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*Contemporary Media Forum*

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## **Publishing Online**

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With the rise of the internet comes a new age for authors and researchers. The internet is a valuable resource for gathering ideas for your work, but it's also a unique opportunity to express your own ideas. If you have an article or even a book that you'd like to get out there, consider putting it on the internet.

One advantage of publishing online is that you are your own boss. You have complete control over how the manuscript is written, page layout, and marketing. Of course, you may not feel comfortable with all of these dimensions of publishing online especially the technical side of creating a web site. It does take time to learn HTML, but it's very do-able. You don't have to be a computer geek. Fancy web techniques like Java aren't necessary. Simple HTML is more than enough and there are many books and web sites that will show you how to do it. You can learn the basics in just a few hours. And there's always the option of getting an experienced web page designer to create the document for you.

There are several other advantages to an online publication:

*Accessibility:* Anyone with an internet connection can read your work. That's a lot of people. Getting your work listed in the large online search engines so people can find it is a relatively simple process. Having the work online will put you in contact with like-minded colleagues from all over the world.

*Revisability:* An online manuscript or book can be revised any time you want. It can become a living, evolving entity. If your research and ideas in that topic area progress, the article can be updated to reflect the state of your art.

*Multimedia:* As we all know, the web has sight and sound as well as text. You can place not only photographs, drawings, tables, and charts into your

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publication, but also audio recordings, video clips, and animated illustrations and diagrams. The possibilities are limited only by one's imagination.

*Interaction:* The online document can be interactive on several dimensions. A simple approach would be appending to the article the comments that readers e-mailed to you. A list of such comments offers a fascinating variety of perspectives and opinions about the work. An automated and more sophisticated version of this strategy would be a bulletin board forum (similar to Usenet Newsgroups) where readers discuss the article by posting messages to each other. If an online publication draws a steady stream of readers, it's even possible to create a chat room where visitors, in real time, gather to talk. The interactive potential of an online document can transform the document into an anchor or springboard for an evolving discussion group, perhaps even a "community."

*Searchability:* An online document can be scanned for specific words or phrases. Any decent browser allows you to search a web page. You also can install search engines that will scan the entire web site.

*Integration:* An article can be linked to other articles and resources located elsewhere on the web. This is a lot more powerful than a reference list at the end of a hardcopy publication, which simply tells you where to go to find the other publication. The hypertext link actually takes you there. The hypertext publication can be embedded within and integrated into a larger body of publications. It becomes part of a network of information and knowledge, part of a larger whole that may transcend the sum of its parts.

*Hypertext:* The ability to jump via links to other pages or to other sections within a page is the essence of the World Wide Web. A document isn't restricted to a linear format in which it must be read from beginning to end. Readers can move back and forth within and between documents. They must make decisions about how they move through the publication. They create their own path and shape the flow of the reading experience. The challenge for writers is to anticipate how people might move through the article or collection of articles. They must construct a set of path options that offers flexible opportunities for pursuing related topics and subtopics, without overwhelming the reader with an overly complex maze of links. Very few or no links within an article fails to take advantage of hypertext; an article plastered with links in every sentence becomes overwhelming. There will be many creative and controversial ways to use hypertext. The emphasis on an associative rather than linear style of writing could very well revolutionize intellectual discourse and scholarship. It may be more powerful, even more "natural." Writing by association may be closer to how humans actually think than writing by linear design.

An important issue is the quality and accuracy of what you publish online. If there are no editors or reviewers to correct weaknesses in the

manuscript, then how do you know you are on track? While being your own boss is very exciting and liberating, it's also necessary to get feedback and give careful consideration to it. Ask at least one colleague and ideally several to read your work before you upload it. Set up an e-mail link in each of your online articles and encourage readers to send you their comments. Announce your work in online professional groups (e-mail lists, forums, etc.) and invite peers to give you feedback.

There's a great deal of debate nowadays about whose ideas on the web belong to whom. I don't pretend to be an expert on issues about intellectual property. It's a complex subject. I do know that publishing on the web does make it easy for people to plagiarize your work. If you are worried about this, then perhaps you should avoid publishing online. Include a copyright warning with your article. I have to say that *most* people have been remarkably considerate about asking permission to cite sections of my online work or even republish whole articles. If you want news of your work to spread through the internet, it may be a good idea to encourage people to borrow and cite it.

No doubt, there are advantages to hardcopy publications. Review and editorial processes insure quality work. Online works will never have the same tactile feeling of a leather-bound volume. They're not nearly as portable either. Some bibliophiles also don't like to read lengthy pieces on a computer monitor. But it's very possible that people's preferences for reading hardcopy may change. Future versions of laptops will become book-like and more portable. Programs that efficiently save entire web sites to disk will make reading offline easier. People simply may get used to reading on a monitor. I seriously doubt that online publications will ever replace hardcopy ones, either in the public domain or in academia. I certainly hope not. Online works can be a valuable supplement to the hardcopy world.