Electronic Publishing in France:
Closed [Temporarily] for Stock-taking

Jean-Michel Ollé & Jean-Pierre Sakoun

In May 2000 a group of researchers, university teachers and publishers met to consider the impact of the new media for knowledge transmission on the intellectual world and listed the projects ongoing in France for publishing content electronically. Eighteen months later no one is able to say whether there will one day be a significant body of electronic publishing with French content. Such a transformation calls for a moment's consideration. So what has happened?

In the mid 1990s, encouraged both by researchers accustomed to American practices and by the construction of a large new national library explicitly designed to be digital, people began to think about the use of the new technologies in humanities research and teaching. At the same time some publishers, attracted by the new commercial buzz-word appearing on the horizon, the 'mass-audience cultural CD', started with government support to issue titles for sale in retail shops. During this same period a few content publishers set about publishing on CD-ROM full-text large databases in the humanities. The point was soon reached where a PC with CD-ROM drive was becoming a widely available item of mass consumption, largely because of falling prices for components.

This brief retrospective gives us some idea of the identity of those who might play a part in the future of electronic publishing in France and the external factors likely to determine its structure. These factors include the American lead in the field, the changes in the working methods and careers of researchers and teachers, the attempts made by French publishers of academic content to find new fields of activity, given the industry's difficulties, which had started roughly since the death of Sartre and Barthes.

Thus everything was conspiring to encourage people to explore new forms. Only two reservations remained. One came from academics, who had not yet taken computing to their hearts – how many of them had email then, or even a computer? – the other came from publishers, who were badly short of the capital needed to launch yet another book-shop revolution.

The solution to this situation came from two different developments: the rapid initiation into computing of university teachers, who progressed from suspicion to childlike enthusiasm in only a few years, and what has been called the e-commerce bubble.

This sudden rush of finance into the new mode of communication and, so it was believed, of commerce, that the Internet set out to be, brought together two groups of people who were suspicious of one another: investors and publishers. At the very end of the 1990s investors swiftly realized, after the first sensational attempts at mass-audience

services, that they needed to turn to content and so logically to publishing. As for publishers, they were at first extremely doubtful about the Internet and dead set against investing in it, but they were finally lured by the virtual profits that were there for the taking.

This development threw up a number of well-known dramatic coups, incidents and announcements, which we shall not go over again. The high point was probably the 2000 Paris Book Fair, where politicians, publishers and consumers turned their backs on the conventional stands and crowded into the first electronic publishing area to appear at the Fair.

In that climate a substantial number of scientific electronic publishing projects were born, either individual authors' sites or shared sites for electronic collaboration.

The phase we are going through today, beyond the headlines about the collapse of the Internet bubble, can and should be seen as a return to a normal pace of development and maturation. It is true that the early experiments produced many disappointments: the mass-market cultural CD-ROMs turned out to be economically counter-productive, all the editors with a medium to long term strategy in the digital field quit the publishing companies, and interest in electronic publishing projects is now confined to the circle of the researchers who design them. Each new day brings its quota of e-commerce failures, which gives those who never believed in it the chance to crow, like the émigrés who came back to France after the fall of Napoleon, and the press the chance to follow the collapse with the same avidity they displayed when they were encouraging the hype.

Where significant projects are frozen or abandoned it is because they require substantial financial commitments. The original sin of electronic publishing is that the investments to be found are on the scale of an industry not a family business, which is what the French publishing and university sectors still are, more or less, in this field, and no one in the world of cultural production, except the state, is used to thinking on that scale.

So must we play the 'Last Post' over the grave of electronic publishing in France and wait for an American saviour to come along one day, once its home market is saturated, and start taking over the micro-markets in the European countries? We do not think so and in fact we consider that, if we ignore the media-hyped crash, all the basic elements for a French electronic publishing industry are in the process of being assembled, but were not in place two years ago when the fever was escalating.

It is obvious when one takes stock of the expertise and the players.

First the state of the art. In order to publish a text electronically a production line must be in place that has now reached the level of efficiency it lacked then.

Every electronic text begins with digitization. For a long time electronic publishing suffered, in terms of design, projects and execution, from utopian assumptions, the most familiar of which is automatic digitization via scanner and character recognition software. Nowadays that myth is history. Everyone knows that OCR (optical character recognition) software, which was developed for electronic management of business documents, is more or less ineffective when it comes to digitizing documents of interest to researchers and academics. All publishers have given up on that mechanistic utopia and use manual inputting. Here too early colonialist dreams of exporting inputting to China at a rate of 0.15€ per thousand characters have faded, and in the last few years serious companies involved in data capture have set up reliable digitization units, offshore of course, but able to transpose a complete text and enrich its structure.

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Similarly, dreams of the publisher being able to re-use files that had already been inputted have been washed away by the flood of unreadable diskettes containing files created using an obsolete program, with a version of the text that did not incorporate the latest corrections. Today digitization has become a profession with its own rules and regulations, in which people can now combine a final OCR, manual inputting and file recovery without nasty surprises. And better still, most publishers now get their files intended for hard copy prepared in formats that ensure they can be used online in the future.

For a digitized text to be properly exploited by the electronic publisher it must be marked up and encoded. Marking up, structuring and indexing of texts, which were once left out of the estimated operating costs for electronic titles, have gone through the same process of enforced regulation. Nowadays people are turning their backs on SGML and its reassuring inflexibility designed primarily for paper. Currently there are two developments in progress: increasing standardization on use of XML, a language with the huge advantage of not prejudging the future structure of marked-up texts, and a desire on the part of all players to work towards the interoperability of reading formats, whatever medium is used (Internet, off-line, electronic book). Everybody is trying to achieve the radical solution where the text would be encoded once only and as close as possible to the moment when it is created.

We could apply the same analysis and at the same tension between standardization and conversion in respect of delivery systems such as Windows. Indeed this means that conditions are now ripe for electronic text to break free of the medium that supports it, and this is crucial for its future interactivity.

Once it is up on the screen the text must be worked on. Here too there have been significant avenues abandoned and then great advances made. Only two years ago all electronic publishers had to pay out of their own pockets for the development of proprietary programs or extensions of programs if they wanted to offer their readers comfort approaching what they would get reading hard copy. This development increased the cost of publications and imprisoned publishers in systems that were increasingly inward-looking. Today all the functionality thought of as 'natural' (searching a complete text, annotating, discussion forums, compiling dossiers, etc.) is available 'off the shelf' and can be bought from software companies or even downloaded as freeware from the net.

In the field of full text search, we have gradually given up the dreams of a magic piece of software that could find all the references to the love of god without either love or god being mentioned in the text, and have realized that skilful manipulation of search software using character strings would give the same results, with the incidental bonus of refining the initial search string.

We will mention in passing the continued drop in price of computing power and the increasing speed of data transmission, even though the Internet is having difficulty getting established in homes (but not in businesses), and we will note the following paradox: just when publishing projects are coming to halt it has never been so easy technically to publish electronically.

So should we blame the main players for the delays? We are not sure.

Let us begin with the foremost producers of resources in the humanities, researchers, whether or not they are attached to universities. Here we should distinguish between two types of practice that are too readily lumped together under the generic title of electronic publishing.

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The first involves making available to the community resources that facilitate or even dictate the direction of other people's research. From sharing bibliographies to working together on the same online material, researchers have taken to electronic publishing in the same way as their American colleagues, more often than not at the instigation of individuals or existing teams.

The other practice involves publishing the results of one's work in electronic format. Here the verdict is more ambivalent. There are wide disparities between researchers in the sciences and those in the humanities and, as far as the latter area is concerned, paper retains its traditional prestige. However, we can say that, increasingly, needs must when the devil drives, and the double pressure of the rising need to publish and the shrinking outlets for paper publishing in the humanities will push researchers towards electronic production, just as today it impels them to seek out conferences and journals.

Currently, teachers are in a temporary double bind as regards electronic publishing. While they are keen defenders of their own use of the net in the same way and for the same reasons as researchers, they appear, with a few notable exceptions, to be reluctant for their students to use it, since they are well aware that this would be a radical change in the modes of transmitting and assessing knowledge. However, they are all agreed, in theory, that electronic publishing is one of the answers to the thing that causes them grief in their day-to-day teaching, the drop in their students' academic level.

Indeed, once you get past the complaints, you realize that the enormous economic, social and cultural transformation of the student population requires electronic publishing to be made general as a tool to support education. What are today's humanities students made of, if we separate out those who are reproducing their parents' cultural practices? They no longer sign up to the pact that previous generations accepted, which insisted that they were studying for pleasure and therefore read, loved, bought, collected books. A good many academics point out jokingly that you can find on department noticeboards evidence of students selling last year's set books secondhand, even paperback editions of Balzac. The old pact that, to publishers' and academic authors' great glee, required students to buy the whole book when they knew they needed only a chapter is dead and gone for ever. Today students follow a very diverse programme and want to get their degree as cheaply as possible; in order to do so they acquire only the quantity of paper that is necessary and sufficient. This runs against the book and is absolutely in line with what electronic publishing offers.

Nowadays, whether they appear dynamically active or fashionably wait-and-see, every publisher has taken the measure of electronic publishing's inevitability. The moment for criticism is past and they are all at work in the privacy of their offices searching for a way of distributing, to get into electronic distribution of content. After the blessed surprise in 2000, when unusually high sales of paper books allowed them to forget for a while the inexorable collapse of sales of content titles, publishers are coming back to their reality as well, which means hanging on to their authors, and, in order to do that, offering them a method of distributing their work that at least does not plunge the company's accounts into the red.

Universities contain all the contradictions noted above. They have teachers who cannot publish any more, students who no longer read and publishers at war with photocopiers. This all means they are ready to deal with any electronic solution that could get them out of this hole.

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Libraries, and especially university libraries, are starting to learn how they can use electronic methods. They too have gone through all the successive stages of enthusiasm and disappointment, and today they are aware that their American colleagues have gone over to those methods without losing their souls in the process. A large number of initiatives and acquisitions of digital resources, which were previously restricted to libraries for the sciences, are being set in train in humanities libraries.

It is clear that everyone is ready to go, but a bit like Offenbach's carabineers who are onstage for a whole act champing at the bit and singing 'Partons, partons' (Let's go, Let's go). So if it is getting easier to publish electronically, and everyone is convinced, what is holding them back?

There are two obstacles that are somehow blocking each other. First of all the prestige of paper. The time has not yet come when the big names will publish straightaway in electronic format or websites can be included with impunity in bibliographies for articles.

The other is the problem of free access. Publishers want to sell their titles, but academics and researchers do not want to pay for the tools they work with. This is a topic that is affected by the question of public service and its aims. But free access is a matter to be debated, rather than a problem. Even when it is made easier, electronic publishing costs money. And those who publish their work deserve to be rewarded if they so wish. So how can royalties, publishing costs and free access be made compatible? The need exists, so the market and the finance exist too. We simply have to reach agreement on who pays and when.

In this brief survey the conspicuous absence of the state will have been noted. This is partly out of charity. In the last few years policy on electronic publishing in France, coming from governments, public bodies concerned with culture and the ministry of education, has been at best confused and vague, as far as both initiatives and lack of action are concerned.

But this absence of reference to the state is also a hopeful sign, because we can imagine that if one day the state accepts its articulating and initiating role vis-à-vis public financing, private investment, educating the rising generations and ensuring the continuation of the elites who are responsible for it, there might be some movement. When we think of the good that the Centre National des Lettres (national centre for the humanities) and the Centre National de la Cinématographie have done in their fields, we start to dream about a Centre National d'Enseignement (national centre for education) that could bring these converging desires together.

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Jean-Michel Ollé & Jean-Pierre Sakoun
OSEA

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

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