

Electronic Publishing

There has been considerable interest in the concept of electronic publication and the thought that conventional paper publications are soon to be replaced by a more "modern" form of communication. There is much to be said for such a concept. With postal rates going ever higher, it becomes increasingly onerous for a publisher to mail a paper-based publication, and the size of each issue becomes critical. This is especially true when the subscriber base is international. Furthermore, conventional mail is slow and sometimes unpredictable. Also, paper costs continue to skyrocket, and publishers are continually being forced to raise prices or compromise quality.

Electronic publication could take many forms, from being on-line through a subscriber service to being delivered on CD-ROM. An on-line electronic journal can reside anywhere and be immediately accessible to a subscriber anywhere in the world as soon as it is posted. Distance is not a factor in on-line communication. Anyone who has chatted on the World Wide Web knows that the origin of the other parties is not only obscure, it is irrelevant. There is no longer a "there"—everywhere becomes "here" in cyberspace. Mastering a CD is increasingly more reasonable, and mailing costs would be much lower than for a paper edition. Each new CD could have that year's preceding issues together with the current edition. I don't know what the terminology would be for the electronic equivalent of a bound volume, but I am certain one will evolve. Furthermore, the environmentalists would point out that electronic publication is kinder to our forests. The elimination of paper journals not only reduces paper consumption, but also reduces the impact on landfills and waste disposal or recycling expenses.

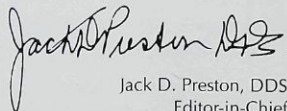
Conventional publication in color is also expensive, and the technology to produce quality color printing is demanding. One need only look at the wide range of color fidelity seen in various dental journals to appreciate what quality color reproduction can contribute to reading pleasure and technical understanding. On-line color can also be variable—but for a professional publisher, it is not a great challenge to offer high resolution digital photographs. The cost is manifest more in the file size than in the dollar value. Electronic publication would complement the emergence of the first digital libraries, which will make superb reference sites.

Yes, for all the foregoing reasons and many more, one could certainly find numerous substantive reasons for moving away from paper toward a more modern and efficient method of publishing. Now, I consider myself at least as "wired" as most of my peers, but I must state that I have every confidence that the paper journal is just not going to be

replaced by any electronic substitute in my lifetime. Whereas all the reasons for moving toward electronic publication are logical and technical, most of the reasons for not doing so are much more subjective and emotional. Currently, the primary reason for not relying on electronic publication is simply that not enough people are electronically prepared to access an electronic publication. I am confident that this reason will be eroded in a short time, and the technical impediment to having sufficient electronic subscribers will be gone. What will remain is the more emotional, and therefore possibly more powerful, aspect of the reader's attachment to the friendliness and familiarity of the written word.

Let's face it, it is not easy to curl up in a comfortable chair next to the fireplace with a good computer. Computers—even the most portable notebook—require certain postures and angles of view. A good journal can be read in any position, and at any time, with no fear of a dying battery. Furthermore, the paper medium can be conveniently tucked away in a briefcase, a sports bag, or even a jacket pocket. One can have various magazines or books at different locations around the house or office to be read when there is the opportunity to do so. Journals are not subject to theft, as laptop or notebook computers are, and one can be a bit more casual with paper media. Furthermore, it is just too easy to read paper. I can't imagine standing in a line and reading a computer. One can page forward, flip back, compare, mark a page, all of which can be done electronically, but with paper it is greatly more simple and natural. Even though there are those working to develop electronic pages that would emulate a book, I doubt that the traditional journal form will vanish easily.

Electronic media are infinitely easier to use for searching for data, locating citations, and storing data, and I wouldn't think of writing this editorial long hand or typing it—but for reading, the paper text is here to stay. There is something that is warm, friendly, and familiar about a book, journal, magazine, or newspaper. I have every confidence that electronic technology will continue to complement the traditional written word, and I am grateful for such support. However, if there are those among you that feel that the professional journal is going the way of the dinosaur, be advised that paper is alive, thriving, and still marvelously friendly, familiar, and satisfying. Sorry about that, Bill Gates.



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