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Timeless messages and the new media

Heidi Schlumpf | Jul. 22, 2010

Are you reading this column online, perhaps on your Kindle, or iPad or the new iPhone4? Did you get here through the *NCR* site, the blog, a Facebook link, or a Tweet? Or are you paging through the actual printed newspaper, maybe getting a little ink on your fingers but not having to worry about carpal tunnel syndrome from too much mouse use?

Does anyone even read actual printed newspapers anymore?

That question costs people in publishing plenty of sleep. Surveys continue to show that fewer and fewer people, especially younger readers, do. Such news (often reported, ironically, in actual printed newspapers) prompts prognostication about the future of print -- or its lack thereof. Such discussions predictably intensify after the release of any new technology that threatens to save more trees. Will everything eventually be ?printed? only on a screen? Can publishers afford to continue to give away free content online? What does this all mean for the future of journalism or literature or even the art of reading?

Just as in today?s polarized political debates, citizens are forced to pick a side in this one: Either you cheer the demise of print, preferably in 140 characters or fewer; or you nostalgically bemoan it, tacking on scare tactics (?Did you know Google is secretly digitizing 3,000 books a day??).

Many in religious publishing often hedge their bets, giving new media lip service or cautiously and belatedly jumping on board, while secretly wishing they could keep doing business as usual. The recent Catholic Press Association convention?s theme, ?Spreading the Good News -- Byte by Byte,? drew praise during the pope?s June 2 general audience, when Benedict said it ?highlights the extraordinary potential of the new media to bring the message of Christ and the teaching of his church to the attention of a wider public.?

But at the convention?s awards ceremony, the predominance of honors for print products belied this online emphasis: Twenty-six went to newspapers (several, including general excellence, to *NCR*), 23 to books, 19 to magazines and newsletters, 12 to Spanish-language print publications -- and only 11 to online publishing.

Meanwhile, at the Religious Booksellers Trade Expo in late spring, Catholic book publishers and booksellers were hungry to hear about microblogging, text-based marketing, podcasting and streaming video as a way to -- paradoxically -- sell more print books.

As someone who never thought she would confess that she now does the majority of her reading online -- and whose job is to train journalists and communicators for the future -- I tend to slant pro-new media.

Still, I must confess my dedication to the good old-fashioned printed word. I love bookstores and libraries and racks of glossy magazines at the supermarket. Our dining room walls are lined with full bookshelves, including a burgeoning children?s section. I give books and magazine subscriptions as gifts, and enjoy receiving them, too. Nothing makes me prouder as a parent than to have my 2-year-old excitedly grab a book and ask me to read it to him.

Of course, I also write books, and articles and columns for printed magazines and newspapers. And I require my students to write papers -- and I still grade them on hard copy. But I get many of my story ideas from friends on Facebook, promote my writing through my blogs, and recently assigned students to give presentations as webinars.

?The medium is the message,? communication scholar Marshall McLuhan famously said almost 50 years ago. He is still right. I would miss reading Anne Lamott?s new novel as an actual printed book. I certainly can?t picture a lector processing down the aisle with a Kindle. And evidence is starting to show that all this Internet scanning is literally reconfiguring our brains and giving us a societal case of attention deficit disorder or, as Nicholas Carr calls it, ?the shallows.?

Reading a printed book, magazine or newspaper may seem so ?last century,? but so is growing your own tomatoes, making cookies from scratch and knitting a sweater. I do all of those things, too, and find a special pleasure and meaning in them.

As much as medium affects message, I also believe ?the message is the message.? The Christian story existed and thrived before the printing press, and it will survive (and thrive) after the new media revolution. It?s trendy today to argue that social networking is making people more connected and thus more spiritual. Others argue the opposite, that shallow networking zaps us of our need for solitary contemplation with God. I?ve read both arguments in the past week -- significantly, both online.

Like so many things in life and in our religion, I don?t think it has to be ?either/or.? Both spirit and body. Both faith and works. Both printed and new media. Our God is a God of both/and.

[Heidi Schlumpf is the author of *While We Wait: Spiritual and Practical Advice for Those Trying to Adopt* (ACTA Publications).]

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