

How will print survive in the digital era?

Is print a dying species? That's a question on quite a few people's lips.

In 2008, CEO Microsoft, Stevie Balmer said: "There will be no media consumption left in ten years that is not delivered over an IP network. There will be no newspapers or magazines that are delivered in paper form. Everything will get delivered in electronic form."

Print is undoubtedly endangered but, even if twenty years ago people started prophesying its death, it seems to be still a large means of communication.

Some people prefer printed materials because there is no risk they are going to run out of battery and are not prone to computer crashes, and advertisers like the printed page because it cannot be switched off or blocked.

Certainly, it is incontestable that new technologies are disrupting the status quo of numerous media. Print is sickening and people are shifting from print to digital consumption, turning to their computers and to the Internet, hunting for entertainment and information.

There are urgent matters the publishing industry must face, changes they must make, in order to deal with decreased sales and market share.

However, there are some explanations behind the problem, different factors to take into account, to try to rescue the print industry or - at least - to delay its decline.

Digital is not evil

One common belief that needs to be dispelled is that digital evolution has been only a disruptive force. Over the last few decades, print has seen important leaps forward in information and printing technologies, which have nourished the branch, rather than killing it.

Until the end of the 19th century, the growth of print was held back by the slowness and, therefore, cost of the operations by hand. By contrast today, as never before, it is easy for an individual or a company to save money and time by doing many operations themselves, thanks to the introductions of computers, scanners and printers.

Furthermore, the printing and publishing processes have been also speeded up and made them more accessible and less expensive by the so-called "digital printing". Because of the Internet, people can easily send files by e-mail or FTP, rather than burn them to CDs or DVDs. This process is convenient and quick, and avoids delay and cost in sending files.

Finally, whilst in the past book publishers suffered from the problem that was unprofitable to print short runs because of the huge preparatory costs, now they can create copies as and when a customer wants, reducing wastage and allowing niche publications to be remunerative.

This method, known as “print on demand”, has radically altered publishing in the 21st century. It has helped bring back many titles, which would have been unavailable, especially academic and technical books. It has also enabled self-publishing which is very advantageous for minor writers.

The reader is changing

While booklovers and bibliophiles still love print editions, the “new generation” - grown up with computers, iPods and other handheld devices - is already passing over print for electronic alternatives. Kids raised with the Internet are accustomed to get most of their information from Google. Electronic versions of books or text perfectly meet their expectations.

Also, there is no point in pretending that it is not happening: people have made substantial changes in their daily lives and do the majority of their reading online. Today’s readers like to interact, share their activities with others and want things instantaneously. And what is the best option for them, if not using stored computerized material that can be access on command?

Print has different forms

When we talk about print, we have to keep in mind that there are several “forms” of print: books, newspapers, magazines, brochures; they are substantially different from each other but they got one mutual point: they are made for entertainment. Therefore, are they all in steep decline? Can we save them all? Let’s analyse each form individually.

BOOKS

A debate over the fate of the book has floated around for decades. Society has been affected dramatically by the development of the Internet and mobile technologies, and it is unrealistic for the “world of books” not to be touched by this cultural change.

Last January, Alison Flood wrote on the Guardian: “A review of 2014 from book sales monitor Nielsen BookScan shows that [...] the decline in sales of print books in the UK slowed last year, with value sales down 1.3% to £1.39bn, and volume sales down 1.9% to 180m.”

This large drop in sales is partly due to a rise in the average price of printed editions and partly to the growth of digital e-book market.

The launch of eBooks (books in digital forms) has revolutionised the way people buy and consume books. Now, we do not need to put our shoes on and go to the bookshop anymore, we can easily make orders online, sitting on the sofa and getting what we want immediately.

Especially references books have suffered the competition of a medium that has low delivery costs and can be updated instantly when required. Encyclopedias and dictionaries, that have been important tools of our literacy for centuries, are being replaced by faster electronic versions, such as CD-ROMs; travel guides are

now published in audio form; podcasts have a helpful role in areas such as language learning.

EBooks are much cheaper than printed versions, and that's why they are taking off in the same way iPod and mp3 did. Perhaps, they will follow the same evolution of music's technological leaps, from one format to another, and they will be "unbind" and exist only digitally.

But at the end, a printed book is just a container, and what if a digital format is more efficient than a physical box?

In 2007, Andrew Marr wrote on the Guardian that reading a text on a screen is not bad as he thought: "In each pace, it was easy to read: I have spent plenty of time reading it and so far, haven't felt any eyestrain, or no more that I would have found with a book".

Looking at the benefits that print industry has by the diffusion of the Internet, we have the emergence of websites like Amazon, which have helped the sale of books all around the world and with a simple click. Moreover, authors can build a public image through online marketing and self-promotion, can take part in online discussions and engage with their audience. And if they will take advantages of the use of tags, they will receive a large reward, because readers are keen on surfing and researching new things on the web.

The time for book reviewers on newspapers is over; the discussions about books take place on the Internet, where people can have their say on forums and social networks. In other words, the Internet will kill as many careers as it will give birth to.

"Here is where the Internet goes from looking like print's killer to its savior, offering tremendous opportunities for writers who are willing to work to harness its power". (David Bann, p. 149)

NEWSPAPERS

Even newspapers, that have been the most popular print informational tools for ages, have been hit very hard by the digital evolution. Let's face it, the market wants profits and it is difficult to monetize print news if the readership is shrinking (and the young generations never got in the habit of reading newspapers).

Printed newspapers are under a double threat: they are losing classified advertising, their main source of revenue, and traditional readers, who are turning online to get information. Therefore, the publishers have to find new sources of revenues from somewhere else and excogitate new ways to catch readers' attention.

I believe it sounds legitimate to ask ourselves: "Why buy printed newspapers when the information is just a mouse-click away?"

Thanks to digital delivery, news goes directly to the customers: with RSS, readers can sign up and get specific portion of a publication, get exclusively what they want. Digital success is not just about technology, it's about applying a shift towards a more personalised customer-centric organisation.

In addition, news is also information with a time limit. If people were once content with the morning and evening news, now they lust for 24/7 information and demand them almost in real time. Any news in a newspaper will be out of date by the time it is printed, so I predict that newspapers of the future will mainly take digital form and publishers need to adapt to online editions if they want to keep their organizations alive.

Newspapers' online versions are at the moment one of the best assimilated cross-over forms from print to digital, and are available globally.

According to Audit Bureau of Circulations, Daily Mail Online and the Guardian.com are the largest national newspapers websites. That is the result of not being hesitant about experimenting, investing in new technologies and recruiting new skills. What it seemed the poison was the cure itself.

MAGAZINES

Some time ago, Dr Samir Husny said: "Without the ink, the paper, the touch, the smell, the look, the taste, it will not be called a magazine. If it is not ink on paper, please try to find another name to define that new medium."

His wish has "unfortunately" not come true. Today, the magazine media industry is thriving across a variety of platforms and formats, in addition to print, and people are interacting with them like never before. Readers' engagement with magazines is growing rapidly. According to the latest AA/WARC Expenditure Report, digital magazines have reason to celebrate since 27% of magazine media advertising is digital, with this growth predicted to be at an all-time high of 6.8% by 2016.

However, even if statistics show that many customers are heading online, still some of them prefer the content in the form of a printed magazine, rather than on a screen. Talking about printed editions, magazine consultant, Jay McGill estimates that profit margins in the industry have dropped off from 20–25% to a still healthy range of 12–15%. That printed magazines are still sound is also proved by the fact that, in recent years, publishers have taken concepts from other media platforms (like All Recipes, HGTV, and Food Network) and turned them into successful print brands.

Nevertheless, if on one hand print brands still deliver large numbers, on the other hand this does not prevent them from having highly engaged and loyal readers who praise their apps, websites and other extensions. The Internet has created communities of interest and discussions boards, in which readers are very interested.

In conclusion, the success and failure of entire companies have been decided by the question of whether they have embraced digital change or not, and by their social strategies. BBC GoodFood is a good example of how different platforms do not exclude, but help, each other.

CONCLUSION

As David Bann said: "Print is still holding its own in areas where other media cannot be as effective" (David Bann, p.6)

If that can be considered true, however, the print world must adapt to the new digital reality if it intends to survive in the long run. Publishers have suffered from fear of change and become paralyzed, but the way to go is to embrace the shift and innovate the new business model. They simply cannot run a business the way they did ten or twenty years ago. And as soon as they accept that, they will realise that there are more opportunities to create and curate content, access top talent, attract investment and make money than ever before. Taking into account certain perspectives, digital communication extends the prospects for organisations, but also individual writers, to promote themselves.

As in any era of transition, disruption and confusion is normal. Some brands will evolve and expand, while some will not. What seems to be holding true though is that the brands that are sure about who they are and what they stand for are still achieving growth.

Greg Satell explained: "The reason why many publishing businesses continue to make money is simple: they're selling a product that people want and need. As long as people want to be informed, entertained, and inspired, there will be profitable opportunities in publishing."

Furthermore, there is an increasing requirement for cross-platform design, where companies have online departments that complement their print identities.

As it turns out, print magazines are viable if they prioritize their digital presences. The coexistence of a print magazine and a companion website brings in more revenue through advertising than either type of media alone.

People who consume information from more than one medium are the most appealing consumers for advertisers. The thinking goes: if consumers see an advertisement more than once, they are more inclined to buy the advertised product. Therefore, magazines that have an online component are more attractive to advertisers.

In conclusion, just as there are fanatics who still collect and enjoy vinyl recordings and music CDs, there will always be people who love books and magazines, the way they look on their shelves, the smell of old paper. For this reason, there will always be a market for print media, although it might be much smaller and the publications will become mostly weekly and monthly.

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