



Changing the Way We Read

For many years we acquired the information we needed by reading books, magazines, and newspapers. For immediate news we relied on radio; later it was television. Today, the medium for reading is changing from paper to electronic displays. Perhaps the most visible proof is the decline of the daily newspaper and the rise of the electronic versions and web logs, or blogs, that cover areas of interest in minute detail.

Right now we are in the middle of this transformation of the delivery of information. How will it turn out? Will books disappear? Will news be farmed out to overseas writers? (Small U.S. newspapers are using this service now. The *New York Times* described a Pasadena, California, paper that uses offshore writers to report on local events.*)

My daily reading sources are an admixture of the paper and pixels. During a normal day, I start by reading a book on a treadmill at the gym and continue with paper, reading the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution (AJC)* at breakfast. Then I switch to the computer for the news and opinions in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Remaining at the desk I assign papers submitted to this journal using a Web browser. While eating lunch I go back to paper, the *New Yorker* or *Wired*, before returning to the screen.

There was a time that I thought I would never read any extended amount of text on a computer screen. But that was when the screens were 640×480 CRTs. Now, with 2-megapixel displays, reading text is a lot less of a strain. Of course, instead of being comfortably seated with a book placed at a convenient angle, we read from a nearly vertical screen and orient ourselves to a convenient angle. (My wife's iMac has a screen on an adjustable arm, an exception that proves the rule.)

Our choice of medium (paper or plastic) is dictated, for the most part, by the content of the material. Yes, I **could** read the *AJC* on the Web, but sifting through the links on a page does not provide the finality of reading a real

newspaper. On a Web version of the paper you never know whether you have read (or dismissed) all the pieces in the morning paper. When it comes to out-of-town papers, I don't feel the need to be as comprehensive. The day's headlines that each paper sends me by e-mail each morning usually satisfy my needs for news and commentary.

Recently a number of portable electronic reading devices (e.g., Amazon.com's Kindle, Sony's Digital e-Reader) have come on the market. In addition, there are readers for use on desktop computers and cell phones. I've used them both and found them wanting. As for the stand-alone readers, their design does not appeal to me.

While the content may dictate what medium we will use to read it, as I noted above, I am concerned that the medium itself may dictate **how** we will read. This goes beyond the difference between pulling a paperback out of a backpack versus waking a computer, opening an application, and scrolling to the proper place. The non-wood-based solutions bring forth additional concerns. Do I have a signal? Is there some free WiFi around here? How much charge do I have on my battery? Am I gonna have to pay for access to the article? Will I be able to finish before they shut the doors?

Beyond the convenience or inconvenience of the medium, there is the matter of attention. Skimming a news report on a Web site or scrolling through one's unread RSS items will command some fraction of our attention, but it will be far from complete and cannot compete with the concentration that will be given to a John le Carré novel or a technical paper in our field of work. Until about 30 years ago, everyone read from one form of paper or another. Now, with formats multiplying and being combined with music and video that have their own rhythms, rereading or contemplation is discouraged. These new formats make it quick and easy for us to satisfy our curiosities, they also reduce the opportunities for reflection and thoughtfulness.

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* M. Dowd, "A Penny for My Thoughts?" *New York Times*, Nov. 29, 2008 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/30/opinion/30dowd.html>>.