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To Read or Not to Read?

By: Gigi Reynard

"To Read or Not to Read?" This is the title of a three year study on reading trends in the US released by the National Endowment for the Arts. The reports concludes that: - voluntary reading rates are dropping - reading skills are "worsening" among teens - adults are becoming less proficient readers Pretty grim news for people like me who's life is all about books and reading. It was with some trepidation that I downloaded the 98 very dry, dull pages and began to read them. Just as I was beginning to nod off I came across this little gem: "Opinions aside, there is a shortage of scientific research on the effects of screen reading—not only on long-term patterns of news consumption, but more importantly, on the development of young minds and young readers. (A good research question is whether the hyperlinks, pop-up windows, and other extra-textual features of screen reading can sharpen a child's ability to perform sustained reading, or whether they impose unhelpful distractions)." (To Read or Not to Read p53) That woke me up. I decided I didn't need to torture myself anymore and deleted the report from my machine. There is an assumption here that I violently disagree with -- the only reading worth studying or reporting on is a printed page in a book. With the advent of the first .com in 1985 the written word gained a whole new life. Email, Web Sites, Blogs, Instant Messaging, and Social Networks have created an explosion of words and creativity. Look around any Starbucks and count the number of people typing on laptops, PDAs and cellphones. Count those reading newspapers. If they are not reading, what exactly are they doing? My email, RSS feeds and blogs provide me with more reading material in one day than I used to get in an entire month. I could say that it this is all work related and not in any sense voluntary. I would be lying. Everyday, I follow links that take me to very strange places. It is so easy to intrigued with some weird factoid and go off on a reading tangent totally unrelated to anything! My personal downfall is when someone sends me a Facebook link. It is very possible that an hour later I am making new friends - after reading all about them. I don't even want to discuss YouTube! Are they unhelpful distractions? Who knows for sure. What we do know (from experience) is that those distractions very often keep us doing sustained reading. AND we are in fact reading things we probably never would have had access to or read any other way. Say what you will, it is still reading. And it is not exactly unpopular. The last time there was this must energy created around words and ideas was when Gutenberg invented the printing press in the 15th century. His press unlocked literacy and information and gave it to the people. For centuries the book has informed and entertained us. Electronic reading propels literacy and information to the next level. It takes a one dimensional object and adds to it participation, sound and movement to create a richer, multidimensional experience. I have always loved books; that is unlikely to change anytime soon. And yet, I find myself increasing feeling claustrophobic and impatient with print. It has been a long time since I picked up a magazine or newspaper. Why bother when I get the New York Times, Wall Street Journal and Publisher's Weekly on my screen with instant updates, links and feedback opportunities. Consciously, or unconsciously, we are all in the process of examining and redefining how and why we read. The NEA is alarmed and gloomy about reading in America. I am not. Call me a crazy optimist; but the evidence of my own eyes suggests that reading is alive and well and maybe even on the upstroke.

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