

communiqué

tech talk by angelo fernando

Surfing the Web while swimming in print

Have reports of the death of print been greatly exaggerated?

We may be in the midst of a tough learning experience about how to engage readers in both analog and digital realms.

You've heard the news: Print is down, web traffic is up. Eyeballs are wandering. Click-throughs are, well, all over the place. Are you shuddering as you hold this printed page in your hands? Are you itching to toss it aside and jump online?

Magazines, newspapers and books are seeing the effect of readers accessing content on new platforms. They are doing it through new filters that reside on the Web or through portable devices such as smartphones, e-book readers and even MP3 players.

I find it amusing that in the rush to declare the “death of print,” many people seem to believe that they've cornered the serial killer. “All this tweeting and Facebooking is only making young people drift away from print,” they complain. “Look what the Kindle and the Nook [the e-book readers from Amazon and Barnes

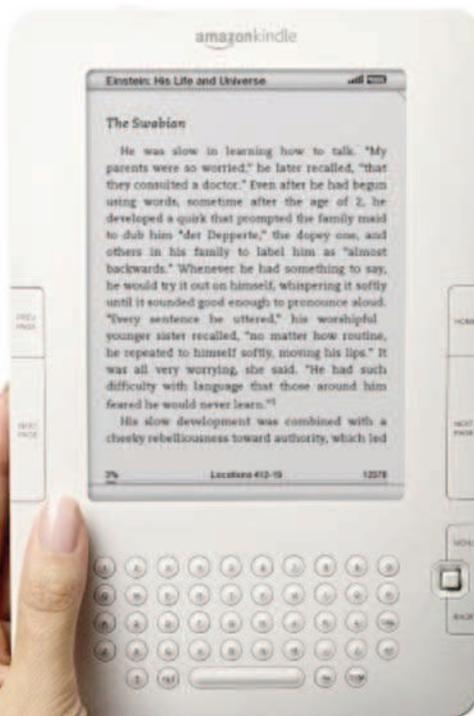
& Noble, respectively] have been doing to print readership!” Indeed, look! While you were not watching, in July, digital-book sales quietly surpassed sales of hardcover books (though not paperbacks), thanks to the Kindle. A report by the Association of American Publishers notes that e-book sales grew 207 percent year-to-date through May 2010.

As content that once was analog begins to pour through these new digital channels, it

does not necessarily mean we are losing readership, or even that print is dead. But we may be in the midst of a tough learning experience about how to engage readers in both analog and digital realms.

Even those infatuated by the tools that take content into the digital realm have mixed feelings. David Paschall, an IT consultant, owns a Kindle, a slim device that's about half the footprint of a magazine. A voracious reader, he's sold on digital books and the changed reading experience. The fact that he can read any number of books at once fits well with his nomadic work life. The screen resolution is “always right,” whether he is in a cramped airplane seat or on the beach, he says. The odd thing, though, is that even though he carries a library of more than 180 books in a side pocket of his briefcase, he loves—absolutely loves!—bookstores.

“I spend a lot of time



browsing the shelves of bookstores, sitting around with a book and a cup of coffee,” Paschall admitted. But when he travels, he pulls out his Kindle and reads, as he was doing when I met him on a flight. (Me? I had an old-fashioned magazine in hand.) “I absolutely love this thing,” he continued, “because I have been moving a lot and I travel a lot. But I like being able to discover new titles and pick up older books in a used bookstore.” Pause. “You can’t do that so well online.”

I considered telling him that the advocates of the “long tail” theory—the notion that a significant portion of sales in online bookstores comes from obscure books that are not available in brick-and-mortar stores—would vehemently disagree, but I did not want to detour our conversation. Right across the aisle, another passenger was reading a magazine—on his iPad.

I asked Paschall about the Kindle’s interface. Does it bother him that he has to push a button to turn a page? It didn’t. Besides, “the ‘page’ is very easy on the eyes, and it’s not a big difference from reading a real page,” he noted. But he kept glancing across the aisle at the iPad. “That’s my next toy! I like how it renders the page in color,” he confessed. Later models of e-readers may have more bells and whistles, but the

Kindle, which has tried to stay close to the book format, is still shunning color. Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos has noted that adding multimedia and color is possible but could detract from the book experience. “You’re not going to make Hemingway better by adding animations,” he said.

But there is one enhancement that makes an e-book a different experience: the ability to make annotations on the page. Should you do that—say, take notes for a class—you could then save them and access them when you synchronize your e-reader with your laptop. I’ve heard that students could collectively take notes and share them, creating a new kind of information commons that could give new meaning to the phrase about everyone being on the same page. People have been reading a lot into the fact that Amazon has the capacity to quietly peek into your Kindle and remotely grab your highlights and notes. OK, maybe “quietly peek” is over the top—Amazon stores your books for you on its servers, so it also has your annotations.

What it all means

The fact that Amazon can store your notes on what you read is just one example that begs the question: Is reading a newspaper or book a private experience anymore, or is it a communal one? If newspaper

publishers intended for it to be private, they would not add those widgets at the bottom of every article online urging us to “blog this,” comment on it or tweet it to our social network. Book authors often host their own web sites with free, downloadable chapters, soliciting comments and sharing.

There are plenty of examples where social media may actually be enhancing the print experience. Taking content online has its advantages, and in these situations, print is the on-ramp to the deeper, more contextual content—especially useful if your organization puts a premium on dynamic content that needs to be updated weekly, daily or even hourly.

All this illustrates the relentless trend of print media turning to digital access points to stay more relevant to readers who are more likely to toggle between the printed page and digital content. You as a publisher will get to interact with (and track) how your audience is using your content. On the edges of this new publishing industry, should you be in the business of packaging and distributing knowledge (such as online classes or technical training videos), you now have a different kind of immediacy and reach. The use of video, slideshows, dynamic time lines and blogs lets editors breathe new life into the reading experience. ●

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about the author

Angelo Fernando is principal of Public Radius, an Arizona-based strategic communication and PR consultancy that helps organizations bridge the gap between traditional and digital media. Read his blog at HoiPolloiReport.com.