

Is it time to kill off the phone book?

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Over at Sightline, Clark Williams-Derry **is declaring war** on the white pages. You remember the white pages, right? Those thick phone books that thud onto everyone's doormat each year. In the age of Google and unlisted cell phones, phone books are used less and less: One Gallup survey found that, in 2008, just 11 percent of households relied on them. Yet the vast majority of states still have laws mandating their delivery.

The annual paperweight stockpile accumulates. (**Jason Meredith**) That's led to one of those rare-but-striking points of agreement between conservatives and greens. Groups on the right, like the Heartland Institute, don't like the undue regulations on businesses. Heartland's Ken Braun **groused** last year that, in Michigan alone, the local AT&T affiliate must print and deliver 1.5 billion pages each year — a pile of phone books nine times the height of Mount Everest — “regardless of whether the customers want it, just because the government says so.”

Environmentalists, meanwhile, don't like the waste. All the trees that get chopped down. All the landfill waste. Only about **36.9 percent of telephone directories** get recycled each year. An easier route, says Williams-Derry, would simply be to alter the laws so that households would have to actively “opt in” to request a phone book. That way, people without access to the Internet — or those who prefer the heft of a three-pound paper directory — could still get the white pages if they wanted. Everyone else could rid themselves of the unused paperweights slowly turning to wintery mush on their front porches.

So far, though, only 16 states have enacted such “opt-in” laws — states as varied as California, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Florida and Alabama. As the University of Iowa's Katherine Winchester **details** (pdf), those states have tried various approaches to filling the void left by the end of the white pages. Ohio set up a call center to handle inquiries from book-less residents, which was inundated with requests. Missouri just limited the opt-in rules to big cities while preserving phone book delivery in rural areas, where Internet access is far less prevalent.

But that still leaves more than 30 states where the white pages are required for all. What's odd here is that there doesn't seem to be an overwhelming interest group fighting against opt-in laws. Publishing companies don't like them and **tend to warn** that they'll lead to further curbs on media delivery, but that's about it. On the other side, phone companies — even WhitePages.com — **have lobbied heavily** to end the laws. (They're markedly *less* keen, however, on ending mandates for the yellow pages, which advertise local businesses, since those books contain a lot of lucrative advertising.) In a lot of cases, the main obstacle seems to be pure inertia.