

# OVERLAY PUBLICATIONS: A FUNCTIONAL OVERVIEW OF THE CONCEPT

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## **Abstract**

This paper tackles the issues of overlay publications (journals, but also edited monographs and books in general). Its two parts are aimed at providing theoretical understanding of what an overlay publication is and at examining a concrete example of a print on demand overlay book, published after the free digital version was released.

The first part takes into account the definitions found in literature and goes back to the functions that every system of scholarly publication must satisfy, as Roosendaal and Geurts (1997) proposed, adopting a value chain perspective of the scholarly communication system. Some examples of overlay journals are then examined in order to clarify which added value an overlay publication can contribute.

According to the first part, the second part of the paper analyzes in depth a first experiment of what can be defined as an overlay book. The case study is about a short monograph in Italian, in the field of online and social marketing published first as a free ebook and then published in print through a print on demand model.

The paper ends summarizing the findings of the case study and providing some insights about overlay publications, trying to clarify what they are and why they are useful.

**Keywords:** Overlay; scholarly publication; Open Access; ebook.

## **1. The concept of Overlay Publication**

The concept of overlay journals or publications is more than 10 years old and dates back, probably, to one of the “fathers” of the Open Access movement, Paul Ginsparg [1], who wrote about this concept back in 1996. In a seminal article in

which Ginsparg envisioned much of the mutation that is still under development now, he wrote that:

A variety of superficial improvements can easily be implemented immediately in the electronic realm. Since there are no financial or physical barriers to widespread dissemination, we can imagine a relatively complete raw archive unfettered by any unnecessary delays in availability. Any type of information could be overlaid on this raw archive and maintained by any third parties. For example, the archive could be effectively partitioned into sectors, gradated according to overall importance, quality of research, or other useful criteria, and papers could be shifted retroactively as dictated by additional information or follow-up research. And rather than face to face, only an undifferentiated bitstream, the average reader could benefit from an interface that recommended a set of “essential reads” for a given subject from any given time period.

The speech continues to propose different ways of providing added values to the raw information in OA repositories.

Many other proposed further specifications of the concept are offered by Smith [2] and Hagemann[3], but a definition that seems quite acceptable in the community which could be a good starting point for further research in this domain is provided by Van De Sompel and his collaborators [4]:

An overlay journal is a journal that does not publish any original articles, but rather selects articles that exist elsewhere, adds certain value to the selection, and publishes the results as a service to its user base.

I think this definition is particularly useful because it stresses the value that the overlay publication offers to the reader, bringing the discussion towards a vision that, in my opinion, is very mind-opening in the reflections about the new digital scholarly publishing environment. This vision can be easily reconducted to a functional perspective, and in particular to a value chain perspective, that analyzes the scholarly publication system in terms of needs, ways to satisfy these needs and functions of the system. This perspective is well described by Roosendaal and Geurts [5] and is useful to answer recent Harnad criticism [6] in response to the Rioja project outputs [7], whose aims were to gain a deeper knowledge about the overlay journal model, analyzing both the economic and technical dimension of an overlay journal and the community needs and perceptions about this kind of publication.

Harnad criticism is well directed to the concept of overlay journal saying that:

I think it's obvious that we are merely talking about a more efficient continuum of electronic means of making submission, refereeing, access-

provision and archiving in the online era. There is no such thing as an overlay journal (or otherwise all journals are and always have been “overlays” of the author’s first draft)” and stating at the end of his comments that journals in the OA era are just “peer review service providers.

Now if we assume, following Rosendal and Geurts, that the functions of the scholarly publications system are:

- Registration, which allows claims of precedence for a scholarly finding.
- Certification, which establishes the validity of a registered scholarly claim.
- Awareness, which allows actors in the scholarly system to remain aware of new claims and findings.
- Archiving, which preserves the scholarly record over time.
- Rewarding, which rewards actors for their performance in the communication system based on metrics derived from that system.

We can easily state that an overlay journal can provide, not only the certification function, but also the awareness and rewarding functions.

It can provide the awareness function in the ways proposed, for example, by Ginsparg in his 1996 article and, broadly defined, by adding value in terms of quality or subject classification, in terms of interface, widening the hypertextual features of the writings, or generally speaking, enhancing the reading and knowledge sharing experience (multiple formats, cross-reference capabilities, visualization options, more descriptive information, context information, etc...).

It can then provide the rewarding function by adding specific metrics to better understand the usage or, as the latter case is described, by providing a paper copy, or by publishing a selection of the best articles in a given year.

The electronic publishing continuum is full of these examples (see for example Chris Armbruster’s analysis [8]), the fact is that they have not always been fully analyzed in terms of the overlay publication concept.

I argue that this could be a productive lens to better understand what the needs of the scholarly community are and to find better ways to accomplish the digital scientific publication system functions.

## 2. Examples of Overlay Publications

I will now try to highlight some examples of publications that can be seen as overlaid and to show that an analysis following these suggestions could be productive to emphasize the features that are most needed in the digital scholarly publishing environment.

Perspectives in Electronic Publishing (PeP) [9] was an experimental journal en-

visioned and developed mainly by Hitchcock for his PhD thesis, back in 2002. *Perspectives In Electronic Publishing* was described in Hitchcock's words:

as a journal-centred portal, with enhancements for exploring selected full-text papers on a focussed topic – in this case, on electronic publishing. The idea was to create an interconnected 'journal' that allows users to explore individual lines of enquiry more efficiently. In this case the journal frames a user-centric information environment, where selected documents can be distributed and accessed anywhere on the Web. Editorially-added links act as the binding between the resources selected for inclusion, and the selection and commentary on documents exercise the journal's editorial voice.

Here we clearly see that the journal is not described using the overlay concept, but we can easily comprehend it in the overlay framework, because it selects documents that are hosted elsewhere on the Web and adds value in terms linking capabilities and editorial choices.

Logical Methods in Computer Science. [10] is an OA journal published as an overlay of CoRR [11], a part of arXiv. This repository is under the auspices of the ACM and Cornell University, and its aim is to guarantee that archived articles are available forever, independent of software development. This is a more traditional OA journal, in the sense that it is overlaid just to outsource the archiving functions, while it accepts author submission, provided that the article will be then stored, or is already stored in the CoRR archive.

The Journal of Machine Learning Research [12] is an overlay journal in the sense that it publishes in OA accepted articles immediately and then it publishes, through Microtome publishing [13], a paper version to provide for efficient and cost-effective archiving of freely available journal materials. The case of this publishing house can be highlighted as one of the first academic presses that fully embraces the overlay publishing model as it aims to provide publishing services in support of open access to scholarly literature, like the print publication of monographs that are freely distributed in electronic format (as in the case study described) and the archiving function through print production. Passively stored and maintained acid-free paper has a track record demonstrating its ability to provide archival access to information over many centuries, while digital storage still has many developments to assume in order to be considered efficient and trustable. To undertake this function Microtome publishes an annual bounded volume of the journal and is sold to libraries and individuals.

The virtual journal example [14] is interesting because it is drawn from a Non Open Access attitude, but it still presents interesting overlay features. The Virtual Journals in the Physical Sciences series have been jointly developed by the Ameri-

can Institute of Physics and the American Physical Society. Each Virtual Journal presents an online collection of relevant papers from a broad range of source journals in the physical sciences published not only by APS and AIP, but also by a significant number of journals from other participating publishers. From the user's perspective, the Virtual Journals look and feel like "real" journals, providing useful traditional features of online journals such as Tables of Contents, freely available abstracts, links to source journal home pages, abstracts, and full-text articles, searching and alerting capabilities. Articles appearing in these Virtual Journals are selected by editors who are experts in the particular fields, so it is evident that the overlay service offered by these journals, whose articles have already been published by other subscription access journals, is to provide added value in terms of editorial choice and subject classification. The journals are, in fact, typical cross-discipline journals that put together contents written primarily for different audiences, which can be also of interest to scholars specialized in other fields.

The journal "Biological Physics Research"[15] is an immediate example, drawing articles both from physics and biological journals.

Faculty of 1000, a service available for two disciplines, Biology and Medicine [16], is another example of the chances that overlay services have in the new digital environment. They are one of the best known examples of literature awareness tools. They are an online research service that comprehensively and systematically highlights and reviews the most interesting papers published in the field, based on the recommendations of other scholars; besides the awareness and selection service, it also offers an evaluation service, and by doing this it tackles the rewarding function in a very incisive way. More in depth Faculty of 1000: provides readers with an updated guide to the most important papers within any given field of research; it highlights papers on the basis of its perceived importance, rather than on IF metrics. It systematically organizes and evaluates the mass of information within scientific literature, and offers other selection services [17]. It is a true overlay service that provides both an awareness and rewarding function. In particular, it provides a rewarding service in the sense that provides individual judgement on every single paper and a related metric, therefore offering an alternative metric to the IF.

The RePEc [18] initiative is a collaborative effort of hundreds of volunteers in 66 countries whose aim is to enhance the dissemination of research in economics, making all of the material freely available. The heart of the project is a decentralized database of working papers, journal articles and software components and has many overlay services drawn on it. The articles are hosted in many institutional repositories or journal websites and the RePEc is just a citational database, giving links to the articles, where they are "physically" available.

One of the most interesting is NEP [19]. It is an announcement service which

filters information on new additions to RePEc into edited reports. The goal is to provide subscribers (who can subscribe for free) with up-to-date information about the research literature. In April 2009 the site reported that there are 52,571 subscriptions from 23,961 unique addresses distributed throughout the world. The reports are generated by subject-specific editors. It is a very large example of a literature awareness service, combined with an editorial added value brought by the subject editors who select the new papers relevant for their field. We can think of each subject specific RSS feed or email subscription as an overlay journal, as they fulfil the awareness function in conjunction with an editorial service.

IDEAS [20] is the most popular RePEc service and it is another service providing information about working papers and published research to the economics profession, adding original bibliographical data to more than 700.000 articles, and giving full text links to more than 600.000 articles.

LogEc [21] is a metrics service that collects access statistics for several RePEc services and gives an overall view of the impact of a working paper or journal article. In doing so it is a rewarding service, whose aim is to understand better the impact of a single given article, measuring abstract views and counting downloads, trying to avoid double counting and removing robot accesses. It is a valid alternative or complement to IF metrics.

We have listed some of the best known examples of what can be considered an overlay publication in the digital scholarly publication environment. The examples have been chosen on a pure perceived relevancy basis and are probably not representatives of the complete spectrum of the overlay publications continuum, but a complete list or map of overlay journals or publications has not yet been provided, as the concept itself is not widely recognized nor the model adopted, making the listing quite difficult and, most importantly, subjective. But we can affirm that the brief analysis in terms of the overlay concept and the "value chain perspective" to the scholarly publications system is in any case useful in order to provide the basis of a better understanding of the system itself. The list, as already said above, is not exhaustive and many other examples might bring more depth to the analysis, but what is important here is to highlight at least some of the features of these services, here defined as overlaid, and understand them as ways to fulfil the features that the system has to have in order to answer the needs of the main actors of the field (mainly authors and readers). In this analysis we bring together and integrate two perspectives, the functional perspective for the theoretical analysis, and the needs perspective for the tactical analysis, in order to understand the system from both angles of analysis, as Rosendal and Geurts suggested.

We can now affirm that overlay publications mainly fulfil, in the different ways described above, the awareness and the rewarding functions, and in a second instance, the archiving function, through print production. It is evident that these

services, fulfilling the awareness function that is one of the main functions of the system, defined by Rosendal and Geurts as “internal”, have to be seen as crucial for a good functioning of the system itself and their development has to be considered essential in order to answer the needs of the main actors of the system.

### 3. Print overlay: a case study

The case study presented here has been chosen because the author is directly involved as the editorial director in the publishing house that offers the print version and has full access to all the data and the way they are gathered. This is particularly important if we think that part of the data consist in sales data, not always publicly available.

We will highlight how an overlay publication can also fulfil another function of the system, not a crucial one as the services described above, but a function that in certain disciplines and countries can be important. This function can be seen as a subset of the rewarding function and it consists in providing a paper copy of a publication (in this case a short monography) originally published electronically and distributed over the Web for free.

In order to evaluate the need and the usefulness of such an operation, we will analyze download metrics of the e-version and sales data for the paper version. Of course, a survey of the opinions towards it would be welcomed, but it overcomes the scope of this article and has already been carried out by Polydoratou and Moyle (2008). In their research Polydoratou and Moyle find that the need for a paper copy is not very strong among the astrophysics community they surveyed and the sum of this finding for the print copy is of little interest.

“MiniMarketing. 91 tesi per un marketing differente” published by Simplicissimus Book Farm [20] is a short monograph in Italian in the field of online and social marketing, published as a free ebook, in December 2008. This monograph was then published in paper by a different publisher, Ledizioni-LediPublishing [21], in late January 2009, through a print on demand model, with online only sales (no bookshop distribution).

This book consists of less than 20.000 characters and is really more an article-length work, than a monograph. It is composed of 91 short theses about the future of online marketing, with special emphasis on the conversational aspects of the so called web 2.0.

The ebook version was downloaded at a high pace for the first week through a file-sharing system [22]. The download link was published on different websites, such as the one cited above along with others. The link provided direct download

of the 3 different versions all available in the same zipped file, with format and file variants: a pdf or mobypocket version optimized for a particular ebook reader (Irex Ilad 2ns edition) and in general for all portable readers with a small screen, and then a pdf version in A4 format. The following download figures are provided by the download counts system provided by box.net [23]. They do not take into account double downloads from the same user, as no registration is required and no IP authentication is performed in order to be able to download, but are all full-text downloads, as no abstract is provided by the box.net service, but only a download facility.

We have reported the following figures, as shown in figure 1, where numbers are relative to the dates in which the ebook version was available:

Downloads	Date
726	11/12/2008 (1)
398	12/12/2008 (2)
320	13/12/2008 (3)
318	14/12/2008 (4)
260	15/12/2008 (5)
276	16/12/2008 (6)

And then the figures have gone regularly down.

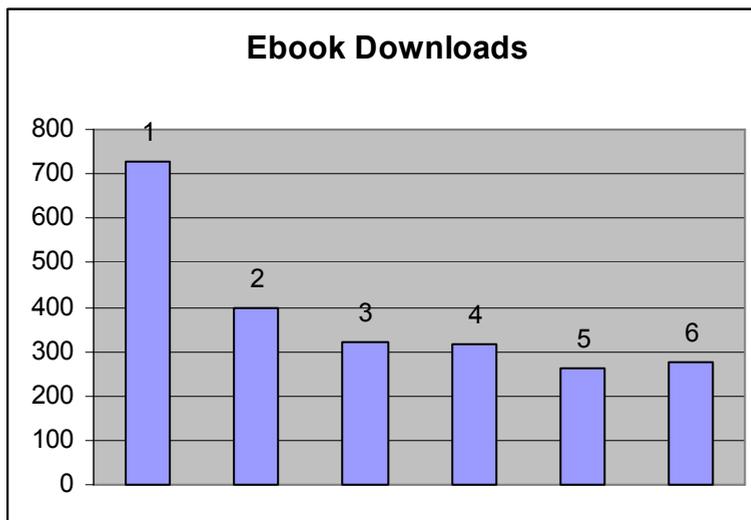


Figure 1

As of now (March 2009) the ebook version is being downloaded just between 5-10 times per day on average. It is notable that during the first month the ebook was downloaded more than 4000 times.

The ebook version was announced on several websites such as the publisher's website, the author's blog, one of the most popular marketing blogs in Italy (and probably, in the author's word, the most popular) [24] and it is being reviewed in various blogs and websites. The review published in Apogeeonline [25] has to be cited, a very popular Italian e-magazine on IT and digital culture. We can easily affirm that the ebook had "good press" in the Italian blogosphere, as the author was quite well known in this community.

The print on demand paper version came out in February 2009. It is published by a different publisher, Ledizioni, whose aim is to exploit print on demand technology in order to, on one side offer the service to other publishers in order to maximize profits from back catalogue titles, and on the other to publish original niche monographs with low print runs and slow selling patterns. The model adopted by this publisher combines print on demand with non traditional distribution services; this means that most titles are not sold through the bookshop channel, but only through the internet (through publisher websites and Italian and international e-retailers).

The paper version is sold at 8 Euros cover price, and is a very short book (56 pages) in 5x8 inch format. The publisher offers it through his website at 6 Euros cover price plus shipping; other retailers offer it at cover price plus shipping.

The publication of the paper version was announced on the publisher's website, on other blogs of the same company [26] and on the author's website [...]. We have reported much less reviews and announcements about the print version, compared to the online version. At the time of the writing of this paper the paper version has been on the market for less than 45 days and it shows a very slow sale's pace, as only 3 copies have been sold to final private customers. A bulk sale was made to the author's company.

In fact, this sale pattern is perfectly compatible with the print on demand model, but this also means that the data we currently have are not statistically significant and are not consistent enough to make a deep analysis on them.

It is notable, however, that all 3 copies were purchased from customers who visited the author's website and followed the "buy this book" present there and did not download the free ebook version after having bought the paper version from the link provided in the buying process confirmation email, probably because they already had downloaded it previously.

We cannot summarize the findings of this case study, as the data reported are not robust enough in terms of time persistence and overall quantity; however, we can highlight some first and general insights:

- 1) 100% of the users who bought the 3 paper copies and did not download the free ebook version from the link provided in the buying process confirmation email might be interpreted as the existence of the need for what we have called the “print rewarding” function.  
These users had already accessed the content in e-format, probably liked it, and wanted to have a paper copy, a more tangible object, to show their appreciation of the book, to be able to display it in their libraries and to have more reading options (when they do not have a computer or reader with them).
- 2) The relationship between more than 4000 downloads of the e-version during the first month and the 3 paper copies sold (excluding the author’s company bulk sale, which might have a role in keeping other print sales low) is significant. It seems that only a few percentages of the users perceived the need to have a paper copy, while the author perceives it more, and in this case he convinced his company to buy many copies of it.
- 3) 100% of the users who bought the paper copies came from the author’s blog and bought it through the publisher’s website. The paper copy is being sold also by main Italian e-retailers (such as [ibs.it](#), [libreriauniversitaria.com](#), [hoepli.it](#) and others) and the author’s blog also provides a link to them, but the price offer presented by the publisher seems attractive, along with a better fulfilment in terms of shipping delay.

The need for an overlay print service seems effective, even if, probably, it is not perceived by readers as being most important. On this study basis we can assume that the overlay print service can be an important feature of the digital scholarly system in the sense that it offers a reward to the authors. In an OA author’s pay model this could be an important service in order for the author to choose this kind of publication and in order for the publishers to attract more authors for this model and publishing houses.

Besides this, a peculiarity of the Italian academic assessment system has to be noted, which accepts only paper copies of articles and monographs for judgement. I know that for an international audience this can appear quite odd, but at the time of writing this is the situation in Italy. As long as this legislative constraint persists, the overlay paper copy service on freely available digital material seems to be quite useful even for a direct, career related, rewarding function. The long-term archiving function provided by libraries, for storing paper copies goes along quite well with this overlay service, as the Microtome example above highlighted, and can be analyzed as an effective way for publishers to provide a useful service to the system.

Finally, it has to be noted that not every scholar, especially in the social sciences and in the humanities, can be considered skilled in searching papers and materials

over the web, so the print overlay copy could also fulfil an awareness function, even if this will eventually fade in the future.

#### 4. Conclusions

Bringing together the overview of the examples of the overlay publications highlighted above, with the brief analysis of the “minimarketing” print on demand case study, we can easily affirm that adopting a functional and value chain perspective of the digital scholarly environment, overlay publications primarily fulfil the rewarding function, and secondly the awareness and archiving function.

If we assume that the new digital scholarly publication system can be composed of units of communication, not only articles or monographs, but also datasets, preprints, bibliographies and other types of contributions which are rather loosely coupled together, but lying on an interoperable ground (such as the one provided by OAI-PMH or ORE project), then we can imagine the function of the system fulfilled by different hub, by different, in other words, overlay publication services, which perform a specific scholarly communication function in a particular way. As Van De Sompel et alii stated [27]:

These hubs may then be composed in multiple combinations to form different pathways through which a unit of scholarly communication may proceed. Each pathway consists of a sequence of distributed service hubs implementing the required functions of scholarly communication in a different way. In such an environment, a single unit of scholarly communication may proceed simultaneously through different value chains implemented across the network.

At the time of writing, such as system is still a possibility and not yet realized, but the technological framework is evolving rapidly, and as always is much more rapidly evolving than the societal and economics layers.

But it has to be noted that in the last few years we are experiencing several mutations in the publishing field, especially in the scholarly publication field.

Experimentation on the OA model has rapidly increased and nowadays all the major English-speaking academic publishers have an OA publication option, mainly based on the author’s pay model. This means that publishers feel the need to evolve, since we can not imagine that all OA publication options offered by commercial publishers were created only to accomplish market demand, even if some have probably been established without much commitment.

The reader’s behaviour is changing, the so called web 2.0, already envisioned in

the eighties by Toffler [28] with the concept of “prosumer”, is characterized by a situation in which everything is increasingly digital, where content is increasingly fragmented, where users merge the traditionally disparate roles of producer and consumer, where search replaces the library and where multimedia mash-ups – not text – holds the attraction for the digital natives.

These above mentioned phenomena, among others not cited here, contribute to the creation of a situation in which publishers need to evolve in order to continue to exist and perform their functions, or at least some of them. As Sara Lloyd [29] who is working for a major trade US publishing house, noted:

first is to stop to think at books and journals as products... If the book continues to be viewed as a definable object within covers... as a singular ‘unit’, publishers will continue to limit their role in its production and distribution, and this is a sure fire way for publishers to write themselves out of the future of content creation and dissemination.

Even if not directly cited, the similarities between this statement and the system envisioned by Van De Sompel and his collaborators are evident, so that we can affirm that the evolution of one of the main actors of the system, the publishers, can take this direction, even if the way seems at the time of this writing, only envisioned.

On one side we have the new network environment that forces publishers to evolve, on the other we have the technical possibilities to create an interoperable system that offers a better fulfilment for all the constitutive functions of the scholarly publication system. Thus it seems natural to advocate for the development of overlay publication services that are both functional to the development of such a system and the evolution and existence of publishing houses.

The development of overlay publication services can allow flexible combinations of the functions of scholarly communication and provide benefits in terms of [See Van De Sompel]:

- Innovation: with more flexibility in how and where services are implemented, there can be more experimentation with new ways of fulfilling the functions of scholarly communication.
- Adaptability: more innovation may result in alternative solutions to fulfilling key functions, which in turn may help the scholarly communication system to evolve as the scholarly process itself evolves.
- Democratization: as multiple service providers implement functions of the scholarly communication process, we may see the emergence of competition in a largely monopolized market. The traditional vertically-integrated system may give way to a distributed, loosely coupled system of alternative and complementary services.

The development of overlay publication services has to be seen as an opportunity for publishers to evolve, to also be hubs of added value in the digital environment and a resource for readers to experience new and better ways to use the content available digitally or in print.

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