Unleashing the force

Intelligent content is opening the door to digital-first publishing, say Renee Swank and Carl Robinson

From the postal service to retailers, many organisations have transformed into technology solution providers; publishers are no exception. How did they get there? Through digital transformation – the application of technology to processes, products, assets, and sales models to improve efficiency, respond more rapidly to customer demand, and uncover new revenue streams. For publishers, this process might focus on content storage, metadata, discoverability, content agility, and automated collaboration.

While this transformative process is enabled by technology, digital tools alone are not enough for organisations to thrive in an environment where customers demand faster, easier and more comprehensive access to the content of journals, books, articles, even data.

In their book *The Digital Helix*, Michael Gale and Chris Aarons put it nicely when commenting on the tendency to bolt on 'digital' as an adjunct to the existing way of doing business: 'The trick is not to be more digital,' they observed. 'It is to become digital and use the technology to transform the organisation's view of how to solve customer problems.'

Equally vital to the success of digital transformation initiatives are the people and their receptivity to change and willingness to adopt technology. The collective editorial expertise and market knowledge of the people in the organisation can be elevated by a workplace that believes in and evangelises a digital-first mindset.

Which comes first?

Many publishers have developed notable digital capabilities for creating content, as well as surfacing content for new uses. However, in publishing houses worldwide, the print-based workflow remains dominant: creating print first; focused on print-first review processes and content creation process; thinking about content linearly and creating front-to-back books.

Consumers in today's digital economy prefer to choose from a variety of delivery

Lightspring/Shutterstock.com

"Embracing digital flexibility in your content empowers new usage"

options on a spectrum from linear to on-demand. To meet this market need, the 'print-first' mindset must be reconstructed; old processes should be challenged.

'Digital first' or 'platform agnostic' is the foundation of content development for the future. For many organisations, the editorial process is locked into a front-to-back production workflow, when it needs to be an everywhere, anytime approach.

How can your content be explored on different platforms? How can different types of consumers use your content? Intelligent or agile content exists in granular pieces that can be mixed and matched, then delivered on all manner of devices. Publishers who embrace a digital-first mindset upstream in the editorial process, and build in content agility from the get-go, will thrive in the future.

Content, liberated

Typically, content is locked into its existing form by a few constraints. Often, files are saved in proprietary formats like a Word .docx file or scanned and saved as PDFs. Use of proprietary formats makes sense for the single task at hand, such as word processing, but for future use it creates a disadvantage. Content in proprietary formats will have little-to-no tagging with metadata, which in turn means that these assets will not surface when semantic search is applied. Compounding the problem, content files are often stored in siloed systems that don't integrate easily, placing barriers between content and the people that need access to it.

'Intelligent content' is the solution. Harvard's Alex Wissner-Gross defines intelligence as 'a force to maximise future freedom of action (emphasis added).' Intelligent content strives to maximise its potential for the future, both known and unknown. The earlier that content is bestowed with intelligence, the more freedom of action it will have in the future.

Intelligent content is stored in a way that allows for flexibility, avoiding proprietary file formats. Entire works can be broken into 'chunks' that can flow out from the original source and be surfaced for new uses. The application of semantics inside and outside of intelligent content makes it more discoverable in the system through semantic search. The method of storing these files is platform-agnostic, provides users with a single source of truth, and easily integrates with other workflows.

Derive new value

Embracing digital flexibility in your content empowers new usage. Intelligent content with robust semantic metadata can drive features on a digital platform like personalisation and adaptive learning. This content can integrate into the customer experience as 'recommended reading,' learning modules, and on-demand requests on niche topics. With its inherently dynamic structure, intelligent content can be delivered in novel ways, like a mobile app, a serialisation, or a subscription service.

Today's advancements in technology allow for exciting experimentation between content-rich publishers and eager consumers. Adopting a digital-first mindset in your upstream editorial processes helps you respond to customer demand and maintain your competitive edge in the marketplace.

By endowing content with rich metadata, you get the agility to package up and deliver front and backlist content across myriad channels quickly and efficiently, helping you derive the most value from your assets and drive new revenue. **Ri**

Carl Robinson is head of consulting, and **Renee Swank** is senior director, at Copyright Clearance Center