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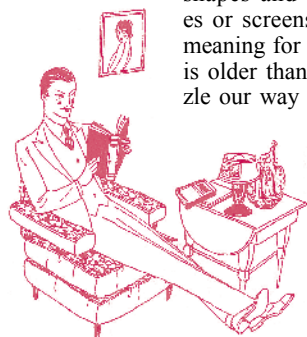
Against the Grain

“Linking Publishers, Vendors and Librarians”

Reading in a Digital Age: Issues and Opportunities — Part One

by **Tony Horava** (Associate University Librarian – Collections, University of Ottawa, Ontario, Canada) <thorava@uottawa.ca>

None of us are born readers. We are born, of course, with our five senses, but reading is a complex, learned skill that takes much time and practice to master. Very early in life we become aware of mysterious shapes and lines on pages or screens that provide meaning for everyone who is older than us. We puzzle our way through many frustrations until the developing neural connections in our brains allow us to make cognitive sense



of these shapes and lines. The light bulb of understanding slowly brightens — we are permanently changed, and a new vista of imagination and ideas beckon to us. Becoming a fluent reader is a pre-condition for success in a knowledge-driven, highly-literate society as ours. The act of reading is the lifeblood that holds together our mission of connecting people, ideas, and knowledge. It allows patrons to explore new landscapes of intellect and emotion, where we grow, learn, ponder, discover, soul-search, and ultimately become the people we are today, and will become tomorrow. The act of reading inevitably connects us to the past (our own past as well as historical past) and engages us in anticipation of new ideas and knowledge, whether in collaboration or in solitude (and often sliding back and forth from one mode to the other).

There is no doubt that the form and experience of reading is undergoing a fundamental revolution, akin to the **Gutenberg** revolution of the 15th century. Mass printing of books using movable type triggered massive cultural change following **Gutenberg**, and our networked digital culture has transformed the way we live, communicate, think, share, and, of course, read. The shift from print to screen reading is transforming how we read, what we read, and when we read. The Web is only about twenty years old, and there is a gamut of new reading technologies (software, tools); communities (Good Reads, Library Thing, online book clubs); and sophisticated media environments. The complete ubiquity and portability of our devices have afforded us the ability to read

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If Rumors Were Horses



Pictured here is **Albert Joy**. You will remember that he retired from the **University of Vermont!** But he has not retired from the **Charleston Conference**. He will be one of our mentors in November! <http://www.against-the-grain.com/2015/01/rumors-from-the-atg-newschannel-11115/>

Hard to believe that the awesome **Deb Vaughn**, our book review editor extraordinaire, is pregnant with her **FOURTH** child! Whew! Y'all will remember that **Deb** has moved to **Clemson** and is teaching some courses there in her spare time. Thanks, **Deb**, for all you do and happy pregnancy.

Meanwhile, is anyone out there interested in taking up the Book Review column for *Against the Grain*? You will get as many new books as you want. Why not? Contact me <kstrauch@comcast.net> or **Tom Gilson** <gilson@cofc.edu>. Thanks!

Thanks to all of you for the congratulations on the birth of our grandson, **George Wilton Jacks**. And of course, he is brilliant. Why the other day, he had his first laugh and he's barely 4 months old. Imagine that!

While we are on the subject of pregnancies, I absolutely forgot to mention that the wonderful **Posie Aagaard** (Assistant Dean for Collections & Curriculum Support, **University of Texas at San Antonio**) missed the **Charleston Conference** a year ago because she had a new baby! We have to reconnect with her!



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anywhere and anytime. How has this affected the reading experience of our patrons, across different generations, and across the socio-economic spectrum? What does this mean for the mission of libraries, and for the ways in which librarians connect patrons with knowledge and information, and teach learning skills? Reading practices have changed profoundly in the digital era; the ways in which students interact with texts is very different from a generation ago. How is our experience shaped by the rush of new technologies? “There is physicality in reading,” says cognitive scientist **Maryanne Wolf of Tufts University**, “maybe even more than we want to think about as we lurch into digital reading — as we move forward perhaps with too little reflection. I would like to preserve the absolute best of older forms but know when to use the new.”¹ The increasing atomization of content — of slicing what we read into mental slivers of all types — holds new opportunities and dangers for the way we engage with the world around us.

Recently I came upon a valuable new book, *The Slow Book Revolution: Creating a New Culture of Reading on College Campuses and Beyond*. It provides various strategies on developing a reading culture in the post-secondary realm. Here is the core of the argument: “The Slow Books Movement seeks to reacquaint readers with the pleasures of books and, particularly, literature... Quiet contemplation is the reward of slow reading, although — clearly — not the only one. The act is an end in itself, a response to, and a way of counteracting, the fragmentation brought on by our increasingly fragmented lives.”² The fact that slow, immersive reading, once taken for granted as integral to our relationship with books and reading, is now seen as “revolutionary” is a stark sign of how dramatically things have changed in the past decade or two. How revealing that a deep and focussed immersion in the world of books is no longer a given in our culture; a deliberate mental space has to be cleared for this to happen today. Finding a balance between slow and fast culture is the challenge that we all face.

The verb “to read” can be traced back to Old English, where “*rædan*” meant to advise, to discern, to interpret, to understand, and, yes, to read [by the way, there is even an Anglo-Saxon baby name *Raedan*, meaning someone who advises]. Reading began in a world where symbols, words, and traditional lore seamlessly co-existed, and was the privilege of an elite few who could discern meaning. It became closely associated with words and text — whether in scroll, manuscript, or eventually the codex book. Today we have so many new vehicles for creating and sharing knowledge — videos, datasets, animations, audio files, blogs, to name but a few — involving a stew of words, sounds, numbers, and images. How do we “read” them? What are the literacies that apply? What are the differences and similarities in the skill sets and habits of mind of successfully reading a text versus “reading” a

video, or a dataset? Digital humanists are text mining primary source documents to discern new patterns of knowledge and previously unknown linkages, thus reinterpreting and rereading the past. New forms of scholarly and scientific expression are expanding the ways in which we create meaning and develop knowledge. Whenever I hear the buzz about media literacy, data literacy, visual literacy, or other forms of literacy, I ponder the challenges and opportunities of learning, and what it all means in our networked culture. **Wolf and Barzillai** note that “Taking advantage, then, of the wealth of information that is always just a click away demands the use of executive, organizational, critical, and self-monitoring skills to navigate and make sense of the information.”³ The traditional dominance of text is being replaced by a variety of mixed media that changes how we create meaning when we are absorbing different content in our brains, in simultaneous feeds of information. We learn and create knowledge on multiple levels; we engage with physical, virtual, and hybrid communities on a continuous and seamless basis.

In the midst of this feverish and unpredictable revolution, there are a few things we do know. Reading will continue to be integral for intellectual development, personal growth and identity, and connecting us with knowledge. There will be a growing proliferation of reading technologies that enhance the user experience of scholarly and popular content. The ubiquity and abundance of reading means that literacy and critical thinking are more important than ever before. Print and digital forms of reading will continue to share our cultural and scholarly space for the foreseeable future; the hybrid collection is and will remain the predominant service model for most university libraries, at least in the humanities and social sciences. Solemn predictions about the imminent death of the book are neither accurate nor helpful. Unlike the dismantling of the music industry or the newspaper industry in the digital era, the print book has not disappeared as a viable technology for distributing knowledge for various audiences. Both print and digital have compelling strengths as well as limitations — context and purpose are everything. This having been said, there are many questions that have sprung into the foreground — what is the impact of different reading experiences on our ability to absorb, learn, and remember? In an era of information overload and multitasking, our brains are highly versatile at cognitively adapting to our new ways interacting with words, for better and for worse. We have become adept at ruthlessly power-browsing our screens for information and then squirreling away objects that we will likely never read. In a text-saturated world, how do screen reading and print reading affect us, mentally and physically? How does the range of reading possibilities and practices impact our role and responsibilities as librarians? What does the shifting balance of print and eBooks mean for how we promote learning and accommodate different learning styles? What does the anxiety about the loss of print really tell us? These are issues that are playing themselves out in our libraries on an ongoing basis. How does the new reality of

reading change our understanding of literacy, learning, and student retention? How do we foster a new critical assessment of texts and multimedia learning objects, while embracing the magic of serendipity? The question of deep reading arises in many studies on reading research — how do we teach and nurture this skill in an era of screen living, endless distractions, and shortening attention spans? And lastly, what is the role of the library in the midst of this sea-change? So many questions and no easy answers! These are large and complex issues that are playing out in the world of education, and will evolve rapidly in the years to come.

In this issue we explore a few of these questions. I’ve been fortunate enough to recruit various academics and librarians who are working on the front lines with students, and who are happy to share their experiences and ideas on reading in the digital era. **Jonelle Seitz and Margaret Warner**, in their piece “Reading in Context, Reading for Sense,” address the challenges of teaching reading skills in an era where information floods into a student’s vision: “There is a disconnect between what contexts assigning faculty may assume a reader can readily discover and the contexts students experience. While a professor may know a particular journal article as having the context of a themed, finite issue within a specific body of scholarship, the student discovers and accesses the article outside of the themed-and-bound, among the thousands of other orphaned articles, citations, and abstracts that are results of a digital search.” The solution is for us to “reflect on our purpose and place within the ecosystem, making and unmaking our own sense about what we are doing, in what context, and whether we are making sense in our efforts to help humans understand what it is to *read*.” **Larina Warnock**, in her piece “New Literacies in Developmental Education,” discusses the many sociocultural, personal, and economic issues that affect how learners approach reading and the strategies to adopt in a digital era. She offers us a “perspective of literacy that includes not only reading for comprehension and writing to demonstrate understanding, but also active listening, faster cognitive processing, strategies to avoid information overload, and the creation of new information through digital means.” **Davonna Thomas**, in her article, “Reading, Writing, and the Library: A Perfect Integration for Students Today” challenges us to understand the close linkages between reading and writing, and practical strategies that libraries can apply to improve the reading and learning experience, especially for developmental students. She concludes that “Developmental students need to see their efforts form a trajectory to a tangible payoff, so I build my teaching practice around the practical utility of everything I ask my students to do.” **Pauline Dewan**, in her article, “Reading Trends and College Age Students: The Research, The Issues, and the Role of Libraries” explores the state of reading on college campuses and the barriers to reading, and why leisure reading is important. She notes that even though “libraries and library schools have focused in recent years on emerging technologies rather than

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reading, academic librarians need to inspire and attract college readers.” And **Barry Cull**, in his piece, “Time for Reflection: Digital Text and the Emerging Paper Divide,” ponders what it means to engage with texts and ideas in a world where digital media are ubiquitous. He asks, “Who will continue to take the time to reflect and deeply engage the technology of the printed word? And for those who do not, will they appreciate what they might be missing, as they go about their days immersed in reading from their digital devices? What might a world of such reading differences do to further entrench socioeconomic divisions in our societies?”

There is much to ponder here. These articles speak to the importance of reinvigorating our approach to reading — how we teach students to navigate digital and analog sources and succeed in their learning; how we critically apply our understanding of digital material to developmentally challenged students who need our guidance the most; how we can think holistically about reading, writing, and thinking. These articles also speak to the importance of strategies that support leisure reading; to the need to reflect critically upon the formats of material that we acquire for our collections; and, following **Wolf**, how we can preserve the

best of older forms of reading while knowing how to use new forms effectively. In so doing, we can ensure that the library remains “an engine for learning, provocation, and discovery”⁴ in the words of **Schnapp** and **Battles**. Embracing new technologies for delivering information remains crucial, but it is even more crucial to be clear about the goals that we are trying to achieve, and how we can thoughtfully integrate these new technologies into our practices and services, in a balanced manner.

By chance I happened to look at the **ALA Core Values of Librarianship** recently: <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/statementspols/corevalues#education>. This provides us with a snapshot of the big professional issues that we should never lose sight of, namely — Access; Confidentiality/Privacy; Democracy; Diversity; Education and Lifelong Learning; Intellectual Freedom; Preservation; The Public Good; Professionalism; Service; and Social Responsibility. It’s a roll call of our professional responsibilities across the ages. It strikes me that the role of reading in our libraries percolates across all of these values, and informs what we do in a very fundamental manner. These values establish a mental roadmap for how we can conceive of a successful library, regardless of the formats, material, and platforms for delivering information into the hands or devices of our patrons — to enable learning, knowledge, growth, and the endless potential of the human mind.

I am quite fascinated by the transformations occurring in reading, and the myriad of opportunities and challenges that we are seeing today. I’m very happy to be editing this issue on the many dimensions of reading in our libraries and in the academy. I hope you will enjoy the perspectives of our contributors. Stay tuned for more articles in the June *ATG* issue! 🍷

Endnotes

1. **Maryanne Wolf**, in **Ferris Jabr**, “The Reading Brain in the Digital Age: The Science of Paper versus Screens” *Scientific American*, April 11, 2013. <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/reading-paper-screens/> Accessed Dec 13 2014.
2. **Meagan Lacy**, ed. “The Slow Book Revolution: Creating a New Culture of Reading on College Campuses and Beyond.” Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2014, p. 4.
3. **Maryanne Wolf** and **Mirit Barzillai**, “The Importance of Deep Reading” *Educational Leadership* 66(6) March 2009, p. 35.
4. **Jeffrey T. Schnapp** and **Matthew Battles**, “The Library Beyond the Book.” Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass: 2014, p. 91.