

It's a digital world: write, edit, index

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It's a **digital world**. Wherever you go, wherever you look, people are using their mobiles to communicate, read, research and share information. How did this happen? What does it mean for books? What's happened to writing, editing, indexing and even reading? As a digital publisher, I'm coming to grips with the changes and the opportunities. This is my attempt to unravel the changes and to persuade you of the benefits of reading and writing in a digital world.

A digital publisher

As a digital publisher, I work with government agencies and private sector clients to convert their print-ready signature publications into alternative digital formats. By alternative digital formats, I mean content in HTML format and in ePUB or mobi format.

The effort required to convert print publications into digital publications is significant and can be costly. An additional layer of complexity is added by the need to comply with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG2.0).

I've been thinking of ways to avoid this time-consuming and costly process. It is my belief that we should be producing content in a form that is native to the internet, namely HTML - without resorting to a conversion process from a print technology,

My talk is about ways of making content readable, findable and accessible online. I used to be a book maker, which is why I thought previously the way to making content available online was by starting with a print publication, but that thinking and those requirements have changed thanks to new online tools.

My own conversion process started many years ago, specifically in 1979 when I joined **Tafelberg Publishers** in Cape Town, South Africa. I worked there for 16 years under Jurgen Fomm. He was a master bookmaker and I was his apprentice.

For years I sat alongside Mr Fomm, learning about type, paper, binding, reproduction, printing and publishing. For a very long time, all I was allowed to do was to sketch typefaces so that I could learn their properties: were they short and squat or tall and thin? Did they suit children's books or adult titles? It took a long time before I was allowed to specify the type requirements for a whole book, but what I learnt from Mr Fomm was invaluable.

The eighties was a time of significant publishing change: during those early years, we implemented the first ISBN and the first barcode. We changed from publishing hardback books with dust jackets to paperbacks with laminated covers. We moved from individual colour separations to four-colour scanning. Printers increased their capacity from one colour to four colours. We pioneered offshore printing for complex coffee table books. And the biggest change of all was the personal computer (PC). In 1980, Mr Fomm petitioned the Board to get a PC - and was turned down. The following year, he again lobbied the Board and was reluctantly allowed to buy one PC for the Production Department. We all know what happened after that: PCs revolutionised the way content was produced.

In 1993, I attended the [Frankfurt Book Fair](#). While there I went to the first ever Electronic Media Conference where I heard Peter Kindersley of Dorling and Kindersley Publishers talk about the sweeping changes that were taking place in publishing. I listened to a presentation on Adobe Acrobat - and I knew I had to do something to take advantage of this new digital world.

It wasn't until we moved to Australia that I was able to fulfil my ambition: in 1998 I produced my first ecommerce website [selling ebooks](#). This was in Wagga Wagga - and everyone thought I was mad, but I assured them that one day there would be a device that would enable them to read digital books - and when in 2011, the first iPad was delivered, I was vindicated.

In 2003 we moved to Canberra where I joined the Australian National University as one of the founder members of the ANU E Press. There we put into practice the ebook skills I'd learnt in Wagga. Two years later I moved to the National Library of Australia as Web Content Manager and eventually as Director Web Publishing in the IT Division. At the Library I learnt about website management and technology, but more importantly I learnt about user engagement and user experience. I learnt that publishing online is not about me, but about you, the users.

In 2010 I moved to Parliament House as Director Publishing in the Parliamentary Library. It was here that I returned to my publishing roots, once again producing digital content. And this is where my story really starts.

Readable content

So what does it mean to make content readable? Twenty years ago, when the internet was new, reading online was a dirty word. Remember how the text used to fill the screen from top to bottom and side to side? The type was in 10 pt Times Roman, which is a font designed for newspaper columns – not computer screens.

In 2015, content on screen is readable thanks to web standards and appropriate design. Web and mobile pages are produced with us readers in mind – the type on the screen is not just for the benefit of systems or web developers – it is designed for logical and pleasurable reading.

My preferred reading experience is to move seamlessly between my MacBook and my iPhone or to switch to my iPad. I read books on my iPad and pick up exactly where I've left off on my iPhone – with no discernible difference in quality or design.

I read **Amazon Kindle** almost exclusively. I buy and download all the latest titles to my iPad, which automatically syncs with my iPhone and my dedicated Kindle reader. I've been reading this way since I got my first iPad four years ago. I very rarely read a print book any more.

I particularly like the Kindle interface as I can control the way the publication looks. I can choose the font size, type style, scrolling or page views and Amazon remembers where I left off if I switch between devices.

Apple iBooks enables us to embed audio and video, enhancing the user's experience. This ensures that readers stay within the publication, removing any requirement to view the video in YouTube or another delivery platform. As a digital publisher and producer, my choice is ePUB, which is an open source non-proprietary product that works on all devices. It has fast become the de facto publishing option.

Editors and indexers may like the Amazon Kindle **inbuilt dictionary**. Its fun to check the meaning of words, even if I think I know these quite well. Having the dictionary built into the application means I never have to leave my device. And talking about never leaving the device, I can toggle between applications. Often I pause my novel to review my emails, check in with Facebook or Twitter and catch up with the news. All of which I do before returning to my novel. I've read that reading online leads to a shortened attention span, but as I've always had a short attention span, it means I can now put my reading and researching preferences to good use.

Reading on iPad, iPhone and occasionally Kindle is for me a good experience. So how do we achieve that pleasurable reader experience?

HTML

We do that by using HTML, the language of the internet. I believe in liberating content, freeing it from the shackles of print or PDF. When we stop producing for print and start producing for screen, we achieve opportunities and quality that exceed print alone.

My presentation is not about HTML, per se. Instead it is about using and producing digital content, taking advantage of existing tools and software to deliver an enjoyable reading and writing experience, delivered through mobiles and tablets – and output in HTML.

Mobiles and tablets

To produce this readable, pleasurable content, I suggest we say goodbye to the desktop. We have moved so rapidly into a mobile digital world that the PC will soon be a thing of the past. A recent market study suggests that there are 16 million active smartphones in Australia. Clearly there is a need to produce relevant and responsive content for this market – and an appetite from users to consume this content.

I think we should move away from retrofitting or converting print books for online display to creating fresh, readable digital content that works on mobile and handheld devices.

Findable content

So digital content can be readable, but how do users find it? In the old days, to find information, you'd usually read a book, which you may have borrowed from the library or bought from a shop. The book contained content in a closed format, generally accessed in linear form with a contents page to assist you, perhaps footnotes and maybe an index. It was unimaginable to share the content other than copying from the book, which might incur fines if you breached copyright.

Digital content, published online can be shared, referred to, copied and more importantly, found. All our publications that we've converted from print to HTML have persistent page identifiers or URLs that are meaningful to users (not machines). When you deliver a publication via individual web pages, you provide the user with a number of individual text pages. This is quite different from a print book that is delivered as a single PDF.

One of our early clients was the Global Carbon Capture and Storage Institute (GCCSI). They harvest hundreds of print publications, which they deliver as PDF from their website. In 2011 they consulted me to help them produce these PDF as ebooks. We ran a pilot project to convert 10 titles to ePUB for iOS devices, and mobi for Amazon Kindle. As part of the conversion process, we provided the HTML files. These files, together with the ePUB and mobi, were published as **digital publications** at their website.

Over a five-month period, the GCCSI measured access to the HTML pages as opposed to the print PDF published online. They discovered that access to the HTML pages was four times as much as access to the online PDF. This persuaded them of the value of producing their content in HTML and we subsequently converted hundreds of their titles to HTML, significantly increasing access to their content and the knowledge within these research reports.

Supercharged indexing

As part of the HTML publishing, we linked to the Institute's glossary of terms. This enables users to do two things: access an **online definition**, and also find other content that contains

the original term. This is an automated indexing process that cuts out hours of manual indexing. It can be applied to specific glossaries, using the client's own terms. The automation was developed by my colleague Dr Jason Guo and is linked to his content uploader available as a Drupal plug-in.

We've considered making content readable and findable. How can we ensure that online content is accessible?

Accessible content

Why should you worry whether your content is accessible? What does that mean? The World Wide Web Consortium has published a standard called the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. The Australian government has adopted this standard and mandated that all government websites should be compliant to a certain level. These Guidelines are dense and challenging to implement or even read. I suggest that at very least you familiarise yourselves with the four web accessibility principles: digital content should be perceivable, operable, understandable and robust.

When we convert print PDFs to HTML, we ensure that the content meets the web accessibility standards. By that I mean that complex tables are delivered as text; all image objects have alt texts; where necessary text alternatives are provided for complex graphs; and images are resized to fit web page widths. Because we work with various government agencies, we are dependent upon their web templates and styles to determine the visual representation. Most agencies these days ensure that colour contrasts and other visual cues are web accessible.

Web accessibility is not just for visually impaired users: its for all of us. It standardises the way websites are built, written and designed, which means that all users can understand the grammar of the internet. Without web standards and therefore without accessible content, we would be forced to accept a lowered and less usable standard of reading digital content.

Measurable content

According to David McCandless, all information and knowledge is beautiful – and I encourage you to buy his books. David creates beautiful graphs, this one entitled 'Farty animals' depicts

annual methane emissions in equivalent CO2. But how practical or easy is it to measure digital content? We don't all have David's talent to turn our websites into gorgeous graphics, but we can use freely available tools like Google Analytics to measure access to our content.

Google loves fresh HTML content. It regularly indexes new web pages. As Google finds and delivers multiple web pages, we always get a better return than just one PDF. For example, imagine a 200-page book delivered online. It is a single entity, which can be searched, but how laborious is it to rely on the 'Find' function? Now imagine this content as individual web pages, divided into chapters or perhaps sections. Suddenly your content can be shared, found and absorbed by users searching for that very specific bit of information and detail.

Authoring online content

Medium – instant online publishing

Moving into authoring online content, I'd like to consider how we write online, using Medium as an example. Medium is a **blogging platform** dedicated to long form writing. Blogging is not new, but this site has additional functionality: it declares up front how many minutes it will take me to read an article. For example, a piece may be a three minute read or it may be a ten minute read.

Designed and delivered by the Twitter founders, Medium provides us with an online writing experience that I, as an occasional author, enjoy and want to use.

I'd like to share with you a few points from a Medium post entitled, 'Ten reasons why I love writing on Medium':

1. Medium is simple

There's no complicated setup process, no superfluous options to choose from: signing up, writing a story, inserting an image, formatting text, publishing — is simple and usually just one or two clicks away,

2. Anything I write will look awesome on Medium

Medium's editor is easy to use and contains just the right amount of formatting options. Medium cares deeply about typography (great fonts and a constant push for improved type) and photography (a few precise photo options, from inline images to huge immersive photographs and photo grids).

3. My Medium stories look great on every device.

Stories are easy to read on everything from small phones to large displays. They're also friendly to screen readers and printers. This is a critical point as it's my expectation as a user that I have a consistent experience across all my reading devices.

4. I can collaborate with others as I write

Medium makes it easy to involve others while my story is still being created. I can share my story with a select group of people, and they can leave notes before it's published — and get credit for helping out, plus a notification the moment the story goes live.

5. Medium makes it easy to build a following

Medium allows you to build an audience of readers — either starting with your existing Facebook and Twitter networks, or independently.

There are prominent follow buttons on my stories and my profile, so people interested in my writing can stay up-to-date.

6. Medium encourages readers (and me) to share stories

Medium starts with the basic building block of the web — beautiful, readable URLs — and adds prominent sharing options so that readers who like my stories can spread them further on social networks or over email.

Social sharing is also part of the core Medium user interface; stories recommended by your circle of friends will be surfaced in your reading list, and faces of friends making recommendations are highly visible next to stories.

7. Medium makes it easy for readers to engage with my stories

1. People can leave notes for me or for the world. The notes can be attached to individual words or entire paragraphs, and can easily grow into conversations. It's a great way of talking about anything from typos to the premise of entire stories.
2. If a note is not enough, Medium makes it easy to respond to one story with another story.
3. When people recommend my story, they can also leave a note explaining why they're recommending it. I get notified every time this happens, and Medium groups together all recommend notes for every story I write — making me feel good about my output.

8. Medium presents great stats

On Medium, I get immediate, up-to-date information about how my stories are doing on a dedicated stats page.

One of my favourite Medium features is a one-click way to see what people on Twitter are saying about any one of my stories.

9. Things I write belong to me, not Medium

My stories on Medium belong to me, and at any given moment I can easily download an archive of all my content.

10. It's fun seeing Medium evolve

Medium is getting better all the time; many of the abovementioned features are brand new or recently improved. Just in the last few months, Medium added:

- embeds: a nicer way of linking of stories together
- responses: a streamlined way for people to respond to stories with other stories
- translation: a way for others to translate my stories to other languages and broaden their reach
- importing: a way to try out or convert your prior stories to Medium
- a way for people without Medium accounts to follow an author via email

I hope you heard in those tips some of the things I've been talking about: embedded content; great typography; the ability to share stories; a consistent user experience. I've published a couple of articles at Medium and I confirm that the writing experience is excellent.

So Medium is good for articles and journalism, but what about novels?

The Vanishing Game - a complex digital novel

The Vanishing Game is an interactive digital novel by international best-selling author William Boyd. Commissioned by Land Rover and hosted on a custom Tumblr page, it is a multi-sensory storytelling experience of Boyd's original tale of adventure and intrigue. It provides readers with a variety of multimedia options to experience the story on a deeper level: you can read the words, listen to the narration, enjoy the accompanying music, view the photographs and experience the animation - all in one digital object.

Boyd was paid in the low six figures for the project. He signed on because Land Rover made so few requests. He says:

'They said they wanted an adventure and they said, "Somewhere in this adventure it would be good if a Land Rover appeared." But it was left entirely to me the extent I concentrated on that or made it fleeting and passing. I invented the story, I invented the characters; I invented the locations.'

Embedded in *The Vanishing Game*'s interactive experience are snippets of driving journeys from actual Land Rover owners. These are curated through the #WellStoried hashtag. If you scroll over certain words and passages, the story will pause as these owners' personal driving adventures are displayed on-screen.

The Land Rover logo appears at the top of the screen and the occasional word or phrase - such as 'river' or 'cross country' - links to a picture of a Land Rover or a real-life story about a Land Rover user. Other than that, the sponsor is not very evident.

Producing a sponsored book is not a new idea, but making the product available in this rich experience, using online technology to deliver words, pictures, narration, music and interaction is truly innovative - and I think a great model for future curated content.

MasterDocs - a collaborative authoring tool

Moving on to a more corporate publishing model, I'd like briefly to mention MasterDocs, which my colleague Richard Stanford has discussed elsewhere at this conference. Developed in Canberra by Oxide, MasterDocs is a collaborative authoring tool for corporate writers. It makes it easy to share documents, ensure version control, and enable 'follow you' access. If you've used Google Docs, then you'll be familiar with the functionality, but MasterDocs provides you with much more. It is ideal for teams authoring and collaborating on large documents where the content is not all sourced or written by one person. All the text passages and images can be used and re-used, reminding me of what Peter Kindersley said in 1993 at the Frankfurt Book Fair: 'If you've drawn a duck for one publication, you can use and re-use the same duck for many publications'. This is exactly what MasterDocs allows you to do: author once and reuse many times.

Crowdfunding

But what about the money? As publishing professionals, you are familiar with the traditional publishing model: an author writes a book; he or she delivers that book to a publisher. The publisher assumes the financial responsibility for producing the book and pays the author a royalty on any sales. Based on the examples of Medium and *The Vanishing Game*, it's clear this business model has changed. In Boyd's case, he was paid handsomely: he has a high profile and is a well-known author. In the Medium environment, no money changes hands: as an author, you are not paid. There are other rewards like wide exposure, handsome articles and shared experiences, but authors cannot live by those alone.

Unbound – crowdfunding for books

Fortunately, there's a new publishing model out there: crowdfunding. Non-traditional and independent publishers are using the generosity of friends and strangers to test the interest and potential financial returns prior to embarking on costly publishing endeavours.

Unbound is a British crowdfunding site that specialises in books. Unbound publishes sample chapters, videos and author content to attract interest from potential readers and buyers. Unbound calls for funding, and rewards pledges with book-related incentives. If the books don't reach the targeted financial requirement, the publication doesn't proceed.

I believe that giving readers a say and an opportunity to participate in the publishing process is an exciting development. Previously, publishers could choose to produce a title based on personal preference or an intuitive decision - neither of which would guarantee an income and might lead to books languishing in a warehouse. Now, with assured funding, the risk of publishing is removed and only the relevant and required number of books is produced and consumed. The author and the publisher both receive remuneration and there is no wastage in terms of over printing.

Kickstarter case study

I'd like to close with a case study: my own crowdfunded publishing experience.

At the start of last year, I approach the Belconnen Arts Centre, offering my services as a volunteer digital publisher. I wanted to work with an artist, as opposed to an author, to expand my digital publishing experience. They put me in touch with Jenny Manning, who was scheduled to exhibit her works in April.

Jenny and I hit it off. We decided to make an ebook featuring images and text from her exhibition. She was enthusiastic about an enduring version of her exhibition. I was keen to experiment with more than just text and images and decided to include audiovisual content. I filmed Jenny with my iPhone, talking about the inspiration for her work. We produced a second short video showing Jenny's sketch technique.

Over the years, I'd produced scores of ePUB conversions, but this was the first time I attempted to produce original content. Essentially it was like making any book: Jenny provided the text and photographs; my team designed and delivered the files. While I was happy to work in a voluntary capacity, I wanted to be able to pay my staff so I suggested to Jenny that we run a Kickstarter project to fund the production.

Putting together a Kickstarter campaign is a lot of fun: we filmed ourselves talking about *Bowls, Baskets, Blankets and Boats*. I wrote the promotional texts and Jenny offered signed prints to anyone who pledged more than \$20. Our target fundraiser was \$1000, which I'm pleased to say we achieved within the time frame. The way Kickstarter works is if you don't achieve your target, no money changes hands.

Running the campaign, I learnt that most funding comes from family and friends. Even though I spend considerable time on social media, I found it challenging to source more funding. I think only one of my colleagues contributed; the rest of the money came from Jenny's followers. But we achieved our aim, which for me was to make Jenny's work available for free and forever - published in ePUB at iTunes. And for Jenny it was another opportunity to showcase her artworks and therefore a good outcome.

The end

So in summary, the internet offers us many opportunities to curate and compile digital content, delivered in a readable, findable and accessible way through mobiles and tablets. I hope I have inspired you to consider new ways of reading, writing and publishing content online. It is, after all, a digital world where we can all participate, create and more importantly, have fun.

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