Vansh Panjabi

ENG 1450 – Reading and Writing in the Digital Age

Prof. Ryan Cordell

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The 21st century has seen technological boom arguably like no other generation of the past, with the Internet and digital spaces serving as entirely new interfaces and mediums for information and entertainment. The discipline of literature, however, in context of the new, digital world demonstrates the rapidly changing ways in which we read and write – on paper or on a screen – and what the consequence and effect of each path might mean for us. The consequences of utilizing paper while shunning digital reading/writing would seriously hinder humankind’s progress, whereas to abandon traditional books and rely solely on digital formats would be a destruction of our history. To stay grounded with art, history and worldwide culture but still maintain our progress amidst technology’s inevitable boom, humankind requires a balance between the reading and writing of traditional bound books and the newly-emerging digital spaces, instead of picking either, we need a blend of our rich past and innovative future. It requires a blend of utilizing both to an affective degree: the paper literature that civilizations have been built on as well as the immersive digital interfaces we find ourselves lost among today.

Ferris Jabr’s story on the website of Scientific American magazine – titled *The Reading Brain in the Digital Age: The Science of Paper vs Screens* – analyzes the debate about the effects of reading on paper as opposed to reading on a screen, suggesting why reading on paper can be more beneficial than the latter. The very beginning of this text ironically represents the argument that the future requires a balance of both – traditional books and digital literature. The text begins describing a “viral YouTube video” that features a one-year-old girl confusing a magazine for an iPad, as she tries touching various shapes and colors on a page, hoping the page might morph into something new, as though it were a screen. He quotes the little girl’s father (who uploaded this video), saying, “Magazines are now useless and impossible to understand, for digital natives"—that is, for people who have been interacting with digital technologies from a very early age.” The opening of Jabr’s story subtly indicates that the traditional book format we have had existent for centuries could prove vital in the case of future generations and the upbringing of a child. The irony, however, arises not only in the fact that Jabr’s article is being read on a digital laptop screen, but that he provides hyperlinks to the digital space of the viral video in description. There’s no fault in the argument Jabr is creating, yet there is definite irony in his advocacy of paper reading rather than digitized reading, when he chooses to rely on the video itself (along with about eight other hyperlinks in the next few paragraphs) by asking his reader to pick the screen option rather than a print one.

Nonetheless, Jabr makes compelling arguments for reading on paper as well as reading on screen, and eventually ties his answer down to paper proving more beneficial through his ‘pros and cons’ style of analyzing numerous research studies. For instance, he deliberates between studies from the past as opposed to the present to demonstrate discrepancies in generally believed theories, in the paper vs screen debate:

“Since at least the 1980s researchers in many different fields—including psychology, computer engineering, and library and information science—have investigated such questions in more than one hundred published studies. The matter is by no means settled. Before 1992 [most studies concluded](https://www.ischool.utexas.edu/~adillon/Journals/Reading.htm) that people read slower, less accurately and less comprehensively on screens than on paper. Studies [published since the early 1990s](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/18802819), however, have produced more inconsistent results: a slight majority has confirmed earlier conclusions, but almost as many have found few significant differences in reading speed or comprehension between paper and screens.”

Here Jabr takes a firm stance on most earlier research against reading on screens, presenting his counter-argument to the benefits of reading on paper to suggest that although paper might scientifically prove more beneficial, digital screens aren’t far behind. Also defending the criticism of reading on screen, Jabr argues that “recent surveys suggest that although most people still prefer paper—especially when reading intensively—attitudes are changing as tablets and e-reading technology improve and reading digital books for facts and fun becomes more common.” Despite this earlier representation of dismissing old studies against digital reading/writing, he argues, consumer reports and polls from the 21st century show that people find e-readers and modern screen inadequate reading experiences as compared to paper, as Jabr argues that paper in fact helps retain and remember information from texts with higher success rates than paper. The text constantly dabbles to and fro, with Jabr’s commentary evaluating the potential benefits (and losses) of reading and writing on paper as opposed to a screen, and although he might lean more towards the paper-side of the argument, his text clearly indicates the gap between the two isn’t all that distant after all.

Jabr’s argument for reading on paper can be juxtaposed with ideas expressed in Craig Mod’s text, *Future Reading*, which looks at the habit-forming process with screens and e-readers, by highlighting some of their benefits, but also crediting the tangible beauty of a physical book. While Jabr’s discourse was generally scientific through his evidence of research, Mod’s text is more narrative through its anecdotal referencing of the friendliness of interface with e-readers such as the Kindle, commending its storage format and online bookstore as a library of the future. He says, “It was an incredible user experience, full of perceived value, delightful in its absurdity. Most importantly, using the device in these ways felt like an investment in the future of books and reading.” The concept of holding one’s entire library in their hands, or even in their pocket, is a beacon of how powerfully technology has surged into the sphere of literature and reading/writing, a notion that Mod is undoubtedly fascinated by. He adds that his belief “that Amazon was going to teach the old guard new tricks” completely immersed his faith into the newfound realm of digital books. Digitized reading’s processing only got quicker, its batter life longer, its thickness slimmer, and its price much, much cheaper. So why ever switch back to the old, boring paper format?

“My favorite gifts, to give and to receive, are still physical books,” Mod says, referencing the tangible beauty of paper books that simply cannot be digitally replicated. He observes that he’s “never read more digitally” in his life, including news and social media on his iPhone and essays/blogs from Buzzfeed, Vox and the likes of other huge “New York publishing upstarts,” but argues, “the multistep process of opening a well-made physical edition” is unmatched in the intimate, personal connection. He connotes that the relationship we have with our physical books goes way beyond the relationship we might have with an e-book. We might never have to read the cover of an e-book, or have the pleasure of smelling its ‘new book smell’, or be able to annotate in a way that only we can comprehend and refer back to on a future date. Mod demonstrates that we spend a few hours with these e-books, which are then forgotten about, but the physical copies that we annotate, crease and wrinkle has an everlasting bond with the reader. He says, “The relationship between a reader and a book is measured not in hours or minutes but, ideally, in months and years,” indicating that the book on our shelf will longer bring us satisfaction than some textual, impersonal, un-unique copy on our tablet.

In many ways, Mod’s argument specifically concerns the mediums of reading literature. These online mediums that literature is presented in, be it a Kindle e-book or a PDF on the Internet, it can be argued that digital spaces are not as focused on the language, or the words, as compared to physical copies of books. For instance, despite a book’s cover being extraordinarily illustrated and/or containing a hard cover with high quality pages, the central focus is always the language and the words of the book. Digital spaces, however, have the option of inserting media into the interface in a way never known to us, a concept alien to the traditional paper book. Or in other words, the immersive experience that is capitulated mainly by the words of a paper book, can be manipulated using pictures, videos, themes and other accessible interactions that might immerse the reader more in an online piece than a traditional paperback, for instance. One could argue that digital reading is the same as a beautiful physical copy, where the book cover is the website homepage, the paper quality is the layout of the article page, the font size and font style. Yet, there is a sense that digital readings offer all sorts of secondary elements that stray away from the actual writing, the actual language of the text, that attract the reader, elements present only in a unique physical copy of a book.

A text that poses as such an example of a digital reading with multiple insertions of multimedia tools would be Jon Bois’ story on SB Nation, called *What football will look like in the future*. He tells the bizarre story of humanity in the distant future, where childbirth is no more possible and humans live on through space probes. In numerous ways, Bois’ article poses as a critique on digital reading and the extent to which one could alter the interface using not just pictures and videos, but also format, structure and the very use of language. His story indicates that the general format of scrolling downwards on a screen can offer so much more than just moving one’s eyes from left to right, reading sentence after sentence. The background of the calendar in the beginning, for instance, connotes a passage of time without Bois having to explicitly write it. Similarly, he uses different colors of text to differentiate between different speakers without ever having to say, “he said”, or “she says.” But this beckons the same question as before, does this accessorizing of the textual interface stray away from the real writing content? Or does Bois intend for his story to be viewed as a film, or picture book, rather than a piece of literature?

The answer to these questions are irrelevant, taken that we live in an era where literature’ definition has now morphed into an entity concerning so much more than language and/or words, and nobody can today dictate how one should be reading. Ferris Jabr, Craig Mod ad Jon Bois all tell interesting stories by offering compelling arguments and critiques on the trajectory in which humanity and its relationship with reading and writing is headed. The future is one where reading and writing are so entwined with technology’s digitalization of literature but still so rooted to the traditional physical format, that the discipline of literature is in a state of fluid transformation in terms of its definition, its audience, its structure and its very storytelling using language and words. The intertwining of digitalism and literature is clearly inevitable with the invention of e-readers and the Internet, and to progress into the future whilst harnessing our progress of the world of virtual reading as well, but holding onto our traditional, literature artifacts, humanity must respect the existence of both formats within the discipline of literature to preserve the best of the past, and of the future.

Vansh, you’re off to a solid start here. Overall your approach is even handed and careful, and you’re making an argument for a middle way that I think is useful after the polemics that typically surround this issue. I think for that middle way argument to work, however, you need to more specifically outline both sides of your argument—establish clearly what each medium can and cannot accomplish and outline why each are valuable in our current reading economy. You also need to move away from summarizing all of your evidence and toward synthesizing and interpreting. You need a few more sources here, as well—these are all from class—and including those additional ideas will help you move toward combining and interpreting rather than paraphrasing. If you’d like to chat about any of this I’m always available during my office hours or by appointment.

--Ryan Cordell

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