



Publishers find a niche on the Net

The Internet has been a boon for small publishers, making their products accessible to readers all around the world, according to Susan Hawthorn, publisher at feminist imprint Spinifex Press.

Speaking at a recent seminar presented by the Communications Law Centre and the Victoria University of Technology, Ms Hawthorn said that access to a global readership was important for the survival of a small publisher in a niche market. A website was an excellent cross-marketing tool for publishers: people purchasing a book were made aware of the website, while those contacting the website became aware of books for sale.

Ms Hawthorn said that while there were few financial advantages from Internet publishing at present, there was great potential for the future. Transactions over the Internet would eventually become sufficiently secure for people to feel confident in buying good and services online. By becoming involved early Spinifex Press would have the skills to exploit Net publishing successfully in future, she said.

Spinifex took the approach of letting people see their works on the Net, hoping that this would lead to sales, she said. So far, only sections of books had been posted, and there was a copyright notice on every page. She was tempted to put an entire book on the Net, but had not yet done so.

The Spinifex site is linked to many other sites which may interest purchasers of feminist literature. They now have a site devoted to feminist publishing in Asia, with some information on the Pacific.

Ms Hawthorne, who is also a lecturer in the VUT Department of Communication and Language Studies, has been a publisher for more than a decade. She became interested in multimedia in 1995, after finding that

CD-ROMs were less interesting and flexible than the Internet. That year, Spinifex Press published *Nattering on the Net* by Dale Spender, followed by *Internet for Women*.

Spinifex took the approach of letting people see their works on the Net, hoping that this would lead to sales, she said. So far, only sections of books had been posted, and there was a copyright notice on every page.

The Spinifex website was established in early 1996. It first consisted only of the imprint's catalogue. Despite this, Ms Hawthorn said, they were pleasantly surprised by the number of hits the site received. While the website now has more material on it, including information on the fifty books it has published so far, the number of hits has declined in 1997, possibly because of the rapid growth of websites in general.

Credibility gap

Michael McMahon, a Melbourne lawyer and arts management consultant, also addressed the seminar, and warned that the reliability of material on the Internet should always be questioned.

In particular, if material on the Net was not dated there was reason to question whether it was continually updated, he said.

The suggestion that 'what the Internet needs is a good editor' had some truth to it, he said.

Mr McMahon said that it had been only a few years ago that the emphasis of electronic publishing was the CD-ROM. However, on-line activities had burgeoned due to their extra flexibility.

The contents of a CD could generally be dealt with in a traditional legal manner, but the on-line environment presented new challenges, he said.

Mr McMahon noted that s.31 of the Copyright Act 1968 talks of a 'bundle of rights' existing in copyright. On-line there was a new range of potential copyright uses not covered by this traditional bundle of rights.

There was no right covering an artistic work being sent out over a diffusion service, such as the Internet, for example.

The characteristics of the new electronic media posed a threat to traditional copyright law, he said. In particular, making and disseminating pirate copies of copyright works was much easier when they were digitised.

Mr McMahon said that a number of existing laws do regulate the digital world, including copyright, broadcasting, telecommunications, defamation, obscenity and censorship laws. But how these traditional principles should be enforced in this area was something that courts and parliaments would have to deal with.

A likely development, he said, would be a series of international treaties and conventions dealing with copyright in the digital world. He suggested that just as copyright collection societies such as the Copyright Agency Limited collect and distribute payments for present uses such as photocopying, a new agency or agencies may be created to deal with the collection of digital payments.

Digital technology had the capacity to track uses of copyright material, and to overcome some of the difficulties in tracking use and misuse of digital material, he said.

Bruce Shearer