sponsorship of digital entertainment may become the norm.

More recently, there have been signs of interest in ARGs from educators, public service broadcasting and other “public interest” bodies; a category of “educational” or “cultural” ARG may yet emerge, funded by non-profit or public resources.

5.2.5 Idea: widening ARG gameplay beyond marketing

While most ARGs are financed either through volunteer labour and may be able to attract corporate sponsorship, the form is growing in popularity. As each generation becomes more accustomed to the Web, ARGs may yet emerge as a significant art form, and there may be a role for ACE to play in supporting ARGs with an educational and literary focus.

5.3 New platforms

5.3.1 Challenging single authorship: wiki writing

Wiki technology enables multiple authors to collaborate in a single webspace, opening up radical new possibilities for online collaborative writing of single stories or collectively authored narrative universes. The best-known wiki is Wikipedia, of course; but there are a growing number of wikis dedicated to fiction writing.

Wikis provide powerful technology for collaboration and knowledge management, and the

technology has been seized upon by many kinds of writer as full of potential for new literary forms. To date, one or two nonfiction books have been written collaboratively using wiki technology: *We Are Smarter Than Me*⁶ was written collectively by thousands of academics, business professionals and interested people, and received good reviews.

Penguin's *One Million Penguins* wiki novel experiment⁷ aimed to discover whether a group could write a novel. For a few weeks over 1,500 authors contributed to and competed in shaping an extraordinary, sprawling text, "not the most read but the most written book ever". The result suggested that with thousands of individual visions little of lasting literary quality is likely to emerge; collaborative wiki writing tends to work best when there is latitude for individual development in different directions (a loose fictional universe rather than a single narrative) and also a clear hierarchy of editorial responsibility.

Wikia, a wiki hosting organisation also owned by Wikimedia founder Jimmy Wales, supports many fan fiction, collaborative writing and other creative wikis with various orientations. Elsewhere, Galaxiki lets writers edit their own star or planet, or even "buy" a planet – their own personal wiki – on which to create their science fiction universe.

5.3.2 Sociable writing: collaboration platforms

1. The various web services we have designated loosely as "collaborative creativity platforms" come and go fairly rapidly online. Initially, we investigated these under the heading of writers' communities, but we have revised this as they are very varied in quality.
2. Writers' communities (discussed in a separate section) are typically oriented towards feedback, critique, collaboration and peer review, implicitly with a view to improving writing skills for pleasure or publication. The social element of web interaction, whether through a forum or other structure, supports these aims. In essence, these communities use the Internet to replicate and extend a set of new writer support systems that predated the existence of the Web. This is reflected in the way that writers' communities of this sort refer to a wider ecology of creativity, that includes magazines, books, readings, events and so on.
3. Collaborative creativity platforms, on the other hand, have few pre-Internet antecedents (save, possibly, parlour games). Sites such as 1000000monkeys.com and ficlets.com use the collaborative functions of the Web to enable users to extend one another's stories, comment on extensions, vote stories up and down and interact with one another.
4. In comparison with writers' communities that use social media to further the interests of good writing, these communities typically use writing to further their Internet-mediated social interaction. An extreme example of this is JustThreeWords, a Facebook application that asks for micro-contributions to ever-growing stories. It is intriguing, and makes for an entertaining distraction, but is of little discernible literary value.
5. These platforms may have some benefit in encouraging creativity, but the structure generally subordinates writing quality to social interaction. Additionally, the collaborative quality confuses the conventions of proprietary authorship associated with "literary" values.
6. The main purpose of these sites is less literary than social, but they attract large and diverse communities of readers who could be interested in ACE projects. They are not in need of subsidy, but those promoting literature in Britain today need to be aware of their presence.

⁶ Barry Libert, Jon Spector and thousands of contributors, *We Are Smarter than Me: How to unleash the power of crowds in your business*, Upper Saddle River, Wharton School, 2007.

⁷ www.amillionpenguins.com

5.3.3 Bottom-up bestsellers: keitai fiction

In Japan, mobile phone devices are much more advanced than in the UK; adoption is pervasive, and Japan has evolved a lively mobile phone – “keitai” culture. In recent years, this has included a growing number of fictions written for – and even on – mobile phones.

Keitai fiction, or *keitai bunko*, is typical of the new, bottom-up digital creativity in that anyone can write such a story. Writers of popular fictions are typically young and female, and writing for a similar audience. Writers build up popularity by beginning a story and gathering readers as it develops; some stories become immensely popular. Notable stories written for keitai have gone on to be published in print, some selling hundreds of thousands of copies.

Keitai bunko has exploded in popularity over the the past five years; in 2007, the industry was already worth EUR60 million.⁸

Some have criticised keitai fiction for its tendency toward simple sentences and “hackneyed” storylines.⁹ This raises questions about how quality is assessed, and whether ideas of linguistic sophistication evolved over centuries of literary tradition should be upheld as a measure of quality in technical formats that have evolved along very different lines from the codex. But every new form evolves new aesthetic criteria; while it remains to be seen whether digital media will absorb existing definitions of literature, or vice versa, and extend our definition of literature, there is no doubt that new developments are extending our cultural capabilities in new and exciting directions.

5.4 Open source creativity

5.4.1 Challenging originality: fan fiction

Fan fiction – the practice of writing stories set in pre-existing fictional universes – made its first appearances in the 1970s with *Star Trek*. Since the spread of the Web, it has become a mass phenomenon, as fans took advantage of low digital barriers to self-publication to evolve this new way of engaging with a fictional world.

While keen fanfic writers – who are predominantly female¹⁰ – maintain their own archives, hubs of fan activity are multiple and change frequently. Across the Web, fans of particular shows, characters or fandoms gravitate toward online communities, share work, commission stories about particular fictional universes – fandoms – or pairings in “ficathons”, proofread and critique one another’s stories and collaboratively generate massive archives of often elaborate, imaginative, well-written – and sometimes disturbing – narratives inspired by existing fictional universes.

Predictably, fanfic exists in an uneasy relationship with copyright holders: some encourage fanfic, others are openly hostile. But increasingly, sites such as FanLit.com, backed by HarperCollins and Disney among others, indicate a growing recognition by the mainstream content industry that fanfic represents engagement with the core product, and is therefore likely to encourage sales in the long term.

Fan fiction raises some interesting questions about the priorities of the literature sector. Is originality important? Is the quality of writing important? For fanfic writers, the quality of writing is usually secondary to a well-plotted story, deft interweaving of fandoms, or some other turn demonstrating command of the subject matter. Is it important for writers to be paid? In contrast with the world of aspiring “literary” writers, for whom paid publication is the holy grail, the selling of fan writing is generally frowned-upon by the fanfic community.

Many “literary” assumptions are thus inverted in fan fiction. Companies are increasingly recognising its value in driving fan engagement around a media product. But while it is a large and dynamic creative field, it is largely voluntary and self-supporting and as such not in need of ACE support.

⁸ *Monocle* magazine, April 2007

⁹ *The Age*, 2007

¹⁰ Gray, Lisa. *The fangirl's crush*. Houston Chronicle. March 12, 2008.

5.4.2 “All rights reversed”: Jenny Everywhere

“Open source” has gained considerable traction in the online world. Much computer code is written in this way, each developer contributing to the “commons” from which all work. But this idea is largely foreign to creative work: even where, such as in TV shows, writing is done by teams, the fictions themselves are tightly controlled.

In 2001 Barbelith online community founder and web commentator Tom Coates and comic artist Steven Wintle led a community discussion about open-source narrative figures. As a result the group decided to create their own: in debates over the next few months, the comics character Jenny Everywhere, aka “The Shifter”, was born.

The group agreed certain core characteristics for Jenny Everywhere, and then proceeded to create their own comics and narratives involving her. The only condition of use is that the following text must be included:

The character of Jenny Everywhere is available for use by anyone, with only one condition. This paragraph must be included in any publication involving Jenny Everywhere, in order that others may use this property as they wish. All rights reversed.

Jenny differs from a mythic character, or a fan fiction narrative existing on the edge of an “official” fandom, in that she was consciously created as an open entity. As David “Fesworks” Leyk, comic artist and guardian of the current Jenny Everywhere archive, puts it:

There is no “official” site for Jenny Everywhere. Since she is Public Domain, and open-source... technically every single Jenny Everywhere comic and story out there is “Fan Fiction”. They only connect to other people’s stories and comic if they choose to connect to them.

New comics starring Jenny Everywhere continue to appear. So far, there have been one or two print precedents but no online analogues. Nonetheless, Jenny Everywhere represents a distinctively web culture that blends individual creativity with openness – one which may yet transform how we think about what a writer is.

5.4.3 Creativity as conversation: remix culture

“Remix culture” is a term employed by Lawrence Lessig and others to describe a culture which allows and encourages reuse and derivative works. An example might be hip-hop music, folk music (prior to the cataloguing of folk tunes begun by Cecil Sharp in the early 20th century) or the conversational quality of remixes and reworkings on YouTube. There, YouTube users will borrow, sample, adapt and “mix” one another’s videos, creating a dynamic ongoing culture of creativity as conversation, in which participants can choose whether to view passively or to participate – at whichever level they wish – in the exchange.

Like Jenny Everywhere and the ambiguous relationship of fan fiction with its fandoms, remix culture sees use of material created by others not as a crime against art – plagiarism – but as a necessary part of the creative process. This presents some severe challenges to an industry economically predicated on copyright; new licences such as Creative Commons are emerging to handle this.

Canonical literary values carry far less weight in a space where the value of writing is measured against the needs of the subcultures that produce them and are determined largely from the bottom up. Thus while ACE’s work towards making literature accessible is increasingly well served by certain digital activities, notions of “quality” may be challenged. ACE will need to be able to make judgements about quality outside its current cultural comfort zone.

6. Reading and writing

6.1 Overview

On my desk I have a poetry calendar; everyday I turn the page and read the poem, but the other day I came across a poet I'd never heard of. This poem just hit me, so I googled the poet, found his website and emailed him. He was in America. In five minutes he'd emailed back to say thanks. It extends my reading in a new kind of way.

Jean Sprackland, poet

Much of the work previously done by reader and writer development sites is migrating online in ways that are both exciting and unnerving. From book recommendation sites through writing communities to book blogs, book enthusiasts are loud and proud on the Web.

What is the role for funded arts development in a world where arts communities seem increasingly to be developing themselves?

6.2 Pioneers of reader development

Section 3 describes the wealth of activities springing up to support and publicise new writing through the Web. But writing needs readers. How are readers to find what they want, or one another?

Literature development officers and reader development agencies emerged in the mid 1980s, their roots in the community arts movement of the Seventies. They share a commitment to opening up the world of literature to an ever-growing circle of readers and writers, especially among socially excluded groups.

Reading groups, review boards, schemes to stimulate word of mouth recommendation, all saw their first incarnations in physical space, pioneered by reader development groups in public libraries. Since then, many of these activities have been taken up by booksellers, the media – and now the Web. Libraries and reader development agencies seem well placed to take advantage of new technologies to extend their activities in new directions.

6.3 Book fan communities

One pleasure of books is the ease with which they can be lent, borrowed, traded, exchanged and circulated; another is the enjoyment gained from discussing them. Now, the Web is creating new spaces where book enthusiasts can do all these things – but are these spaces replacing traditional provision or enhancing it?

LibraryThing reaches over 360,000 users, and lists 24 million books. Shelfari provides a similar service with an integrated Facebook application. Readitswapit.co.uk, a site – like BookMooch – where users can exchange books, was described by the *Independent* as one of 50 great ideas for the 21st Century,¹¹ but has been criticised by author Jeanette Winterson for attacking writers' livelihoods.¹²

¹¹ www.independent.co.uk/news/science/50-great-ideas-for-the-21st-century-410543.html

¹² www.jeanettewinterson.com/pages/content/index.asp?PageID=378

But while data indicate that book issues in libraries continue to decline,¹³ other statistics show that library visits and issues of audiovisual material continue to rise. Though some of the traditional functions of a library are migrating to the Web, new uses for libraries continue to emerge.

6.4 A new role for libraries

Only a few years ago public libraries saw their unique selling point as providing free access to books and information. But the explosion in online information means that many readers will entirely bypass these services in favour of Google Books, Amazon and LibraryThing. Increasingly, the advantage of libraries is that they operate as a kind of “facetofacebook”, enabling actual, local, community interaction.

For example, at the Speed Reading event devised by members of the London Library Development Agency for Booktrust’s Get London Reading campaign in 2006, participants took a favourite book from table to table and talked about it with a stranger. It is hard to see how this kind of excitement could be replicated without the physical, real-time interaction involved.

Rachel Van Riel is director of the company Opening the Book, and a pioneer of reader development. Her company has an impressive track record of reader recommendation websites, including one for the Man Booker Prize in 2004 and the www.whichbook.net site launched in 2002.

But in *The Reader-friendly Library Service*,¹⁴ Rachel sounds a note of caution about libraries initiating Web 2.0 social networking sites:

Libraries need to be realistic about what they can offer online. The desire to create communities of readers is laudable but sometimes naïve. Libraries might consider a national effort to create and share a social networking site for readers, but why aspire to create what goodreads.co.uk is already doing very well...?

Rather, she suggests that libraries should think hard about what they are hoping to achieve: “If the aim is to reach local communities, then the site needs to make very strong links with offline services.”

Reader development agencies have always focused on reaching audiences not targeted by the commercial sector. But while many platforms have emerged that enable users to discuss and share book-related information, these are typically oriented toward the mass market and may leave excluded groups untouched. Libraries and reader development groups can both leverage the Web for their own activities, and also, in recognition of the widespread adoption of self-funded reader development activity online, focus more on targeted interventions making use of existing, widely adopted platforms.

¹³ Loughborough University, 2006, see www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/lis/lisu/pages/publications/als06.html#download

¹⁴ Olive Fowler, Rachel Van Riel and Anne Downes, *The Reader-friendly Library Service*
Publisher: Society of Chief Librarians, Price: £25, ISBN 978-0-9559028-0-2

6.5 Case study: The Reading Agency

6.5.1 Balancing real-world and online work

In its first five years, The Reading Agency (TRA) has grown tenfold, now fielding 21 employees, many part-time, and 25 freelancers.

TRA is no stranger to digital collaboration tools: during the first years of its activities, the team collaborated remotely, only acquiring an office when it became clear that somewhere central to meet was necessary as a complement to remote working. Most staff still work remotely, spread right across the country from Cornwall to the North, but can now meet regularly in London.

TRA reaches 600,000 children with its Summer Reading Challenge, and has secured participation by 96% of library authorities. Collaborations with Orange (Chatterbooks) and *Richard and Judy* create profile, while a host of projects reach out to local communities. It is difficult to gain a clear idea of The Reading Agency's scope from the organisation's central website, as each project tends to generate its own site – all accessible through the main site but distinct in character and look.

The organisation has recently revamped this site, with the help of Reading-based web design team Studio Lift. "It's much easier to add new content," says TRA's Maureen McCulloch, "though we've introduced ferocious new rules about house style!"

6.5.2 New developments

TRA is now working on a new development project, a social network building links between real-world libraries and distributed online conversations between young readers. The brainchild of TRA's Ruth Harrison, the project is being financed from TRA's reserves.

The site aims to leverage the capacity of the Web to connect niche interest groups across geographies, while also remaining firmly grounded in the physical world. It will virtually connect the young people involved in Headspace, informal reading spaces in libraries, cafés and community centres designed for and by young people as part of a three-year project funded by the Big Lottery. It will be tested through the build by these and other groups of young people. Online they will be able to form their own reading interest groups, put up their own writing and get comments, reviews and recommendations from their peers.

The site is being developed using the "agile" process of building, where you don't build and then beta test but test as you build. It's exciting and scary, funded from our own pot designated for artistic risk. It needs a flexibility of approach that's hard to get funding for at this stage, so we're funding it ourselves – this is one from the heart. It will grow organically as successful sites do. The target group is 11 to 19 year olds and we aim to hook in non-book lovers.

The project has young people at its core. "The original Headspace idea came from a group of young people in Derbyshire known as the Book Pushers, who wanted a new, laid-back environment in which to read and enjoy books," Maureen explains.

6.6 Case study: the New Writing Partnership

The New Writing Partnership (NWP) was established in 2004, to explore relationships between writers, local communities and cultures in the East of England. Director Chris Gribble has initiated a digital media and organisational development programme, developed with Bill Thompson, new media pundit and a member of NWP's board. This is being funded by the Arts Council cross-regional "Thrive" initiative as part of the AmbITion consortium, and marks a shift of focus's from writer support to the writing itself. NWP made a successful bid for £56,000 from the ambITion programme and the work was scheduled to begin in April 2008. Chris

intends to commission a white paper on digital futures from APT Studios and work on planning a new website, and sent a staff member to the recent O'Reilly Tools of Change conference in New York.

6.6.1 Website improvements

The current site attracts around 7,500 unique visitors per month, up from 3,500 over the past ten months. The mailing list has around 2,500 subscribers. Recent changes in practice include adding more news and links to the front page, and promoted the URL heavily; but there has been no single obvious cause of the growth.

Chris is keen to see the new site develop, describing the current one as 'retinally bleeding'. It will go beyond news and workshop booking facilities to include a writers' community element. There are other tools that already do this, but not with links to NWP's conferences, prizes and other developmental opportunities for writers. "Personally I'm not interested in the cutting edge, more in the potential of new forms of participation and collaboration," Chris says.

6.6.2 Wider plans

Alongside the external blog, NWP has an internal blog, updated by the communications manager. Three or four staff members have access to the site; but staff are hired at least partly for digital literacy and enthusiasm. The oldest staff member, in her mid-50s, regularly uses Facebook, Twitter and MySpace to promote world music events. But while Chris believes that the sector must engage fully with new technology, he argues that it is important not to lose perspective for the sake of exciting new technologies. He says:

Sometimes the space created to talk may be more interesting than the work created. I'm not anywhere near as interested in the vehicles or forms the new technologies come in, rather on the impacts that they have. If the literature sector can't tell the story right then it's no one's fault but our own.

6.7 Case study: Flax

The relatively low costs of publishing online make it the ideal technology for groups serving niche communities. It is also a powerful tool for writer development groups in supporting writers who are unsure about how to market themselves.

6.7.1 A showcase and stepping stone

Originally a literature festival, Litfest in Lancaster has expanded to include literature development activities year-round. FLAX is a downloadable ezine produced to provide a showcase for local writers. As well as publication, authors are given editorial time and support, some professional development sessions, a set of postcards of their work and a photoshoot to create good publicity photos.

6.7.2 Self-marketing resources for writers

Andy Darby, Director of Litfest, decided that literature development could best be achieved through digital means:

Writers need to spread themselves about a bit. A digital magazine can have high production values, and writers can give the URL to anyone they like. There are great writers who don't promote themselves – and plenty of bad ones who do. By seeking out good writers with the will to get themselves noticed, and providing each writer with a set of postcards with contact details and quotes from their work, FLAX has given authors what they need to go forth and network.

In the last 18 months, led by Sarah Hymas, FLAX has published 22 authors in digital form. Reach is still relatively small – the first issue was downloaded 428 times, and the current issue around 280 times so far. But of the seven writers published in the first issue, two subsequently

found agents and one received an ACE funded mentorship. Thus Andy is untroubled by a relatively low download rate: “Because the purpose of the magazine is writer development, providing a showcase for writers to market themselves, we’ve put more energy into editorial than marketing,” he explains.

6.7.3 Moving into other media

Though FLAX began as digital text only, more recently it has begun expanding the digital publication to include video, audio and image. FLAX is also beginning to extend beyond digital to print output, and has already produced some paper publications through Lightning Source print-on-demand.

Keeping up with technology is a constant challenge: the site is built in the well-established content management platform Joomla!, which offers many benefits but does not mesh easily with platforms and applications such as YouTube and PayPal. In-house, the team has picked up some technical skills over time but does not have a dedicated technical officer, and it is not clear where they should turn for guidance on such matters.

For Andy, the future will see a mixture of online and offline activity, and the key challenge is to ensure that infrastructures support and help develop this community. “We’ll have a small bookshop and auditorium as well as the virtual space; but these must all be parts of one thing. I want a fully symbiotic relationship between virtual and actual,” he says. This mixed strategy goes a long way beyond producing publications, whether online or offline:

We aim to connect more with other mass media, for instance working with local radio who can use our digital recordings, video work with the University who can host our work on the giant interactive screens they have in public spaces on campus, and we hope to link with The Duke’s cinema and theatre.

Digital media provide great opportunities for expanding audience, and Andy believes in taking advantage of this while remaining locally-rooted: “Our first audience will always be in Lancaster, then Lancashire, Cumbria and then the rest of the world.”_

6.8 Creative writers

For individual creative writers, the Web is multifaceted. For some writers, whether established or emerging, a web presence is a vital part of maintaining profile around other activities. For others, the Web is a publishing medium in its own right. For others again, both are true.

Hari Kunzru is redesigning his site himself and updates his Facebook page regularly. Tracy Chevalier’s site includes extensive FAQs and updates on what she’s been reading, doing, thinking and writing. The poet Jane Holland runs a blog about performance poetry.¹⁵ And while, in an interview with Chris Meade, Andrea Levy expressed discomfort with authors who use the Web to chat informally with their readers, she is thinking about how she might use the Web to gain more autonomy over publishing and marketing her work.

And yet, while self-publishing is enabling a new generation of writers to explore opportunities to bypass the strictures of the publishing industry and literary tradition and create work on their own terms, this throws up some complicated feelings for many writers – especially where economics are concerned. As Andrea Levy says

There is a certain sort of romance about writers that you can’t be cavalier about. I was with a friend recently and wondering how much I would receive as an advance on my next book and they looked at me and said, “That’s not why you do it, is it?” And the pain – the idea that I might be thinking about or doing it for the money and not for a better reason! I feel it too: if I thought my favourite writer was thinking about making money I’d be just devastated.

15 www.poetsonfire.blogspot.com

Elsewhere, writers are going beyond use of the Web to market work published in other media. While a perception still lingers that Web publication is inferior to publication in print – that the Web is a kind of vanity press – increasingly writers are exploring the ways in which creative work can be made that takes advantage of what the Web can offer.

6.8.1 Case study: Kate Pullinger

6.8.1.i A foot in both camps

Kate Pullinger is a novelist and teacher of creative writing, and a rare example of someone who has come to new media writing from a literary route. The author of several acclaimed novels, she works with digital producer Chris Joseph on various online artefacts including Inanimate Alice and her current project Flight Paths.

6.8.1.ii A personal portal

Although her agent and publisher have sites with her details, Kate's own web presence is vital to her:

My website does the job most effectively of being a yellow pages entry; it justifies its existence over and over again because there's a contact button. It comes up top of the google list, and has led to offers of work, readers wanting to get in touch and more.

Many author sites are updated only when a new book is about to appear; Kate makes an effort to update hers regularly. The site provides a portal to Kate's work, literary and digital: "It doesn't have an RSS feed, but the digital content really enhances it; there's no danger of it being a tombstone site."

Using the Macromedia programme "Contribute", Kate adds new content herself, and pays Chris Joseph from time to time to make structural changes. For someone committed to writing in the digital space, Kate is vague about some details: though there are Amazon links on her site for those who wish to purchase her books, she has not implemented the affiliate programme. Nor does she have any interest in traffic statistics.

In this, Kate is like many print writers. Part of the appeal of print publication is the expectation that publishers will handle promotion and distribution. Unlike, for example, the relentless need for self-published writers to promote themselves, or the way in which performance poetry, with fewer institutional supports than traditional "page poetry" has learned more rapidly to leverage the promotional power of the Web, many print authors are far more prepared than Kate to leave the creation of their website to others.

6.8.1.iii Championing the written word online

In Kate's view, many of her literary contemporaries are "phenomonally Luddite – fetishistically so". But even as many print writers fetishise paper, so the Web is becoming gradually less text-based: "Up to now the Web has been text based, now it's becoming less so," Kate says. For the first time, vlogs, IM, animation and other media threaten to eclipse text online; Kate is concerned that new media writers will soon be a thing of the past.

Experiments in hypertext poetry, websites of themed texts entered by a range of collaborators, stories told through words and flash animation. These permutations of text and technology are important in their own right, Kate believes, but also because they keep the written word alive on the web.

She is ambivalent about the role of traditional publishers in the new digital space:

It worries me that traditional publishing structures will stay in place in the digital era. The traditional economics of publishing are not very favourable to writers. I worry that publishers will offer the same terms for digital publishing and be laughing all the way to the bank. Lots of publishers are currently negotiating royalties on writers' digital backlists and all seem to be offering a range between 50% [and] 10%. But a percentage of what?

Kate is adamant that it is both feasible and desirable to work towards bridging the gap between digital and literary culture, and that there is a role in this work for large-scale public interventions. For instance, she advocates that a literary prize and showcase sites for new media writing should be established. She is also keen to spread understanding of the role of curators in collaborative fiction, and to see more spaces for live performance of digital work.

6.9 Book blogs

It is difficult to distinguish book blogs from ezines. Many, such as the very reputable LitKicks, publish reviews, recommendations and book gossip alongside new writing or poetry. All are united by an enthusiasm for their subject. If there is a difference, it is in the promiscuity with which blogs link and cross-pollinate, in contrast with the more self-contained ethos of an online publication with a magazine-like approach.

The blogosphere operates by the transmission of gossip, opinion and recommendations through cross-linking, quotation and debate, and follows a conversational form. This read/write Web increasingly connects book lovers along channels determined by book fans themselves; rather than rely on the word of a broadsheet literary critic, or the academic canon, a reader can find what she likes by recommendation – and will blog about what she thought when she has finished.

See www.britishtitblogs.com for a selection of well-regarded book blogs.

6.10 Case study: ReadySteadyBook

Mark Thwaite set up ReadySteadyBook when he left Amazon, as a hobby and a means to continue to receive review copies from publishers. Produced, unpaid, by Mark and a team of reviewers, Ready Steady Book began as simply a website but the blog is now its driving force. Currently it receives 5,000–10,000 unique visitors a day.

6.10.1 Ephemeral?

There are currently around 110 million blogs, mostly intended to be personal and ephemeral.

For Mark the three key issues concerning those that play a role in cultural debate are quality, commodification and control. How do you find the best ones (for you)? How are they supported financially? And, finally, who defines their cultural worth? “The best cultural writing I’ve seen is on blogs,” he states.

He feels that the blogosphere is having a powerful emancipatory effect on discussions around literature:

On the Web if a blog has a solid readership feeding back intelligently, if whoever writes it is surviving financially, then it doesn’t need to decide where it fits in some pecking order of cultural importance – and that’s frightening to those who feel they define the canon.

As an autodidact, he is enthusiastic about the ways in which readers can teach themselves in the space. “It’s the only place to learn. We’re all looking for the mavens, those who can help us navigate through our reading, and books provide an ultra-democratic university.”

6.10.2 Predicated on friendship

Rather than decisions from the top, Mark celebrates the way the blogosphere is predicated on friendship:

Doing ReadySteadyBook I've made good friends, found many good writers and, when I once mentioned in a post an obscure text by a Portugese novelist, was contacted immediately by its English translator. Job done!

And friendship can lead, even in unpaid work, to other things. While Mark earns nothing from the blog, it led indirectly to his being offered the job of managing editor of Book Depository. With sales of £24 million in 2007, Book Depository exploits demand for niche books from backlists that even Amazon does not stock.

7 Live literature

7.1 Overview

In the world of live music, shrinking record sales revenues have driven musicians to look for income from gigs, drawing on a large and networked community connected through the Web. Will something similar happen to the literary world?

Live readings, book tours and other appearances ensure that once-stark divisions between performance poetry and more traditional literary events are shrinking. Everyone expects to be a performer of some kind. And live literature promoters are among the most forward-thinking and creative adopters of new technologies. Whether for promotion, preservation or simply to extend reach, live literature organisations are taking advantage of the opportunities offered by new kinds of media “capture” to share podcasts, videos and other byproducts of live events as a means of spreading their word.

Penned in the Margins founder Tom Chivers knows that promoting these events nowadays involves a complex blend of traditional PR and ongoing social media activity. To get this balance right, he estimates that in the runup to the London Word Festival 2008 he spent around a third to half of his working time interacting with the audience through MySpace, Facebook and other social media platforms. Building community and ensuring a regular stream of updated content and gossip kept his potential live audience members engaged at all times. “It’s not technically complex,” he says, “but it’s time-consuming and hard work.”

Meanwhile, literary bastion the Guardian Hay Festival has discovered that it will soon gain as many viewings through downloads of electronic content as it does real-world audience. And new technology platforms have shifted the focus of performance poetry organisation Apples & Snakes from being a support mechanism for emerging poets to a more “canonical” seal of quality with an interest in developing projects that combine live and digital elements.

The potent combination of one-off events with material easily captured and shared online makes live literature a dynamic space for new digital possibilities. For example, Apples & Snakes recently released an album of performance material to celebrate the organisation’s birthday, which has received a number of offers from commercial distributors. *My Place Or Yours*, planned to be a major project for 2008, comprises events around the country that will broadcast and mix live and online activity with real and virtual residencies, some of which have already attracted media attention.

The question, then, is whether material produced in this way is mere documentation of the live activity, designed only to draw audiences back to the core product – the live event – or whether it is becoming an artform in its own right, produced by creative curators? Certainly, consensus is emerging among commentators on new digital cultures that the sheer bulk of material available online makes curators more necessary than ever. Literature organisations may find it beneficial to extend the skills honed in event programming and organisation into the digital space, to create new kinds of online publication and a networked archive of such artifacts.

For Peter Florence of Hay Literary Festival, editors are growing in importance:

We’re cutting out more middle men, highlighting the importance of the editors who haven’t had the credit they deserve. These guys have great taste – a Liz Calder or Jamie Byng book, like a Hay event, is a valuable brand.

And in the future, he believes that this will only become more visible:

I think some publishers will retain a brand identity as guarantors of quality as people trust their judgement in the wild west that is digital online publication. The publisher brand will have value, as will all the filtering systems, including literature festivals, and all will have to work harder – which is thrilling.

But will these online curated spaces survive? In the rapidly changing world of the Web, links decay and formats change at an alarming rate: an astonishing amount of creative work is lost in this way. Along with learning new skills and finding the time to leverage social media for profile, a pressing question for the live literature sector is digital archiving.

7.2 Case study: Metaroar

7.2.1 Simple beginnings

Metaroar began as an informal mailout in 1999, to let a handful of interested people know when upcoming poetry gigs would take place. Since then, the list has grown to many thousands of subscribers, and has gained a community website – all built by technology and education consultant and performance poet Jacob Sam LaRose.

An unpaid, unfunded labour of love, Metaroar provides a hub for live literature on the Web. But Jacob is adamant that live poets are ahead of most in leveraging social media to build profile.

7.2.2 Canny

“There are many of people in traditional literature who are scared of new media,” he says. “But because performance poetry has is such a direct relationship with the audience, performance poets have to be canny about who their audience is.”

Rather than relying on a third party to select and promote them, poets are increasingly using video and other media to share their own work. And this, in turn, is affecting the more mainstream poets:

As the number of poets using MySpace and so on grows, some of the more traditional poets are starting to catch on. There are workshops put on to teach these writers to access the Web – but there’s also a number of experienced poets from the live literature circuit who’ve become experts on this already!

7.2.3 A community hub

Jacob is currently redesigning the Metaroar site, and will migrate it from a Wordpress blog-based platform to Drupal. “The community management options are so much more powerful,” he says. Also, while social media provide a powerful set of tools for poets to promote themselves, this work – while technically fairly simple – is highly labour-intensive. “I want to start being able to share content from the community,” he explains. “The new site will let me crowdsource much of the content that’ll be available on the site.”

7.3 Case study: Bookslam

7.3.1 A variety of digital promotion strategies

Bookslam, a monthly live literature and music event in West London, was founded by Whitbread prizewinner Patrick Neate, and has grown steadily in popularity in the last four and a half years. While the reach of any single event is necessarily limited, Bookslam employs a range of strategies to promote events online and sustains a loyal community through this approach.

7.3.2 Hit count is not the full story

Bookslam's website is built by web design consultancy Square Eye. The site includes a simple content management backend, which makes it easy to administer: "I don't have to do any coding – all I do is stick new content in whenever it's ready," Patrick says.

Bookslam's website hit count is relatively low – unique visitors per month are usually in three figures. But this is not the whole story. "Our email list reaches 4,500 people, who've all been to an event," says Patrick. "Though I can't prove it, I'm convinced that this has much more impact than flyers or the site." Certainly, ticket sales bear this out: advance bookings often sell out.

The most successful means Patrick has found to extend the reach of Bookslam beyond the live event has been podcasting. These podcasts are professionally produced, and have led to a steady stream of downloads – currently around 3,500 per episode.

Bookslam has also recently added a YouTube channel, skinned to resemble the Bookslam site, and self-deprecatingly directs site visitors to its MySpace page with the words "We also have a MySpace page but no friends. Do feel free to change that." An Amazon Affiliate link for book recommendations provides a small source of income.

Patrick says:

There are so many third-party tech offerings out there these days, that there's an amazing amount you can do for not much money. A few years ago, if you wanted video on your site you'd have had to pay a fortune to host it on your own server. But nowadays there's YouTube. So there's lots you can do.

7.3.3 Quality content online?

Patrick believes that publishing is an "archaic monster" and that "the literature sector needs new models to survive". He explains: "Because Bookslam is seen as a 'cool' thing to do, I get calls from branding agencies all the time wanting to associate products with us." The Web 2.0 era has seen a growing acceptance of the convergence of culture with advertising, and Patrick is clear-sighted about this: "I don't have a problem with that – I think there's a huge gap in the market for quality content on the net, and great opportunities to work with sponsors to produce it."

7.4 Case study: Hay on Wye Festival

7.4.1 Extending the reach of a well-known player

First devised by Peter Florence in 1988, the Hay Literary Festival has been described by Bill Clinton as "The Woodstock of the mind".¹⁶

Since 1988, the festival has grown 12% per year for 20 years, and spread to four continents, turning over £3 million, and playing to 300,000 annually in Britain, Spain and Latin America. What's more, it has enthusiastically embraced electronic additions to its core offering of live events.

While the Hay Literary Festival needs no introduction, it is not immune to the encroachments of digital media. Far from it: the Web has proved invaluable to extending reach, broadening audiences, reaching out to those unable to attend – and selling tickets to those who can.

¹⁶ Will Hide, 'The world this week: find "the Woodstock of the mind"', *The Times*, 20 January 2007, see http://travel.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/travel/article1294325.ece

7.4.2 Sales and promotion outlets

As of 2008, the Hay Festival sells 130,000 tickets to the festival in Wales, and 68% of these sales take place online. This is not unusual for live events; but, astonishingly, podcasts from literary events effectively increase the festival's audience by a third. Last year, audiences downloaded around 45,000 podcasts, and director Peter Florence foresees that in 2008 there will be more podcasts downloaded than attendees at the events themselves.

"We started off with digitisation of our audio archive," he explains. "We used to stream this on the site, but now we distribute it as podcasts." Peter suggests that this audience comprises a mixture of academics, existing Hay visitors who wish to hear an event again, and those who could not attend.

The organisation charges a nominal fee for podcasts to cover bandwidth and maintenance. Users pay a flat fee of £10 to become "members", after which downloads are unlimited. This reflects a growing trend in online content delivery, where content – music, film etc – is provided not on a pay-per-unit basis but as a service. Apple and Yahoo are both exploring unlimited music services by subscription (as of March 2008). While it clearly lacks the global reach of an international technology firm, Hay's brand profile and relative financial strength puts it in a Yahoo-like position in the literary world, enabling it to offer a similar podcast service to literary enthusiasts.

7.4.3 A platform for thought leadership

The TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) conference in Monterey brings together the brightest people from technology, entertainment and design for an annual event in which they give 18-minute talks. The best of these are put on the website as podcasts, available for free. Almost 200 talks are now downloadable, with more added each week, and many of the best have spread around the world and become highly influential, forming discussion points for cultural discussion in the blogosphere and beyond. For example, Sir Ken Robinson's talk on contemporary education and creativity¹⁷ has had a powerful influence on the personalisation agenda.

Hay may be developing a similar role in literature: site statistics indicate that many of those downloading come from Google searches on particular writers; the podcasts provide an exciting destination for fans and researchers looking for more material on a favourite writer.

Peter Florence sees the Web straightforwardly as a way of enhancing live experience – and vice versa: "Everything we learn from the music industry tells us that in an age of individuation, going to a big festival is a part of the experience," he says. And this is an exciting challenge: "The audience will get more demanding and less tolerant of poor events, so everyone will need to be raising their game – hooray!"

7.5 Case study: Jean Sprackland, the Poetry Archive

7.5.1 An online-only archive

The Poetry Archive, set up by Poet Laureate Andrew Motion and Richard Carrington, is a hugely popular site providing downloads of poetry recordings. With around 100,000 unique visitors a month, the site currently ranks in the top three results of Google searches for many individual poets.

Jean Sprackland, Education Officer and prizewinning poet in her own right, is conscious that the Poetry Archive has deliberately chosen a much more focused remit than other poetry organisations: "For organisations such as the Poetry Society, online is just one way of presenting what they do. For us it's everything." This extends even to a reluctance among

¹⁷ <http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/view/id/66>

some staff members to provide any print content at all: “We’ve started producing leaflets to reach particular people,” Jean explains, “but the key thing is that the archive is about audio. Listening.”

The Poetry Archive chose to focus on the Web in part so as to avoid competing with organisations that have an array of projects and publications. But is the best and most cost-effective means to broaden and deepen the readership for poetry in the 21st century to concentrate on using the affordances of the digital network?

7.5.2 Looking ahead

The Poetry Archive site is built and is maintained by Clerkenwell-based web company Good Technology. “They’re not cheap, but ours is the kind of website that has to have money spent on it,” says Jean. “There’s got to be good audio and video, and it has to be ultra-reliable, both on the design and technical side.”

Good Technology also supports the Poetry Archive in planning ahead, and Jean values their advice:

They’re good at imagining how best to place it in the digital world, looking ahead for other stuff we can do. Recently they suggested a means of delivering site-specific poems to mobile phones – a massive idea that could lead to major partnerships with the tourist industry.

The key challenge for the archive is funding. As it is entirely digital, the archive’s overheads are relatively low; but CD sales are the only grant-independent source of income – and these are relatively sparse. Jean says:

Some enthusiasts will buy CDs and sell them at gigs, but for most people six minutes is about the right amount of a poet’s work. In the long term we may phase out CDs and replace them with downloads; but we need to do more research into permission fees first.

8. Publishing

8.1 A changing industry

While it may seem sometimes as though the division between print and digital is stark – even artificially so – in reality the division is slight. As Route Publishing’s Ian Clayton puts it: “Everything we do is sent to digital – even down to final versions sent to printers.”

But in terms of distribution, business models, promotion strategies and even the kinds of content created, the Web is having a profound impact. Publishing has long held a powerful position in our economic and cultural landscape; how will this be transformed by new media?

8.2 The great e-reader debate

The Web is not only a publishing medium but also a means for discussing published media, and therefore provides both opportunities and threats for the publishing industry. Online booksellers such as Amazon have transformed the marketplace, and ebook readers such as the Kindle often prompt fears of the death of the paper book.

A recent book by Jeff Gomez, *Print Is Dead*,¹⁸ claims that the age of digital content has dawned. And with the Amazon Kindle selling steadily in the USA, and available soon in the UK, the talk is of whether the publishing industry’s ‘iPod moment’ is finally at hand. Are books, like vinyl records, soon to become a collector’s curiosity? Or will readers remain loyal to paper?

Whether or not they’re read on laptops or e-readers, Michael Bhaskar of Pan Macmillan is convinced that the time has come for full-length books online: “In 2008 pretty much every publisher will be focusing much of their effort in the digital space on eBooks; this is the most readily monetisable area,” he says. The failure of CD-ROMs may have dampened publishers’ enthusiasm for digital products, but Michael states that the climate is changing: “The UK scene is going through a transition,” he says, “where eBooks are entering the mainstream” (in publishing circles at least).

Peter Florence is enthusiastic, not least for environmental reasons:

The book world destroys swathes of wood and trees; writers will win when you can download a book for three quid, one quid of which goes to the writer. We’re different from film in that you cannot persuade people to buy a book from a marketing campaign. Only viral word of mouth works. You cannot persuade people to give 8 to 12 hours of their time with a book. But you will be able to sample a book online and that means publishers won’t lose so much money from overproduction. If you only print what’s been downloaded 50,000 times then you’re not wasting resources – printers and paper manufacturers are the only losers.

8.3 User case study: Guy Whitehouse

Of course what is published makes little difference if it is not available in an accessible format. Guy Whitehouse is a blind PhD student researching how digitisation can help the sight-impaired find the books and educational materials they want.

Guy is concerned about the mid-list, “the kinds of books that aren’t bestsellers but do get mentioned on *Start the Week*”. These can be the hardest to find in accessible form. And while

¹⁸ Jeff Gomez, *Print is Dead: Books in our digital age*, London, Macmillan, 2008.

the cost of scanners that read text aloud is decreasing, these are, he says, “always troublesome”. So he hopes that e-readers such as the Kindle will be adapted to make more books accessible.

Guy is also exploring whether in the future bookshops would be able to provide audio and accessible versions of books to download to individual devices. Also, advances in XML may enable rapid automatic conversion of text files in accessible formats.

But while the Kindle and similar devices seem promising for the sight-impaired, Guy is pessimistic about persuading a corporation to take on the necessary R&D. “Currently only 4 per cent of books are available in Braille,” he says. “But the major players will only take on expanding this if it is in their commercial interest to do so.”

8.4 New kinds of book promotion

While some publishers nervously await the outcome of the great e-reader debate, the more forward-thinking are exploring the myriad ways of promoting saleable content through the creation of free digital content or services. Faber CEO Stephen Page wrote in a recent article in the *Guardian*:

So publishers must harness the great power of online networks through enriching reader experience. We must provide content that can be searched and browsed, and create extra materials – interviews, podcasts and the like. We mustn’t be afraid of inviting readers to be involved. Beyond online retailing, publishers can now build powerful online places to showcase their books through their own and others’ websites and build communities around their own areas of particular interest and do so with writers. The key to this is just to make available and to resist too much control. A year ago this felt like a world in its infancy for books; but now it’s here, and it is a mighty relief as it provides a new world of conversation about reading.¹⁹

There is growing evidence that other publishers are doing likewise. After the much-discussed *One Million Penguins* project in 2007, Penguin has recently launched WeTellStories, an ARG incorporating stories based on Penguin Classics. Scholastic launches a game of its own in summer 2008. Elsewhere, HarperCollins promotes its young adult fiction through MySpace, and is beginning to offer whole books online; FanLit, a new fan fiction community, is supported by several media and publishing companies. Meanwhile, smaller and more agile publishing companies are embracing entirely new strategies for content promotion.

8.5 Case study: Route Publishing

Like most cultural industries, publishing is catching on to the opportunities the Web affords for promotion and profile. And nowhere is this clearer than among smaller publishers.

Originally part of Yorkshire Art Circus, Route Publishing produces both books emerging from community creative activities, and also more commercial publications. An Arts Council Organisational Development bursary at the beginning of 2007 has enabled Route to develop a forward-thinking and web-savvy strategy.

Where Faber’s CEO discusses what publishers must do, Route is already doing it. Ian Daley, editor at Route, reflects:

The Web has evolved so much over the last 18 months. There’s now huge investment from major players – software developers, publishers and beyond – and people are becoming familiar with these new environments. More and more people are used to using Web apps, downloading, sharing content and so on; so it’s moving toward the mainstream.

¹⁹ www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/mar/06/internet.gadgets

For Ian, this represents a powerful opportunity for an adaptable publisher. He explains:

In the old days you'd have a website and make people come to you. Three years ago if you made a film about your book, you'd have to show it at a cinema. But now you can broadcast yourself. Similarly, audio is a great device for publishing stories – again, the mechanisms for doing that were tricky and expensive. Now we can channel audio into all kinds of places. So we're looking at different outlets for stories, that all lead back to books.

Equally, it enables publishers to tailor content for different audiences:

The digitisation of copy allows us to put texts into different formats – people aren't needing to go looking for us, we can bring stuff to them. For us, who are very up, keen, there's a real opportunity right now.

8.6 Online publishing

However the debate unfolds around the e-reader, it is certain that publishers are being forced to innovate fast.

Pan MacMillan's Michael Bhaskar is part of the organisation's new digital department, responsible for exploring new digital opportunities and "managing the organisational, cultural and operational change to enable this". For Michael, one of the challenges is that online content producers tend not to make money directly from the content. Online, the more lucrative option tends to be in providing the service that enables users to create their own content, such as Lulu.com.

Although publishers are preparing to make books available online, Michael can think of no obvious way to monetise them in this space. Indeed, while big-name writers such as Cory Doctorow make their books available for free, Doctorow himself admits that little of his income comes from book sales. "It's fine for a publicity stunt – think of the attention Radiohead received for making their album available – but it's an unsustainable model," Michael says.

Michael states that although publishers are interested in creating net-native content in principle, in practice it is challenging to do this. It is both difficult to source good content, and difficult to generate it in-house as the corporate structures of a publishing company are functionally suited to the print publishing cycle and do not typically reflect the more agile, flat-structured, multi-tasking approach of digital producers. Salt Publishing's Chris Hamilton-Emerly agrees: while as a writer he has been involved in collaborative, process-driven projects, this kind of work – although interesting – is "the antithesis of commodity driven product".

But Chris remains interested in this kind of work, and has commissioned books from new media writers such as Alan Sondheim and Caroline Bergvall. Similarly, while Michael Bhaskar states that in general publishers are concentrating more on adapting existing material for the Web, he and others at Pan Macmillan would be keen to see more done to promote digital writing and reading.

8.7 The new players

Away from the major publishing conglomerates, ACE has tended to support small publishers dealing in poetry, short stories, work in translation – all deemed to need some subsidy to survive in the commercial world. Although there have recently been some controversial cuts in ACE funding for small publishers, some small companies are demonstrating exciting initiative, selling books printed on paper but approaching their market with a smart entrepreneurial drive, showing how well the Web can be used to market literature.

Snowbooks aims to provide alternative bestsellers to sit in stacks alongside the work of big name authors and publishers. Salt Publishing exploits the long tail and the low cost of production to build a large list of books which keep on selling.

8.7.1 Case study: Snowbooks

8.7.1.i Multi-skilled

Emma Barnes left a consultancy job in 2003 to found Snowbooks, which publishes a range of titles, and describes itself as a “feisty, award-winning independent book publisher”.

Emma proofs, typesets and designs covers for Snowbook titles herself. Having taught herself Web design, she also manages the blog and Facebook profile, creates promotional microsites for each title published, and made headlines as the first independent publisher with a shop in Second Life.

Emma believes strongly in this multi-skilled approach. She explains:

Part of the problem with the publishing industry is that it works in function silos. It baffles me that a management process that was originally created by F W Taylor for manufacturing should be applied in a creative industry. It’s unfulfilling, drives lack of ownership and responsibility, and ensures everyone’s time is tied up in meetings so you need constant communication.

So Emma decided that Snowbooks would be different: “When we started we decided we’d have project managers who took a book through from start to finish, rather than function managers,” she says.

Though there are some functions – such as sales to retailers – that need a consistent individual, this approach has ensured that Snowbooks remains nimble and able to adapt. Emma reflects:

Because I do so many different things every day, I know exactly what value I add. We outsource distribution and invoicing but everything we can, we do. I design the covers, typeset and proof read; we don’t work with agents, but work directly with authors, pay a PR agency sometimes. That’s it.

8.7.1.ii Swings and roundabouts

Snowbooks has been quick to exploit the publicity opportunities of new platforms. The Second Life shop attracted attention across the industry, and the Snowbooks site attracts around 16,000 unique hits a month. The resulting revenue is negligible, but the publicity benefits are considerable. Rather than needing to contact multiple journalists about each new title, Emma has created a strong, appealing and interesting blog presence – meaning journalists come to her for news.

Emma is unfazed by the idea of giving away free content to promote a book, and sees this as a classic strategy to use the digital space to increase interest in a book. But while some aspects of the Web work strongly in favour of small, nimble, creative publishers, others militate against their success. The Amazon model doesn’t work for Snowbooks. Emma explains:

Amazon works by selling one copy of a million books – we work by selling a million copies of one, ideally! There’s a mismatch there: the long tail impacts hard on small publishers, unless you’ve been going for 30 years and have a backlist of 800 books. In truth our business plan is to stay in business long enough to have a backlist.

8.7.1.iii A meeting place

Emma believes that the literature sector needs a meeting place, to create a sense of self-belief in self-publishing, and to show that there are other options than passively waiting for an agent to say “yes”.

What we want is a community centre, a physical place where authors could come, have classes, talk to authors – like guitarists jamming. They could meet service

providers, we could pool resources, we'd be able to share skills across small independent organisations. And it might help break down the divisions between writers, agents, publishers, distributors and so on – the thing that's so frustrating right now is this them and us relationship.

8.7.2 Case study: Salt Publishing

8.7.2.i Poetry chunks

After working in electronic publishing at Cambridge University Press, Chris Hamilton-Emery left to found Salt Publishing on a conviction that there was a market for poetry publishing that was going unserved. His conviction was proved right: nowadays, Salt owns the rights to much of the British poetry revival movement of the 1970s, and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry in the USA. The company has retained a strong interest in electronic publishing.

A new deal with MyiLibrary (a division of Ingram) means that Salt's content will be distributed world wide to a huge range of digital partners including NetLibrary. Salt is also one of the first independent literary publishers in the UK to sign up with Microsoft's LiveSearch programme and will be developing website integration with the service over the next few months.

8.7.2.ii Give away free content, sell more books

Like Snowbooks, Salt gives away free content online to help sell their books: "We believe in focusing on authors before books," Chris says. "We provide podcasts and free downloads on the author's own site, which creates a direct link between reader and writer."

Chris is clear about which channels deliver the benefits:

Google book search is no better than a browser. The driver of sales is publicity; it's the author, not the book, who is the primary brand. So we use YouTube and podcasts to build the visual bond between reader and author. Sales can be quadrupled by good publicity.

8.7.2.iii Keep updating

Salt maintains a main website, and four blogs. Designed and maintained by Chris, these are updated daily. These spaces generate 12 million hits a year, and are linked to a system – also written by Chris – that supports ONIX.

It is not clear exactly how much money is generated through online channels, as the site drives sales to Waterstone's, Borders and Amazon, as well as to direct purchases from the site. However, direct sales through the site are worth about £60,000. Two years' funding from ACE has given Salt the space to develop, and the organisation has added £100,000 to turnover this year – a 78% growth in one year.

8.7.3 Translating books and bookselling

Funding experiments in how an accessible digital bookshop could work might open up some radical ideas for new forms of bookselling.

Imagine a downloading post, a print on demand machine, e-readers and laptops, shelves of books old, new and purpose-made for customers, a performance space and meeting place for local writers and readers, staff equipped to advise on how to access all kinds of cultural products...

8.8 Print on demand

With online publishing and print on demand, conventional publishing only survives nowadays because of its snob value.

Emma Barnes, Snowbooks

There is a long, distinguished and dynamic tradition of self-publishing. From William Blake's illuminated plates sold by subscription, to memoirs photocopied and bound for friends and family, anyone willing to pay or learn the skills needed can make a book. "Self-publishing" is often confused with "vanity publishing", where companies flatter victims into believing their work has been selected for its merits, overcharge for printing and provide no sales support. And, of course, there are many other variations on the theme.

With the Web 2.0 boom, new players such as Amazon's BookSurge and Lulu.com have entered the market. These hand all editorial and design responsibility to the book's originator, simply handling fulfilment, but also giving each book its place on the bookshelves of the digital bookstore.

But which is the right form for whom? There are many kinds of publication that, while of great value to the community that created them, have little commercial potential and can only be produced through a contracted press. This is a perfectly acceptable route to disseminating your work – but it can be hard to decide what constitutes "real" publication.

8.8.1 Case study: Mute

Grass-roots art magazine and service provider Mute began as a magazine, and first explored print-on-demand publishing as a way of spreading the costs of magazine production.

Now, as OpenMute, the organisation is moving into a range of technology projects with a highly flexible model of publishing. Elements on offer include print on demand with Mute providing editorial services to supplement this, a web publishing service, and Web 2.0 POD, a platform in development that automates layout so that a user can take Web content and format it as a book.

What characterises Mute's various services is a strong commitment to, and connection with, its community – a cross-section of visual artists, activists and technologists. Mute provides print-on-demand services for this community; to date, all clients have come through word of mouth. But this is more than enough: currently the organisation handles around five books a week, typically for print runs of around 300–400 a year.

Mute founder Simon Worthington says:

We're not a publisher – we call ourselves a press. We do some of the things associated with a publisher though, including some of the metadata work such as assigning an ISBN and, if required, editorial support.

Simon feels it is important that services such as these should remain embedded in communities:

Lulu is the market leader but they rip you off. We provide a more niche service to an existing and tight-knit community, along with advice and personalised support. We'll be looking at commercial applications as time goes on but for now we're focused on supporting our community.

In the future literary activities will blend community platforms, peer review, multiple print and digital revenue streams, and publishing modes (print on demand, self-assembly, edited publishing) to reach increasingly diverse and digitally literate audiences.

9. Technology

9.1 Introduction

In the literature sector, as throughout society, the spread of technological know-how is patchy, variable and based more on personal interest than professional training. The furious rate of change means all are running to keep up with new developments in software and in thinking.

When we were invited to dinner with a range of people from literature organisations in the Yorkshire region to talk about this research and the work of the Institute for the Future of the Book, there was ample evidence of the digital divide, but a keen desire from all sides to tackle this, and a recognition that it's knowledge rather than equipment that is most required.

What follows is a guide to the nuts and bolts of the Web, which aims to provide a base line for discussion about how the sector as a whole can increase its skills and learn to thrive in the digital era. To some, much of this will be old hat, to others very new.

9.2 Raising online profile

There are countless ways of “networking” and promoting a site or activity – this short overview is by no means exhaustive. The aim is to give some sense of the wealth of opportunities available for raising a site's profile using the Internet.

Mentioning the website in all press releases, print and speeches is a start, but there are many ways to spread the word online.

9.2.1 SEO

SEO, or search engine optimisation, is considered a mysterious process even by many technology-savvy people. In essence, it involves maximising a website's chances of being indexed (noticed) and given a high ranking by a search engine.

There are many companies and consultants who specialise in SEO – these vary from highly skilled professionals to unscrupulous spammers and rip-off merchants. They can be very expensive – before engaging such a person it is advisable to investigate references and previous experience, and also to consider whether expending resources on SEO is necessary. While maximum exposure is of course a goal for many websites, if a site is not commercially oriented, or of limited or specialist appeal, the money and attention may be better spent on providing a good user experience than on simply attracting visitors.

9.2.2 Community building

Websites are much more likely to build a community of regular visitors if people are given a reason to come back, and some common methods of doing this are described below.

9.2.2.i Provide reciprocal linking

Many people find sites through search engines, and search engines “rank” sites depending on – among other things – how “networked” they are with other websites. Hence, the more inbound links connect to your website, the more popular a search engine will conclude your website is, the higher it will rank and the more people will find it.

Reciprocal links perform two other functions within a website: telling people about you, and providing resources for your readers. Each link in or out tells visitors to a site more about what the website is for, and who is interested in it.

9.2.2.ii Create a blog

Essentially a regularly updated online journal, a blog is an opportunity for an organisation, body or individual to speak directly to its readers, audience or customers, to interact with them through the comment field, and to demonstrate authority within a given space. Entering the blogosphere is in many ways an extension of encouraging reciprocal linking: blogs are highly conversational and promiscuous in interlinking webspaces that share interests.

As discussed earlier, the read/write Web is a dynamic space for active consumers of literary culture.

Literature bodies that are part of a larger ecology – such as publishing houses, some magazines and organisations – benefit a great deal from blogging. If the blogger is in touch with what is new in the field, others will come to rely on their posts to keep them abreast of developments. As noted above, Emma Barnes of Snowbooks has turned this into a core marketing strategy. This, in turn, will cumulatively begin to provide a wider network, an improved search ranking, higher traffic and a stronger brand.

It is worth bearing in mind, though, that while there are many “blog engines” available for free, blogging is a commitment. While blogging is technologically relatively straightforward, doing it well is time-consuming and takes practice.

9.2.2.iii Provide regular updates

Updates give people a reason to revisit your webspace, and also – as content accumulates – increase your chances of being indexed by a search engine.

9.2.2.iv Maintain a mailing list

Make it easy for users to subscribe to regular updates, news and so on. Make sure you keep mailouts short, image-free (you never know what browser someone’s using), easy to read and ideally full of links back to your site. For example, a mailout might include an announcement of a poetry prize winner, with the poem text available on the site. There are many mailing list management engines available for free download – PHPList is one example. This is recommended over online mailing lists, which often include advertising content that you cannot control.

9.2.2.v Promote others

If you write about others’ activities, they are likely to discover you have done so and return the favour, improving your site’s authority.

9.2.2.vi Let people talk back

Where appropriate, invite comments, guest articles, discussion and so on. Give your community the chance to participate. Be aware, though, that this takes attentive and regular moderation, as wikis, message boards, comment fields and similar are increasingly under attack by spammers.

With the issue of child protection such a concern, any interactivity involving minors will need to be carefully monitored. Booktrust has recently introduced a child protection policy across its online and offline activities. For its planned site for young people, The Reading Agency is using the services of Tempero, a major community management company used by Channel 4 and the BBC whose services include chat room and message board moderation.

9.2.2.vii Provide useful content

This might seem obvious, but people are more likely to come back to a website if they got something out of the experience the last time they visited it. The Internet is so bursting with content that attention is an increasingly rare commodity, so those managing successful sites keep in mind that visitors are more likely to browse, explore and share their content if the sites are pithy and accessible, and focused on the visitor’s needs rather than the organisation’s internal structure.

9.2.2.viii Use social media

Much of the second wave of hype surrounding the Internet has concerned “social media” – applications, platforms and widgets that connect people to other people. Frequently, the larger the network the greater the benefits of participation.

9.2.2.viii.a *Social networking sites*

Promoters of literature have been quick to discover how useful it can be to create a group on Facebook for an event, activity, magazine or similar. This enables the group’s creator to send messages to anyone who joins, to post regular news updates, to share photos and to raise awareness. Likewise, some create MySpace pages that perform a similar function. There are many social networking sites, and it is worth considering which attracts the most relevant demographic – for example, a site targeted at 14–19 year olds might be better suited to MySpace and Bebo, while one with an older target audience might do better associated with Facebook.

But fashions change fast, and social networkers can migrate rapidly from one space to another. Indeed, social networking platforms are showing early signs of fatigue and fragmentation into smaller and more specialised offerings. Thus anyone reliant on social media for profile must be prepared to keep up with the rate of audience migration.

9.2.2.viii.b *Moblogging and microblogging*

Moblogging – mobile blogging – and microblogging platforms (Twitter is the best known) allow users to update their content constantly, from different places including mobile phones. Twitter lets users collect “fans” and can make a significant impact on the profile of a news release if the blogger has enough followers. Demographically speaking, though, this type of social media is currently most pervasive among technology devotees, and would not necessarily provide a useful service to non “early-adopters” of the literary world.

9.2.2.viii.c *Viral content*

Viral content is simply short media that is funny, catchy or otherwise designed to make the viewer want to send it to a friend. Literary examples might include a short video of a performance poet, or a funny poem accompanied by an animation. The purpose of viral content is to encourage viewers to send it to their friends, thereby spreading the originator’s brand or message.

Arguably the oldest poetry was ‘viral’ – Old English verse repeated many stock phrases, and the bardic tradition combined well-known stories and tropes with improvisatory skill. More recently, popular poems have circulated through letters, commonplace books etc. Thus the Web is arguably simply an accelerated medium for transmitting such material. For the purposes of building profile, content should be designed to be optimally popular and transmissible, with a built-in link or reference to whatever is being promoted.

9.2.2.viii.d *Social bookmarking*

Social bookmarking tools include Reddit, del.icio.us, StumbleUpon and Digg. These tools allow users to mark a favourite page and share it with friends through the social bookmarking site. A common method of increasing traffic to a site is to encourage friends to bookmark your PR news release, thereby driving traffic through the social bookmarking recommendation to your pages.

Social bookmarking can also be used to share information across a sector. Literature organisations can agree to pool their information in an informal but effective way, adding to the common store by linking their bookmarks.

9.2.2.viii.e *RSS feeds*

RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds use XML to separate content (words, images, other media) from their environment (the web page) and “syndicate” it to other locations on the Web or a home computer. Many people read their favourite blogs through an RSS reader,

which will collect and list any new items in one place, a little like an email inbox, for the reader to browse.

This means that webmasters can take content originating in one website and have it appear on a second site. When the content updates at source it will update on the second site too. Similarly, others can syndicate any content formatted for RSS from a given organisation's home page to their sites – spreading awareness of content and improving the organisation's profile.

RSS is still largely the territory of the tech-savvy. But it is one of a number of new technologies enabling internet users to customise their experience of the mass of available content. One's own RSS reader will only contain feeds from blogs or other content providers which you trust and wish to follow.

On the one hand, this strengthens connections between interest groups, which have, so to speak, embedded their loyalty to one another in their network technologies. But, on the other hand, it leads to an increasing stratification and clustering of content, with subcultures sticking ever more closely together and becoming steadily more impenetrable. This, in turn, makes it difficult to gain visibility.

However, RSS feeds are a useful tool for sites keen to share their content as widely as possible. If site content is regularly updated and of good quality, readers will syndicate the feed to save others having to check the site regularly, and will themselves be drawn back to the site itself via the syndicated content if it is appealing. Use of RSS would be most obviously relevant to literary ezines, book blogs and possibly writing communities.

Nothing esoteric, just time and effort: getting to grips with promoting an activity or website online is much less intimidating than it might seem. Most technologies are straightforward to use and invite exploration and experimentation, with little to lose if a venture does not work.

However, the social web is above all else conversational. Though it costs little to enter that conversation, it is immensely time-consuming to keep up with it. Tom Chivers of Penned in the Margins, the young live literature promoter who ran the 2008 London Word Festival, estimates that he spends at least a third of his week maintaining and constantly pushing his events' online presence.

9.2.2.viii.f *Time poverty*

The preceding technologies offer powerful opportunities for spreading awareness of an event or organisation online, at very little cost. But while new technologies may be cheap or even free, the time cost of maintaining a Web presence is considerable. Small organisations with limited time may not have enough hours in the day to maintain a Facebook page, moderate a forum, maintain a blog, respond to comments, purge spam and perform all the other day-to-day chores of maintaining community profile in the Web 2.0 era.

9.3 Building and measuring

*Of course, the worry is that we'll spend a fortune on some fantastic new technology only to find six months later that someone is giving it away free.*²⁰

The most exciting development in web technology in recent years has been the explosion in new technologies that make creating and maintaining a Web presence relatively easy and accessible even for those not well versed in computer science. Naturally, though, this has been attended by an explosion in people doing so, along with a huge variety of tools on offer. The challenge for would-be users of today's digital technologies in the literature sector is less in learning coding skills than in choosing the right tools, learning how to get the best from them, and finding the time to do so.

²⁰ Maureen McCulloch, The Reading Agency

This section will cover a few principles aimed at supporting the UK's literature sector in developing a sustainable digital strategy.

9.3.1 What's already there?

For some time, the literary world has prized originality in its writers and thinkers. Distinctive voices are celebrated, and plagiarism is the worst a writer can be convicted of.

Technologists, on the other hand, build on one another's work. Originality is less important than simplicity and quality of execution; code is borrowed and reused; the ethos of the Web has always strongly championed sharing, recycling and collaborative advancement. Chances are there is already a website out there that does more or less what you want; it may be possible - and permissible - to "lift" code wholesale from elsewhere; or at least to show a designer what is needed.

9.3.2 Doing a few things well

Once upon a time, the Web was mostly composed of chat spaces, static websites and a few e-commerce sites. These days, there are a seemingly endless number of tools available that let us create and share content, comment on others' work, join communities, create our own communities, buy, sell, trade and interact. Not all these tools are necessary for all uses.

Websites in the literary sector fall broadly into three categories: digital publishing (such as ezines), read/write communities, and promotional spaces for offline activities (such as live literature or print publications). Each of these has different requirements. An ezine may not wish to enable reader comments on the material it publishes; but a commenting and ranking system can be an effective addition to a writers' community.

In the new climate of providing endless feature choice, sites risk becoming cluttered with busy design and unnecessary features. It has become axiomatic among developers that it is better to do a few things very well, and become known for that, than to attempt to do everything and disappoint everyone.

9.3.3 Websites don't have to be complicated

Organisations obviously benefit significantly from a site that provides basic key information about mission, activities and contact. But if the main purpose of a website is to provide simple information about activities taking place mainly offline, there is not necessarily any great need to load the site with features such as comments – especially as these can be resource-heavy to promote and maintain. For many, an informative and easy-to-navigate site with a mailing list and regularly updated news page constitutes a more than adequate Web presence.

9.3.4 Get it for nothing

New developments in Web technology mean that much can now be done using free, open-source or minimally modified technologies, shortening Web development cycles and drastically reducing barriers to entry in the digital space. In addition, many communities meet and collaborate online for the pleasure of pursuing their interests; in these cases, much of the management and upkeep of spaces is borne by self-selecting volunteers.

In a perhaps unexpected turn of Lessig's "Free Culture", this mixed professional/amateur environment, in turn, reduces the need for a class of professionalised literary workers to be funded in the digital space. As was noted in Chapter 4, we found little appreciable difference between the effectiveness, quality and popularity of funded and unfunded literary offerings in many spaces – particularly writers' communities and ezines.

With so much available for free or on self-funding models, new proposals for social technology development in the literature sector should demonstrate a critical awareness of existing provision and potential revenue streams as well as of the proposed market.

9.3.5 Seed funding, not sinecures

But while a cornucopia of dynamic and committed literary activity takes place already online, both funded and unfunded, there are areas that continue to need support. Though much can be achieved with self-taught technical skills and persistent community-building, some work can only be achieved if properly resourced. Bootstrapped technical infrastructure is often rickety, and hampered by hard-to-handle legacy technologies and poor backup.

The most impressive achievements observed during this research were often supported by development grants: finite bursaries enabling a period of reskilling, restructuring (technical or organisational) and additional resource for exploration and expansion. In such cases, those supported saw the funding as a one-off opportunity to gain knowledge and improve technical infrastructure, and remained firmly oriented towards becoming financially self-sustaining.

Existing funding strategies for the “offline” literary sector are beyond the scope of this report. But in terms of strategic development, two areas in particular will benefit significantly from support in developing their digital offerings: “pre-digital” literary organisations in need of advice regarding which tools to use and how to use them, and “net-native” literary startups in need of a boost to take them to the next level.

Most funding is already predicated on the need to demonstrate sustainability beyond the funding period. In the digital space, this is not just desirable but logical: a “seed-funding”-style support mechanism, targeted at organisations with an already entrepreneurial bent, is likely to create the strongest organisations.

9.3.6 Open source and technology lock-in

The rapid pace of technological development can leave users worrying that new tools will become obsolete even before they are installed. Unfortunately, unless an organisation has the resources and skills to become technologically self-sufficient, a degree of dependence on technicians for upgrades and advice is inevitable. Difficulties can arise when external technical providers are contracted for development, deliver proprietary software, and then become unavailable or unaffordable for subsequent upgrade or improvement work.

This kind of proprietary technology lock-in can leave organisations faced with a choice between a full rebuild at great cost, or struggling with tools that do not meet their needs.

Where possible, ACE should raise awareness of the importance of avoiding technological lock-in, for example by encouraging uptake of open-source technologies with a strong and active developer base.

9.3.7 Web traffic

Web traffic is the term used to describe the number of times a website is visited; Web traffic statistics also show further data about visitors' behaviour when visiting the site, and thus measure its popularity. By analysing visitor behaviour, Web traffic statistics can be used to help improve a website.

Part of any public arts strategy necessarily involves measuring outcomes. Using Web traffic data is an appealing means of doing so. This section outlines some of the key Web traffic measures, and sounds a note of caution about over-simple use of Web statistics to assess the effectiveness of digital activity.

9.3.7.i Visitor numbers

A key measure for most websites is the number of visitors they receive. Web traffic statistics can show breakdowns of total visits, "unique" visits (the number of unique "IP addresses" logged as having requested pages from that site, often significantly lower if the site has high repeat traffic), returning visitors and other factors.

9.3.7.ii Loyalty, page views and time on site

But visitor numbers do not always tell the whole story. A site might have relatively low visitor numbers but a highly loyal user base returning frequently to the site and spending time there reading in depth. An example of such a site might be a highly focused and well-regarded ezine whose readers check regularly for updates and read new material at length. Obviously it would be misleading to conclude on the basis of modest visitor numbers that such a site was ineffective, while ignoring visitor loyalty, number of page views and time spent by each visitor on the site.

Conversely, a high number of page views per visitor could indicate that the site is interesting and users want to spend time there browsing; but it could also indicate that users are finding it difficult to locate the information they need.

9.3.7.iii Traffic sources

Analysis of how visitors find a site can provide useful information on how well connected and promoted the site is. A high proportion of direct traffic (from visitors who knew where they were going and typed the URL straight into their browser) might indicate that the site is being better promoted through non-digital media such as magazines or flyers than through online means. Analysis of referring sites provides information about which inbound links provide the best sources of interested visitors, which can help shape a Web marketing strategy.

9.3.7.iv Other questions

Other questions include:

- How many clicks does it take for my visitors to find what they want?
- How long are they spending on my website?
- Which are the most popular pages?
- Which are the least popular pages?
- Where do my visitors leave from?

There are many more questions that Web traffic analysis can help answer, and much more that can be said on the subject. An in-depth look at Web traffic analysis is beyond the scope of this report.

9.3.7.v Lack of comparability

Though it might seem that measuring Web traffic is relatively straightforward – counting how many people have visited a website – in fact these statistics are measured in many different ways.

For instance, “hits” and “page views” differ significantly. A “page view” is generated every time a visitor requests any page within the website; but the Web server log file will note a “hit” any time a file is served. This “hit” could have resulted from someone visiting a web page, but might have been generated by someone accessing a single image or other content type (of which a single page may carry several). Thus, one page view could generate ten “hits”.

Therefore two different trackers may return radically different statistics for the same site, with one claiming the site has received millions of hits and the others registering only a few hundred unique visitors.

There have been calls for standardisation in Web tracking tools, and the variety of approaches to measurement means that traffic statistics from different providers cannot easily be compared.

Large websites often use a statistics company such as OneStat, but these services are generally available only for a subscription fee. Paying for traffic analysis also does not guarantee the best service, as some effective and reliable tools are available for free.

One popular such tool is Google Analytics, a free service that requires a small amount of code to be inserted into the site. Webmasters can then access their statistics through the Google Analytics website.

9.3.7.vi What does this mean for literature sites?

Clearly, literature organisations vary widely in terms of reach and likely impact, and it is not reasonable to expect an organisation with a relatively specialised target audience to reach millions simply by having a website. However, as organisations’ digital presence continues to increase in importance, it will become ever more urgent for ACE to implement standard measures for all of them.

In order to ensure a consistent and useful body of web traffic data, we recommend at minimum the implementation of Google Analytics or a similar free Web traffic application for all RFOs with a digital presence.

Standardising traffic analysis across funded organisations is not a cure-all for measuring digital impact, though. Traffic can peak and fall, especially those serving time-sensitive information such as literature festival websites; not all sites are aimed at a mass audience; not all sites aim to keep visitors reading for long periods of time. Factors such as these must be taken into consideration if web traffic data are to provide useful information on effectiveness and impact of funded organisations.

We recommend standardising Web traffic analysis tools across all ACE funded organisations. But analysing Web traffic can only provide useful benchmarks of effectiveness if measured across time, and analysed in the context of the specific website and the organisation’s reach and objectives.

We have refrained from proposing a definitive list of key Web traffic measures for the literature sector as websites differ widely in their aims, ambition and execution, and the same statistic can mean different things in different contexts.

9.4 Metadata

9.4.1 RSS

RSS is discussed above in terms of its usefulness in helping digital content providers syndicate their material, helping to build audiences. RSS is not yet a mainstream technology, and as such RSS-based publishing models (such as DailyLit.com, an application that sends subscribers short daily chunks of longer narratives by email or RSS) are still relatively niche – but unlikely to remain so for long.

9.4.2 ONIX

Of much more importance within the book trade is the patchy uptake of metadata standards. ONIX, or ONline Information eXchange, is the international standard for sharing book, video and serial product information in electronic form. It is aimed primarily at helping publishers supply rich product information to online booksellers and other trade customers.

Machine-readable book metadata enables information about a book to remain consistent across all sellers. It speeds website development, saves time on data inputting and helps provide information on pricing and availability.

Though ONIX uptake is increasingly standard among larger publishers and booksellers, there is limited understanding of the standard and its implications among small publishers – and few resources for implementation and training.

With growing numbers reliant on the Web for book title information, ordering and fulfillment, small publishers have an opportunity to find greater audiences in the long tail of book buying. But without a wider grasp of how to use metadata standards these organisations are severely disadvantaged in an increasingly competitive bookselling market.

9.4.3 Supporting small publishers entering the Semantic Web

ACE is well placed to support training in ONIX among small publishers, or the development of user-friendly tools that simplify the metadata.

9.5 Rights

There are as many perspectives on digital rights as there are creatives online. It is clear, though, that digital media present as many challenges to the literature sector, as opportunities. Traditionally, literature has depended on earning money from the sale of printed items, so the infinite reproducibility of digital formats – unless locked by technological means – appears to threaten the economic foundation of copyright, even of culture itself.

So many young publishers seeing free digital content as an effective means of promoting print books, live events and other marketable artefacts. Is there any future for paid-for digital content – will anyone pay to download from one archive when they can get something similar for free elsewhere?

As if this were not bad enough, the infinite reproducibility of much online content encourages what Lessig calls “remix culture”: an active, conversational culture of reappropriation and repurposing entirely at odds with the strict anti-plagiarism laws laid down for print.

The Web also creates challenges for new work originated online. Though some kinds of online content are protected by traditional copyright law, there is lack of clarity over whether content published online counts as “published”.

9.6 Royalties

Recently novelist Kate Pullinger launched an attack on publishers for offering a royalty to authors for their digital rights which seems to bear no relation to the costs involved – or rather, not involved.²¹

She concluded:

At the end of the day, the writer herself is a more valuable brand than the publishing house and it's time for writers to wake up to this fact: why should we sign contracts giving us a paltry 15% royalty in an industry where actual costs are being massively reduced overnight? Why aren't writers jumping up and down over this?

9.7 The openness debate

For Chris Hamilton-Emery, the problem with rights is less one of writers' digital royalties than one of publishers' failure to implement intellectual property for digital rights so as to leverage this financially.

But another perspective again sees strict implementation of intellectual property online as unfeasible and destructive of creativity. Lawrence Lessig argues that copyright law, while initially developed to safeguard the interests of artists, has become a restrictive mechanism that in fact stifles creativity and hampers cultural life. Lessig cites the free software movement as proof that making material freely available does not prevent individuals or corporations making money from information that is in the public domain. Therefore, he suggests that if the copyright stranglehold on digital material is loosened, far from destroying the content industries, they could actually benefit from it.

Lessig has since helped to found Creative Commons, a new licensing structure that enables users to choose what level of control they wish to have over how their material is reused. Though Creative Commons has been criticised by radical proponents of free culture for being too friendly to the content industries, it represents one possible approach to the challenge of licensing content online. See www.creativecommons.cc for more information.

²¹ www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/feb/28/bookscomment.digitalmedia

10. Conclusion

10.1 Free words

The commercial sector is working hard to find ways to sell words online while protecting their authors and institutions. The priorities for a public body such as ACE, however, are different: it needs to construct a view of the literary landscape that incorporates a clear-sighted, accurate and up-to-date picture of what is available online, and remain prepared to offer funding where it is needed to improve quality, diversity and access.

In the light of the changes the Web brings, ACE must decide where best to allocate its resources. The Web world seems to include many bright, youngish individuals, prepared to work for nothing between periods of paid employment, who are motivated, driven and relatively satisfied with the situation. The literature world includes many doing something similar for the art form they love, but more likely to feel trapped in a cultural and financial cul-de-sac from which only ACE or a surprise bestseller might free them.

The roots of this cultural difference seem to be partly the result of lower barriers to entry – relatively easy-to-use technology and reduced financial outlay mean the risks associated with failure are lower and experimentation is rife. The accelerated feedback loops of online life also increase the likelihood that such engagement will eventually result – directly or indirectly – in benefit to the individual. It might improve a CV, raise a profile, lead (as it did for Mark Thwaite) to a job offer, or – in the case of web entrepreneurs, professional bloggers and others – might become the job.

Meanwhile somehow people need to earn a living, and the creation and promotion of literature needs the energies of more than those with time on their hands as a result of privilege or poverty.

The sources of income have not fundamentally changed: advertising, membership, donations, sales, trusts and funders; though there are new skills to be learned and shared about how best to generate money online.

Writers need money, but then most writers do not make much now, so unlike industries clinging on for dear life to an infrastructure of buildings, equipment and careers, they have less to lose and much immediately to gain from the digital era: a public place to put one's work, a powerful and inexpensive marketing tool, a thriving community of creative readers and writers.

Appendix 1: Sticking points

The two authors of this report come from different generations and different sides of the digital divide. Writing this together has been hugely enjoyable but differences arose over our views of the digital and literary worlds.

1.1 Will 'literary' writing survive online?

With many years' experience in the literature sector, Chris Meade feels that the sector's long history of reader/writer interaction, and an ecology which mingles paid and unpaid, tradition and innovation, the highbrow and the popular, leaves literature organisations ideally placed to embrace the Web.

Mary Harrington, with an English Literature degree and five years' experience working at the intersection of writing (commercial as well as creative) and the Web, suggests that many of the defining assumptions of the literary sector are in fact contingent on the history of print and hence unsuited to wholesale transposition online. She argues that in terms of explicitly "literary" content, the Web is well-suited to its promotion but not to its publication; and, further, that net-native content requires its own aesthetic criteria, many of which challenge fundamental assumptions of "literary" writing, such as the importance of originality.

1.2 Will e-readers play a significant role in our future?

Chris envisages all kinds of books soon being downloadable to laptops or electronic readers and expects to then see a flowering of new media writing and publishing for these devices and their "transliterate" users: networked books with word, sound, moving image and space for reader responses embedded, designed a public who no longer pigeonhole their media. While Mary acknowledges that a minority will find digitised books appealing, she remains sceptical about the ultimate impact of artistic forms that – through e-readers and such devices - attempt to replicate print literary assumptions in the digital space. Though she has spent some time over the last few years documenting the emergence of artistic forms native to the medium, Mary emphasises that these frequently challenge established aesthetic values so profoundly as to be unrecognisable by the "traditional" literary sector.

1.3 Will digital publishing ever sell its products directly?

Neither Mary nor Chris see a clear pathway to economically-sustainable online publishing. But they differ on the likelihood of this taking place. For Chris, the growth of digital-rights-managed content as an income stream for publishers seems inevitable. Mary, though, points to the growth of free, ad-supported, and subscription-based models for online content distribution, along with the spread of remix culture and the inevitable decay of digital rights management systems. For her, while quality content can be a powerful tools for growing user bases, the income from such endeavours is increasingly gained indirectly; for publishing online to be successful, publishers will have to form alliances with corporate sponsors or public funding and gain their income from such sources.

Whatever happens in the commercial sector, literature organisations are already adept at building and sustaining such alliances.

Appendix 2: Ideas

All those interviewed for this research expressed a sense of excitement and potential. However, there were many different perspectives on how the literary sector can best move forward in the new digital era.

Pay As You Geek

Maureen McCulloch of The Reading Agency wanted a technical expert, (“Pay As You Geek”) shared across different organisations, keeping all up to date with new developments.

Best Practice Guidelines

Andy Darby at LitFest wants good practice guidelines on the best open-source solutions to content management and compatibility issues.

Reverse mentoring

Many endorsed if:book’s suggestion of reverse mentoring schemes whereby experienced staff can be twinned with more web-savvy colleagues.

More time

There was wide agreement that it was money for more time rather than equipment that was most needed to improve skills and standards.

Prizes for new media writing

Kate Pullinger proposed a prize for new media writing, more opportunities to showcase the best work and more venues where it could be shown.

Agency for new media creatives

if:book’s suggestion of an agency bringing together writers and digital makers was endorsed by Pan Macmillan.

Curators

There was general interest in curation: projects which use the web imaginatively to present work in a networked setting.

Solutions centre

Emma Barnes at Snowbooks proposes a “solutions” centre where writers can find people with the skills they need to help them reach an audience and raised the possibility of re-imagining how literature could be sold on the highstreet.

Accessibility

Guy Whitehouse supports moves to help ensure websites and digital readers are fully accessible to disabled people.

...and more

Other ideas include an analysis of the potential market for income generation through advertising and selling content digitally; information on Print on Demand shared by all organisations; and strategic funding of aspects of activities, including those currently unsubsidised, to encourage cultural and creative diversity.

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www.ABCtales.com
www.amazon.com
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Appendix 4: Author biographies

5.1 Chris Meade

Chris Meade is Director of if:book. He was Director of Booktrust from 2000-7 where projects included Bookstart, Booktime, the Children's Laureate, the STORY campaign and Get London Reading. He was Director of the Poetry Society from 1993-9 launching the Poetry Café and the national Poetry Places scheme of residencies and commissions. Chris pioneered creative reading work in libraries, working on 'Imagination Services' in Birmingham and the Sheffield Opening The Book Festival in 1989.

Chris was a founding member of the FLO consortium of literature leaders and is currently studying for an MA in Creative Writing & New Media at De Montfort University.

5.2 Mary Harrington

Mary Harrington is a research associate at if:book. Since graduating from Oxford University in 2002 with a First in English Literature, she has conducted numerous experiments in on- and offline peer learning, avant-garde poetry and fiction, collaborative writing, performance and cross-platform storytelling . When not working with if:book, she is co-founder of School of Everything, an up-and-coming social media startup supported by Channel 4 Education and the Young Foundation, and co-founder and creative director of arthouseparty, an occasional event blending interactive drama, performance art and London nightlife.

if:book

if:book is a think and do tank exploring the potential of new media for creative readers and writers and investigating the evolution of cultural discourse as it moves from printed page to network screen.

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