



## NRJ Books

### ***Newspapers of Record in a Digital Age: From Hot Type to Hot Link***

***by Shannon Martin and  
Kathleen Hansen***

(Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1998,  
\$55 hard cover,) 159 pp.

*reviewed by Marc Edge*

The movement to supplement paper publication with online information has gone a step further in some areas, where digital postings have replaced printed matter altogether. State and appellate courts in Minnesota, for example, no longer provide written reasons for judgment, instead requiring lawyers and journalists to access them electronically. And who hasn't had a request for information answered with an invitation to instead visit that organization's Web site?

Many newspapers also operate Web sites, where much more voluminous information can be provided through links to databases than could ever be contained on the printed pages of their daily editions. While the notion that online publications might replace newspapers altogether has been disputed by many, online services nonetheless are making inroads into traditional newspaper preserves.

One such area is that of legal notices, which is the primary focus of this book by authors Shannon E. Martin, assistant professor of journalism at Rutgers University, and Kathleen A. Hansen, associate professor of journalism at the University of Minnesota, where she is also Severeid Librarian. They examine the past and present of legal notices and predict their future.

Government business has traditionally provided a steady stream of income for newspapers, especially smaller publications, some of which derive as much as 10 percent of their total revenue from such announcements by being named a government's official publication for legal notifications. In 1994, the **San Francisco Examiner** won that city's designation as "newspaper of record" and a \$400,000 contract by underbidding the previous official publication, the **Independent**, by nearly \$200,000. State and local governments across the country are exploring cost-cutting opportunities by posting online their calls for bids, notices of property auctions and other official information. The question of whether such electronic publication is an acceptable alternative to appearing in a printed, circulating newspaper is the central question addressed by this book, which is part of the Praeger Series in Political Communication.

A related issue addressed by the authors is the need for preservation of online newspapers, which often do not correspond directly to their printed editions. Already much information posted online has been lost forever because systems to capture and preserve the Web publications are not in place. Historians express concern over the quality standards of online information, the authors note, but that does not change the fact of publication. One day, the evolution of digital publishing will be a topic for study and much of the early evidence will have been lost.

The central question of whether online publication can meet the criteria for carrying legal notices is an interesting one, which the authors examine from a librarian's perspective. Newspapers designated official publications are required to be published with a minimum frequency, usually at least weekly, have a certain number of paid subscribers, and typically meet format and advertising ratio criteria. The authors find that the current requirements of most regulations would not qualify online publication to replace newspapers as an alternative for legal notices. They conclude, however, that online newspapers have the potential to serve the same function that printed matter has in the past because they can serve as "far more comprehensive, highly localized, tailored and searchable databases of community intelligence than the newsprint counterpart ever did."

The examination of the issue is a worthwhile one in an era of rapidly-evolving technology, but while the authors examine the component parts of the issue, they fail to consider the broader societal issues. They focus on such criteria as system compatibility, permanence, comprehensiveness and quality while ignoring larger questions of appropriateness and equity. The rush to embrace technology fails to acknowledge the growing gap this elite medium creates between the information haves and have-nots. The ability to access online information requires investment in thousands of dollars of computer equipment as a pre-condition, and usually payment of a monthly subscriber fee to a service provider. The capital expenditure involved in accessing legal notices contained in a printed newspaper is typically 25-50 cents.

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