

The New Generation of Readers

Greg Foyster

I'm a writer who can't read. When I plunge into a novel, I don't stay submerged in the fictional world for long. After a few minutes some snag in the text will deliver me back to the present, and I'll find myself staring at the page, confused. Sometimes I'll feel a sudden need to check my email or send a text message, watch television. Reading makes me restless, thirsty for fresh stimulation.

I don't have trouble processing text; I scored good grades in English and my comprehension is probably above average. My problem is with focusing for extended periods. My eyes dart about the page and my thoughts bolt in all directions, wild and undisciplined.

I can't help wondering why reading isn't easy for me. Why can't I read smoothly like others can?

Yet I've begun to suspect that other people can't read properly, either. The evidence is mostly anecdotal, but it's building. Over the last few years, I've heard classmates stumble when reading aloud, listened to friends lament that they can never finish books and watched co-workers misinterpret memos. I'm not talking about people with dyslexia or other reading disorders. These are focused, educated people without any intellectual impediments. They're also mainly young.

Author Mark Bauerlein writes in *The Dumbest Generation* (2008) that today's young people just aren't into 'the whole book thing'. The statistics he calls on for support are mind-boggling: the number of eighteen- to 24-year-olds in the USA who read one 'literary work' a year dropped twenty-eight per cent between 1982 to 2002; only fifty-one per cent of eighteen- to 24-year-olds read a book for pleasure in 2002; and the percentage of seventeen-year-olds who 'never or hardly ever' read for fun more than doubled between 1984 and 2004.

Bauerlein believes television and the internet have created a youth culture with the intellectual depth of a kiddies' pool. Years spent 'clicking away from big blocks of prose and thick arguments' has conditioned Generation Y to shun serious literature.

The result is that those who regularly gawk at websites, video games and plasma screens often roll their eyes when forced to read anything in depth. In the battle for youth attention, *World of Warcraft* has vanquished *War and Peace*.

Is this why today's young people, in particular, find reading such a chore? Is this why they become easily distracted? Let's look at two pervasive forms of electronic media: television and the internet.

Australians spend, on average, almost three hours a day worshipping the household shrine to light and motion. In *The Brain that Changes Itself* (2008), Norman Doidge writes that television's cuts and zooms trigger our orienting response, the instinctive



urge to attend to sudden changes. This response, which probably evolved to help our ancestors identify dangers and opportunities, slows the heart for up to six seconds. If we watch too much television we come to expect these quick, stimulating changes all the time. Activities that don't trigger this response become boring and tiresome.

Well, what could be more static than staring at ink on paper? Type is immobile, shackled to the page. Our eyes do all the moving, hopscotching from word to word in quick jumps called 'saccades'. At each landing, we take a mental snapshot and store the image in our short-term memory. These page-Polaroids are strung together to form a smooth journey for good readers, or a bumpy ride for remedials like me. All this action takes place in the mind, not on the page.

The other factor is the internet. The web provides a bewildering amount of information, but no consistent structure to bind it together. This free association of data encourages a sort of intellectual scavenging. People bounce from site to site, rummaging through the digital junkyard for a single usable fact. Often they settle for whatever random garbage falls within their net of search terms. This aimless browsing creates scattershot minds, furnished with frivolities.

It's well known that web-based texts encourage 'nonlinear, nonhierarchical, nonsequential' reading, as users poach snippets of information from several sources. In 1997, online usability guru Jakob Nielsen reported that only sixteen per cent of test subjects read online text word-for-word. Others scanned, their pupils pinballing between sentences and paragraphs. In 2006, Nielsen found that many users read in an F-shape: they scanned the headline and opening paragraphs in a horizontal swipe, skipped to the middle of the article, then skimmed down the left.

Meanwhile, it's been said that print texts encourage more orderly thinking. The codex, the book, the thesis are forms with planned, sequential information. This linear progression of ideas sets the cogs of logic whirring into motion. As the mind reads, it remakes itself, becoming more and more like the structure of the text. The result is that the printed word teaches the brain important analytical and reflective skills.

So the argument goes that if we spend our time surfing the internet instead of reading books, we may lose our capacity for sustained focus. Spend enough hours online, and our minds could grow to mirror the web's messy tangle.

Such predictions would sound far-fetched if it weren't for discoveries in neuroplasticity. Michael Merzenich, a leader in the field, explains that the mind is more malleable than we realise: 'Our brain is modified on a substantial scale, physically and functionally, each time we learn a new skill or develop a new ability'. Norman Doidge believes that a loss of eloquence could be due to the disappearance of old-fashioned cultural practices, such as learning foreign poems by heart and writing longhand, which strengthen our auditory memory and pre-frontal cortex.

Yet are today's readers really turning into e-idiot? Some studies indicate that the internet can have a positive effect. A 1991 investigation found that comprehension was higher when reading from the screen.

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In 2007 the *New Yorker* reported on a study which showed that teenagers' grades improved with time spent online. A 2007 research project by the Poynter Institute found that, on average, people read a larger percentage of text online than they do in print.

We also can't ignore the benefits of reading on the internet. Hypertext is a less intrusive citation method than footnotes. Links encourage accuracy; a journalist may quote more scrupulously if she has to embed the source. And online discussion from the hundreds of millions of bloggers and readers does more to invigorate discourse than any print format yet invented.

Besides, it seems that many books on the dangers of new technology were written by people with a vested interest in promoting literature. Mark Bauerlein, for instance, is a professor of English. Of course he believes that reading online is no substitute for the slow mastication of a good book. The cultural bias behind his carefully sculpted prose is clear — as a lover of literature, he is incapable of viewing this issue at arm's length.

There is a long tradition of cultural conservatives dismissing new technology as harmful. As Walter Ong pointed out, Plato's Socrates says that writing destroys memory because it takes away the need to

store information in the mind. (The same charge has been levelled at computers — rather than storing facts in our heads we save them to our hard drives.) But although writing and typing may well have dulled our capacity for recall, Socrates overlooked the benefits of recording words in physical form. Had writing not been invented, his probing ideas could never have reached across the ages to inspire us today.

I find reading difficult, but so have people throughout history. Unlike speaking, reading isn't a natural part of a child's development, and most students expend enormous amounts of energy learning to decode text.

Technology hasn't made me, or others, read poorly. It has made us read differently. As our attention spans diminish, so too does our patience for longwinded prose.

The sluggish tempo of novels from a hundred years ago jars with our supercharged times. People like me aren't bad readers, we're just looking for literature that's hitched to the souped-up speed of modern life.

When we find it, we'll wolf it down.