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Digital era claims another print institution

Montgomery Advertiser - Montgomery, Ala.
 Date: Dec 30, 2012
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Document Text

HASHTAG, America -- It is comforting to think of death as a passing rather than an end. In that vein, I prefer to think of Steve Jobs' final words as editorial commentary: "Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh wow." If the Afterlife were unpleasant, wouldn't he have said something more profane?

Similarly, I have forced myself to think of the last print edition of Newsweek magazine as a transition rather than yet more evidence of The Death of Print. The last hard copy, which left the presses a few days ago, is merely the magazine's passing from this life to the next. Dust to dust; paper to digital? It isn't quite as poetic as our earth-to-heaven transmogrification, but it will have to do. What's the alternative? We printosaurs can mourn the loss of our medium, or we can frolic in fresh clover. Or so "they" -- the blogger-Twitter hordes -- keep telling us. Still. Frolic as we may, the celebrate-new-media prescription falls short of palliative. This is because, notwithstanding the obvious benefits of new vehicles for old passengers, there is something uniquely sublime about print that has nothing to do with content. Hard copy is a full-on sensory experience.

Yes, the words are the same, whether perceived on paper or on a small, illuminated screen. But the experience is not. One can read "One Hundred Years of Solitude" on a Kindle or an iPad, but one cannot see, hear, feel and smell the story in the same way. I'm unlikely to race to the sofa, there to nuzzle an electronic gizmo, with the same anticipation as with a book. Or to the hammock with the same relish I would with a new magazine. Somehow, napping with a gadget blinking notice of its dwindling power doesn't hold the same appeal as falling asleep in the hammock with your paperback opened to where you dozed off.

This is not mysterious. Paper, because it is real, provides an organic connection to our natural world: The tree from whence the paper came; the sun, water and soil that nourished the tree. By contrast, a digital device is alien, man-made, hard and cold to human flesh. Future generations may never know the satisfaction of print, nor, likely, miss it -- a recognition that is both sad and startling. One of my earliest and fondest memories is of reading with my father, who taught me not only to love words but also to appreciate the smell of a book. Even today, I judge a book by its smell and am always surprised when others don't employ this obvious method of criticism.



Smell is fundamental to our being from our first moments. Babies use smell to recognize and bond with their mother, memories can be jarred by smell, and cognitive functioning has been tied to olfactory stimulation. With near certainty, I can predict that no future adult will fondly recall the scent of a favorite, childhood laptop. Smell is also connected to what we now call Old Journalism. Ask anyone with decades' experience in a print newsroom and they'll likely confess a love affair with the newsroom itself -- a sensory universe that once included the smells of coffee, cigarettes, ink and paper, including carbon paper. It was, above all, a people place that over time has become something else -- more efficient, perhaps, but less human.

Tension between man and machine is an old science-fiction plot that just happens no longer to be fictional. The more digitally entrenched we become, the less human our interactions. Social media replace human gatherings; online porn becomes a substitute for relationships; email is less trouble than dialing a number and making small talk. Everything at the click of a button has made it less likely we'll take the trouble to exchange pleasantries with a fellow human. I am hardly immune to some of these digital conveniences. I order out, shop online, have groceries delivered and resent the phone. I read newspapers and magazines online because it's easier, cleaner and I can stay in bed. Still. There's no substitute for opening one's front door the morning after a blizzard and finding a rolled newspaper wrapped in plastic, reassuring us once more that no matter what nature doles out, human beings will deliver the paper.

Of course, this same newspaper was the product of digital processes for which we are ever grateful. Likewise, we'll cheer the next technological advances as we mourn the passing of old ways. Even true believers grieve the death of loved ones, no matter how "wow" their parting.

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