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The Digital Age: What's Ahead for Magazines and Newspapers?

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Office of University Communications

October 29, 2012

Gardner-Webb University Communication Studies Expert Weighs In

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. – Recent reports that the historic publication *Newsweek* magazine would release its final print edition in December and switch to an all-digital format in 2013, reinstates the question: What will the future hold for magazines and newspapers in the ever-changing world of technology? Ongoing changes in these fields have caused colleges to rethink how they educate their students. Gardner-Webb University's Dr. Joseph Webb, professor of Journalism in the Communication Studies department, recently addressed these emerging issues.

“The newspaper and magazine are two different animals,” said Webb. “All indications are that magazines will still thrive by making the digital transition. They have a developing target audience. It will be a bit more difficult for newspapers, but not out of the question they can take advantage of both print form and the Internet.” Devices like handheld digital readers already offer magazine subscriptions. Because publishing is expensive, in many cases going digital seems to be a desired alternative. “The magazine industry feels like their audience won't go away if they cease the in-hand publication, but will instead expand,” added Webb.

Newspapers continue to be faced with the challenges of technology, as it seems likely that its next generation of readers will access information in an online format. Webb said, “Younger audiences are not attracted to the print newspaper. However, those of us who are older may still appreciate receiving the newspaper the old-fashioned way; having it delivered in our driveways.”

The emergence of people getting their news online has caused, regardless of the size of a newspaper, the industry to downsize their staff. “Today, with fewer reporters doing more work, newspapers have to present themselves in multi-formats, including an online presence. On the flip side with technology, a story's turn-around time is faster, as a reporter can compose their piece in the field and have it posted in no time.”

Still, Webb feels there are reasons to believe the print form of newspapers have a future. “Some scholars are saying the end of the newspaper as we've known it is immature. For instance, some people are not excited if they have to pay for a subscription for news online. There are also signs that some advertising still works better in print form over online.”

Gender differences may also be a factor influencing decisions in the industry. “Statistics tell us that more men read newspapers than women. Yet, females are drawn to localization. This favors a local papers’ presence.”

The changes involving digital media mean the way journalism and radio/TV broadcasting majors are taught by GWU Communication Studies professors is also evolving. “From an educational view, we have had to adapt,” said Webb. “Students have to do much more than write a story. They have to know how to write in four or five forms that involves video, audio, and photography for online. Visual storytelling is crucial now.” The GWU student newspaper “The Pilot” went digital a few years ago, including video, and is online at gwu-today.com.

Time will tell if more publications go digital-only, but in the meantime, students hoping for a future career in the industry can receive the most up-to-date knowledge and job preparation from Webb and other educators at Gardner-Webb.

More information is available on the GWU Communication Studies department at 704-406-4372.

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