

PERPETUAL ACCESS TO DIGITAL RESOURCES

A DAM HODGKIN of *Exact Editions* looks at the ways that digital publication is changing how products and services are supplied to the library sector and how they need to be preserved.

In the traditional, pre-digital era archiving and preservation tended to be the preoccupation and the problem, sometimes a headache, for archivists, curators, libraries and museums. But with digital stuff the onus on preservation has moved back towards creators. The digital wave for periodicals and books started to crest in the period 1995–2005 when printing and production methods became increasingly and dominantly digital. In libraries and homes the switch to primarily digital reading is now in full swing though it may take the best part of a generation to peak. As the digital wave moves inexorably towards the reader and the user, the responsibility for preservation, curation and long-term access is increasingly demanding the involvement of publishers and service providers.

Publishers and book sellers used to ‘wash their hands’ of the product once it was bought, leaving it to the librarian to figure out what to do, how to catalogue, shelve, bind, re-order, loan or even dispose of the book or issue once it had passed its useful life. Digital products and services are more entangled and in principle unpredictable in ways that our traditional approaches can easily accommodate. Abby Smith Rumsey in her excellent *When We Are No More: How digital memory is shaping our future*, (Bloomsbury 2016) emphasises the enormous challenges that we face in saving our digital culture. Preservation is imperative and practical, but files and formats are what we need to preserve, not objects. Everything and any data we place

in digital code needs regular tending, migration and refreshing. Only then will we be able to use it, or even open it, in 2030 or 2100.

Recently there has been a move by consumers to asking for the option to acquire perpetual access, paying a lump sum for outright and eternal access to content. The interest in having perpetual access to publications which are ongoing seems to require a new approach. Some periodical publishers offer perpetual access retrospectively to the issues for which organisations have paid a subscription. But there seems little point in having access to part of a back-run if all of the content can as easily be provided – the stingy alternative of maintaining individually incomplete access for each different subscriber is certainly a complication. Since digital resources are only useful and usable in the future if they are supported and sustained by the intermediary who wraps them in software and service, they need future support as well as retrospective access. We are sure that effective perpetual access has to be both backward and forward looking, retrospective and prospective. In the digital age perpetual access is an important and reachable goal but it is not a one-off proposition it will require publishers and librarians to commit to long term preservation and support. 🌱

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