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Editorial

Paper vs. Screens?

By Edward T. Dell, Jr.

What Benjamin Franklin began back in 1775 is now rapidly being destroyed. Ben, a youngest son from Boston, ran away to Philadelphia, became the discoverer of electricity, founder of the first fire department, negotiator for funds to financially enable the American Revolution, and our first assistant Postmaster General.

As one of the staunchest of supporters of American independence, he believed it essential that if the powers of government were derived from the consent of the governed, then the governed ought to be well informed. His postal service set up a special rate for periodicals to make their distribution possible, and more affordable.

No one these days seems to have any memory or regard for this vital public support for citizen information. The United States Postal Service is a quasi-governmental entity which operates on a fiction that it is not part of the government. For some time, up until a couple of years ago, this was belied by the tags adorning USPS-owned vehicles which read "US Government." These have since disappeared. Now, the vehicles have no tags at all. Naturally not, since the USPS is an "independent" agency whose deficits are funded by the US Congress, and which pays no taxes of any kind, not on gasoline, or vehicles, or anything else.

The USPS has raised rates for delivering periodicals by approximately 18%. At least that is the rumor. These rates have remained somewhat mythic for several months since even after they went into effect, no publisher knew exactly what his or her costs were to be since the postal people did not know either. No rate forms, no mailing forms for periodicals were available either and still are not, three months after going into effect. Publishers pay at two levels for mailing magazines and newspapers, one for editorial content, and the other for advertising pages. The latter is scaled

in cost based on distance. The larger the publication's circulation, the cheaper the rate, since they can pre-distribute palletized batches by truck to distribution centers.

The Internet has changed everything. First-class mail is used primarily for moving checks, and that is shrinking. Advertising is moving from newspapers and magazines to the web. It appears likely that USPS is repairing its first-class shortfall by charging periodical readers higher rates. Inevitably, publishers must pass along these rate rises to the subscriber. We are holding steady in our rates, except for overseas readers, for the moment. Rates for 2008 will be higher, however. How much will depend on what we eventually hear about what the rates are.

Internet and periodical rivalries have raised the inevitable question of whether periodicals will survive. Our 400-year-old reading habit of holding paper in our two hands will take time to disappear—if ever. The vote is ongoing. Most periodicals have expanded their offerings to the web.

You can watch a politician in a movie attached to his quote in an Internet news story. This certainly enriches what periodicals are able to offer readers and is another advertising revenue stream. But it remains true that periodicals cannot survive without advertising. This periodical cannot. Technology has helped us do more with less. We remain efficient and have continued to improve our productivity.

As always, you are in charge. What you value you will pay for. You have made *audioXpress* a unique, worldwide vehicle for information about the technicalities of audio. It is also a community where we are able to explore a dynamic technology together. It is a showcase for our best collective thinking.

Your choices about subscribing and patronizing our advertisers will determine our fate.—Ed.