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Print is Dead! Long Live Print!

Introduction

by Judith Norton

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The news seems dire. We read about the decline in newspaper circulation, the demise of small publishers, and the replacement of print subscriptions with digital content. Mobile devices allow instant access to information. After a decade of tinkering (remember all the buzz about the Rocket? <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOz-E4OuHMI>), the e-book is gaining acceptance. Amazon estimates that it has sold over three million Kindles in the past two years.

But warnings about the death of print, particularly books, have been regularly heralded for the past century. First, movies, then radio, and later television, were all seen as replacements for print. So, is print in the final death throes, or are we, once again, so dazzled by new technology that we are overlooking how print still plays a role in our intellectual and cultural lives? In this issue, we will explore a number of perspectives, some philosophical, some practical, on how Oregon libraries are responding to the print versus digital debate.

- Robyn Ward sets the context for this issue with her review of the Nicholson Baker controversy, and how librarians and archivists responded.
- Why do so many of us still love books? Sequoia Campshure reflects on book culture, the book as artifact, and how books symbolize more than just a container for content.
- Print still has value for library users. Patrick Goodman presents his original research on how touch 'n' feel books help support cognitive development in infants and toddlers that will enable them to navigate a multimedia world.
- With the shift in user preferences and the growing constraints on space and budgets, what are academic libraries doing with older print collections? Mark R. Watson describes the Orbis Cascade Alliance's Distributed Print Repository and possible plans to expand this collaborative initiative.
- Oregon Health & Sciences University Library has an extensive historic journal collection. I write about how OHSU has created a special collection of valuable older journals for permanent retention and digitization.
- Zines do not necessarily come to mind when we think about print, but Multnomah County Library (MCL) has a wonderful print collection. Print vs. digital is as hot a topic in the zine world as it is in library land. Listen to Sandra Morgan's interview with Emily-Jane Dawson, a reference and zine librarian at MCL.
- As studies have shown, when the public is asked about what they think about libraries, the first answer is "books." With the displacement of print, how can libraries rebrand our services to truly reflect the amazing array of formats we typically provide? Penny Hummel draws an unusual analogy with how Johnny Cash transcended the narrow brand of Country music and suggests that we apply those lessons to how we market our libraries.

- With his Five Laws, Ranganathan developed what are probably the most succinct guidelines for the library profession. Friday Valentine takes a look at those laws and updates them, advocating that we provide users the various formats they want.
- Turner Masland, a current MLIS student in the Emporia program, leads a discussion with two other library students on how Digital Natives, while loving their technology, also want to keep (at least some) print at hand.
- Lastly, *OLA Quarterly's* own publications chair, Diane Sotak, discusses the decision to publish *OLAQ* exclusively online. While most *OLAQ* readers indicated that they supported the migration, a substantial minority expressed concern about eliminating print issues.

As many of the articles point out, the debate is less about “print *or* digital,” and more about “print *and* digital.” Print is not being replaced, but it does appear that it is being displaced. Information that demands currency, such as breaking news, a lost phone number, or directions to a new restaurant, is most effectively delivered online. And no one can deny how expanding online access to research, DIY, and community sites that would be difficult, if not impossible, to locate in print, is reshaping our society in positive ways that support democracy and self-efficacy. But for those times when we need or want to absorb, contemplate, or enjoy what we are reading, print still delivers the goods. As Mark Twain is alleged to have stated, “The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.”

“Print is alive. Pass it on.”

David Sarasohn in a March 7, 2010 editorial:
<http://tinyurl.com/oregonlive-sarasohn>

