Learning to Read All Over Again

Aug 04

What produces better students – reading in print or reading on-line? The answer is both.

In the 1990s, many intellectuals and educators worried deeply about the presumed "visual turn" of contemporary culture. They feared images would completely replace text, and that we might loose our ability to read critically and write with proficiency. The last decade has proven many of these concerns unwarranted. No age has seen more reading and writing than the era of text messaging, social networking, smart phones, ubiquitous computing, and restless live tickers on ambient television screens. And yet, new fears have superseded previous ones.

Some argue that to produce text on the move, with the help of handheld electronic gadgets, makes a mockery of the true art of writing and inevitably leads to widespread dyslexia. Others fear that a culture of omnipresent media, of always "being on," corrodes the possibility of focused attention and promotes agitated, albeit vacuous, forms of multitasking. In short, it obliterates what good reading is all about.

With many good reasons, educators at all levels of instruction frequently chime into this more recent swan song for reading, eagerly pointing at various symptoms of the decline of traditional reading. College students no longer consult library books or journal collections to carry out research, but expect on-line delivery systems to put the world of knowledge—in searchable format—at their fingertips. Young adults know how to process a myriad of text messages a day, yet find no pleasure in following the arc of a novel, let alone the intricacy of a well-developed written argument. Even kindergarteners today need touch screens to practice their first letters and are no longer invited to experience the sheer materiality of a book—the feel of its pages, the imprint of letters on paper, the traces of use and age, the disruptive and titillating sensation of turning a book from one page to another.

While educators of centuries past had their own worries about the future of reading, they tended to envision ideal reading as a highly spiritual, solitary, silent, and stationary communion with a text. Images from different ages and cultures present the perfect reader as an individual slightly hunched over a book, tucked into an interior's corner or under the shelter of a tree, his or her gaze fully absorbed into what eludes our own view. In many of these older images, the reader's hand serves as a curious site of transcendence. It holds the physical book firmly, and in doing so, allows the mind to access a self-contained and disembodied universe of thought, reflection, and imagination. In today's parlance, we would call this meeting of hand and book an interface.

Today, it is hard to find any image that idealizes solitary and stationary reading. Reading today happens on the fly, as we are in motion. It is about sharing and networking rather than exploring utterly intimate and private spaces. It exists as one of many other media activities that we may carry out on one of various devices at once. And it is defined not by unsettling travels into the world of the spirit, but by our ability to process information efficiently and solve problems effectively as they come along, second after second.

Similar to most other debates about the cultural impact of digital innovations, the majority of conversations

about the transformation of reading in the digital age are deeply Manichean in nature. Today's culture of computing either liberates us from all possible strictures of the past, democratizes access, and opens up unknown opportunities — or it flattens important meanings and values, produces highly distracted users, and disintegrates essential structures of sociability. While presumed technophobes continue to battle with apparent technophiles and utter enthusiasm clashes with profound skepticism, participants in today's debate often feel pressed to assume positions as if our only options were either to go fully digital or to stay entirely analogue. It is as if similar debates about the impact of technology on cultural practices had not occurred, whether it was about the distribution of paperbacks in the nineteenth century, the invention of the telephone, or the rise of cinema.

Although this divide might make for good arguments, its Manicheanism holds us back from appreciating a more nuanced assessment of the gains and losses, the continuities and discontinuities associated with the rise of new media and computer-based reading practices. It tends to present technological hardware as being in complete control over what we do with certain media, and it has little patience for ambivalence and multiplicity, the productive messiness that might ensue when historical revolutions change some, but not all, parameters of our existence.

In this new culture of information overload and electronic mobility, the competition for enabling and maintaining reader attention may become one of the century's primary battlegrounds. Amid ambient digital screens and seemingly unlimited streams of texts and images, we face the question of what truly controls our ability to focus—what succeeds in controlling our awareness, in managing how we dedicate time to certain subjects while ignoring others, and thereby manipulates our sense of recall, anticipation, and presence.

Our ability to read well, to process and take pleasure in text will certainly play a significant part in the battle for attention. Reading may indeed no longer be what it once used to be. What we need to do, however, is to reflect thoroughly on how computing has changed or added to the concept of reading and its economy of attention before we propose viable perspectives about what to do about the rivalry between words on screens and words on paper.

You do not have to be a media determinist to see how reading conventional books is different from text on screen. And it would be foolish to deny that different media platforms enable different practices and temporalities of reading. Although we might at first think of the pages of a book as a window to the world generated by the text, as a transparent frame effectively transporting us into a different and imaginary time and place, such metaphors largely fail to address how books have historically managed to grasp a reader's mind and attention. A book's page can be a self-effacing looking glass onto a different order of things, but much depends on the reader and the context. Readers may find themselves fully immersed in what the letters on paper communicate to them, but at the same time they experience the physical turning of the page, the quality of the paper, or the material properties of the cover as something that deeply contributes to how they hold on to the book and allow it to move them forward in time.

A book's physical properties matter to our act of reading. They play a considerable role in seizing our attention and inviting us to enter a curious space of temporal negotiation: a space in which our own sense of time, a book's story time, and the time it might take to physically read its letters and sentences in their prearranged order meet and take hold of each other. Books invite us to get lost, to lose ourselves within their pages, precisely because they provide something steady and permanent, as something we can touch as much as it can touch upon us.

By contrast, the "window and frame" metaphor is much more appropriate to describe reading text on a screen than in a printed book. Screens and reading software encourage us to scroll across, zoom in and out, travel across, scan and skip text similar to the way in which viewers might use a window to peruse distant realities at their own will. Unlike the printed word, digital text has no real existence or permanence unless users chose to endow it with such. Digital text allows vast possibilities of non-linear appropriation, whether we use search

functions, follow embedded hyper-links, or in fact start to reassemble its form or order with the help of different software functions. Digital reading is closer to roaming. It empowers readers to meet a text on their own temporal terms and immerse themselves in their own ability to manipulate what appears in front of them rather than in the world represented by the words. Existing in some strange nowhere land, text on screen not only asks us to find or plod a way, but find or plod our way to define what we want to count as text in the first place.

The most important point, however, is not to develop an unbending claim that traditional books necessarily produce one kind of reader, while digital devices necessarily produce another. Rather, educators need to stress the value of print and digital reading in equal measure: that both the absorption of print readers and the willfulness of digital readers are necessary to face the challenges of an increasingly connected world. And there is no reason to think that we can only do one at the deliberate expense of the other. What we need are readers able to get lost in books as much as readers able to maneuver extended cartographies of words; readers who know how to follow narrative or argumentative arcs and readers who understand how to scan texts quickly, search for relevant information, and isolate central ideas from ornamental baggage; readers touched by the words on a page and readers eager to touch-up and reassemble what they see in front of their eyes. What we need, in other words, are readers who do not understand certain features associated with paperbound or screen-based reading as exclusive options, but who explore them as equally important elements of what reading in past, present, and future is all about.

Today's debates about the cultural impact of advanced computing rarely provide enough space to emphasize the "and" rather than the "either/or." Dominant voices in these arguments urge us to take sides and, energized by technological optimism about the "next new thing" or by horror at the speed of progress, they make us think of one media platform and media practice as the sole site of future meaning and development. Ever more often labeled as digital natives, today's students need to be encouraged to practice the art of slow, paperbound reading so they can learn that our encounter with text is not solely for the sake of information processing. But they also need to acquire critical skills as screen readers because reading has never been solely about aesthetic pleasure and the overcoming of instrumental reason. Rather than lament the state of reading today, let us understand our times as ripe with opportunity—the opportunity to develop concepts of reading far more comprehensive and multi-faceted than anything we have known in the past.

What we gain, and lose, when machines read for us

Aug 05

Prof. Lutz Koepnick, Vanderbilt University

Computers do more and more of our reading for us today. In most cases, however, we are unaware of this fact. Search engines such as Google read billions of web pages in the blink of an eye to facilitate our quest for knowledge. Servers and routers constantly read incoming blocks of data to reconstruct coherent information from scattered transmission packages. Computers read us whenever we type words on a keyboard so as to display our thoughts on our monitors. GPS devices read satellite positions and preprogrammed maps to provide us with accurate information about our locations and desired directions. Machine voices read prefigured bits and pieces of text to all of us, at all corners of contemporary life.

We have mostly come to rely on machines reading for and to us because of their reliability. Computational reading might generate things that surprise users as informative and unexpected, but only because it executes codes and functions that leave little room for error or deviation. We might not understand exactly what happens inside the machine when Google facilitates our thirst for knowledge. But our response to its mode of reading is largely driven by our belief in the objectivity of rule-bound numerical operations, the assumption that any computational process is not only predictable but could be made entirely transparent.

Human readers, on the other hand, are notoriously fickle and unpredictable. No one really knows exactly what it takes for the human mind to understand and process text. But, then again, isn't this sense of fuzziness, subjectivity, and unpredictability what reading is all about? We may want to stop and think whether we should call machine reading, precisely because of its utter objectivity and consistency, reading at all.

The end of attentive reading

Aug 06

Each week, Symposium Magazine invites an author to expand on his or her essay. This week's guest blogger is Prof. Lutz Koepnick of Vanderbilt University.

Music is so omnipresent today that it has become difficult to escape its reach even for more than an hour. In her recent book, Ubiquitous Listening, the musicologist Anahid Kassabian argues that the constant presence of music in modern life has changed the very nature of listening, of how we attend to, recall, and are affected by musical sounds.

Traditional concepts of attentive listening are outdated, she argues; we need to develop frameworks that take inattentive and distracted hearing seriously, unless we want to completely miss the realities of listening today.

It might be time to apply similar views to today's reading practices.

Inundated by printed, projected, or electronically displayed words everywhere, we probably spend more time skimming and scanning text than we devote time to reading something deeply from A to Z. Meanwhile, our existing cultural and academic frameworks continue to value depth over shallowness, profoundly focused over fickle, inattentive activities. Are these norms anachronistic? Do they blind us to what readers are actually doing today?

We need to find a way to take inattentive and distracted reading seriously without endorsing a culture that produces ever-shorter attention spans for the sake of increasing economic profit.

What is critical reading today?

Aug 07

Each week, Symposium Magazine invites an author to expand on his or her essay. This week's guest blogger is Prof. Lutz Koepnick of Vanderbilt University.

To teach students to be critical is one of the central aims of higher education, a pedagogical program repeated over and over in the mission statements of colleges, the teaching philosophies of its faculty, and in state educational guidelines. But what does it mean to be a critical reader? It certainly involves our ability to discern the compositional principles of a given text. We need to understand its internal structure, its particular devices to communicate meaning, its ways of addressing the readers' mind and appealing to their emotion.

It also involves our ability to develop interpretations, place materials in cultural and historical context, and competently form synthetic or aesthetic judgments. Critical reading requires work and distance. It cannot do without an ongoing willingness to read and assess one's own reading.

Students today often assume that critical reading happens whenever we learn how to contain the sheer joy of being absorbed into a book or text. Critical reading and pleasure, or analytical distance and self-forgetting absorption, are presumed to be at odds with each other. Yet given the ceaseless reading required from us to make it through a single day, and all the bursts of short-lived attention produced by today's culture of omnipresent computing, perhaps we should think of a reader deeply absorbed into the pages of a book as a profoundly critical reader as well — as someone who challenges the restless and discontinuous itineraries of our highly connected present.

Going back to oral culture

Aug 08

Each week, Symposium Magazine invites an author to expand on his or her essay. This week's guest blogger is Prof. Lutz Koepnick of Vanderbilt University.

Groucho Marx once quipped: "Outside of a dog, a book is a man's best friend. Inside of a dog, it's too dark to read." When recently asked what they like about reading, my teenage daughters and their friends offered their own takes: "Books allow me to forget all the troubles of the present world and focus on a different reality." "Opening the first page of a book can transport us into another world or open our eyes to see the one we live in more clearly." "I like reading because it helps improve my SAT score."

Self-improvement, knowledge, imaginary displacement, friendship, consolation, diversion – all these are important arguments, made throughout the history of the written word, on why reading is good for a reader's mind and heart. One of the most important, albeit often forgotten, effects of good reading is to hone one's writing. What we need to keep in mind, however, is that templates of good writing themselves are subject to historical change. Our age of mobile electronic writing, instant connectivity, computational spell-checkers, and at one copious and often ephemeral text production certainly requires a different concept of good writing than an age of rare readers and writers.

It is often said that mobile electronic reading and writing today moves us closer again to what scholar Walter Ong famously termed oral culture. Unlike literate cultures, oral cultures do not produce fixed physical records to transmit thoughts and meanings. Orality stresses repetition and rhythm rather than unalterable inscription as a tool of effective communication and memorization.

Teachers of good writing and reading today might want to learn a lesson from this to meet the demands of our new age of electronic orality. They should urge students to acquire greater skills in working with the beats, tempos, and rhythms—the musicality—of language, and perhaps place less emphasis on grammatical correctness or the semantics of individual words. Good writers today understand how to make the rhythm of their language speak in order to connect to the minds of their often restless readers.

Today's Post

Aug 09

Each week, Symposium Magazine invites an author to expand on his or her essay. This week's guest blogger is Prof. Lutz Koepnick of Vanderbilt University.

In earlier centuries, scholars were often quite concerned about people, in particular young females, devoting too much of their time to reading. Stimulating the imagination, books were seen as something that distracted the individual from work, order, efficiency, and discipline—from understanding and assuming one's proper role in society. Silent reading escaped parental control. It enabled the reader to wander into uncharted and possibly dangerous territories.

Today we hear similar arguments about the Internet. But no one seems to complain anymore that students and young adults may read too much. And yet, text is all around us today. It wants something from us on ubiquitous screens, social network, blogs, signs, posters, and billboards.

Amid the urban flood of text and print, occasional self-imposed bans on reading may have the power to open our eyes and senses to what is around us again. They can serve as panacea to today's excesses of text consumption and re-teach us the art of perusing the particular features of a face, a landscape, or a building, the figures human and non-human objects write into space without being recorded by some machine.