

THEOLOGICAL PERIODICALS: COULD THE END BE IN SIGHT?

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The possibilities opened up by electronic publishing warrant a complete re-evaluation of all the reasons for the communication of thought by means of the printed word, of the ways enquirers are being addressed, of the relationship between scholar and publisher (including the matter of copyright) and of the advantages and disadvantages of the new technologies to the ultimate user of information. This paper will examine how one area increasingly under pressure could benefit from the new technologies.

Theological journals provide a major outlet for religious thinking and an unparalleled resource for dialogue and clarification within and between worldviews. While most of these journals initially targeted professional theologians or other specialists they now reach a much wider readership thanks their availability in libraries, through excellent indexing and abstracting services and through inter-library loan. The continuing increase in publication of new journals and their availability in libraries has led however to a decreasing number of personal subscriptions which (combined with increasing production costs and transfers to commercial publishers) has led to pricing structures which are now becoming prohibitive to personal as well as library budgets. This is leading to even further rationalisation by means of wider sharing arrangements, to even fewer subscriptions and yet higher prices. It is obvious that the bubble has to burst, especially in

unsound economic times. It is therefore imperative that alternative and less wasteful ways of communicating knowledge be found.

The following standard terms will be used in this document:

OPUS: any type of mental construct conceived of and written as a result or challenge to previous writing or assembled for didactic interests.

PEERS: two scholars in the same discipline consulted before an opus is finalised and ready for publication. They ensure that high standards are maintained. Their role is consultative not one of censorship or endorsement. The rules under which they operate are determined by a standing conference of national/international scholars (Council)

COUNCIL: a group of Christian scholars of various denominational or independent backgrounds which lays down policy guidelines to preserve standards and prevent abuses.

BASE: the actual publishing instrumentality that provides the opus with identification tools, adds it to its database and distributes it to users. It charges for its service but also maintains electronic copyright ledgers for reimbursing the author (royalties). Base accepts directives in editorial matters from Council but is otherwise financially independent.

STEPS

1. The opus is produced with standard word processing software according to agreed literary and scholarly conventions and technical prescriptions. It is then checked by a second person for typographical and grammatical correctness.
2. It is submitted to peers in printed format for brief scholarly comment or criticism in standardised format. The comments should be taken seriously but should not be seen as curtailing the freedom of opinion or expression of the author. Institutional or denominational controls have to be applied by these bodies themselves. The peers act according to Council guidelines and in extreme cases refer matters to Council.
3. After possible revision in light of comments by peers the opus is submitted to base together with standard information such as author (full name and birth date), author identification number, denominational or institutional affiliation (optional), level, brief abstract and subject keywords. Payment may be required at this stage from the author if operational costs cannot be fully recovered from sales. This may be offset however by royalties for copies to third parties (see 6 below)
4. Base checks formats and supplementary information and proceeds to allocate the necessary subject headings (as per standard thesaurus) assisted by the keywords provided by the author as well as a classification (?) and unique accession number. It then transfers the opus and supplementary identifiers to the database.
5. Base becomes distributor for the information i.e.
 - (i) CD-ROM annual subscription for all or part of the database (e.g. particular disciplines only) and disks from

preceding years.

(ii) It supplies photocopies of articles or copies on disk at a standard charge.

(iii) It supplies collections of articles by a particular author, institution or on a particular topic for publication in book format.

6. Base also becomes copyright agency and applies credits to the author.

7. Base also becomes the indexing agency. It can provide bi-monthly, halfyearly and annual cumulations in paper format with classified listing of articles using the supplementary information provided by the author. Indexes are eventually transferred to CD-ROM.

8. Book reviews continue separately in book reviewing journals. An index to these journals should be incorporated into 7. above.

THE IMPLICATIONS

At present journals are produced by institutions, professional bodies as well as national/international organizations. Apart from widening the horizons of a particular discipline or readership their specific functions may be reduced to those of institutional achievement, professional excellence or didactic purpose. Often these functions overlap wittingly or unwittingly.

1. Institutional achievement.

Many journals are the intellectual flagship of an institution. They give that institution status and allow it to be tangibly present in other institutions. The journal as institutional status symbol might disappear if individual scholars were to contribute to a central database

instead. It is a well known fact however that the disparate nature of its articles make these journals inaccessible except through good indexing services. A central database would provide these, allowing searches for and recombination of articles not only by subject but by authors and institutions as well. The institution could from time to time decide to cull selected articles by its members, on a particular topic or of a particular tendency and publish them in traditional paper format.

A second important factor which needs to be considered in relation to this type of periodical is its book reviewing function. Journals are a major means of alerting readers about the publication of new books. This type of advertisement is a source of many book review copies sent to journals in the hope of a review. This in turn becomes a source of acquiring new books for institutions as well as individual scholars. If this book reviewing function were to be taken over by a book-reviewing journal this would lead to fewer free books to scholars and fewer (but arguably better) book reviews. Against this must be weighed that this type of journal generally cannot keep itself afloat without some kind of institutional subsidy (finances or staff) and that readers are unfairly treated by journals which pad their contents with excuses for book reviews. In these days of smaller subscriber numbers due to high production costs and an oversupply of journal titles, book reviews are better dealt with in separate high class review journals as suggested in Step 8 above.

2. Professional excellence.

Journals published by a scholarly body have the special function of being a bonding element in professional bodies

or associations. They are a major way of keeping a discipline alive, progressing and re-thought in line with tradition or with recent findings or breakthroughs. The briefness and tentativeness of the article allows a current interplay of minds and is unlike the book which needs a long gestation period. Its publication is now increasingly coming in the hands of a small body of publishers who intend making a profit from scholarly journals with small and dwindling numbers of subscribers. Their subscription costs are largely beyond the means however of the scholars they are meant to reach. It looks therefore as if electronic publishing may hold the key for fast efficient and cost-effective interchange of ideas within a specific discipline and also for inter-disciplinary cross fertilisation.

3. Didactic purpose.

Many religious journals target not the scholar but exist to provide general information, edification, apologetic, pastoral and spiritual formation, etc. They are basically intended for reading in the home and it would not make sense to do away with this type of publication in its present format at least not until some sophisticated home reading facility becomes available (the electronic book). The eventual availability of indexing services and text on line in the home will provide for actual rather than institutionally perceived needs. This may force many of these journals to rethink their raison d'etre and to specialise rather than be all things to all wo/men.

CONCLUSION

The advantages should by now be obvious. In economical terms we would see cheaper publishing, dissemination of scholarship and wider availability of material in all kinds of electronic formats (which could be converted to paper on demand). This would be an enormous boon to theological education in third world countries in which a majority of Christians now find themselves. Electronic publishing would reduce the need for spacious buildings, accessioning of periodicals, binding, reshelving and the replacement of lost copies. It would therefore reduce not only acquisition budgets but also the need for costly personnel. No longer would libraries be filled with unused information but we could tailor our holdings and access constantly according to our actual and contemporary needs.

Australia could well be a leader in this field. The existing cooperation of bodies like ANZATS, ANZTLA and its offspring ARI together with the Centre for Information Studies at Wagga Wagga could provide the basic components for such an undertaking. While I have tried to foresee some of the difficulties that would be encountered in this radical shift in the communication of information and ideas many problems remain to be discovered. Let us hope that it may inspire some higher degree candidate or researcher to delve deeper into the social, religious as well as financial repercussions of such an option.

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