July 28, 2004

TO: RSS Professional Communications Committee

FROM: Kenneth Pigg, Treasurer

SUBJECT: Annual Report

There are just three items on which I wish to report at this meeting. One deals with our website; second with TRS and its future. The third deals with the opportunities that will present themselves by virtue of our relationship with Ingenta. I use this report to describe this second topic as I believe that it will address much more than “just publication” activities and encompass all that we do electronically as well as our “image” on line.

The Rural Sociologist

Since I proposed that we consider moving TRS to an electronic newsletter format we have “experimented” with one type of format in the December issue. I had asked for feedback from members and, in fact, received some 15-20 notes. All but three of these were supportive of such a change. Of the three that were not supportive, two were from libraries that have subscriptions and what they wanted to know was: if RSS planned to continue this format and whether they would get a hard copy later on (of that issue). It would appear that these librarians were concerned about keeping a full volume together on the shelf.

I do not mean to belittle these concerns, but I believe it is very feasible to continue to plan for moving to an electronic format. However, it will mean that we complete our plans by next June so that the libraries currently subscribing can be informed of the change in format and we can plan to accommodate their interests—or not. For example, if we placed TRS online (via our own site) in a PDF format (so that it has issue integrity), perhaps librarians would simply print a hard copy and put it with other issues on the shelf. In any case, we currently sell only about 53 subscriptions to TRS (beyond our members) at $18/year, so any lost revenue is minimal. At the same time, cost savings for printing and mailing would amount to about $10,000 annually or more. So, I continue to think we should move in this direction and plan to publish our first electronic volume in 2005.

In keeping with this note, I want to stress that I believe our “internal communications” could be best handled via the RSS Website via a “push technology”—e.g., announcements of new postings are e-mailed to members as they are made available or monthly as appropriate—and external content could best be handled with a new TRS publication reminiscent of that published about 15-20 years ago when TRS had rather significant content between its covers. Such an approach would provide a vehicle for distribution of “policy briefs” as well as other articles descriptive of rural conditions and policy analyses. This type of publication would likely be even more attractive to librarians for selling subscriptions, especially if it were bundled with the journal for an increase in price of, say, $30/year.
RSS Website

In order for the above to work well, we need to revamp our website considerably, or design a new site to place on the URL www.ruralsociology.us which I purchased rights to several years ago (it was cheap). The present site might remain as is, with a new site oriented to external audiences linked to the internal/members site but also standing alone. Before we proceed with this, I would like to request the Committee’s support for a proposal to the Council that RSS solicit bids for “graphic design services.” The purpose of any resulting contract would be to have a professional firm in this field examine all the “elements” that contribute to the public image of RSS—journal, TRS, annual meeting program, website, display, etc.—and develop a consistent and attractive graphic presentation of the Society and what it wants to be known for in the marketplace. I am estimating these services would cost about $5,000 this fiscal year. Procedurally, I will draft an invitation and bid specification document that could be circulated to potential providers for bids. This draft would be coordinated with the Membership and Development Committees to insure we cover the full range of services desired. A joint committee (a participant from the PCC would be most welcome) will help review bids received with me to formulate a recommendation to the Council. I would like this recommendation to be ready at the mid-year Council meeting and the work completed by next spring, so that any changes could be presented to RSS members at the 2005 Business meeting next August. Your support will be helpful in securing Council support for this initiative.

Ingenta’s Information Commerce System

I attended a conference hosted by Ingenta in Washington, D.C. in mid-February. The attendees were all new publishers who had recently signed contracts with Ingenta. The purpose was to update these publishers on the services offered by Ingenta and the directions of change in Ingenta’s business model. Also on the agenda was a presentation by the Vice-President of CrossRef and a private consultant who discussed “pricing models” for electronic publishing.

Ingenta’s software system is continuing to undergo some changes that will permit—by the end of the year—greater control by publishers of their intellectual property. Greater control means it will be possible to manage access according to some sort of user ID code, a period of time, by URL, or by username or password. The direction headed by Ingenta means, according to their staff, that publishers should begin to think about their on-line publication(s) as a bookstore instead of a locked safe (with access limited to subscribers or pay-per-view users). In their terminology, this is an issue of “access and entitlements” that comprise an Information Commerce System for electronic publication management.

In short, their prospective system will provide:
- Flexible hierarchies
- Multiplier subscriber identities
- Capacity to understand content
- Governance of access to dynamic resources

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1 I am repeating this content for the benefit of new Committee members who may not have seen the February report. Obviously, I continue to think this is an important topic for discussion and action.
They argue that “twelve month subscriptions and pay-per-view” are rarely enough to provide users all they want and publishers need to be able to offer a mix of alternatives. Publishers need to think about “reusing” content and offer content assets “by the drink” (Think about the different ways you can buy a Coke in the grocery store today.) or even by the “tanker load” to wholesale distributors. Consider the diagram below to get an idea of how this might work.
If we think about where we (maybe) are headed with a new publication on rural areas and a policy papers series and an electronic newsletter, in addition to a journal then this sort of ICS approach begins to take on new significance.

One of the elements that “makes an ICS work effectively” is the “digital object identifier or DOI” that is managed by CrossRef. Every article we publish in RS will now be assigned a DOI (by RSS) and any articles in back issues may be assigned a DOI. In addition, for each article RSS publishes, CrossRef reviews its citation list and adds DOIs to all citations where these have been assigned by publishers (and contained in the CrossRef data base). At present, CrossRef has 276 member publishers, 10.1 million items from 9,000 journals with over 1 million DOIs retrieved each month. The CrossRef data base also includes 650,000 books and proceedings DOIs. It is the DOI system that, in part, permits the differentiation of product and user in an ICS.

In her presentation on “pricing systems” the consultant in this field focused primarily on how publishers “extract value” from their products. She asked several questions that should be considered by publishers in developing their plan for an ICS. These include:
- What is the unit of content on-line?
- What do you offer customers?
- Do all customers want the same products and services?
- Do you build to order or prepackage?
- Can you sell more content by enabling more granular choices—at the article/chapter vs. the whole publication level?

She stressed that, in theory, “every customer should be able to buy something different on-line.” The consultant also distinguished between traditional subscription approaches and “generalized subscriptions” an approach in which subscribers purchase pre-paid bundles of articles over a specified of time, vs. a PPV system. She also noted that generalized subscriptions were a success because they open up access to all content by users, featured subscriptions defined by users, and was prepaid/time restricted. She also described several new approaches being used by other publishers such as bundling selected articles online from their journal according to themes with pricing based on the amount of content bundled.

In summary, I wanted to share this information as a sort of “alert” to the Committee (and Council) regarding the opportunities that will soon be available to RSS in its contract with Ingenta. However, we will only be able to take advantage of these opportunities if we begin to think differently about our content assets and ways of doing business re: RSS content assets. Thinking about this will take time, but we should be ready by this time next year to address any changes we may wish to make, implement these changes in about six months and get new information to “subscribers” by June, 2005 as part of our normal fulfillment process. Obviously, this is quick, but I believe these opportunities might help overcome some (if not all) the income we have recently lost due to declines in subscribers and members.