

Electronic publishing: Are we ready?

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The history of electronic publishing is very short. The very first e-publication came in 1980s in the form of text e-mails. Later, CD-ROMs appeared to be a much more effective medium with excellent quality pictures, low-cost support, and long life. In 1994–95 appeared the very first e-journal distributed by Electronics Letters Online by Institution of Electrical Engineers.¹ World Wide Web started in 1995–96 and was an immediate success. Now e-publications enter in the Era of downloading in handheld devices like PDA (Personal Digital Assistant).

There are many advantages of e-publishing which includes quick full text availability worldwide which increases the readership, and faster editing with the use of latest software tools. Production time is shortened by eliminating printing, binding, shipping and by publishing articles when they're ready, thus eliminating backlogs of accepted articles. Cost of producing e-journal is lower than print journal. New Modes like audio and video can be included. Different journals are using e-alerts of their table of contents and also publishing articles in advance as future articles.

There are three models of e-publishing: traditional, alternate and sub-service.¹ The traditional model which is used by all the online journals of Pakistan is availability of online edition in parallel to their paper edition. The alternate model is based on the availability of the e-edition only and subservice model composed only of a table of contents (TOC), with pointers to the selected articles that remain in publicly available domains as e-archives.

There are about 54 biomedical journals published from Pakistan. Out of them Pakistan Medical & Dental Council (PMDC) has recognized about forty. Only 16 have online editions available and all are free of charge.

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Majority of Pakistani journals provide just the Portable Document Format (pdf) versions because it can be made in a few seconds without any extra efforts. Moreover, its very easy for IT companies to upload article in pdf format to complete the formality. Abstracts are helpful for the readers who just want to see the highlights of an article and in the same way html full text is downloaded fast and do not require a third party software like Acrobat Reader. All leading international journals use all three formats to increase their functionality. Currently, only three journals (Journal of Pakistan Medical Association², Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences³ and Rawal Medical Journal⁴) have availability of abstract, full text in html and pdf format available online.

There are many major issues relating to E-publishing in Pakistan. One of them is Awareness. Publishers should be aware that the cost of running electronic journal is about one tenth to the paper edition. Domain registration is below Rs. 500/- per year and hosting packages are also available at much reduced cost. There is much to do beyond the online edition of any journal. We at the Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences (Pak J Med Sci) are in the planning phase of accepting videos, animation and audio files with the manuscript for publishing. So far there is no proper electronic publisher in Pakistan. Different journals hire IT companies to do the job for them and they do not have properly trained staff to sort out the emerging requirement of biomedical journals. There is neither any IT company nor any journal is using XML tagging for their journal which is the future for proper biomedical e-publishing. XML tagging provided by companies outside Pakistan is very costly and not feasible for us. There is no biomedical journal in Pakistan accepting proper online submission. Email submission is accepted by many journal but we need to go toward the online submission with proper online reviewing process to utilize web more effectively. Being a developing country we should be using our resources more effectively. One way of doing this is by publishing ELPS (Electronic Long and Paper Short) version of articles⁵. There is need to increase awareness and acceptability of ELPS among publishers as well as authors.

There is still plenty of room for further progress as far as Electronic publishing is concerned in Pakistan. Of course change is inevitable and those publishers who fail to keep pace with the changing environment will not be able to survive.

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