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JULY 2003: PUTTING ONLINE ACTIVITIES INTO CONTEXT

* Many of the activities discussed this month have resulted from publishers' attempts to impose order on what they perceive to be a chaotic networked world – can these initiatives help to balance out the tensions between standardisation and customisation?

by Kate Worlock, Director

One initiative which aims to impose order is DOI. The strategic importance which multilinking from DOIs can bring is beginning to be understood, and the use of DOIs is moving out from the STM market in which the system has found its feet to areas such as education and public sector publishing. Multilinking can enable a range of opportunities for publishers, directing users to purchase documents, locate related content, or access more information about the author, and could have significant impact on content distribution and business models.

The key to the value provided by multilinking is that it can offer the user options which are directly relevant to the content being viewed. This ability to put content into context has been another core theme this month, particularly well in Macmillan's development of blended e-learning activities with Cultura Inglesa. In this instance contextualisation emerges through the concept of blended e-learning, placing Macmillan's online content into an environment where users can access it in conjunction with local offline learning resources. Other examples have been seen this month in the world of contextual advertising, where the importance of associating advertising with relevant content was demonstrated by Yahoo!'s decision to purchase Overture for USD1.6 billion.

In some cases publishers have tried to impose order in the digital world by seeking to create services which relate directly to the way in which their print businesses operate - The Guardian's launch of paid-for services this month provides a case in point. The connection between print and online services is still strong, not least with the newspaper publishers, but this can also be seen in other markets - the recent ALPSP report on the STM publishing market found that online services were often priced based on their print counterparts, while Houghton Mifflin's recent strategy has been to build online services specifically as support elements to existing print products. This enduring connection between print and online dangerously restricts strategic thinking, and can lead to situations where publishers are demanding standardisation in order to ease production processes while users are demanding the opposite: customisation and individually tailored services. The key will be using technology standards to enable the building of customer services by users, choosing elements from a variety of providers which they can be sure will interact efficiently. This vision still seems a long way off.