

NARRATOR: When people think of printing, they think of copiers, toners or pamphlets, but the print industry is growing and new technologies are impacting how products are developed and printed. In this episode of Intersections: The RIT Podcast, alumna Stephanie Fallon, management, publishing leader at Wayfair, talks to Cecilia Savka and Emi Knape, undergraduate students in the Graphic Media Science and Technology Program about creativity, learning to be a “jack of all graphic trades” and the skills needed in today’s print industry.

STEPHANIE: Knowing that you’re both in courses, taking a look at the industry now – can you speak to any developing technology or developing areas that are newer that might be of interest to you?

CECILIA: I’m actually doing an independent study for my senior year. One thing that I’m working with Dr. Bruce Myers with is e-ink, so electronic ink and electronic paper. It mimics the appearance of paper but on a screen. There’s LED, there’s LCD displays, they all use a lot of energy. And this display is really interesting that the technology can run for a month without being charged. But it’s really interesting because there are basically ink particles inside the display that will move up and down, closer or farther away from the screen that we see due to electronic charges. And it’s a lot better sustainable way for displays, combining electronic paper and ink together is one thing that’s happening.

STEPHANIE: Very cool that you mentioned e-ink. I live in Boston now and I was over near Fenway Park and I actually saw a city stanchion where they put a map up of that smaller area that you’re in or something or announcements. But it was e-ink, and they had a sign next to it explaining that it was e-ink, which is really interesting to think about, like you were saying, how efficient it is in terms of energy usage, but the fact that they can update the messaging at any time compared to if it was some sort of poster or sign they had to pay to make every single time they did it. Great that you’re researching that.

CECILIA: I know Emi really well because we’ve had a couple classes together. Emi, I know you do a lot in the print industry already.

EMI: In the major I’ve found that I really love designing, but I also love the printing aspect. Everybody in the major has something like a different interest that they’re interested in. Some people are all about print production or pre-press. Some people are more design. Some people a little bit of both, which really works hand-in-hand, which offers a lot of collaboration. I love both aspects. But I definitely lean more toward the design. But I also think it’s so satisfying printing something that you made. I feel so cool when I’m putting in the paper measurements and the grammage. I’m like, man, I’ve got this giant machine that takes up half the room to print my little design. That’s kind of my way of getting both the design and printing areas in.

CECILIA: I like how you mentioned the touch and feeling what you made. I think that’s so prevalent in the industry. There’s going to be people wanting to touch things, wanting to feel the paper, wanting to see it not through a screen. Even though the industry is

moving digitally and there's all these things that can be done on the screen, I think just having paper to your hand is something that won't go away, that people want to have.

STEPHANIE: I completely agree. And it's awesome, Emi, that you're taking your work from start to finish yourself. There's something so empowering about that. But also, the zeroes and ones behind the shapes and colors. Where a lot of people just assume when you say, "Oh, I'm in printing," they think of their desktop printer and that you just change the ink cartridges and hit send. Whereas there's a lot of work that goes into setting up those projects and having them come out correctly. And I agree with you, Cecilia, about the tactile nature of print. I'm the same exact way. I'm a vinyl collector even though I have a Spotify premium. There are just some things that you want to be able to see and touch in real life, and that's a way we're going to keep seeing print going. It's not going to be like before we had screens where everything needed to be printed to then be dispersed. But being intentional and being creative about the way that the companies that we work at deploy print. Because there are some experiences that you just can't translate to a screen at this point. And one thing that sticks out to me, National Geographic ran an article about a flower that had gone extinct a very, very long time ago. They found a sample of it or were able to reconstruct what the build of the smell was and then create a scented varnish to then print into the article. So, you could smell this eons-old extinct flower like it had just grown out of the ground yesterday. And until we have smellivision, I don't know how else you have an experience like that. That's what I'm talking about – creativity and being intentional about it. To me, that's a home run in executing something in print.

CECILIA: I don't know if you've seen – because a teacher showed us this in class – it's a wine bottle label. And if you put your phone to it, I guess there's a code or something that it scans, and then the picture on the label that's already printed starts moving on your phone when you're watching it. I saw that and was like, that's crazy, that now that's what's going on and what you can do with technology and print at the same time.

STEPHANIE: Yeah. There are some very cool systems where you can create a QR code that doesn't look like a QR code. You capture an image, and it designates that image as the QR code instead of the little blocky squares that you're kind of used to seeing when you think about it. And I remember in school there was a design class that actually went to the art museum in Rochester, took photos of the paintings, and then, with the animation students, were able to animate the works of art, so that when you held your phone up to them, they would come alive. And so, those are preexisting works of art, but imagine that on any kind of printed material. What if we could just make that letter start bouncing around or something. The possibilities of the use of that in some ways can kind of be a novelty. But the same way that the scented varnish of the extinct plant could be leveraged in some cases. You can really, really do something special. And that's a perfect example of hand in hand, digital and print working together, versus the way a lot of people think of it as, digital is killing print and it's going to take completely over. I don't think that's the right way to look at it.

CECILIA: How did you decide where to go in print media? Because there's so many different ways you can go with this major.

STEPHANIE: Through my classwork at RIT and through my co-op experiences, I wound up at Hasbro. I was producing their packaging artwork through that and really understanding all the zeroes and ones that kind of go behind the shapes and colors and all of the rules that you have to follow, or at least know, to get something to reproduce from a screen to print. And I thought that was really powerful, paired with the other stuff that we learned in the program about web output and tablet output. So, once you have the keys to every channel, you know how to make something look the same on a screen versus printed on glossy paper versus matte paper and then auto resize itself for a tablet. That's some pretty powerful stuff, especially now with companies deploying across every channel. So, along the way, learning all these things is like accumulating tools, accumulating tools, and kind of figuring out what speaks to me along the way. And every step of finding a new role or considering a new role, learning about a different area of the industry was like cross-checking with my own personal list. What do I like to do? What do I wish I could do more of? What do I wish I never had to do again? Finding those sweet spots.

CECILIA: I think our major is a good liaison between other industries. This major, you learn a lot about the basics of graphic design and then a lot of the production workflow after it that kind of gets lost somewhere between packaging science or graphic design or any other major. I think we are a good bridge between a lot of positions and a lot of majors.

STEPHANIE: One hundred percent. And I think it sets you up really well. You find yourself almost being a translator between the different functions. Because you're equipped to speak design speak where maybe they can't specify something like total area coverage of inks or specify the percent they need lifted off a page. But you can hear that in the way they communicate with you, turn around to a print vendor and then give them the specifications that they need and that they understand. And I've found that skill valuable as I've grown in my career where, starting off right after school, I was a hands-on pre-press person setting up files for digital presses, then moved in to catalog production at ESPN where I was not only prepping files and mechanics but I was marking up imagery for retouching, working with our vendor to make sure the files were coming out, getting into logistics and project management to make sure all of our files were coming in on time. And my current role at Wayfair is kind of a third evolution of that where I've leaned more into the project management side. I currently run end-to-end production for a catalog program with around 10 different functions of groups that all need to work together and be coordinated through the process. I was valuable to the building of the workflow because I understood what it took to get a print project out. It's always something you're going to have in your back pocket that's just a value-add to you in whatever you want to pursue as your job title.

EMI: We do get experience in so many different areas. From cross media to digital media to graphic design to pre-production and even a little bit of webpage production.

So, I like to think of our major as a jack of all graphic trades. We kind of learn a little bit of everything. And some people choose to go one route and some people choose to do a little bit of everything. Talking about Steph's point about the production workflow, in your first year you learn how to read a paper label, which I never thought was something that was a skill that you would have. But you need to know that when you're talking to clients in the industry. Talking about what paper, the grammage, the size, the gloss, if it has UV in it. All these different terms that it helps put us a step above where we have a little bit of that industry experience already in our major. So, we are able to talk in the print jargon that they use in the industry, we understand that and are able to communicate that with the projects that we create as well, which I think is really cool.

STEPHANIE: I think there is a reality to the print industry that it definitely can be volatile. And depending on what arm of it you're in, you want to develop transferrable skills and you want to always be learning. Regardless of your industry, you always want to be someone that continues to learn and try new things and keep up with how things are going and see trends ahead of when they land. In my own case, knowing that the thing I really fell in love with was magazines in a time when I'm watching a lot of different titles be sold off or discontinued or converted to digital only. That didn't discourage me from deciding that was what I wanted to pursue. But I also wasn't naïve to the fact that the same situation I was seeing on these titles could happen to mine. And so, in my time at ESPN, I was like, I love this. But in the back of my head I was always thinking, how can I grow beyond it? So, taking on more project management responsibilities, understanding more about the workflow of it all instead of my silo in the process. And that kind of led me to this next phase of being, what are the core things that I liked about that? I liked being able to teach the people that I worked with about printing and about output, so I really liked that collaboration. I liked keeping things in order. I'm very type A, so the project management really spoke to me. And so, kind of moving into my Wayfair role, this is a perfect marrying of those things. I get to stay in a print channel. So, the thing I'm outputting is still the thing that I love. But I'm flexing new muscles. I'm just adding to my toolkit. So, it's a change but it's a win-win.

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