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Tariffs, Tactility, and the Future of Print: A Survival Guide for the Bold

The story of print has always been a tale of resilience. From Gutenberg's movable type to the meticulously designed issues of The New Yorker, print publishing has endured revolutions, industrial, digital, and now geopolitical.

As of July 2025, we find ourselves facing another reckoning. It's not wrapped in flashy tech buzzwords or flashy new platforms. It's wrapped in bureaucracy, tariffs, and economic whiplash.

This latest blow isn't as flashy as the digital migration or as public as the collapse of ad revenue; it's quieter, more insidious. But it's just as destabilizing. The culprit? Tariffs.

This hits close to home. In the 1970s, my first newspaper, The Express, was blindsided by a paper price hike that wiped us out. Back then, we were twenty-somethings with plenty of passion, but no cushion. Paper fluctuations aren't theoretical to me; they're personal.

Fast forward to 2018, when the U.S. imposed tariffs on Canadian groundwood paper. Prices spiked by as much as 30%, and the aftershocks were brutal. Community newspapers folded. Indie publishers cut frequency.

The Weekly Standard, Redbook, Cooking Light, once regular fixtures in mailboxes and on newsstands, either scaled back or shut down. Even legacy publishers with deep pockets couldn't avoid the pinch.

Though those tariffs were eventually repealed after fierce lobbying from every corner of the publishing ecosystem, the damage was done. Paper mills shuttered or pivoted to more profitable packaging materials. Supply chains frayed. Publishers learned that certainty was now a luxury.

And here we go again.

A new 35% tariff on Canadian imports, slated for August 1, 2025, has reignited old anxieties.

While some paper may technically be exempt under USMCA rules, the fine print is murky, and the application process feels more like a bureaucratic maze than a trade agreement. When your

raw material depends on how a trade lawyer interprets a clause in Ottawa or D.C., you're no longer in the publishing business, you're in the gambling business.

And it doesn't stop with paper.

Take Monocle, for example. The UK-based title has built a global reputation on the physicality of its product, thick pages, tactile finishes, and elegant design.

But producing that level of craftsmanship means printing in Europe, often in Germany or Italy. Those countries have long been subject to trade restrictions, which have only intensified in recent years. Result: double-digit cost increases, delayed deliveries, and tough decisions. Either raise prices for subscribers or cut corners on quality. There is no third door.

Tariffs hit equipment, too. High-end Heidelberg presses from Germany? More expensive. Japanese finishing machinery? Slapped with duties. U.S. printers, facing these higher costs, pass them along. And so the cycle spins: a cover line here, a page count there, slowly eroding the tactile luxury that once defined premium print.



It's why titles like Popular Science, Glamour, and Seventeen have abandoned print entirely. The frequency declines, but so too does the physical experience, the unmistakable feel of ink on paper, the quiet indulgence of unplugged reading.

And yet, amid the pressure, something remarkable is happening. A countercurrent. A quiet rebellion.

Publishers like The Surfer's Journal and Backcountry have leaned into scarcity and substance. Their publications are printed on archival-grade paper, saddle-stitched, designed to last, and

priced accordingly. A single issue might cost \$15 or more. But their readers aren't flinching. In fact, they're leaning in. For them, the physical object is the value proposition. It's a collectible, a conversation piece, a coffee table mainstay. That's not mass media. That's meaningful media.

In this new world, the old rules are crumbling. Mass distribution isn't a virtue, it's a vulnerability. Shorter print runs. Higher price points. Direct-to-subscriber models. These aren't signs of retreat. They're signals of intent. Print isn't going away. It's getting sharper, leaner, and more deliberate.

Just look at Delayed Gratification, the UK-based quarterly that proudly publishes "slow journalism." Their motto? "Last to breaking news." They don't compete with the 24/7 news cycle, they reject it. And they've built a loyal base of readers who crave context over clickbait. It's not fast, but it's lasting.

Or consider the rise of luxury indie zines like Drift (coffee culture), Popeye (Japanese menswear), and Apartamento (interior design with soul). Each one has found a profitable niche by offering print that feels like art, because it is.

So, where do we go from here?

Not backward. This isn't an ode to the golden age of TIME and LIFE. It's a declaration for a reimagined future, one where publishers move beyond the mechanics of "How do we print?" and boldly ask, "Why do we print?" What purpose does the physical product serve? Who is it speaking to? Is it a marketing instrument, a brand artifact, a subscriber's ritual, or something more immersive?

There's no single answer. But the winners will be the ones who adapt, not simply react. The ones who lean into hybrid strategies, invest in bold design, and price with conviction. Who stops apologizing for being in print and starts celebrating its presence.

I've been championing this shift for years, advocating that magazines transcend their role as disposable commodities and instead stand as cultural luxuries, expensive, intentional, and worthy. I first said it in 2007, during a spirited exchange with Professor Samir Husni, Mr. Magazine™ himself. We both agreed that the best print has always meant more than words; it's an experience, an artifact, an aspiration. That reality is finally catching up to the marketplace.

Because print isn't dead, it's evolving, under pressure, yes, but with undeniable purpose.

And maybe that's exactly how it should be. Publishing has never thrived by standing still. It pushes forward, issue by issue, navigating tariffs, trade wars, shifting policies, and shifting tides.

If we do it right, if we print with pride, with clarity, with a little audacity, print won't just survive. It will astonish.