Issues in Mobile and Cross-platform Content Delivery

Report from the first Semantico Online Publishing Symposium

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The first Semantico Online Publishing Symposium was held recently in London to discuss implications of the shift to mobile for publishers and information providers. An invited audience of publishing industry leaders debated the issues under Chatham House rules. Delegates were from organisations including Oxford University Press, Nature Publishing Group, Macmillan Education, Wiley-Blackwell, CrossRef, CABI, BSI Group and the Institute of Engineering and Technology.

The discussion was in three parts, covering the following themes:
- Devices and technology;
- Business models;
- Future strategy options.

Part 1. Devices and technology

Forget devices, focus on the underlying technology

If proof were needed that these are nervous times for publishers, just consider the case of Flash. Not only does Apple not support Flash technology on the iPhone or iPad, but the world’s most popular video-sharing site, YouTube (owned by Google), is quietly in the process of moving away from Flash video. In addition the emerging HTML5 standard, which aims to reduce the need for such proprietary plug-ins, looks likely to make it all but obsolete. So will Flash die? Almost certainly, say the tech-heads.

This is appalling news for publishers with large amounts of legacy online content in Flash. It also serves as an example of one of the strongest themes to emerge from our Symposium, which is that publishers and information providers who hope to thrive (or at the very least survive) in the turbulent
times ahead would be well-advised to disregard, to a certain extent, the hype and wow surrounding high-profile device launches like that of the iPad, and focus on the underlying technology issues in cross-platform delivery. That’s where the real uncertainty lies. Marvellous though they are, it’s not about the devices – but about the content, and the user’s experience of the content.

There is no denying that the iPhone has instituted something of a paradigm shift in the delivery of content, but notwithstanding this undoubted fact, a good deal of skepticism was evinced by our delegates about what is perhaps the most significant innovation to be introduced along with that device, the App Store.

A significant strand of opinion believes that an app is really not that much different from a mobile-optimised website. As far as the user is concerned there is little difference. In the not-too-distant future, it was predicted, you will download something you think is an app but you will actually be interacting with a website optimised for mobile use.

The iPad experience of web surfing (about 42% of our small but select sample had had hands-on experience of the device) might make us question whether we need apps at all, in the opinion of one delegate. Maybe what we need is not apps but better-designed, more mobile-friendly websites.

**So far, so heretical**
However, there is a counter-argument to this. From the user's point of view, the experience of using an app is utterly different from that of using a PC. One virtue of the app is that it does a very narrow, specific thing. Apps streamline our use of the internet and cut out – or at least reduce – much of the pain associated with PCs (e.g. constant downloads of plug-ins, patches and updates, the state of total war we have to live in with viruses, spyware and spam, etc.).

A website is always going to feel like a place you go to, to harvest a crop of information. In the case of an app, the crop is turned into biofuel: information becomes the petrol that gets your knowledge car from A to B – to a designated destination. A website might be a field of dreams (if you'll excuse a criminally over-used film reference), but an app helps you actually do something.

These two points of view are not, in essence, irreconcilable. It’s a matter of perspective; of whether you are looking at things from the producer’s end of things or from the consumer’s. If you strip away the wow, yes, an app is no more than a website. But what produces the ‘wow’ is fantastic usability – and that’s a matter of primary importance for most end-users.

**Marvellous though they are, it’s not about the devices – but about the content, and the user’s experience of the content.**

Search lags on mobile
… Which is not to say that the current generation of mobile devices together embody a giant leap forward for usability. In actual fact they can look like a bad step backwards.

In particular, search took a while to get established on the desktop internet, and to reach its current state of utility. By comparison, search on mobile is very slow at the moment, even on 3G networks. Also, it is not that easy to find the app you want: the discoverability of apps is not great. This situation is liable to get worse before it gets better, as apps and app stores proliferate.

A certain frustration is surely excusable for those who soldiered through the difficult early years of the millennium when publishers were just beginning to build their first sites, and had to cope with the teething troubles of the early web – only to see many of the same problems coming back to them a decade later. There is a new network, and it has yet to organize itself effectively.

**Monitoring the Big Tech face-offs**
Focusing on underlying technology and networks throws a deal of emphasis on the importance of monitoring and understanding what is going on