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Christian Libraries for the Next Generation

Expanding Access to Evangelical Literature

Drafted by Gregory A. Smith and presented to the Board of Directors of the Association of Christian Librarians, October 2006

Context

The world of information is undergoing significant change. Over the past 10 years there has been an evident shift towards the dissemination of information via the World Wide Web and other digital networks. Information-seekers show an overwhelming preference for digital retrieval; this generalization is especially true of college students (OCLC, 2005; Wittenberg, 2006).[1] Scholars have a growing range of options for retrieval and management of scholarly information in a digital environment (McGeachin, 2004). For many members of the higher education community, Clifford Lynch's visionary prediction from nearly a decade ago has become a reality:

> *Now that we are starting to see, in libraries, full-text showing up online, I think we are very shortly going to cross a sort of a critical mass boundary where those* ***publications that are not instantly available in full-text will become kind of second-rate in a sense, not because their quality is low, but just because people will prefer the accessibility of things they can get right away****. They will become much less visible to the reader community. (Educom Review Staff, 1997)*

Ironically, though almost all information is "born digital," much of it is still distributed in paper form because of legal restrictions or outdated business models, not because it has consciously been chosen as the best medium for communication. Some segments of the information universe are, however, distributed predominantly in digital form. For example, a 2005 survey of 220 academic journal publishers found that "**90 per cent of the journals published are now available online**, an increase from 75 per cent in 2003. 84 per cent of humanities and social sciences and 93 per cent of STM [science, technology, and medicine] titles are now published in online versions" (Cox & Cox, 2006, p. 1).

Paper-based scholarly publishing is a stressed industry (Thompson, 2005). Information technology was not the first cause of the scholarly communication crisis; in fact, the latter antedates the former. While it is debatable whether technology can mitigate the problems of print-based scholarship, it is beyond question that change is in the air (Wittenberg, 2006). A number of innovative distribution models are emerging in the face of current circumstances:

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[1] OCLC's (2005) research found that college students were more familiar with search engines than libraries (pp. 1/4-5); more favorable to search engines than physical libraries (p. 1/10); likely to attribute to search engines, rather than to online and physical libraries, the virtues of "reliability, cost-effectiveness, ease of use, convenience and speed" (p. 2/9); and apt to state that search engines, more than libraries, fit their lifestyle perfectly (pp. 3/20-21).

- Several mass digitization efforts are underway—most notably, the Google Books Library Project, which involves 6 world-class libraries (Kelly, 2006).

- Two of the search engine giant's products, Google Scholar and Google Book Search, have assumed their place as significant discovery tools for scholarly materials—regardless of whether such resources are managed or owned by libraries. And Microsoft recently entered the fray by launching Live Academic Search.

- Despite the traditions associated with tenure review and graduate education, there are signs of experimentation with new approaches to scholarship: multimedia products, dissemination of large data sets, e-only publications, etc. (Jaschik, 2006; Visel, n.d.).

- Alternative publishing, archiving, and delivery arrangements—among them open access—are drawing the attention of scholars, publishers, and librarians (English, 2005; Kho, 2006; Luther, 2005; Swan & Brown, 2004).

- On the retail side of things, we are seeing what Anderson (2004) has referred to as the "long tail": No longer constrained by the limits of physical display space, online sellers offer a selection of books and media that is amazingly broad, and customers respond by consuming content for which there was little apparent market. This phenomenon has been observed primarily among popular materials; it will be interesting to see if it has equivalents in the scholarly arena.

Within higher education, distance learning initiatives show robust growth. Many American Christian institutions are making efforts to offer programs—degree completion, undergraduate, and graduate—away from traditional campuses.

While Christianity's center of gravity continues to shift decidedly away from the West (Johnson & Chung, 2004), English persists as the language of trade and scholarship and the American Christian community retains a high responsibility as steward of comparative wealth.

In the midst of all this change, anecdotal evidence suggests that access to evangelical literature via the Web is comparatively poor.

- A significant number of evangelical journals are unavailable in full-text databases, whether such databases cover religion, other specific disciplines, or a broad range of disciplines.

- Very few evangelical book publishers disseminate their content through major e-book vendors such as NetLibrary and ebrary.

- Anecdotal evidence suggests that evangelical journals focusing on a specific discipline or profession are inadequately indexed and/or abstracted by the standard tools in their respective fields

- Scholarly tools essential to biblical interpretation (lexica, commentaries, etc.) are available as software packages, not via Web-based subscriptions.

- Databases favoring evangelical literature (e.g., the *Christian Periodical Index*) are not licensed by many secular libraries.

The net result of these circumstances is that (1) evangelical literature is essentially invisible to users of non-Christian libraries; (2) evangelical institutions of higher education are hindered in their efforts to provide viable support to distance learners; and (3) American Christians are missing a great opportunity to minister to seekers and believers in many nations of the world.

The Association of Christian Librarians (ACL) has historically made 3 significant contributions to the development of evangelical libraries across a broad range of denominations:

- successful development of an on-line periodical access tool, the *Christian Periodical Index*, produced by volunteers

- provision of professional development for evangelical librarians, especially those working for Christian colleges, via a professional journal, an annual conference, and listserv communication

- provision of assistance to Christian libraries in developing countries

This report suggests ways that ACL can fulfill the vital role of supporting evangelical education and scholarship in a context that is increasingly global, Web-based, and free from the confines of the traditional college campus.

Strategies

The following pages outline 6 strategies that could lead to making evangelical literature much more accessible via the Web, the dominant delivery platform of our day. No single strategy is likely to remedy fully the current problem, so **it will be imperative to combine multiple approaches**. Nevertheless, it may not be necessary to pursue all of the alternatives simultaneously.

Strategy 1: License copyrighted journals, reference works, and books for inclusion in *Christian Periodical Index* and/or other database(s)

- This is the **classic aggregator model**—what EBSCO, ProQuest, and other major vendors have done in databases such as *Academic Search Elite*, *ProQuest Religion*, *LexisNexis Academic*, etc.

- Under this strategy, ACL/FACL would negotiate with publishers for digital content (whether by purchase or term-based license), then pass content along to libraries in exchange for a subscription fee.

- This approach would be most useful for . . .

  - **magazines with freelance content**; under the *Tasini* ruling these are apparently subject to different treatment than journal articles

  - **in-print books**; publishers would obviously have a strong economic interest in charging for digital delivery that might compete with print sales

Strategy 2: Host a title-by-title digital delivery service on behalf of journal publishers

- Under this strategy, ACL would mediate access to journal content per the directives of publishers, requiring a high level of communication concerning subscriber permissions.

- There are probably precedents for this model in the marketplace. It would bear similarities to services provided by companies as diverse as Berkeley Electronic Press, Blackwell, EBSCO, and Ingenta. However, in contrast with at least some of these examples, ACL would seek to manage electronic access to the journals, not buy them outright.

- This approach could accommodate various access models:

  - partial open access (see Strategy 3 for more on this subject)

  - all retrospective content available to current subscribers

  - content available to institutions consistent with their subscription history (whether or not current subscribers)

- Access could be restricted to specific institutions via IP range or password authentication. Depending on arrangements with publishers, free or discounted access could be provided to institutions in developing nations.

- This strategy could fulfill both preservation and access functions. A true preservation function would require . . .

  - acquisition or generation of high-quality page images

  - a legally binding commitment from the publisher to permit perpetual access, even if publication eventually ceases

- *CPI* records could provide persistent URLs allowing patrons at subscribing institutions to link directly to desired articles.

- The downside of this model is that it would likely involve significant initial and recurring costs.

Strategy 3: Host an open access repository and/or an open access journal service

- This strategy would include two components, both based directly on the principles of the open access (OA) movement that has risen to some prominence in the last few years:[2]

  - a journal publishing venture that assists publishers in converting from subscription-based distribution to OA distribution with alternative revenue sources

  - a repository for e-prints (journal articles, out-of-print books, conference presentations, etc.) deposited by authors

- This approach would be most viable for publications that have little, if any, ongoing market value

- *CPI* or another subscription database could add value to open access content through . . .

  - better descriptive data (abstracts, controlled vocabulary)

  - aggregation with non-open access full-text content

  - aggregation with indexing of non-full-text sources for broad discovery

- Contributors could include . . .

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[2] OA essentially consists of making scholarly information freely accessible to all readers via the Web. It admits two major approaches. **OA journals** are those that have developed economic models under which the costs of publication are not borne by readers, but by authors, sponsoring institutions, grantors, etc. By contrast, **OA repositories** are basically digital drop-boxes where individual scholars can deposit their intellectual property for long-term preservation and access. OA repositories are typically institution-specific or discipline-specific. Both OA journals and OA repositories can be indexed by search engines that use the Open Archives Initiative Protocol for Metadata Harvesting. For various perspectives on OA, see Bailey, 2005; Dryburgh, 2003; English, 2005; Guterman, 2006; Open Society Institute, 2004; Peek, 2006a, 2006b; ProQuest Company, n.d.; Swan & Brown, 2004; Willinsky, 2006.

    - end users—through submission of e-prints, conference papers, etc.

    - libraries—principally through digitization of public domain books

    - publishers—through submission of out-of-print books

- Funding sources could include . . .

    - core funding from ACL (e.g., revenue surplus from *CPI* subscriptions)
      Note: This could be extended to journal publishers in exchange for rights to include content in a subscription database for convenience of end user

    - corporate sponsors (e.g., for-profit publishers), whether at level of entire repository or specific journal(s)

    - institutional sponsors, whether at level of entire repository or specific journal(s)
      Note: ACL could encourage libraries formerly holding subscriptions to specific journals to continue their support of the journal, even at a discounted rate.

    - grant funding secured by FACL; this should be attractive in that access would be provided free to readers worldwide—a worthy philanthropic cause; nevertheless, sustainability after the grant period is a significant concern

    - contributions, in lieu of subscription fees, received from individuals who have previously subscribed to one or more journals

Strategy 4: Digitize retrospective journal content

- Under this approach, ACL would seek permission from publishers to digitize their content. Digitized content could be used in one of two ways:

    - ACL could negotiate for perpetual license to purvey content in a subscription database; this model would be similar to those implemented by the ATLAS and JSTOR digitization projects.

    - If ACL could persuade the publisher to convert to OA model, it would make sense to dump retrospective content into an OA repository or journal service.

- This kind of project might attract funding from a charitable foundation.

Strategy 5: Negotiate for consortial discounts on full-text databases developed by vendors and/or publishers

- This model is essentially an expansion of what ACL did with NetLibrary over the last year.
- Its strength is that it relieves ACL from the financial risks and staffing burdens involved in bringing a full-text product to market.
- ACL should consider securing group discounts for products such as *ProQuest Religion*, EBSCO's *Religion & Philosophy Collection*, Logos Research Systems' *SeminaryLibrary.com*, the *Christianity Today Library*, the Theological Research Exchange Network's e-docs collection, and other full-text resources.

Strategy 6: Advocate for the development of relevant full-text products on behalf of the Christian higher education community

- This strategy has to do with developing ACL's identity as an interest group that speaks vocally for the information needs of Christian higher education institutions. Target audiences to be reached by ACL could include book and journal publishers, e-book vendors, software companies, database aggregators, etc.
- ACL's role would be to . . .
  - communicate clearly the needs that are inadequately addressed by products and services currently on the market
  - advise vendors concerning desirable content and interface features
- One way that ACL could implement this strategy would be to lobby major vendors to include evangelical publications—both journals and books—in their aggregated databases.
- This approach is based on the theory that . . .
  - evangelical institutions' needs overlap enough to create a substantial market for Web-based information resources
  - ACL's membership represents the evangelical institution market
  - ACL's members could coordinate discussion to develop unified messages that would carry much more authority with publishers and other vendors than individual libraries could in isolation

- The location of the 2007 annual conference in Grand Rapids, Michigan, seems strategic, as the city is known as a center of evangelical publishing. This event offers unique opportunities for bringing the Christian publishing and library communities face to face for discussion that is urgently needed.

Competition

ACL will surely face some competition in the religiously-oriented information market space. Entities other than ACL—publishers, software companies, professional and scholarly associations, and others—have already developed, and will continue to develop—resources and services that mediate information to researchers and institutions interested in evangelical literature. Even though such products and services may not overlap directly with *CPI* or other potential ACL products, their presence in the market will surely compete for the limited funding available to ACL's customers. Accordingly, we need to consider carefully ACL's relationship to those products and services.

Below is a list of possible responses to competition, originally drafted in relation to the *SeminaryLibrary.com* service. It is applicable to other forms of competition as well.

- **Ignore it.** This option seems ridiculous given that we aspire to offer product(s) within the same market space (religiously-oriented full-text databases).

- **Seek consortial discounts for members.** This is a worthy option in that it (1) can attach value to ACL membership, (2) may encourage libraries to subscribe, thus ensuring that the product will have continuing viability, and (3) will relieve ACL of the need to develop a similar product or service.

- **Partner with the other vendor to shape the development of the product (both content and interface).** ACL could represent the evangelical library community in a manner that would be more effective than any individual library could. This could result in development of a superior product. This option would be compatible with seeking consortial discounts for members.

- **Partner with the other vendor to embed their content within a larger, ACL-sponsored database.** The advantage of this option would be that it would allow end users to approach one-stop shopping—journals, books, and anything else that we may offer (theses/dissertations, reference works, etc.). If ACL pursued this route, I would recommend negotiating for reduced pricing, then offering at full price to end users on account of convenience. ACL's

license would not be exclusive (i.e., the other party would still be able to market the product as a standalone database).

- **Create a competitor product.** This would obviously be risky. It could be necessary if we felt that none of the other options were resulting in good outcomes for ACL-affiliated libraries. We may find that a lot of unique public domain resources in our collections do not stand much of a chance of being digitized by Logos, Google, Open Content Alliance, etc. In such a case, it might be best for us to set up some sort of open archive to which various ACL libraries could contribute the fruits of their book digitization.

Conclusion

If we are inclined to enter a segment of the market where we are likely to face substantial competition, we should consider the following factors:

- **Penetrating the market(s)**
  Determining who we want our audience(s) to be will help to decide whether to develop a full-text product/service, and if so, what its focus should be.

  - Non-Christian academic market: NetLibrary is an established, recognized e-book vendor. E-book titles made available through their service will likely be much more visible to (and, ultimately, available in) non-Christian libraries. The same can be said of content in aggregated journal databases maintained by EBSCO, ProQuest, etc. If we are concerned that evangelical literature have a chance of penetrating the secular academy, it probably makes a lot of sense to make provisions for it to be aggregated with non-Christian sources on similar topics. After all, not many non-Christian libraries subscribe to our current product, *CPI*.

  - Evangelical market: Some books—perhaps concentrated by publisher, subject, and/or author—will probably hold little appeal outside the evangelical subculture, but will prove essential to institutions (and hence libraries) within that community.

    - For example, conservative reference works supporting biblical studies have not emerged in a Web-based format. These resources are critical to the Bible college and seminary curricula.

    - In theory, ACL could focus on developing digital products that would not compete with NetLibrary (or, for that matter, ATLA, etc.), but would be heavily used in evangelical

institutions, whether they are focused on ministry training or the liberal arts.

- **Financing our venture**
  There are substantial costs involved in bringing a digital product to market—staff, hardware, software development, etc. Furthermore, copyrighted digital content has to be licensed. These costs would have to be balanced against the revenues likely to be gained from purchasers/subscribers. There is a risk involved, with a potential for profit or loss. What level of risk is ACL able to tolerate? Where should it focus its limited resources?

- **Adding value**

  - Establishing ACL's continuing viability?

    - Libraries, librarians, and the associations that represent them are under threat in today's environment, where essential information functions increasingly take place outside traditional libraries. ACL might solidify its long-term viability somewhat by demonstrating that Christian librarians—in the aggregate rather than in the confines of their local institutions—are assuming responsibility for the continuing availability of evangelical content.

    - On the other hand, we might demonstrate our value in other ways—for example, banding together to represent evangelical interests in the information marketplace. The latter approach could lead to outcomes such as greater availability of evangelical literature in popular search tools; the negotiation of purchase/subscription discounts for ACL members; and clear messages to corporations regarding the development of products with content and features that are responsive to the needs of evangelical libraries and their patrons.

  - Better intellectual access?

    - At least in theory, our understanding of evangelical literature could empower us to create better metadata for evangelical information sources than those produced by the industry at large. However, we could also be surprised by the power of new search technologies. As an example, I am working on a research paper in the field of rhetoric this semester. I have been surprised to find Google Scholar my best discovery tool for resources on the subject. By contrast, databases in the fields of language and communication have done little for me. It is at least possible that we would encounter similar

outcomes if substantial evangelical resources were embedded within the major search tools of the day.[3]

In conclusion, **perhaps the best course of action for ACL to take is to commission a full-scale market analysis**—ideally, conducted by a well qualified agency—to generate business intelligence about the size of the market for evangelical information, the most obvious gaps presented by the current array of resources and services, and other strategic information. Armed with this analysis, ACL could follow up with appropriate action—both unilaterally and in partnership with other organizations.

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[3] Along these lines, another ACL member recently shared with me that Amazon.com's "Search Inside the Book" feature allowed her to provide more effective reference service than she might have been able to do using tools and methods traditionally associated with librarianship.

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