

In the Beginning Was the Word

*The book, that fusty old technology, seems rigid and passé as we daily consume a diet of information bytes and digital images.
The fault, dear reader, lies not in our books but in ourselves.*

BY CHRISTINE ROSEN

IN AUGUST, THE COMPANY THAT OWNS *READER'S Digest* filed for bankruptcy protection. The magazine, first cobbled together with scissors and paste in a Greenwich Village basement in 1922 by De Witt Wallace and his wife, Lila, was a novel experiment in abridgement—in 62 pages, it offered Americans condensed versions of current articles from other periodicals. The formula proved wildly successful, and by midcentury *Reader's Digest* was a publishing empire, with millions of subscribers and ventures including *Reader's Digest Condensed Books*, which sold abridged versions of best-selling works by authors such as Pearl Buck and James Michener. *Reader's Digest* both identified and shaped a peculiarly American approach to reading, one that emphasized convenience, entertainment, and the appearance of breadth. An early issue noted that it was "not a magazine in the usual sense, but rather a co-operative means of rendering a time-saving device."

The fate of *Reader's Digest* would have been of interest to the late historian and Librarian of Congress Daniel Boorstin. In his renowned 1962 book *The*

Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America, Boorstin used *Reader's Digest* as an example of what was wrong with a culture that had learned to prefer image to reality, the copy to the original, the part to the whole. Publications such as the *Digest*, produced on the principle that any essay can be boiled down to its essence, encourage readers to see articles as little more than "a whiff of literary ectoplasm exuding from print," he argued, and an author's style as littered with unnecessary "literary embellishments" that waste a reader's time.

Today, of course, abridgement and abbreviation are the norm, and our impatience for information has trained even those of us who never cracked an issue of *Reader's Digest* to prefer 60-second news cycles to 62 condensed pages per month. Free "aggregator" Web sites such as The Huffington Post link to hundreds of articles from other publications every day, and services such as DailyLit deliver snippets of novels directly to our e-mail in-boxes every morning.

Our willingness to follow a writer on a sustained journey that may at times be challenging and frustrating is less compelling than our expectation of being conveniently entertained. Over time, this atti-

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Intrepid readers browse the charred Holland House library after a London air raid in 1940.

tude undermines our commitment to the kind of “deep reading” that researcher Maryanne Wolf, in *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (2007), argues is important from an early age, when readers learn to identify with characters and to “expand the boundaries of their lives.”

As Boorstin surveyed the terrain nearly half a century ago, his overarching concern was that an image-saturated culture would so distort people’s sense of judgment that they would cease to distinguish between the real and the unreal. He criticized the creation of what he called “pseudo-events” such as politicians’ staged photo-ops, and he traced the ways in which our pursuit of illusion transforms our experience of travel, clouds our ability to discern the

motivations of advertisers, and encourages us to elevate celebrities to the status of heroes. “This is the appealing contradiction at the heart of our passion for pseudo-events: for made news, synthetic heroes, pre-fabricated tourist attractions, homogenized interchangeable forms of art and literature (where there are no ‘originals,’ but only the shadows we make of other shadows),” Boorstin wrote. “We believe we can fill our experience with new-fangled content.”

Boorstin wrote *The Image* before the digital age, but his book still has a great deal to teach us about the likely future of the printed word. Some of the effects of the Internet appear to undermine Boorstin’s occasionally gloomy predictions. For example, an increasing number of us, instead of being passive viewers of

images, are active participants in a new culture of online writing and opinion mongering. We comment on newspaper and magazine articles, post our reviews of books and other products online, write about our feelings on personal blogs, and bombard our friends and acquaintances with status updates on Facebook. As the word migrates from printed page to pixelated screen, so too do more of our daily activities. Online we find news, work, love, social interaction, and an array of entertainment. We have embraced new modes of storytelling, such as the interactive, synthetic world of video games, and found new ways to share our quotidian personal experiences, in hyperkinetic bursts, through microblogging services such as Twitter.

Many observers have loudly and frequently praised the new technologies as transformative and democratic, which they undoubtedly are. But their widespread use has sparked broader questions about the relevance and value of the printed word and the traditional book. The book, like the wheel, is merely a technology, these enthusiasts argue, and thus we should welcome improvements to it, even if those improvements eventually lead to the book's obsolescence. After all, the deeply felt human need for storytelling won't fade; it will merely take on new forms, forms we should welcome as signs of progress, not decay. As Boorstin observed in the foreword to the 25th-anniversary edition of *The Image*, "We Ameri-

This Is Your Brain on the Web

AS SCIENTISTS BEGIN TO BEAR down on the cognitive differences between reading online and off, they are discovering that the two activities are not the same at all.

Numerous studies have shown that we don't so much *read* online as *scan*. In a series of studies from the early 1990s until 2006, Jakob Nielsen, a former Sun Microsystems engineer, and Don Norman, a cognitive scientist, tracked the eye movements of Web surfers as they skipped from one page to the next. They found that only 16 percent of subjects read the text on a page in the order in which it appeared. The rest jumped around, picking out individual words and processing them out of sequence. "That's how users read your precious content," Nielsen cautions Web designers in his online column. "In a few seconds, their eyes move at amazing

speeds across your Web site's words in a pattern that's very different from what you learned in school."

Nielsen recommends that designers create Web sites that are easy to comprehend by scanning: one idea per paragraph, highlighted keywords, and objective-sounding language so readers don't need to perform the mental heavy-lifting of determining what's fact and what's bias or distortion.

It is particularly hard to hold readers' attention online because of all the temptations dangled before them. Psychologists argue that our brains are naturally inclined to constantly seek new stimuli. Clicking on link after link, always looking for a new bit of information, we are actually revving up our brains with dopamine, the overlord of what psychologist Jaak Panksepp has called the "seeking system."

This system is what drives you to get out of bed each day, and what causes you to check your e-mail every few minutes; it's what keys you up in anticipation of a reward. Most of your e-mail may be junk, but the prospect of receiving a meaningful message—or following a link to a stimulating site—is enough to keep your brain constantly a bit distracted from what you're reading online.

What are the effects on the brain of all this distraction? Scientists are only beginning to answer this question. A recent study by three Stanford researchers found that consummate multitaskers are, in fact, terrible at multitasking. In three experiments, they were worse at paying attention, controlling their memories, and switching between tasks than

cans are sensitive to any suggestion that progress may have its price."

Our screen-intensive culture poses three challenges to traditional reading: distraction, consumerism, and attention-seeking behavior. Screen technologies such as the cell phone and laptop computer that are supposedly revolutionizing reading also potentially offer us greater control over our time. In practice, however, they have increased our anxiety about having too little of it by making us available anytime and anywhere. These technologies have also dramatically increased our opportunities for

distraction. It is a rare Web site that presents its material without the clutter of advertisement, and a rare screen reader who isn't lured by the siren song of an incoming e-mail's "ping!" to set aside her work to see who has written. We live in a world of continuous partial attention, one that prizes speed and brandishes the false promise of multitasking as a solution to our time management challenges. The image-driven world of the screen dominates our attention at the same time that it contributes to a kind of experience pollution that is challenging our ability to engage with the printed word.

The digital revolution has also transformed the experience of reading by making it more consumer

those who prefer to complete one task at a time. Clifford Nass, one of the researchers, says, "They're suckers for irrelevancy. Everything distracts them." Unable to discriminate between relevant material and junk, multitaskers can get lost in a sea of information.

The things we read on the Web aren't likely to demand intense focus anyway. A survey of 1,300 students at the University of Illinois, Chicago, found that only five percent regularly read a blog or forum on politics, economics, law, or policy. Nearly 80 percent checked Facebook, the social networking site.

Maryanne Wolf, director of the Center for Reading and Language Research at Tufts University, says it's not just what we read that shapes us, but the fact that we read at all. She writes, "With [the invention of reading], we rearranged the very organization of our brain, which in turn expanded the ways we were able to think, which

altered the intellectual evolution of our species." When children are just learning to read, their brains show activation in both hemispheres. As word recognition becomes more automatic, this activity is concentrated in the left hemisphere, allowing more of the brain to work on the task of distilling the meaning of the text and less on decoding it. This efficiency is what allows our brains the time to think creatively and analytically. According to Wolf, the question is, "What would be lost to us if we replaced the skills honed by the reading brain with those now being formed in our new generation of 'digital natives'?"

In the end, the most salient difference isn't between a screen and a page but between focused reading and disjointed scanning. Of course, the former doesn't necessarily follow from opening a book and the latter is not inherent to opening a Web browser, but that is

the pattern. However, that pattern may not always hold true. Google, for example, recently unveiled Fast Flip, a feature designed to recreate the experience of reading newspapers and magazines offline. Other programs, such as *The New Yorker's* digital edition or *The New York Times'* Times Reader 2.0, have a similar purpose, allowing readers to see on the screen something much like what they would normally hold between their two hands. And with the Kindle and other e-readers quickly catching on, we may soon find that reading in the future is quite like reading in the past.

Until such innovations move into wider use, the surest bet for undistracted reading continues to be an old-fashioned book. As historian Marshall Poe observes, "A book is a machine for focusing attention; the Internet is [a] machine for diffusing it."

—Rebecca J. Rosen

oriented. With the advent of electronic readers (and cell phones that can double as e-readers), the book is no longer merely a thing you purchase, but a service to which you subscribe. With the purchase of a traditional book, your consumer relationship ends when you walk out of the bookstore. With a wirelessly connected Kindle or iPhone, or your Wi-Fi-enabled computer, you exist in a perpetual state of potential consumerism. To be sure, for most people reading has never been a pure, quasi-monastic activity; everyday life has always presented distractions to the person keen on losing herself in a book. But for the first time, thanks to new technologies, we are making those distractions an integral part of the experience of reading. Embedded in these new versions of the book are the means for constant and elaborate demands on our attention. And as our experience with other screen media, from television to video games to the Internet, suggests, such distractions are difficult to resist.

Finally, the transition from print reading to screen reading has increased our reliance on images and led to a form of “social narcissism” that Boorstin first identified in his book. “We have fallen in love with our own image, with images of our making, which turn out to be images of ourselves,” he wrote. We become viewers rather than readers, observers rather than participants. The “common reader” Virginia Woolf prized, who is neither scholar nor critic but “reads for his own pleasure, rather than to impart knowledge or correct the opinions of others,” is a vanishing species. Instead, an increasing number of us engage with the written word not to submit ourselves to another’s vision or for mere edification, but to have an excuse to share our own opinions.

In August, Stanford University released preliminary results from its Stanford Study of Writing, which examined in-class and out-of-class writing samples from thousands of students over five years. One of the study’s lead researchers, Andrea Lunsford, concluded, “We’re in the midst of a literacy revolution the likes of which we haven’t seen since Greek civilization.” The source of this revolution, Lunsford proposed, is the “life writing” students do every day online: The study found that 38 percent of their writing occurred outside the classroom.

But as Emory University English professor Mark Bauerlein pointed out in a blog post on *The Chronicle of*

Higher Education’s Web site, this so-called revolution has not translated into concrete improvements in writing skills as measured by standardized tests such as the ACT; nor has it led to a reduction in the number of remedial writing courses necessary to prepare students for the workplace. Of greater concern was the attitude students expressed about the usefulness of writing: Most of them judged the quality of writing by the size of the audience that read it rather than its ability to convey ideas. One of the most prolific contributors to the study, a Stanford undergraduate who submitted more than 700 writing samples ranging from Facebook messages to short stories, told the *Chronicle* that for him a class writing assignment was a “soulless exercise” because it had an audience of one, the professor. He and other students in the study, raised on the Internet, consistently expressed a preference for writing that garnered the most attention from as many people as possible.

Our need for stories to translate our experience hasn’t changed. Our ability to be deeply engaged readers of those stories is changing. For at least half a century, the image culture has trained us to expect the easily digestible, the quickly paced, and the uncomplicated. As our tolerance for the inconvenient or complex fades, images achieve even more prominence, displacing the word by appealing powerfully to a different kind of emotional sensibility, one whose vividness and urgency are undeniable but whose ability to explore nuance are not the same as that of the printed word.

What Boorstin feared—that a society beholden to the image would cease to distinguish the real from the unreal—has not come to pass. On the contrary, we acknowledge the unique characteristics of the virtual world and have eagerly embraced them, albeit uncritically. But Boorstin’s other concern—that a culture that craves the image will eventually find itself mired in solipsism and satisfied by secondhand experiences—has been borne out. We follow the Twitter feeds of protesting Iranians and watch video of Michael Jackson’s funeral and feel connected to the rest of the world, even though we lack context for that feeling and don’t make much effort to achieve it beyond logging on. The screen offers us the illusion of

participation, and this illusion is becoming our preference. As Boorstin observed, "Every day seeing there and hearing there takes the place of being there."

This secondhand experience is qualitatively different from the empathy we develop as readers. "We read to know we are not alone," C. S. Lewis once observed, and by this he meant that books are a gateway to a better understanding of what it means to be human. Because the pace is slower and the rewards delayed, the exercise of reading on the printed page requires a commitment unlike that demanded by the screen, as anyone who has embarked on the journey of an ambitiously long novel can attest. What the screen gives us is pleasurable, but it is not the same kind of experience as deeply engaged reading; the "screen literacy" praised by techno-enthusiasts should be seen as a complement to, not a replacement of, traditional literacy.

Since the migration of the word from page to screen is still in its early stages, predictions about the future of print are hazardous at best. When *Time* magazine named "YOU!" its person of the year in 2006, the choice was meant as a celebratory recognition of our new digital world and its many opportunities for self-expression. We are all writers now, crafters of our own images and creators of our own online worlds. But so far this power has made us less, not more, willing to submit ourselves to the singular visions of writers and artists and to learn from them difficult truths about the human condition. It has encouraged us to substitute images and simplistic snippets of text for the range, precision, and peculiar beauty of written language, with its unique power to express complex and abstract ideas. Recent surveys by the National Endowment for the Arts reveal that fewer Americans read literature for pleasure than in the past; writers of serious fiction face a daunting publishing market and a reading public that has come to prefer the celebrity memoir to the new literary novel.

There is a reason that the metaphor so often invoked to describe the experience of reading is one of escape: An

avid reader can recall the book that first unlocked the door of his imagination or provided a sense of escape from the everyday world. The critic Harold Bloom has written that he was forever changed by his early encounters with books: "My older sisters, when I was very young, took me to the library, and thus transformed my

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life." As Maryanne Wolf notes, "Biologically and intellectually, reading allows the species to go 'beyond the information given' to create endless thoughts most beautiful and wonderful."

The proliferation of image and text on the Internet has exacerbated the solipsism Boorstin feared, because it allows us to read in a broad but shallow manner. It endorses rather than challenges our sensibilities, and substitutes synthetic images for our own peculiar form of imagination. Over time, the ephemeral, immediate quality of this constant stream of images undermines the self-control required to engage with the written word. And so we find ourselves in the position of living in a highly literate society that chooses not to exercise the privilege of literacy—indeed, it no longer views literacy as a privilege at all.

In *Essays on His Own Times* (1850), Samuel Taylor Coleridge observed, "The great majority of men live like bats, but in twilight, and know and feel the philosophy of their age only by its reflections and refractions." Today we know our age by its tweets and text messages, its never-ending litany of online posts and ripostes. Judging by the evidence so far, the content we find the most compelling is what we produce about ourselves: our tastes, opinions, and habits. This has made us better interpreters of our own experience, but it has not made us better readers or more empathetic human beings. ■