

Musings on the Demise of Paper

We have been hearing the dire predictions about the end of paper and the book since microfiche was hailed as the savior of libraries decades ago. Now it seems that technology may be finally catching up with the hype. With the Amazon Kindle and the Sony Reader beginning to sell in the marketplace despite the cost (about \$360 for the Kindle), it appears that a whole new group of electronic alternatives to the print book will soon be available for users next year. Amazon reports that e-book sales quadrupled in 2008 from the previous year. This has many technology firms salivating and hoping that the consumer market is ready to move to digital reading as quickly and profitably as the move to digital music. Some of these new devices and technologies are featured in the March 3, 2009, *Fortune* article by Michael V. Copeland titled "The End of Paper?"¹

Part of the problem with current readers is their challenges for advertising. Because the screen is so small, there isn't any room to insert ads (i.e., revenue) around the margins of the text. But new readers such as Plastic Logic, Polymer Vision, and FirstPaper will have larger screens, stronger image resolution, and automatic wireless updates, with color screens and video capabilities just over the horizon. Still, working out a business model for newspapers and magazines is the real challenge. And how much will readers pay for content? With everything "free" over the Internet, consumers have become accustomed to information readily available for no immediate cost. So how much to charge and how to make money selling content?

The Plastic Logic reader weighs less than a pound, is one-eighth of an inch thick, and resembles an 8½ x 11 inch sheet of paper or a clipboard. It will appear in the marketplace next year, using plastic transistors powered by a lithium battery. While not flexible, it is a very durable and break-resistant device. Other e-readers will use flexible display technology that allows one to fold up the screen and place the device into a pocket. Much of this technology is fueled by E-Ink, a start-up company that is behind the success of the Kindle and the Reader. They are exploring the use of color and video, but both have problems in terms of reading experience and battery wear. In the long run, however, these issues will be resolved. Expense is the main concern: Just how much are users willing to pay to read something in digital rather than analog? Amazon has been hugely successful with the Kindle, selling more than 500,000 for just under \$400 in 2007. And with the drop in subscriptions for analog magazines and newspapers, advertisers are becoming nervous about their

futures. Or will the "pay by the article" model, like that used for digital music sales, become the norm?

So what should or do these developments mean for libraries? It means that we should probably be exploring the purchase of some of these products when they appear and offering them (with some content) for checkout to our patrons. Many of us did something similar when it became apparent that laptops were wanted and needed by students for their use. Many of us still offer this service today, even though many campuses now require students to purchase them anyway. Offering cutting-edge technology with content related to the transmission and packaging of information is one way for our clientele to see libraries as more than just print materials and a social space. And libraries shouldn't pay full price (or any price) for these new toys; companies that develop these products are dying to find free research and development focus groups that will assist them in versioning and upgrading their products for the marketplace. What better avenue than college students?

Related to this is the recent announcement by the University of Michigan that their university press will now be a digital operation to be run as part of the library.² Decreased university and library budgets have meant that university presses have not been able to sell enough of their monographs to maintain viable business models. The move of a university press to a successful scholarly communication and open-source publishing entity like the University of Michigan Libraries means that the press will be able to survive, and it also indicates that the newer model of academic libraries as university publishers will have a prototypical example to point out to their university's administration. In the long run, these types of partnerships are essential if academic libraries are to survive their own budget cuts in the future.

References

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2. Andrew Albanese, "University of Michigan Press Merged with Library, With New Emphasis on Digital Monographs," *LibraryJournal.com*, Mar. 26, 2009, <http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA6647076.html> (accessed June 22, 2009).

Bradford Lee Eden (eden@library.ucsb.edu) is Associate University Librarian for Technical Services and Scholarly Communication, University of California, Santa Barbara.