

Probing question: Are print newspapers dying?

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It's a morning routine repeated across the country: Before heading off to work, you sit down at the table with a cup of coffee, a bowl of cereal and the local paper spread out in front of you. But as the Internet becomes a leading source for news, what are the chances that the newsprint on your fingers will be replaced by the feel of the laptop keys?

Print newspapers won't go the way of the dinosaur anytime soon, predicts Russell Frank. But Frank, an associate professor of communications at Penn State, does think that the print version may become more difficult to find on the newsstand.

"There are people who will always want a print version," he said, adding that there are places where it's difficult to read a newspaper online, like on a bus or at the beach. "You can spill coffee on it," he said of the familiar broadsheet. "You can make it a keepsake, framing a front page of a certain event." But in the end these conveniences simply don't outweigh the costs of printing and distribution.

"The biggest expense after employee salaries is the newsprint," Frank explains. "You take that cost, the cost of printing, and the cost of circulation, right down to the kid on the bicycle throwing it onto your front porch. With a wave of the wand, all those costs can be eliminated when papers go online."

Frank notes that The Capital Times in Madison, Wis., recently abandoned its print format and is now exclusively a digital publication.

He thinks the reason more newspapers haven't taken that plunge is because no one has developed the perfect hardware for reading electronic newspapers.

"You want something that is durable, something that can be read in daylight, something that is very portable," he said. "It should be something that combines the advantages of the print newspaper with the additional advantage that the news can be updated all the time."

The Internet also changing the reporting of news, he noted. Newspapers and other online purveyors are turning to citizen-journalists who write blogs and report news as it is happening in front of them. "The blogosphere has put a tremendous amount of pressure on traditional journalists to report on things before they feel comfortable reporting them," said Frank. "Because if you don't report it, you look slow and as if you are in cahoots with the powers that be to suppress information."

However, Frank doesn't think the rise in amateur newsgathering will put an end to professionalism. Most readers, he hopes, still want to see good reporting. "Delivering the news is becoming more multimedia," he noted. "As professionals, it's no longer enough to have the traditional skills of a print or broadcast journalist, because now we need to produce multimedia reports." Online newspapers, he adds, are as well situated to provide those reports as television stations or other media.

"There are things about a print copy of the newspaper that people will miss," Frank acknowledged. "I'd miss it. But ours may be the last generation that has that attachment to the printed newspaper."

Source: By Sue Marquette Poremba, Penn State

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