Picture for a moment a dystopian hell-scape. The year is 2150 and the world’s last print book is succumbing to mold and dust in some octogenarian’s forgotten attic storage. All around you teenagers – oh god teenagers! – flit by like rats faces shrouded by hoods, noses twitching fiendishly into the cold, inhuman, insomnia-inducing blue wavelength of that great bane of humanity, screens. “Sweet Christ”, you say, “What has become of the proud descendants of Tolstoy and Twain!” Imagine your abject terror and disgust, knowing what you know about the benefits of reading when you consider what the world has become. Now pause. Take a deep breath. Everything is going to be alright.

It’s hard to imagine how every passing generation falls prey to the same niggling sense of moral superiority. They feel utterly convinced that they are much smarter, much wiser, and know that the children are headed for certain destruction. But despite the prevailing sense of doom living in the glasses cases and bookshelves of the Luddites, the reality of literacy in the digital age is, in fact, a subtly nuanced picture that is just now unfolding around us. A picture that only the keen vision of hindsight will be able to fully appreciate. The aim, therefore, of this essay is to consider the effects of our developing relationship with literacy across its many emerging mediums, in a balanced, calm, and morally objective manner. Reading is undeniably beneficial, but the notion that the medium of printed text is the only way to obtain its benefits is flawed. Methods of reading have always changed and always will, any attempt to hinder this development is counter-productive. I will attempt to demonstrate that the benefits of reading are not inherent to the form of print books, and that reimagining the medium is essential to allow future generations to retain what print books currently provide.

It is easy to imagine that as long as people have read they have approached the practice with the same intentions, perceptions, and goals. The reality is that the practice has been more transient. Form and treatment of popular reading material have changed over the generations to yield the material we expect today (Rothman 2017). For instance, before there was the archetype of the book lover – a person who forms attachments with books beyond their utilitarian value – there was the book reader who sought only to increase their cultural viability through literary erudition (Rothman 2017). During that period readers were more likely to engage with poetry or nonfiction than today’s cultural kingpin, the novel (Rothman 2017). Our modern conception of readership is just that, modern. It is essential that we recognize that and understand that changes in form are inevitable and that attempting to prevent future modes from taking hold is futile and counterproductive.

It is important to remember that printed books and texts are powerful. They, more than other platforms developed so far, engender deep-reading, and deep-reading – “the active process of deliberate reading carried out to enhance one's comprehension and enjoyment of a text” – is beneficial (Jabr). Most people living in America have been subject to a tirade on the importance of books. Parents, teachers, precocious classmates, and media spokespeople without fail tout the importance of reading or at least harbor a sensation that it is a valuable vocation. Many cite the effects reading can have on intelligence, and indeed reading has been shown to influence the mind in various meaningful ways. For instance, a study conducted by NCBI confirmed that even when controlling for mitigating factors, reading “… increases vocabulary, general knowledge, and verbal skills. (Stanovich)” Similarly, exposing young minds to a greater number of words through reading from an early age appears to correlate with better performance in school and enhanced cognitive development (Gentry 2011). Even so, the power of reading extends beyond the expansion of vocabulary and intelligence.   
  
 The notion that reading is intellectually beneficial is easy to accept – it fits neatly with our cultural expectations. What might come as a surprise is that reading has benefits that extend beyond the expansion of our cognitive abilities. For instance, increased mental activity, such as that engendered by reading is associated with slower mental decline, and this applies not only to the normal mental decline associated with aging (NHS). Patients experiencing Alzheimer’s and Dementia can stave off the progression of symptoms by engaging with a text (NHS). Not only can reading protect the brain, but it can exert influence over our emotional lives as well. Readers, particularly those of literary fiction, were shown to demonstrate increased empathy and emotional intelligence (Gentry 2011). It would not be surprising if, as our understanding develops and further research is conducted, we discover even more benefits of literary engagement.

The internet is rife with horror stories of the digital world. Most are spoken down the long and hopelessly out-of-touch noses New Yorker columnists who ruefully shake their heads at the failings of today’s youth. Here is a quote from that magazine, “A common sight in malls, in pizza parlors, in Starbucks, and wherever else American teens hang out: three or four kids, hooded, gathered around a table, leaning over like monks or druids, their eyes fastened to the smartphones held in front of them. The phones, converging at the center of the table, come close to touching. (Denby 2017)” The fear one reads in these doomsday fortunes comes from a place of powerlessness. The rapid development of technologies like the smartphone has left older generations out of the cultural developments of the day and they fear the effects it will have on their progeny. The difficulty arises when their concerns are addressed in unproductive manners. The technology we live with is ubiquitous, and not only that but for the digital natives of the near future, older technologies will be incapable of commanding attention. That is why it is essential to harness the power of our modern technologies to capture the benefits of outdated modes. Relics like print books hold a tremendous value that will be lost if we focus on holding on to them rather than adapting to their replacements.

Like it or not we live in the digital age, and our love affair with the screen has precipitated our scorn for printed texts. The percentage of American’s who have read novels, short stories, or plays in print or on screen has declined by roughly 13 percent in the past 40 years (Ingraham 2016). This is not to say that we read less in general, indeed, we are reading more words in texts, social media posts, etc. than ever before. However, the digital format has not as yet adapted the qualities that make deep reading viable. For instance, the screen appears to inhibit comprehension (Jabr). E-readers lack certain tactile qualities that allow our brains to make the connections necessary to grasp reading material adequately (Jabr). When we read a book, we make a mental map of where information was stored in relation to page number, paragraph location, and distance from other parts of the work (Jabr). E-readers do not lend themselves to this kind of spatial conceptualization in their current form (Jabr). Similarly, people tend to approach reading on a screen with a different mindset than what they bring to a printed text (Jabr). Because the majority of reading done on screens is cursory and light, we are not used to devoting our full attention to screen-reading (Jabr). However, these problems are not unsolvable. Rather than assuming that the screen is inherently deficient and that the book holds some mystical value that cannot be replicated, we must determine what is preventing deep-reading on the screen and adapt it so that it functions.

Already we see advancements in that direction that demonstrate the potential that our future holds. Research and innovation have the power to make deep-reading on screens possible and to encourage the development of new benefits that have not been considered until now. Recognizing the gap between print and screen, researchers set about investigating the problem with a mind for increasing the viability of digital technology rather than a regression to analog mediums. They posited that by priming screen readers to bring a greater level of focus to their task, a focus more akin to what most readers bring to print, participants would enhance their comprehension of the material (Jabr). Lo and behold, it did (Jabr). Not only do we see the divide shrinking, but we can imagine what could be developed if the old paradigms are left behind. Once the exact nature of our interaction with text in print is understood, it can be distilled and recreated through novel techniques on the screen.

And so we are confronted with certain realities. Readership in the traditional formats is on the decline and modern, screen-based technology commands our attention. Additionally, we recognize that deep-reading, as afforded us by printed text, is markedly beneficial and that with planning and care digital text can provide the same benefits. Thus situated, we must recognize that our only course of action if we wish to retain the gifts we are bestowed by deep-reading, is to adapt our screen technologies, not to hang vainly on to print.

David,

You’ve made good progress with this since the draft I saw last week, but there’s still much work to do. In particular, as you review my comments and look back over the paper, think hard about your audience. Who precisely are you trying to convince here, and is the way you’ve structured your argument likely to engage them or turn them away? I’m happy to talk about all this in my office hours if you’d like to think through my suggestions and your own ideas about revision.

--Ryan Cordell

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