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What is print's place in a digital world?

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Introduction

The digital world we live in today is a relatively recent development, having emerged over the last few decades. Since then, it has evolved at an unprecedented pace, with new technologies emerging almost every day. In fact, the digital world we live in today is characterized by the extensive use of technology and the internet. From smartphones to social media platforms, digital technology has become a part of our daily lives. As a result, many aspects of it have been transformed, from the way we communicate and socialize to the way we work and consume media.

In today's digital age, print media is often seen as a relic of the past. With the advent of the internet and digital devices, many people have turned to online sources for their news and entertainment. However, despite the shift towards digital media, print still holds an important place in the world.

Print media vs Digital media: a user-based experience

Information and communication technologies have generated new platforms on which to read, from desktop and laptop computers to tablets and smartphones. However, print media, such as books, newspapers and magazines, offer a tactile experience that cannot be replicated by digital media. An argument often used when comparing a book to a kindle, for example, is that the kindle *is not a book. It doesn't have a smell, you don't touch it ...* [1] In fact, one of the main advantages of print media is its tangibility. People can hold a newspaper or magazine in their hands, flip through the pages, and write, mark or highlight important information.

Moreover, as often seen in films, printed items from past activities like tickets, records, photographs, books, etc. act as printed reminders of important moments of our lives and they can have a substantial impact in the way the feelings and memories of those moments are remembered.

In short, the physical experience of print can provide a unique sensory experience that can engage people in a way that digital media is incapable of.

In addition, similar to what is very often seen in fashion, we are seeing, for a couple of years now, a re-emergence of analogue physical media, especially amongst younger generations. And even though we were born in this digital age, something about that

old technology seems to fascinate us. Vinyl records and analogue photography are just two examples of old technologies that have made a comeback.

For the print industry I think this is quite important, as it puts forward the fact that physical media is still very much relevant, and that it remains a preference for some.

Moreover, studies have found that prolonged reading on glossy self-illuminated screens, like computer screens, smartphones and tablets, requires a greater physical and mental effort than reading on paper. This can lead to a decline in comprehension and retention of information and can also increase eyestrain and headaches. [2]

Furthermore, print media has also a unique ability to reach certain demographics. For example, many elderly people may not be as comfortable with digital devices and may prefer reading a physical newspaper. Additionally, print media can be distributed in areas without internet access, making it an important source of information for communities in rural or developing areas.

However, print media also faces some challenges in the digital age.

Whilst it is true that print media provides an experience that digital media cannot replicate, it is undeniable that the latter is more accessible, with lower barriers, making it possible for millions of people to have access to documents that would otherwise be beyond their reach, financially and/or physically. In addition, digital media allows us to expand our scope of educational and recreational experience to include audio and visual materials.

Furthermore, one main advantage that digital devices provide is their practicality. In fact, it is much more convenient to carry around your smartphone, which can easily fit in your pocket, rather than a bulky book or a large newspaper. While commuting by public transportation, for example, it is much easier to use your phone to check the news, which in addition allows you to precisely look for what you are interested in, rather than having to unfold and carry a newspaper.

Conversely, unlike print media, which by nature tends to be concise (to the topic of whatever we are reading), the internet gives us access to an almost limitless amount

of information which can be overwhelming and make it difficult to separate credible sources from unreliable ones. In addition, with web content starting to be highly saturated, with thousands of articles, blogs and ads being posted daily, there is fierce competition for space. From this point of view, print is a great alternative to get away from that volatile marketplace, and more so because print media is not susceptible to ad-blocking which most people use on their devices nowadays.

Overall, many people now prefer to consume information digitally, which has resulted in a decline in the sales of physical books, newspapers, and magazines and therefore a decrease in average run lengths. However, despite its decline in popularity, print media still has an important role to play in the digital age. In fact, their existence is complementary. While digital media has transformed the way we consume information and communicate with each other, print media still has its own unique strengths and offers a valuable experience that continues to make it relevant and important.

Impact on the Environment

Now more than ever, people worry about the future of the environment, with plastic pollution and deforestation being some of the most recurring concerns. The environmental impact of print media versus its digital counterpart is a complex issue, with both print and digital media having their own unique environmental advantages and drawbacks.

On one hand, the production of paper, ink, and other materials used in print media consumes a lot of energy and natural resources, like water for the paper making process, for example. Additionally, the transportation and distribution of print materials can also have a significant impact on the environment.

On the other hand, the production of electronic devices such as computers, tablets, and smartphones, also requires a significant amount of energy and natural resources. Plus, these devices usually have a limited lifespan and when they become obsolete, they regularly end up in landfills, where they can be harmful to the environment. Additionally, the data centres that store digital media consume a lot of energy and contribute significantly to climate change.

In my opinion, misinformation and lack of awareness has often caused print to be seen as a threat to the environment. But the truth is sustainability has been a trend within the print industry for some time now and it continues to be one of the greenest industries out there. Importantly, sustainability does not have to mean less printed materials but better monitoring procedures, for example.

One of the biggest myths is that the print industry is responsible for deforestation. However, the raw material used to make paper comes mainly from other industries' waste. In addition, the industry has already come a long way with FSC® (Forest Stewardship Council) et PEFC™ (Program for the Endorsement of Forest Certification) certifications becoming increasingly more common for paper mills and printers. And as a matter of fact, this sustainable management has resulted in a growth of European forests.

Moreover, paper can be recycled and reused, making it that much more sustainable, in the circular economy system that reigns in the paper making and print industries. Additionally, innovations in inks have also led to an increase in environmentally sustainable options.

On the contrary, the digital world, with its cloud storage, has been contributing to the destruction of the environment unnoticed. In fact, because of its non-material nature, it is harder for people to perceive its impact. However, some studies highlight how much more impactful the digital media can be, when compared to its print counterpart [4][5]:

- An email contributes 1.7 times more to the ozone layer depletion than a paper letter
- An email travels on average 15 000 km before reaching its recipient
- An online catalogue is 5 times more impactful to the ocean acidification than a paper one
- A video on social media contributes 3.3 times more to global warming than a leaflet

Plus, electronic devices are much more difficult to recycle than paper products.

To sum up, both print and digital media have their own unique environmental impact. The environmental impact of print media is mainly due to the production and distribution of paper products, while that of digital media is mainly due to the production and disposal of electronic devices, with its impact being seemingly greater than that of the print industry.

What future for the print industry in a digital world?

The digital world we live in today has and will continue to face big changes. With the development of new technologies, it is almost undeniable that everything will be more digital, robotic and automated in the future. However, as people are becoming more and more aware of the real impact of this new technology, some have started to wonder whether maybe we might have been going too fast, and if it is maybe time to slow things down, and perhaps even go back to a less technologically dependent world.

However, as much as things might change, in my opinion printed materials will inevitably still be needed for packaging, signage, security documents, books, etc. In addition, as said previously, the re-emergence of physical media will favour the print industry.

Furthermore, whilst traditional print might be affected, the development of new technologies allowed the development of new branches for print, that have merged with the digital environment we live in today. One of the most popular ones are QR codes which allow cross media interactions, between physical and digital media. Additionally, the development of 3D printing and printed electronics show promising results as a next-generation technology. Regarding printed electronics, this new technology which is low cost, energy efficient, and environmentally friendly, is repurposing traditional printing technologies for the production of electronic elements and devices. An already widely spread example is that of RFID antennas.

In conclusion, print media still has an important place in the digital age, it provides a tangible and trustworthy source of information, and also can reach certain demographics that digital media cannot. It may not be as widely used as it once was, but it still has value and will continue to have a place in the world. Moreover, the development of new technologies like printed electronics show promising results for the print industry that has and will continue to adapt to the ever-changing world we live in.

References

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