

Authoritative publishing



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A website manager posed a vexing question recently, and one which has no simple or definitive answer (thanks, Necia!). Since the lines are blurring between digital and print-based publishing, it is often difficult to determine which is the more authoritative. Why would this be important?

If it isn't already obvious, perhaps a concrete example would help.

A government department publishes an important reference work — one that is used frequently by those who receive the publication. The document contains up-to-date material relating to an activity, and due to the nature of the activity, a printed publication works well and is easily transportable (not everyone has ready access to the web). However, the nature of the publication results in updates being published frequently, with an extensive distribution chain to keep information flowing. And making use of the internet, the publication is mirrored on the web, with instant updates which can be made as frequently as demand dictates. Of course, in this enlightened age, both reference publications are available.

So which is the more authoritative? Naturally, the web-savvy will point to the online version, since it is (in theory) more up-to-date. The traditionalists will say 'print', because it is set in stone. But is this really the case? Can it be tested? Is there a policy governing which publishing medium is the more authoritative? Does it really matter?

With the advent of print-on-demand and the democratisation of publishing, as well as the promotion of websites as an authoritative source, not to mention blog software, the answer is 'Yes, it really does matter'. And authority can be determined by a number of factors (which some would write into a policy).

Date of currency

Information must always be qualified by a date of currency and relevancy. That information is generally much easier to determine in print-based publications, since most publications will include a publication date. Not all published material follows this convention, however. Many leaflets, flyers, posters and other similar ephemeral material omit or neglect to include date information. On the web, it is often extremely difficult to determine the date of publication of material — even with footers to declare when the page was 'last updated' (which can mean many things).

Standards

Traditionally, the print production process would entail commissioning, writing, editing, proofreading, printing and distribution, often with a chain of critical reviewers along each step of the way. The investment by individuals and businesses in the whole process would

ensure a rigorous application to a number of standards, resulting in a publication with considerable authority (though this is changing with print-on-demand and the high availability of offset printing presses). On the web, even with 'content management systems', the vetting and proofing of material are not guaranteed.

Promotion

Not to be confused with marketing, but rather the extent to which the parent author or publisher promotes one method of publication over the other, and in what way. Definitive statements in print publications such as 'Please refer to updated information in the online version at...' or 'Check website for up-to-date amendments' demonstrate that the publisher is committed to making the online version the authoritative copy. On the other hand, a reference in a website to the printed publication can indicate the reverse.

Presentation

Print-based publications often present material in a way that is superior to screen-based content in terms of readability, comprehension and overall dimensions (such as in posters or fold-out maps). Web-based presentation can offer mixed media (moving images and sound, as well as text), which might lend greater authority to the online content. Further, it is often possible to add a level of interactivity that is otherwise impossible in print — and can allow information to be filtered or highlighted in ways that make presentation more meaningful.

Audience

'Build and they shall come'. Or, in this context, 'print and they shall read'. Or perhaps not. This is a critical issue. If the intended audience is more attuned to reading in print, and pays scant attention to the online version, then authority is vested in the print publication. Conversely, if the intended audience is highly web-savvy, then the print publication becomes less authoritative. However, much of the authority can be transferred from one medium to the other through definitive statements (see 'Promotion' above).

All of these factors will influence a decision over which mode of publication has the higher authority. However, there is no simple answer to the question of which is more authoritative. Publishing policies should be drafted carefully to encompass all of the factors highlighted above, and with enough flexibility to ensure that the policy is relevant for the range of publications produced by an organisation. Further, procedures need to be put in place to ensure that the relevant publication (online or print) is updated according to such a policy. ■

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