



Diffusion of knowledge

Smithsonian explores almost everything

Both newspapers and magazines have embraced the Internet as a platform for delivering their content, often with impressive results. The problem is they haven't been able to generate enough advertising revenue online to make up for what they've been losing in print.

So even though I earn a good portion of my income from a primarily print product, I'm guilty of dropping some of my print subscriptions in favor of their electronic editions.

Smithsonian magazine is one of the victims of my virtual treason. It's a terrific magazine with excellent writing on a wide range of topics that interest me. Unfortunately, its website, smithsonianmag.com, is so well done that I can't justify having the printed magazine delivered to my house every month.

Print vs. electronic

There are several reasons why I prefer reading it online. In these tough economic times cost is always an issue. I can get the same content online that I get in my paid print subscription, plus additional multimedia features, for free.

The desire to live greener is also a factor. The magazine uses paper, ink, chemicals and fossil fuels for its production, delivery and eventual recycling. The website only uses electricity in its creation and viewing.

The website also has past articles archived in a searchable database, as

well as games, blogs and more. When I view it on my iPad it's just as portable as a printed magazine. I'm afraid the printed publication is fighting a losing battle.

The website, as well as the magazine, is part of the Smithsonian Institution, which is the world's largest museum and research complex. Its mission is, "the increase and diffusion of knowledge."

All things great and small

It's the shortest mission statement I've ever read, but it encompasses practically every topic under the sun, as well as every topic beyond the sun.

A set of tabs across the top of the home page reveals the range of subjects covered. History & Archaeology, People & Places, Science & Nature, Arts & Culture and Travel are the general categories. Clicking on any one of them will bring you to pages and pages of articles covering every imaginable aspect of the category. The articles are accompanied by slideshows of outstanding photos, illustrations, graphics, maps, videos and more.

Under Arts & Culture you'll find stories on E.B. White's inspiration for Charlotte's Web, the top ten moments of Bob Dylan's career, a retrospective of artist Willem de Kooning's work, Thomas Jefferson's homemade Bible and the resurging popularity of bourbon in America. And that's just on the first page. Every other category has a similar rich, eclectic mix of material.

The writing is top notch. It's one of the things that first attracted me to Smithsonian magazine. Subjects as diverse as a contemporary look at

"The Struggles Within Islam," to "The Surprisingly Exciting World of Mushroom Picking," are explored in interesting and engaging ways. The writers make even the most mundane subjects entertaining.

Educational and fun

There are also tabs for Photos, Videos, Games & Puzzles and Blogs. You'll find striking images from all over the world and beyond. Slideshows include topics such as "The Best Facial Hair in the Civil War," "Wild Things: Tarantulas, Jellyfish and More" and "Dazzling Photographs of Earth from Above." Videos cover everything from "Photographing the Elusive Jaguar" to "Bavaria's Beer Gardens."

The games and puzzles have an educational bent to them, such as naming as many elements as you can on the periodic table in 15 minutes or identifying novels by the opening lines. There's also electronic versions of hangman, crossword puzzles, sudoku and more.

The website logically organizes a vast amount of content and is intuitive to navigate. The design isn't so much visually compelling as it is functional. Blogs and links to social media allow you to broaden the online experience.

I've been a fan of Smithsonian magazine for years, and it wasn't an easy decision to drop my subscription. If Smithsonian charged the magazine subscription rate to use the electronic edition it would be worth every penny.

KEVIN O'NEILL is a graphic artist for The Times-Tribune. Contact him at koneill@timeshamrock.com with links to your favorite websites.



KEVIN O'NEILL
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