The Impact of Electronic Publishing on the Academic Community

Session 5: Digital libraries and archiving of electronic information

Introduction

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Before introducing the contributors to this session, I would like to introduce the European Commission on Preservation and Access (ECPA), which I represented at the Academia Workshop. The ECPA was established in 1994 by a group of librarians, archivists and scholars out of concern for the fate of the millions of books and documents in Europe threatened by acidification and embrittlement. Although the critical situation of the relatively recent paper record was the direct inspiration for creating the ECPA, it has been clear right from the start that activities aimed at saving the printed and written heritage will have to take place in the context of general policies for preservation and access. The work of the ECPA therefore encompasses all material collected in archives and libraries: books and documents, photographs, tapes, film and video, digital records, etc.

The European CPA is a younger sister of the American CPA, which has been successfully campaigning for about 10 years in the United States and abroad to raise public awareness of preservation issues and to get the problem on the agenda of politicians and decision makers. The ECPA claims to be a European platform for similar activities, bringing together information and stimulating discussion and exchange of experience among all those involved in the preservation of our intellectual heritage. The aim of the ECPA is "to foster, develop and support in Europe collaboration among libraries, archives and allied organizations, in order to ensure the preservation of the published and documentary record in all formats and provide enhanced access to the cultural and intellectual heritage".

The 14 members of the ECPA represent universities, academies, learned societies, archives and the world of publishing. The ECPA is unique in bringing all these groups together in one
European platform focusing specifically on the preservation of and access to our documentary heritage. The members of the Commission and their institutions have committed themselves to promote this European initiative and will actively support ECPA projects, acting as intermediates between the European and the national/regional level. The Secretariat has been housed at the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences in Amsterdam since May 1995.

As said earlier, the ECPA is interested in the preservation (and accessibility) of all carriers of information, including electronic modes. In fact, one of the solutions for the loss of memory due to paper decay is the transfer of the information to other carriers. Microfilming, tapes, discs and digital media are being used extensively for this purpose.

Of course, we should not over-emphasize the importance of electronic preservation as yet. There are two reasons for this reservation. The first is the quantitative modesty of electronic library content. Let me quote a figure of the Vice-Chairman of the ECPA and director of Die Deutsche Bibliothek, Klaus Dieter Lehmann, mentioned in a recent interview in Der Spiegel under the very apt heading "Books do have advantages". He said that of the 300,000 acquisitions per year of Die Deutsche Bibliothek, the deposit library of Germany, only 2,000--3,000, that is less than 1%, are in digital form. If so much of the new acquisitions of large libraries are still in paper format, ECPA's concern for the fate of paper materials obviously does not reflect a quaint preference for an outdated medium.

The second argument for this reservation stems from the fact that building information networks, creating electronic communication systems and applying mass digitization of information do not guarantee longer longevity. On the contrary, we will be lucky if digital information can be read 20 years after its storage. Even if a carrier of such information can be kept in good condition for a few dozen years, there remains the problem that equipment and software become outdated much more rapidly. It will be clear that in the electronic age the need for adequate strategies for preservation and access will be even more pressing.

In two sessions the problems of digital libraries and the needs, possibilities and impediments of proper archiving of electronic information will be introduced and discussed.

In the first chapter Mats Lindquist describes the problems libraries will have to face if they "go electronic", as a whole or partly. He shows that the primary goal of meeting the user's needs requires extensive knowledge of the latter. A balance should be found between the need for adequate access on the part of the users and the need to secure the rights of the content owners. Ann Okerson shows that the copyright regulations stemming from the 18th century, when the product of printing was the physical artifact, are absolutely inadequate for the modern electronic situation without tangible products. She describes a new form of pricing, namely licensing of book series and journals, as practised at various American libraries, including her own library at Yale. Jack Meadows analyses the similarities and differences between the classical libraries and the new electronic libraries. He states that just as printing did not replace handwriting, so electronic information storage and exchange will not replace the printed mode. The two modes are complementary and not competitive. It makes, therefore, more sense to speak about the combination of the two, the hybrid library, than about a purely electronic one. As a discussant Robin Peek raises a number of questions and issues, such as the influence of politics on further
developments of digital libraries, the importance of generation differences in access, and the limitations of licensing.

John Mackenzie Owen asks attention for the importance of electronic deposit libraries during the transition from printed to electronic information. Neither the user nor the owner or the printer will guarantee a proper and permanent storage of essential electronic information. He sees an important role for the national deposit libraries. Donald Waters, who has co-chaired a CPA committee which has analysed the problems and possible solutions with respect to electronic archiving, reports on his American experiences. He shows the limits of digital technology, the need for preservation of the integrity of the information, and a proper organization and infrastructure of digital archives. As discussant Yola de Lusenet criticises the depository function of national libraries and questions their adequacy as proper places for access and the selection of the information to be stored.

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