Digital publishing coming of age

Seema Sindhu / New Delhi February 13, 2008

E-PUBLISHING: As high-speed Internet access invades the average household, digital publishing is evolving into big business.

When Brian Murray, group president of HarperCollins, said, “The younger generations are consuming information in a different way. They may not necessarily be going into bookshops. They are spending time on Google, MySpace, Facebook, author websites, Yahoo and MSN,” he meant the augment of the age of digitisation of book publishing.

As high-speed internet access invades the average household, an odd 320 million households with broadband access in 2007 worldwide, digital publishing (e-books, e-papers, online research papers, etc) is evolving into big business. Publishers are taking their content online to reach out to a wider audience across geographies.

Most universities and libraries are digitising books (fiction, research, white papers, etc); advantages being that people can read samples online and then buy books online or buy a part of the book that they want as opposed to buying the whole book.

Globally, digital publishing is a $430 billion industry. In the west, digitisation has witnessed a revolutionary growth. Microsoft and the British Library announced a partnership to digitise 25 million pages from 100,000 out-of-copyright books in the British Library’s collection in 2006.

New gizmos (iPods, PDAs, e-readers, etc) facilitating ‘anywhere reading’ have provided with much impetus. Sony Reader, Sony’s pint-sized e-book reader broke open the e-book market.

In China, lately, the government decided to supply 165 million students with an e-reader in order to avoid all the physical costs associated with textbooks.

India has been a big beneficiary of digitisation in terms of outsourcing. The Indian publishing industry grew by over 15 per cent this fiscal year.

Major international book and journal publishers such as Oxford, Cambridge University Press, Prentice Hall, Macmillan, Elsevier and Springer have been outsourcing a lot of business to India in content transformation (which has a price advantage of 40 per cent). And the work goes beyond the printed word to CDs and other electronic formats.

There is much more ahead. The Rs 80 billion publishing industry in India is riding a wave of success, thanks to innovative marketing strategies like blog discussions, e-mail to readers and preview booklets to promote new titles.

Of the total titles produced in India, 45 per cent are in English, making India the third largest producer
of books in the language after US and Britain.

While STM (science, technology and management) is the core business in digitisation, the literati is not very enthusiastic about e-publishing, reason being the readers’ approach.

Steven Inchcoombe, chairman of MPS Technologies, a part of Macmillan group of companies, says, “I pick a Jeffrey Archer book, the way I absorb the information is on a pleasure-time basis. It is not like a pharmaceutical or biotech researcher or academic researcher like Harvard medical school, who is doing research on the 9-5 everyday. More than 90 per cent of what they are reading online is their work. If they need to do significant kind of research, then they need to crosslink searching a very large quality.”

There is sluggish progress on arts front. “I think there are several reasons. Readers want to read the book by the natural author and the story and the material is essentially a large volume of text. Hyperlinking or something like that robs the reader of interest,” opines Inchcoombe.

Ranjit Singh, president and CEO of Aptara, a leader in content transformation, says: “The publishers and authors are not aware of the business model — how the publishers will earn their profit and how the authors will get compensated. Secondly, distribution is another concern as one copy you buy online can be shared with 1 million people unlike a physical book.”

And for that matter, ‘profit’ remains a concern to publishers and authors when they think of e-publishing. To tackle this concern, publishing companies are inventing innovative technology.

Recently, MPS Technologies launched one such widget — BookStore Discovery. BookStore Discovery facilitates viral marketing and gives publishers full control over how much of their content is available to browse through online. It integrates seamlessly into the clients’ existing websites and allows them to retain their current shipping cart and payment process.

Such technology helps maximise print and non-print sales. Research shows that books offering a ‘browse inside’ functionality see a 10 per cent uplift in sales compared with books that do not have ‘browse inside’ available. Leveraged with new mediums and technology, certainly, digital publishing is slated to revel good times.

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Posted By : Andrew on 13 February,2008

New media can work alongside the old, creating a word-of-mouth buzz and giving instant access to material. I have recently made a film for YouTube to promote my forthcoming novel "The Overnight Fame of Steffi McBride" (anyone interested can view it at www.steffimcbride.com) If YouTube can bring musicians like the Arctic Monkeys to the attention of tens of millions of people, it can do the same for journalists, novelists and every other kind of communicator.

Posted By : mapai on 13 February,2008

This is a very informative article with lots of stats. Can the author shed some light on the availability of the STM books in hard/soft cover as low priced editions in India?.Generally even if the books are produced in India they are priced at the EU/US level. The explosion of the real knowledge economy hinges upon availability of state of the art material for researchers in S and T at reasonable prices. Sharing an e book is a good idea. M.A.Pai mapai@uiuc.edu