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# Random Ramblings - Mourning the Passing of the Print Edition of College & Research Libraries

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# Random Ramblings — Mourning the Passing of the Print Edition of *College & 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 “beggars” 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 and being able to summarize the 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 for reasons that I’ll explain later.

Finally, as I’ve written elsewhere, I believe that the basic unit of scholarly communication is becoming the article rather than the journal. I still, however, consider *C&RL* to be a coherent entity because of its focus on an area of great interest to me. I would not say the same about *American Libraries*, which, while appealing to a much more diverse audience with a great variety of library news, includes some content of less interest to each individual member of its

audience. I would also contrast reading *C&RL* with much of my digital reading where each short item is self-contained and usually not related to other parts of any digital document in which it is contained. I consider these documents comparable to newspaper articles and quite different from substantive documents. For longer texts, including books, I still prefer print. My other option is to read lengthy digital documents at my peak energy levels, usually in the morning fortified with several cups of coffee, when I have greater patience for sustained digital text.

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 *CR&L*. 🍂