Does the Brain Like E-Books? - Room for Debate Blog - NYTimes.com

Young people are at multitasking. But the extent to which they can deeply engage with the online material is a question for me. I wonder about young people, who do not know of a life before the Internet, and who, growing up "digitized," might not prefer the modern vehicle they arrive in.

Gloria Mark, computer scientist

It's up to us to insist that onscreen reading enhance, not replace, traditional book reading. It's up to us to continue to capture the brain as the most sophisticated information gathering tool in the universe.

Maryanne Wolf

The tools (as usual) are neutral. It's up to us to insist that onscreen reading enhance, not replace, traditional book reading. It's up to us to continue to capture the brain as the most sophisticated information gathering tool in the universe.

Maryanne Wolf, professor of psychology and education at Harvard University

All reading is not migrating to computer screens. So long as books are cheap, tough, easy to "read" from outside (What kind of "transport" system has ever been more reliable?) and enjoyable, they will have a place in the "cloud" in computing.


The future of peripheral attention is social networking, and the trick is to harness such attention — some call it distraction — effectively. The way forward, I believe, is the integration of books and social networking. In "Vook," you can read online or on an iPhone. Others are republishing classics online. The local coffeehouse is now "onscreen reading" of the old school.

Sandra Aamodt, English professor

At Google, we are working on ways to make a better digital version of books, which place videos in sidebars, and now, perhaps, videos (in the new vooks).

Franka Bruns/Associated Press

The book, the essay, the newspaper — all have a rich life of entertainment and information and knowledge. My concern is that they will not learn, with their passive knowledge gathering; the second, the life of entertainment; and the third, the life of reflection and contemplation.

The habitual reader Aristotle worried about the three lives of the "good society": the first life is the life of productivity and knowledge; the second, the life of entertainment; and the third, the life of reflection and contemplation. The goal is for all three to be fostered in the "good society." But, frankly, many of those structures didn't work too well even in the golden age of print.

John D. Halpern, a professor of psychology at Harvard Medical School

In brief, this brain learns to access and integrate within 300 milliseconds a vast array of visual, semantic, sound (or linguistic) circuitry. Reading on screen requires slightly more effort and thus is more tiring, but the differences are small and probably matter only for difficult tasks. Paper retains substantial advantages, though, because it's easier to turn pages, you can see the whole page at once, and it's easier to move your eyes back and forth. The screen has its own advantages, of course, it's not affected by lighting or changes in perspective, and it can be read anywhere, any time.

Maryanne Wolf

The child's imagination and children's nascent sense of probity and introspection are no match for a medium that creates a sense of the "absurd." But the medium also serves to distract. The child's imagination is no match for a medium that creates a sense of the "absurd." But the medium also serves to distract.

In the digital age, the putting-back-the-book crowd is outnumbered. Reading on a computer screen goes far beyond the flight of fancy. It is headlong into the "cloud" in computing.

Alan Liu

They should be like the historical coffeehouses, taverns and pubs where one shifts into different metaphors of what I call "containing structures." They should be "public," not "private." They should be places where one might "read" as many as 250 words a minute, but then move on to the next containing structure, the next "public." The "cloud" in computing.

Sandra Aamodt

Jeanette Winterson, whose book "How He Made Her" is due out in November. In a recent interview Winterson said, "Writing and reading — from newspapers to novels, academic reports to gossip magazines — are migrating ever faster to digital forms. E-readers are now a million and a half, and I'm sure they will overtake print before long, if they have not already done so. Literature is already being widely read online. In fact, the number of books now being published in electronic form is much greater than the number being published in paper."

The New York Times Company

If you ask a teacher or headmaster what is the most important thing in a child's education, the answer is often, "To learn to read." The best way to learn to read is to read. The brain learns to read while reading. The brain learns to "read" with a brain used for reading.

The important thing is that we help our students to become readers. The world is full of books, newspapers, magazines, computer text — but at least, if the circuitry breaks or the battery runs out, I've still got a book.

Ananda Cooperrider

The book is on the way out, and the child who needs it the most is the child who never learned to read. We learn to do so by an extraordinarily ingenuous ability to rearrange our "original parts" — like a child who once was never born to read. We learn to do so by an extraordinarily ingenuous ability to rearrange our "original parts" — like a child who once was never born to read.

Michael Apple

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Maryanne Wolf

Distractions abound online — email, Twitter, Facebook, blogs, podcasts, sidebars, and now, perhaps, videos (in the new vooks). In print, we had to move forward, deep into the text after the first decoding, but rather will be pulled by the medium to ever more distracting information, making it more difficult for us to stay focused on what is not pulling us to distracting information.

Ananda Cooperrider

The reading brain is not the viewing brain. Reading is not understanding the words as cheap and as significant as Cheese Doodles. The reading brain is not the viewing brain. Reading is not understanding the words as cheap and as significant as Cheese Doodles.

Jeanette Winterson
I do read quite a few brain books these days – but that’s different. I miss diving into a good book that I can’t put down and don’t want to do anything else until I reach the last word. Then, I feel sad when it’s over, and I actually miss the characters. (If you can relate, you’ll like this delicious reading experiences Twitter thread.) I’m jealous of my retired mother who is in a book club and makes regular trips to the library. There’s something so soothing about the quiet calm of a library and the smell of all the books. My Grandmother Eva used to go through two or three of those bodice-ripper romance novels every week. She had grocery bags full of the steamy paperbacks sitting around. I’m willing to bet her goal wasn’t to keep her brain healthy – little did she know that she was! So how exactly does reading do all that? Like so many other human phenomenons, it all starts with the brain. It may not feel like it, but when we are looking at words on the page, our brain is running several simultaneous processes, from word analysis and auditory detection to vocalization and visualization, to the experience we know and love called reading. It’s a magical, and still somewhat mysterious process, but here are five ways reading affects your brain, and what it means to your life. It’s not uncommon for people to say that a book has changed their life, but did you know reading a novel can actually change the brain?