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Random Ramblings: Mourning the Passing of the Print Edition of College and Research Libraries

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I sometimes learn about changes that concern me in unexpected ways. In a recent article on “Arguments Over Open Access” by Carl Straumsheim from Inside Higher Ed (January 6, 2014), Mary Ellen K. Davis, Executive Director of the Association of College and Research Libraries, reported that College & Research Libraries will no longer appear in print. “The ACRL made its scholarly journal, College & Research Libraries (C&RL), open access in 2011, and the publication will this month go online only after members ‘begged’ the organization to end its print edition,” Davis said. “I certainly am not one of the ‘beggers’ and will give two personal reasons plus an organizational worry to explain why I’m mourning the disappearance of the print edition. I will add that I’ve been a member of ACRL for over forty years.

My first reason springs from the advantages that print still maintains for me as a reading format. Please don’t accuse me of being anti-digital. I teach online, answer email online, and do most of my research online. I stopped printing out documents years ago because I put them in folders and never read them. Then why do I feel differently about C&RL? To begin, I consider it to be a treat to read this publication in the evening in my easy chair, most often with a glass of wine, after I’m completely sick of looking at digital screens. I have wireless access for my easy chair; but I don’t want to look at yet another digital device whether it be a netbook, tablet, or smart phone. (I don’t have any special love for the feel or smell of paper.) In addition, I want to look at the whole issue as expeditiously as possible. I scan print for content much more easily than I can scan digital even if digital includes abstracts, summaries, and tables of content all hyperlinked to the correct spot in the journal issue. I started my career as a subject cataloguer and have retained the skill of flipping through non-fiction works in order to be able to summarize content in less than ten minutes. I dare anyone to do this with a substantive e-document. When the latest issue of C&RL arrives, I scan the articles quickly, often reading the abstract, first paragraph, and conclusion to see if I’m interested in reading the complete article later. I also pay particular attention to the book reviews, C&RL is the journal equivalent of browsing the stacks for related physical books of potential interest — another loss from the increasing focus on e-resources.

The second reason I’m mourning the print edition of C&RL is the serendipity factor. Most of my professional reading and research focuses on precise topics where I use resources like Library Literature Online. I’m searching for a known item, most often discovered elsewhere, or for a specific subject. While complete issues of many library science periodicals are available, I seldom if ever take the time to look at an entire issue. I often feel guilty about no longer scanning important journals such as the Journal of Academic Librarianship but not guilty enough to make doing so part of my regular routine. With the physical copy of C&RL, I sometimes find myself reading articles that I would have otherwise paid no attention to but find interesting enough from the abstract to read in their entirety. I pay particular attention to the book reviews — first, because they are relatively short, and, second, because they keep me up-to-date on scholarship in library and information science. I’d also suggest that scanning C&RL is the journal equivalent of browsing the stacks for related physical books of potential interest — another loss from the increasing focus on e-resources.

The third reason for mourning the physical edition of C&RL is that I believe that dropping the print edition of C&RL may pose some organizational risks for ACRL. I can certainly understand the decision to do so from a fiscal perspective. Providing a print copy and mailing it to 11,944 members (2013) must be a substantial cost for the division. On the other hand, the print version is one of the few tangible benefits of paying $58 annual dues as a full member. I have long thought that the policies of the American Library Association offer
few inducements to join divisions and round tables. Programs sponsored by ALA units are open to all members, as are any committee or interest/discussion group meetings, though some special events charge a lower fee for members. Being appointed to a committee requires membership in the unit, but a subject for another column could be why ALA members are becoming increasingly disinterested in such appointments. The arrival in the mail of C&RL reminds me that I’m an ACRL member and am receiving a visible benefit from this membership. Over the years, I’ve dropped membership in two other divisions when they ceased distributing print publications. I have enough commitment to ACRL that I’ll most likely continue to renew each year. Perhaps this factor doesn’t concern other members who are more involved with ACRL through Facebook, Google Groups, Twitter, ALA Connect, and other social media.

The cost savings in eliminating the print version of C&RL will most likely far exceed the loss of revenue from any decreased membership dues. Nonetheless, I worry about this slippery slope that I see occurring in many parts of my life. My local daily newspaper went digital and also reduced content to save money. In the beginning, I read the digital version daily, though not as thoroughly because scanning the entire issue was more difficult as I’ve already discussed above. I stopped reading it completely when I lost the email that contained the password and didn’t consider it important enough to go looking for it. The same will most likely be true for the digital edition of C&RL. I’ll get the digital email about the new issue, perhaps even with a table of contents; make a mental note that I should really, really read it; file the email away in my “read later” folder; and eventually delete the email without reading the issue. To be fair, I have a stack of publications in my office that will also be discarded at some point without systematic reading; but I have at least scanned the most important ones when they arrived and noted the organization that sent them. In the end, I’ll have less of a connection with ACRL and ALA. I don’t know if other organizations have faced this same issue. A quick Google search indicates that many professional societies stress the benefits of receiving print publications as a perk for joining and at least a few have less expensive online memberships that don’t include print journals.

I’m beginning to worry that I look like a Luddite in too many of my columns, but I’ll remind readers that the Luddites were right — technology would change their lives in ways that they didn’t like. Where they were wrong was that they could do anything to stop these changes. I know better than to make that mistake but hope that I can at least mourn the losses attached to adopting new technologies, including not receiving a print edition of C&RL.

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