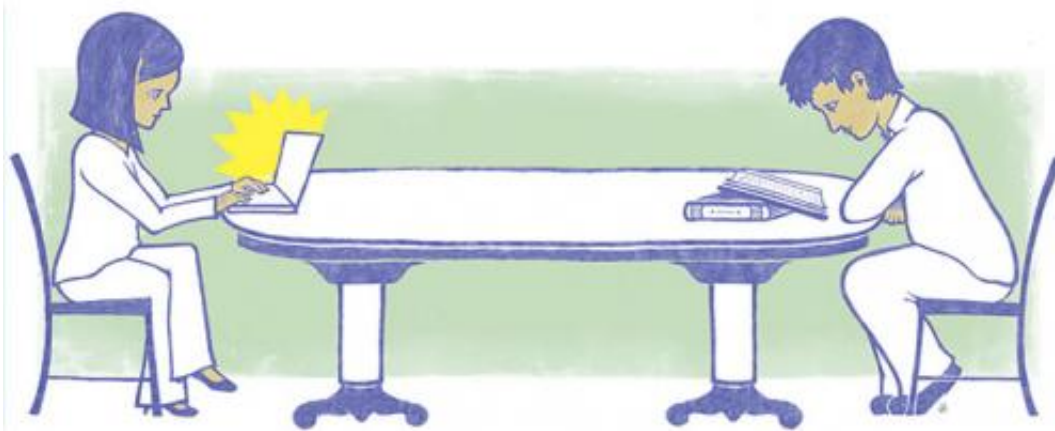


# Read it or Reddit? MSU faculty and students grapple with the evolution of reading in the digital age

April 29 2014, by Michael Becker

---



Thousands of years ago, when writing was first becoming widely used, it was touted by its early adopters as a memory aid that would make it possible for knowledge to transcend the ages.

But critics argued that the long-term effects of this new technology were unknown. They worried that the young people who were eagerly learning to write could be irreparably harming their minds by allowing traditional skills to wither.

Memory, in particular, was forecast to quickly atrophy, taking with it the [critical thinking](#) that deep reflection on one's memories encouraged. Even Socrates disparaged the [new technology](#), calling it an "elixir not of memory, but of reminding."

This debate should seem familiar. It has been repeated invention after invention for millennia. The printing press, novels, paperbacks, radio and television—all have been blamed at one point for corrupting youth and ruining the future.

Today's debate concerns the fate of reading in a world where a growing number of young people spend a growing portion of their waking hours staring at a smartphone or other screen.

As universities like Montana State University rush to find ways to take educational advantage of [students'](#) enthusiasm for these devices, some worry that too much screen reading and too much multitasking are rewiring our brains to be less critical, less empathetic and less wise.

"My attention span is definitely less than it used to be," said Fred Vollmer, 22, an honors student from Deming, Wash.

A senior in economics who's minoring in English and eyeing graduate school for computer science, Vollmer has seen a lot of reading assignments in his time at MSU. But he has noticed that since a smartphone has become a regular part of his life, reading assignments have been harder and harder to get through without distraction.

It's an observation backed by research. A 2009 Stanford study found that people who often use multiple media at once tend to be more distracted, sometimes to the point of "sacrificing performance on the primary task to let in other sources of information."

Or, as one of the researchers put it, multitaskers are "suckers for irrelevancy."

MSU elementary education student Adrienne Petch knows the feeling. A recent smartphone adoptee herself, she noticed the distraction almost immediately.

"I'm constantly bouncing around from place to place," she said. "I can do all these things on it, but I do find that I have trouble concentrating. Even when I'm working on something, I feel compelled to always check my phone."

And the attraction to screens is not limited to college students with phones. The 22-year-old senior from Grand Junction, Colo., just finished her student teaching at Meadowlark School in Bozeman and said she saw how the first-graders lit up when given a chance to interact with a tablet computer.

"(They're) so excited and visually stimulated, and I think it's hard for them to create the same vision in their heads when they're reading a story," she said. "It's less exciting than what they see on their iPads."

That's a concern for people like Maryanne Wolf, whose book "Proust and the Squid" looks at how the brain is affected by reading.

Wolf writes that reading takes heavy advantage of the brain's ability to make new connections with old memories and its ability to recognize patterns. But the mind needs time to wander and create these connections—time that was once afforded by reading in the relatively distraction-free print medium.

Screen reading—especially the kind of quick lookup reading made possible by Internet access, search engines and many, many specialized

apps and social media sites such as Reddit—may rob from that deeper reading experience by providing a "seemingly complete" text instantly. Almost no time is needed to process the new information; no critical thinking is required.

"I fear," Wolf writes, "that many of our children are in danger of becoming just what Socrates warned us against—a society of decoders of information, whose false sense of knowing distracts them from a deeper development of their intellectual potential."

Twenty years ago, the temptation to read on screens wasn't there. Screens provided such a terrible experience compared to ink on paper that it prompted novelist Annie Proulx to famously predict in the New York Times: "Nobody is ever going to sit down and read a novel on a twitchy little screen. Ever."

That was 1994. Since then, the resolution of computer screens has improved dramatically, and millions of people have taken to reading all sorts of things on screens much smaller than anything Proulx was picturing back then.

American reading habits, believed as recently as 2008 to have been in decline to the point of crisis, have rebounded dramatically, according to studies from the National Education Association.

The rise of e-reading has played a part in that. Forty-three percent of Americans age 16 and up now read e-[books](#) and magazines on their devices, and many people say they are reading more now because of the ease of digital formats, according to studies by the Pew Internet Project.

Allison Wynhoff Olsen, a first-year professor of English education at MSU, has observed as much in her research of literacy practices in secondary school-aged youth. Between text messaging, Facebook and

other online posts, students are reading all the time.

Wynhoff Olsen said she does not align with the concerns that the youth in this country are in a literacy crisis.

"Rather, I am concerned that we (as a broad society) view and evaluate (youth's) reading and writing habits with a narrow lens," she said. "In so doing we are not always aware of the multiplicity of reading in which they are engaged, some of which is texting, Facebook, reading magazines, blogs, newspapers, novels, menus, directions, etc."

Wynhoff Olsen said if the goal is to get youth interested in reading, they should be allowed to read in the format they choose.

"To require them to read a print text may distance some youth from reading, particularly if they do not like or struggle with the printed format and particularly because it may feel false or inauthentic," she said.

If format is a consideration in the current discussion, so is content of what students are reading, according to a 2005 University of Toronto study.

The study found that people who read fiction tend to empathize with the characters in the stories in the same ways they empathize with people in real life. Identifying with the thoughts of a writer or fictional character can gradually help readers better understand themselves.

In a related study eight years later, those Canadian researchers also found that exposure to fiction decreases a person's need for "cognitive closure"—the aversion to ambiguity and need to reach a quick decision. People who need cognitive closure tend to make decisions more quickly based on less information.

(Now, keep in mind that 86 percent of smartphone users in America use their phones for exactly that sort of "just-in-time" information, according to a 2012 Pew survey.)

Reading fiction, the researchers found, provides a chance to think things through "without concern for urgency" and lets readers think in ways not their own.

Reading, especially the reading of great literature, said Michael Sexson, MSU emeritus Regents Professor in English, is a kind of cure for the attention deficit disorder that seems to afflict everyone in our society, including himself.

"I'm not a Luddite by any means," said the veteran professor and devoted tablet user. "I'm fascinated by technologies, in particular, communicative technologies.

"At the same time, I don't think it's amiss to be severely critical of the ways in which electronic technologies have provided us with so many more options than we've ever had before, to the point that these options become the choices of distractions."

The kind of deep involvement, concentration and the ability to be informed on a productive level are, in his view, largely the result of reading books.

Yet more and more students, when he asks them, say they don't have time to read.

"That's silly," he said. "Everybody has exactly the same amount of time in a day. It's not a question of time. It's a question of priorities."

That balancing of resources—how much attention to give to reading

books versus other pursuits—is mirrored in the changes under way at MSU's Renne Library, where the tug-of-war between old and new reading is best embodied.

The number of students visiting the library is consistently growing—it's the second-most visited building on campus. Yet the number of books being checked out is dropping. In 2008, 45 percent of the print collection circulated; in 2012, just 24 percent of the books moved.

"The fact is, those print books are not being used much anymore," said the library's dean, Kenning Arlitsch.

That reality has led to more library space being given over to non-print pursuits. Areas that just 10 years ago were dominated by books and documents have been repurposed with more computers and more study space.

At the same time, Renne is spending less on books and more on digital offerings, such as access to academic databases. That's in line both with the university's research focus, Arlitsch said, and with the role libraries are taking in the digital world: hubs of digital scholarship.

"Pulling together humanists, scientists and technologists and letting them work together is curating new scholarship and opportunities," he said.

Though fewer books are being checked out, MSU students actually have access to more books than ever thanks to partnerships with e-book services such as HathiTrust, a digital library consisting of books scanned by Google at some of the country's largest universities.

Whereas Renne's print collection holds about 700,000 books, HathiTrust will give MSU access to upward of 5 million books.

Ink and paper volumes, despite people's emotional attachment to them, make up a tiny percentage of the information offerings that Renne is expected to provide as the library in a research institution, Arlitsch said.

"You can't have a large print collection taking up a lot of real estate and offer students digital services" like databases and massive stores of research data for analysis, he said. "It's just not economical."

Though Renne isn't a reading-for-pleasure library, research librarian Jan Zauha said there's plenty to learn from public libraries, especially about marketing their print collections.

"I think reading widely makes you a more resourceful, creative and empathetic person," Zauha said.

Getting those old books off the shelves is one reason behind a new program at Renne, the browsing library. Located next to the first floor coffee shop, the browsing library displays books picked by staff and students, placed prominently so students can peruse the titles and, maybe, take home something they might not otherwise have encountered.

Outgoing MSU student body president Lindsay Murdock also believes there is a future for the book. While she said that she, too, has trouble focusing on reading at times—something she attributes to growing up around screens—the 22-year-old senior in sociology said she's old-fashioned in her love for the feel, experience and romance of books on paper. And, she doesn't think the future requires drawing a hard line between print and screen.

"It doesn't have to be a binary," she said. "I think the discussion can go farther."



English professor Kirk Branch shared that optimism. Now in his 11th year at MSU, he also directs the Yellowstone Writing Project, a professional development organization for K–12 teachers.

"We have to understand that there's a new media that students have to become savvy about," he said. "They have to become the same kind of critical readers they would be with any other types of texts."

And professors need to become familiar with the technologies students use so that they can find ways to meet students where they are ready to learn.

"I think students are ready to usually follow us where we take them if we are competent in what we do," he said.

But the idea that students are less capable of critical thinking due to reading non-print matter doesn't hold water for Branch.

"As a professor and as somebody who's made a career and loves working with college-age students and graduate students, I'm not going to approach them as if there's been a decline in their literacy," he said. "We have to assume we have the brightest people we can possibly have in front of us and work with that."

Marcel Proust wrote that reading makes us all readers of ourselves. "The writer's work," he wrote, "is only a kind of optical instrument he provides the reader so he can discern what he might never have seen in himself without this book."

Several of the MSU scholars said that if anything is clear about reading, it's that it is intensely personal. It can't help but be so when it encourages so much reflection and when it has for centuries been so instrumental in educating generations of [young people](#).

So it's easy to get worried, they say, when reading seems to be in danger. But reading—and society—survived the printing press, the novel, the paperback and the Internet. With so many students, professors and others thinking so much about the subject, perhaps reading is poised to transcend a few more ages.

Provided by Montana State University

Citation: Read it or Reddit? MSU faculty and students grapple with the evolution of reading in the digital age (2014, April 29) retrieved 19 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-04-reddit-msu-faculty-students-grapple.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.