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Journals Are People, Too: The Human Factor in Sustainable Journal Publishing Partnerships

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The University of Michigan Library has been publishing journals on the Web since the late 1990s. To date, Michigan Publishing has partnered with 32 journals and serial conference proceedings (MPublishing Journals, 2012). We have been quite catholic in our approach to new projects: our journals' disciplines vary from music to chemistry, philosophy to feminist studies. Journals are not required to have any connection with the University of Michigan (although we prioritize supporting faculty where possible), nor have they been required to adhere to any single model of distribution: most are open access, some delay publishing material online up to one year after publishing a print issue, and two use a traditional subscription-based model. Typically, journal editors manage submissions, review, and editing

(including copyediting), delivering the final content to Michigan Publishing for publication on our platform.

Of our 32 partners, six have permanently ceased publication and three are on indefinite hiatus. As of May 2013, 10 had published new content in 2013, activity which ranges from producing new articles each week to delivering four volumes of backlogged content at once after a long silence. Thirteen had not yet published new content in 2013, which might indicate that they are right on schedule to publish their spring issue soon, that they have forgotten to send us the files for their most recent issue, or that they have ceased to publish altogether. The term “serial,” suggesting regularity, consistency, and predictability, does not quite capture the wide range of activity we observe among our journal partners each year.

As coordinator of Michigan Publishing’s journals program (a new position as of November 2012), it is my job to chart the future course of our journal publishing program. Michigan Publishing’s aim is to “create innovative, sustainable structures for the broad dissemination and enduring preservation of the scholarly conversation,” in service of a larger goal: “to ensure that the benefits of scholarship accrue to everyone” (MPublishing About Us, 2012). We want to make excellent scholarship available to as wide an audience as possible, and to preserve and distribute work that might otherwise remain unseen.

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However, when it comes to journals, excellence and ideals are not enough. Sustainable journal publishing depends on long-term relationships: when we form a partnership, we agree to work with the editors for the life of the journal, and commit to helping them make that life as long and productive as possible. Trends, technologies, and practices will come and go over time. It is the human factor—the motivations, priorities, goals, expectations, and engagement of each editor—that determines whether a journal will thrive in partnership with us. I want to clarify that here I am not talking about the success of the journal according to traditional measures of impact, citations, or circulation. Rather, I am referring to the success of the relationship between the library and the publication: Is the partnership fruitful? Sustainable? Do both parties benefit?

The answers are not always so clear. Our partnership agreements outline what each party has agreed to do, but do not address *why* we are doing it, or whether our “whys” are the same, complementary, or at odds. Our journal partnerships are typically born when a person or small group approaches us *for one reason or another*, and we decide to take on the project, *for one reason or another*. Hitting on the right combination of reasons is the key to developing a partnership that will thrive. The wrong combination can lead to projects that drain resources on both sides, without meeting the expectations of either.

Motivating Factors for Journals

Michigan Publishing provides similar services to most of our journal partners, so it is easy to forget that they initially came to us with different needs and goals. Even where our services are the same, their reactions, expectations, and level of engagement will all be shaped by these initial driving factors, some of which I describe below. These examples, of course, are not exhaustive, but portray some common circumstances in our shop.

Tech Support

It is not uncommon for the editor of an existing print journal to seek a partnership with Michigan Publishing in order to establish an electronic version of their publication. Our ready-built infrastructure, support for conversion of content to XML, and commitment to long-term preservation are appealing to individual editors and small scholarly societies lacking the funds, technical expertise, or institutional home base to put their journal online. Because the print journal is already up and running, this can be a great way to get a publication off the ground quickly. However, the long-term success of the partnership depends on the extent to which the journal is willing to reconfigure its existing practices to support collaboration with Michigan Publishing.

For example, when journals continue to publish in print on their own, delivering the final files to Michigan Publishing is often the last step in their process, sometimes even after the issue has been published and distributed. If there is an embargo between print and online publication, the issue might not be expected to go online until months later. In these cases, editorial staff sometimes forget to send the files, or even to document this step so that new staff know to do this. We have on occasion contacted a journal to inquire about recent issues, only to discover that the editorial board had turned over, and the new staff did not know about our partnership.

On the other hand, if the editors of the journal are motivated to move to an online-first model, there is a good opportunity for mutual benefit. Because Michigan Publishing is the primary home for the publication, the editors cannot forget to stay in touch. When issues already exist, we can add the journal to our platform in short order. The editors' labor and costs are reduced because they no longer need to support typesetting, printing, or subscriptions/circulation. Michigan Publishing benefits from adding a known publication to its portfolio. In this scenario, the motivations of the journal align with the practical requirements of the partnership, so working together comes naturally.

Backup Plan

In three cases, Michigan Publishing has partnered with journals that are already publishing on their own external websites. These editors are often drawn to the long-term preservation provided by the library. More than one editor has alluded to anxiety about what will happen to their journal when they retire: journals are frequently the pet projects of extremely dedicated individuals who worry about handing off the work or losing hosting/programming support at

their home institution if they leave. Michigan Publishing can provide a neutral, stable home for this content—one less thing for the editor to worry about as he or she plans for the future of the journal. These partnerships are most satisfactory when the editor is willing to make Michigan Publishing the primary home for the journal’s content. This way, we can avoid duplicating content, falling out of sync if an article changes, and confusing users (including third-party indexing sites) about where the canonical home for the content is. However, we often find that there are obstacles to doing this. In two cases, our partner was simply invested in the look, feel, and functionality of their own website, and unwilling to switch to our platform. In a third case, the partner wants to make Michigan Publishing its primary home, but fully integrating the journal’s idiosyncratic infrastructure for managing submissions and publishing manuscripts with our own system has turned out to be the work of years.

When content lives in two places, editors tend to think of their own website as “the journal,” and Michigan Publishing’s version as “the archive.” Whether or not we consider this a successful partnership depends a great deal on how we define success: we have ensured long-term preservation of and access to this content, and met the needs of the editor. As a *library* publisher, perhaps we have done well. On the other hand, editors sometimes forget to send new issues on to us, meaning we must chase them down or risk our version of the publication becoming outdated. As well, Michigan Publishing becomes rather invisible as a participant in the journal’s publication. For example, one of our journals is listed in the Directory of Open Access Journals (<http://www.doaj.org/>) only under its external host. Our archive is not mentioned. In this case, Michigan Publishing does not get much return on investment, in terms of visibility or reputation, for hosting and preserving this content. As a *library publisher*, it is difficult to make the case that this is a successful partnership.

Breaking New Ground

Some of our most energetic, symbiotic partnerships occur when editors develop a new journal with Michigan Publishing as the original publisher. In these cases, the journal’s workflows and practices can be established from the start to integrate with Michigan Publishing’s and the new journal benefits from its affiliation with our brand. Usually, we share an interest in open access and in exploring new models of editing and review. These editors are also typically quite involved: They tend to be the most fastidious about previewing content before it goes online, because Michigan Publishing is the site of first publication. They are also the most likely to request improvements to our interface and site functionality, because they envision their journal looking and behaving a certain way. These requests often lead to valuable developments that can be applied across the board, benefiting all of our journals.

Establishing new publications together with editors is exciting, meaningful work. However, it is a heavily front-loaded, labor-intensive process. It can take several years from initial discussions to the publication of the first issue, and without an ongoing publication schedule providing regular opportunities to communicate, it is easy to fall out of touch. Some journals fade away before they ever publish a first issue. Others fall off the radar for years, resurfacing

suddenly, ready to go, at a moment when we may not have the capacity to leap into action. It is disheartening to invest a great deal of time into a publication that struggles to get off the ground. While it is certainly important to expect change and remain flexible, it is also important to nurture this nascent partnership by keeping in regular contact with the editors so that changes of direction come to light sooner rather than later.

Conclusion

As Michigan Publishing becomes more strategic and proactive about acquiring new journals, I aim to build on the example of our most fruitful partnerships. We have developed several strategies for better understanding our partners' motivations and needs early on in our planning process. Perhaps most importantly, we have developed a proposal form (Appendix) that asks editors to describe the working relationship they envision with Michigan Publishing (among other things). There is no single right answer to this question, but asking it establishes the expectation that our partnership will require mutual engagement and collaboration, and gives us a glimpse of the partners' point of view.

Asking [editors to describe the working relationship] establishes the expectation that our partnership will require mutual engagement and collaboration...

Here's the rub: in order to evaluate the fit of a partners' needs and priorities, we must first be able to clearly identify our own. This is the real challenge that lies before us and, I wager, any library publishing operation. It is easy enough to tell when a partnership is not going well—communication lags, issues fall out of date, the partner does not seem to understand us. But unless we can state clearly what we want out of a publishing partnership, we will not be able to tell whether we have achieved it, or predict whether a future project is likely to. Broad goals to do with affordable, open, responsive preservation and dissemination of the scholarly record keep our eyes on the prize, but for the day-to-day work of sustaining journals and their

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champions, we need to get more specific. There must be something we want. After all, library publishers are people too.

References

Michigan Publishing. (2012). MPublishing Journals [web page]. Retrieved from <http://www.publishing.umich.edu/publications/journals/>

Michigan Publishing. (2012). MPublishing About Us [web page]. Retrieved from <http://www.publishing.umich.edu/about/>

Appendix

Example of Michigan Publishing journal partnership proposal form:

Michigan Publishing works with scholars to design affordable and sustainable publishing solutions for material of interest to scholars in many fields, extends the University of Michigan Library's commitment to the production and distribution of scholarship, and experiments with new possibilities for library-based publishing.

If you are interested in becoming a publishing partner, supplying details about your project will help us determine whether it is a good fit for the services we offer. It will also help us identify which tools and resources might suit your needs most effectively.

Please send A) two letters of reference and B) your completed application to mpublishing@umich.edu. Letters of reference should be written by individual(s) who can speak to the role your publication will play in its field, and administrator(s) able to provide information about levels of institutional commitment and support.

Institutional Information

Please supply your name, email, phone, departmental affiliation, website URL, and name (or working title) of your proposed project. Tell us about any supporting institutional framework, organizations, or societies affiliated with your project. What is the mission or charge of each group for which your publication will be an organ?

Project Goals & Audience

Please describe your project's ultimate purpose. Be as specific as you can in providing context for this project, including the field in which it will be positioned, and the contribution it aims to make to that field. This will help us to assess how the project corresponds to Michigan Publishing's mission, and understand the types of resources (editorial, design, programming, etc.) you will need to achieve your goals.

Please describe your projected (or existing) readership. Is your publication aimed at a general readership, a scholarly readership, or somewhere in between? Are there existing publications for your readership? Where else are your contributors publishing their work? What distinguishes your publication from existing journals in this field?

Content

Please tell us about the current status of your project (e.g. under development, content solicited but not yet written, content finished and in need of distribution channels, etc.). What is your anticipated timeline for the initial launch of your publication, as well as the timeline for future issues (if applicable)?

What kind of formats will your project include? Please describe analog and digital formats that will be included (word processing files, XML/HTML, PDFs, digital images, books or documents to be scanned, multimedia, etc.).

Regarding the appearance and functionality of your publication, please describe what you hope your project will look like and how your readers will engage with it—online and/or in print (if applicable). If there are existing online or print publications that you have looked to for inspiration, please list them, along with specifics about why they appeal to you.

If your project will include both print and online components, please be sure to describe the particulars of each as applicable (frequency of publication, trim size, design requirements, etc.) as well as the role each format plays in meeting your project’s overall goals as described above.

Editorial & Peer Review

Please describe your editorial workflow and the composition of your editorial board (names, titles, affiliations, etc.). If published content will undergo peer review, please describe the criteria for selecting reviewers as well as the guidelines for reviewing submissions.

Financing & Support

Do you plan to make your publication available for free (as an Open Access resource) or for a fee? Please provide a few sentences explaining the rationale behind your choice. Please describe any revenue streams, financial resources, or institutional support that will be used to subsidize your publication, including available labor and expertise at your disposal.