

Plus ça change

I STILL NEED business cards.

A year ago in this space, I mentioned needing a new box. The printer I had been using had turned away from small jobs, and many other shops had a limited selection of card stock. Another batch of cards on my preferred stock would be tough to come by—if, indeed, they were even relevant in a digital age of electronic contacts and social networking.

This winter, several stories offered a further glimpse of where things stand in the world of commercial printing. *Inside Higher Ed* reported on paper shortages for commercial printers (not just card stock!) as well as the effect consolidation among printers was having on the production of academic titles. The companies printing books in the U.S. are thriving, it said, because their numbers had dwindled.

“There’s been a lot of consolidation and now there’s less capacity,” Gregory Britton, editorial director at Johns Hopkins University Press said. “In the past when there were delays, we might have been able to shift work to a different printer—now those printers don’t exist.”

This has meant longer publishing schedules. Books that might have taken four weeks to print now require six weeks. Schedules are made months in advance and timelines are tightly controlled so jobs don’t lose their place in the queue. (Speaking personally, planning for a new edition of one of my own books began this spring; the publisher said if the finished text couldn’t be in by the end of September, it would be deferred till 2020.)

The month after *Inside Higher Ed*’s report on the impacts of consolidation among printers, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics contributed another. The job titles “printer” and “screen printer,” not to mention “printing support jobs,” were discontinued. Remaindered, if you will (they’re still on offer wherever fine press printing takes place, however).

The bureau told the *Washington Post* that the move reflects the need to protect the confidentiality of respondents; in short, the sector is so small that proprietary information could be revealed. So the positions have been aggregated in a sector now known as “Printing and related support activities.” According to the numbers, employment has fallen from nearly 560,000 at the start of 2009 to just over 420,000 today, a drop of approximately 25%. The *Post* attributed the decline to falling demand for job printing and increased productivity as even printers embracing a letterpress aesthetic employed digital technology to pump out their products using fewer people.

It’s against this backdrop that this issue of *Amphora* focuses on activities across the University of Toronto campus this spring that helped bring printing and the traditional book arts alive for a new generation. The events included a multisite exhibition of fine press printing in Canada, and a special tribute to book designer and printer Glenn Goluska. Staff at the University of St. Michael’s College and its John M. Kelly Library published a chapbook in print and online that served as an experiential learning exercise for staff and students alike that explored a concept of media theorist Marshall McLuhan. The medium was the message the project intended to convey, to steal McLuhan’s line.

Rounding out this issue is our regular Ex Libris column, which highlights the innovative spirit of George Edward Desbarats, appointed first printer of the newly created Dominion of Canada in 1869. Desbarats was too busy to hold the position for long, but his entrepreneurial spirit led him to technical accomplishments that underscore the commitment to craft that remains—above and beyond business success—a hallmark of the printing tradition in Canada.

~ Peter Mitham, editor