

CHAPTER 4

READING

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THE discovery of writing some six millennia ago was the overture to a world in which texts—and in particular books—became the chief vehicle for recording and disseminating knowledge and culture. One would be forgiven for thinking of the discovery and development of writing as an historical accident. In fact it was not. Writing evolved as a ‘convergent’ phenomenon in three different parts of the world independently, suggesting that its discovery was probably inevitable. That we can read and write is one of the most extraordinary cultural achievement of our species. Although it takes years to learn, in all Western countries literacy has become part of a compulsory educational curriculum. We don’t have to go to school to learn to speak. Without apparent effort—except on the part of our parents—we all manage to become amazingly sophisticated mother tongue users. But all the parental time, energy, and patience—freely and lovingly donated to the cause of getting our offspring to communicate through speech—pale to insignificance compared to the machinery set in motion to teach each and every young child to read and write. Long years of formal instruction demand arduous and ceaseless exertion: a severe toll exacted by society on all new entrants. The development of fine motor skills accounts for a large part of this tremendous effort. More fundamentally, unlike for spoken language, our brain is not wired for its written counterpart.

To achieve the formidable feat of reading we repurpose a collection of brain areas that evolved for other, older tasks, such as ‘reading’ tracks in nature. One well-known neuroscientist has therefore gone so far as to call reading ‘unnatural’. A deliberate provocation perhaps, but it does help to drive home the point about the artificiality of the practice. Compared to other media, from music to the spoken word, from games to film, writing demands an extra decoding effort over and above what the brain has to do when it sees and hears people speak. Neuroscientifically there is no difference between listening to someone speaking in person or through a medium such as radio, television, or an audio recording. But when we *read* the same words, whether from paper or from a screen, we first have to link the visual *image* of the characters that make up the words to the linguistic utterance they represent. Only then can we access their meaning in our mental dictionary. Unlike spoken language (and yes, that includes audiobooks), written

language is always mediated and reading always involves this extra decoding step. Whether or not audiobooks should be included in reading statistics therefore depends on what they are intended to measure: the number of ‘stories’ consumed or the amount of text decoding performed.

We have the tremendous recent growth in reading research to thank for many new insights into the extraordinary phenomenon of reading and writing. What has triggered this sudden advance in reading research is the evident need for a better understanding of the impact of digitisation. In assessing this impact, one of the first, and rather sobering, realizations has been that the role of reading in society is by no means as securely established as is normally assumed. Over time reading became a necessary skill for gaining access to culture and knowledge. Yet it is not an easy activity for humans to engage in and screens offer many competing means of communication. The book industry has a great deal to learn from this newly arising awareness of the historically contingent role of reading. The status and position of reading depend on conscious decisions and continued efforts to make it relevant and, in a world dominated by screens, reading requires more conscious cultivation than one would like to think. This is emphatically not to say that reading is in any way endangered as such. Rather, how and what readers read today is rapidly changing, notably in the direction of fewer books. This is making the continued existence of that reader as a dependable customer of the book industry rather more uncertain than it has ever been.

The position of readers at the end of the value chain could easily suggest that they are a mere appendage to what the industry is really about. In a curious way for a long time that was probably indeed the case. To the industry, the reader was chiefly relevant as ‘the end user’, or even more abstractly, ‘the market’. In that capacity readers were chiefly the concern of the bookseller. The reader was perhaps always an elusive entity, but readers were known to be out there. They just needed to be hunted down so they could be turned into buyers. Nor was the issue that there were not enough of them; merely that they might be hiding in fragmented and diffuse markets. Even if readers could occasionally only be reached indirectly, through the library, their existence, and even their ongoing willingness to read books and thus to become potential customers were not fundamentally in doubt. The prevalence of reader-buyers followed naturally from the Order of the Book (Chartier 1994; Van der Weel 2011) that slowly established itself over the last few centuries. By the second half of the nineteenth century the socialization of book reading through formal education had become institutionalized in most Western countries. In reality never more than a relatively small proportion of the population—an elite few—may have turned into active readers, and again not all of them turned into buyers. Nevertheless, that proportion used to be fairly stable. The expectation was that there would always be a significant reading class for whom the continued existence of a book industry, supplying a constant stream of fresh books, from the most popular and ephemeral to the most erudite and classic, was essential.

With the Internet as one of the main drivers, this is now changing. Reading has of late become a subject of (renewed) concern and an object of study. The question is not so much *whether* people read: it is glaringly obvious that they do. The Internet is to a

large measure a textual medium. Accessible through an endless variety of screen devices, it adds significantly to the amount of reading time its users chalk up. A substantial proportion of the massive amount of time that the average person spends online is spent reading—even if it is only navigation instructions, comments, or text messages. As shopping and banking and myriad other ways of servicing our lives increasingly move online, they too now involve reading. The issue is that such brief and fragmented texts as web pages, emails, status updates, blogs, and so on are not of book length, and are not products of the publishing industry. The same goes of course for the massive amount of analogue ‘other’ reading that we are not aware we are doing. Think of advertising leaflets and government brochures; subtitles and credits; guidelines and instructions, to mention just a few genres.

READING STATISTICS

Much of this diverse reading remains undocumented and is therefore barely visible. There are no reliable statistics on the total amount of text an ordinary person might read in a day, let alone in a lifetime. It is safe to assume that in twenty-first-century Western society more reading is done than ever before in history. However, despite—or precisely because of—the deluge of text in people’s daily lives, that mainstay of the publishing industry, book reading, is in decline. Changing reading habits are focusing attention on the extent to which the reader is the one truly indispensable actor in the chain—for all of his being the last. Unfortunately in this transformation, with so much reading taking place outside of the industry, the reader as consumer is probably becoming even more elusive than ever.

Time surveys and library loan statistics show that the amount of time spent reading books, magazines, and newspapers is going down. In the USA, from 2005 to 2015, the average amount of time Americans spent reading for personal interest on weekend days and holidays fell by 22 per cent to 21 minutes per day and 17 minutes on normal work days. Younger Americans (age 15 to 44), read less than older Americans, spending an average of 7 to 12 minutes reading. Predictably, over the same decade this decrease in reading was matched by increases in leisure-related screen use such as gaming and watching television (Humanities Indicators 2016). In Germany the number of regular readers who read a book at least once a week fell from 49 per cent in 2002 to 42 per cent in 2017. Again the decline is disproportionately high for the young (14–29 years) and middle (30–59 years) age groups, regardless of educational level (Boersenblatt 2018). In the decade 2005–14 the proportion of adults in the UK who had visited a library over the last year dropped by 28 per cent from 48.2 to 34.9 (Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2014). In the Netherlands, between 1994 and 2015, the number of library loans plummeted from over 180 million to less than 80 million (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, Statline 2017). Meanwhile the percentage of ‘intensive readers’ (here defined as people reading more than twenty books a year) decreased from 19 per cent to 12 per cent

between 2012 and 2016, while the number of ‘non-readers’ (people reading zero books per year) increased from 11 per cent to 21 per cent (Stichting Lezen 2016). The gloomy trend suggested by these figures was confirmed when GfK reported in 2017 that the proportion of non-readers of books around the globe was highest in the Netherlands and South Korea, while China at 36 per cent (against a global average of 30 per cent) has the highest percentage of every-day book readers (GfK 2017).

The Dutch national time use survey published in 2018 once again corroborated the finding that the decrease was especially strong in the younger cohorts. Almost half of 13–19-year-olds, and almost three-quarters of 20–34-year-olds, are now non-readers (Wennekers et al. 2018: 60, 62). This is a greater cause for concern because one revealing outcome of reading research has been that this decline is not made up for in later years, but is maintained throughout people’s life spans (Huysmans 2007: 179–92). There is no reason to assume that this is not indicative of a more general trend.

Surprisingly perhaps in this light, children’s books tend to perform strongly in most markets, and this may be taken as a proxy for a strong and continuing reading activity in the relevant age group. Nevertheless, as research shows, in spite of all attempts at socialization at schools, in their mid-teens adolescents are inclined to abandon long-form reading in favour of social media and other screen reading (Eyre 2015). It is easy to blame the smartphone and the computer, but the decline in reading probably set in much earlier. Leisure time has been spent on media other than books, notably television, for much longer.¹ Now the computer and the smartphone add significantly to the numerous popular alternatives for leisure time spending. Screens are agents of distraction especially because those alternatives compete for attention on the same few square inches of screen real estate—and they are, as we have seen, less demanding in terms of brain processing. This goes for gaming, scouring image-based social networks such as Instagram (but also increasingly Facebook, whose algorithms seem to favour video and images), watching TED talks, series, or Youtube films, which are all in direct competition with reading, both for information-seeking and leisure purposes. An additional factor that may drive people to seek out media other than text when it comes to their leisure time is that many people spend much of their working day reading on screens for work.

Public libraries were instituted everywhere from the second half of the nineteenth century with the explicit brief to make books broadly available, particularly to those who could not afford to purchase them. In this perspective the downward trend in library loans, which is much sharper than the decline in book sales, means that we can be fairly sure that the economic cost of reading is not a crucial factor in its decline. Indeed, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, the statistical data show book sales to have been more stable in recent years than the decrease in reading time would lead one to expect.² Even after correction for inflation, we thus find a discrepancy between buying

¹ While no firm data are available, the effect would appear to correlate with lower education levels.

² The combined turnover of European publishers (29 countries) in 2016 amounted to 22.3 billion euro, leaving the value of the book market unchanged from 2015 (Federation of European Publishers 2016).

and reading behaviour, offering a twenty-first-century confirmation of the old book historical truism that buying and reading are not necessarily closely related.

How can this discrepancy be accounted for? This has not been researched, but a number of interrelated factors may be assumed. First of all books are relatively cheap, so people can afford not to consume the books they purchase. Compare, for example the expendable music file with how the expensive LP record used to be treated. There is much less incentive to learn to appreciate media in which we have not invested economically. At current price levels, a disappointed reader who gives up reading one book does not have to think very long about buying another. More importantly books continue to be favoured as gifts. The symbolic capital books represent accrues both to the recipient and to the giver. Giving a book as a present assumes that value is attached to reading both by the giver and by the receiver. The book gift thus acts like a sign of mutual intellectual or cultural appreciation. Related to this, a third factor is likely to be that among certain social groups reading itself accrues symbolic capital. If book ownership is a cue suggestive of a reading mind, it is one of the features of print that it makes that ownership, and by extension the presence of a reading mind, visible. Today the symbolic capital effect of print probably still accounts for a significant portion of sales, dampening the statistical evidence of a decline in book consumption. In the short term each such sale may represent one bird in the hand, but it does not of course provide a stable basis for the continued health of the industry.

While the statistics are revealing in themselves, it is necessary to look beyond them at readers and readership more fundamentally and in an historical perspective. The digital developments are too diverse and still too new to be easily explained through figures alone. Seen in a longer historical context, the digital revolution is one more punctuation in that ‘punctuated equilibrium’ that characterizes the evolution of text and reading technology from its origins in handwriting. As a result of this revolution once again the amount of information, the number of readers and the speed of dissemination increase with a jolt—just as happened after the invention of printing with moveable type. It is of course to be welcomed that reading is yet again finding a broader base, but just as in the case of earlier revolutions it comes at a price. In the transformation of the book culture shaped by print into a reading culture shaped by digital text, the stark reality seems to be that though reading may be increasing overall, book reading is decreasing and the book as such is starting to carry less prestige. Reading as a pursuit in its own right (in contrast to more functional reading) does not seem to rank as highly as it used to. Consequently, it is no longer the conventional book and print industry that is supplying the changing demand. Rather it is the digital behemoths, the handful of popular platforms where people tend to spend most of their online time: Google and the social media, particularly Facebook.

Both these trends seem undeniable. And even if the prevalence of screens in the modern world may not explain the whole story, it is equally undeniable that digitization is one major contributing cause. As our lifestyle is rapidly becoming more digital, it looks like the decline in long-form reading may not be a temporary phenomenon either. That the future of reading and a (paying) readership can no longer be simply taken for

granted has obvious long-term implications. More than being a merely economic problem affecting the industry, changing consumption habits are part of—and reflect—a fundamental change in the place of books and reading in society. At the same time, in capitalist societies governments are progressively abandoning such tasks and responsibilities as supporting and promoting the writing, production, and distribution of books to the market, diminishing their potentially corrective influence. This presents a vastly different challenge than the book industry is accustomed to handling. That is not to say that it has no role to play; in fact it is indispensable. But before examining what that role might be it will be instructive to take a moment to survey what the spate of recent reading research has to teach the industry about this extraordinary cultural phenomenon.

LEARNING FROM READING RESEARCH

Fortunately the benefits of reading are no longer in doubt as they once were. Especially in the last few decades of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth century, the reading habits of the fast growing mass of newly educated readers were often met with suspicion and even contempt. Since then learning to read has effectively become a precondition for being able to function in society. With the social emancipation of the ‘lower classes’ their reading habits were less patronized by people who conceived of themselves as their betters. The latest research concentrates on showing the benefits of reading with much less prejudice to content.

So why then is reading good for people? Before attempting to answer that question it must be recognized that readers may engage with texts on many levels. PISA³ tests the ability to read only at a very technical level. Even a literary text may be read variously for the narrative as a story, for the enjoyment of the author’s stylistic skills and vocabulary, for the psychological insights proffered, and so on. But perhaps the very first point to note, and this is no less important for being a millennia-old cultural phenomenon, literacy changes the way humans think. Whether one considers these changes as advantageous—or even literate ways of thinking as superior to non-literate ones—is not relevant. The point is simply that literate thinking is different from non-literate thinking. Notably, literacy fosters abstract thinking and reasoning skills that have defined the cultural history of the literate part of the human species.

More recently, a variety of fascinating correlational statistical patterns have been remarked. Perhaps not surprisingly, the prevalence of books in households turns out to correlate with the educational achievements of the children who grow up with them. That correlation holds for all cultures around the world, and is not affected by socioeconomic status (Evans et al. 2010). In a similar vein, reading books (but not newspapers and other types of texts) turns out, for example, to correlate with longevity (Bavishi et al. 2016). As the authors of that particular study conclude, their findings suggest that

³ Programme for International Student Assessment, pisa.oecd.org.

‘the benefits of reading books include a longer life in which to read them’ (Bavishi et al. 2016: 44). Of late, reading research has been particularly interested in empirically demonstrating the direct benefits to people’s personal lives. Three main, but somewhat overlapping categories of effects can be distinguished.

First, reading broadens our thinking. Fiction and non-fiction alike tend to present perspectives different from our own, stimulating reflection on our beliefs and opinions and training the imagination and creativity. In fact, reading is frequently documented as having been life changing.

Secondly, reading helps us to understand others and train our social abilities. Readers are prompted to contemplate the writer’s (or persona’s) thoughts, feelings, and wishes. This effect is, as we shall see, especially strong in fiction.

Thirdly, reading improves our well-being. It does so in a direct way through the pleasure furnished by the reading act itself. More indirectly it helps to create meaning and order in the happenstance of life. Meaning and order offer a greater sense of being in control and, by extension, a means of coping with difficult or even adverse circumstances.

Besides these—and other—reasons why reading is a good use of one’s time, there are less visible—but not therefore less important ‘side’ effects of reading. It is likely—though hard to prove in the absence of a representative non-reading control group—that reading is a crucial source of such of essential life skills as, notably, concentration and mental discipline. It teaches us sustained attention for something that does not compel it, but that we expect to repay the investment. More generally reading promotes well-being because solitude can lead to relaxation and stress reduction. When carried out in ‘fertile solitude’ reading fosters readers’ resilience, offering greater impermeability to social pressures and expectations, such as those encountered on social media (Salgaro and Adriaan van der Weel 2017).

In response to the decline in book reading some commentators like to say that if it is *reading* that matters, that is being done more than ever. It is true that reading of any sort will help keep up or develop fluency in reading. However, short texts not written by skilled authors are unlikely to do much for concentration and mental discipline or vocabulary. Length may not be crucial per se, but for obvious reasons, long-form sustained arguments or serious fiction require greater concentration and are more likely to correlate with a broader range of vocabulary.

Fiction reading is often singled out from reading at large as having beneficial effects all of its own. Fiction is thought to stimulate reflection on one’s own feelings and concerns; contemplation of alternative life scenarios; and the development of intercultural sensitivity and empathy. By offering possible acting scenarios, it is thought to help the reader in resolving moral issues, negotiate difficulties in interpersonal relationships and so on. The jury is still out about the extent to which literary fiction affects readers differently than popular fiction, but it makes sense to assume that literature makes greater cognitive demands. Genre fiction tends to effect immersion in the same way as do, say, computer games, while literary fiction, serious non-fiction (such as academic writing), or poetry demand deep reading.

Insofar as the benefits of fiction reading are singled out, some critics object that any form of storytelling—in games, series, films—would have the same effects. So, their thinking goes, book promotion activities need to be aimed at emphasizing the importance of stories rather than reading habits. It may of course be countered that given the popularity of films, series, and games such marketing is not likely to benefit *reading* very much, and that anyway films, series, and games do not stand in need of as much promotion as reading does. The salient point, however, is that the imagination is stimulated more by reading fiction than by watching a film. This goes for reading in general. Requiring a more active mental contribution than any other medial form, it stimulates a particular brain development, enhancing particular thinking skills. Certainly the passive consumption stigma that was once attached to reading fiction has been largely removed or, insofar as it still exists, has moved from reading in general to reading genre fiction, and from books to series and films. This is one fascinating illustration of the contingent status of reading in society.

Besides requiring greater concentration and subjecting the reader to a broader range of vocabulary, long-form reading offers other strengths. Because they are associated with greater complexity, longer texts promote memorization and mental organization abilities. Understanding and analysing textual arguments is an important prerequisite for responsible citizenship in democratic societies. It has often been noted that reading from screens tends to involve shorter text units while long-form reading tends to be more associated with paper. That is not to say that people will not read full-length books from screens. The most suitable type of screen for that purpose is the e-ink or e-paper screen of some dedicated e-reading devices. Its reflective surface provides a paper-like reading experience. However, most digital texts are read from backlit screens: smartphones, tablets, and laptop and desktop computers, and most are short: social media, emails, blogs, texts, news, web pages. When they do read long-form texts from screens, many readers report difficulties in sustaining their attention. So another intriguing research question is whether or not it matters if we read from screens or from paper, and if we read in long form or not.

The short answer is that the substrate does indeed matter. Just like a story—as we just saw—is not a story, a text is not a text. The question is just *how* screens affect the reading experience and whether the effect is significant. The history of concern about the effects of screens on reading is a long one. It started by pointing at the inferiority of screens compared to paper in terms of flicker; reflection and glare; resolution and legibility. Especially some of the earlier concerns regarding screens now appear a little naïve. A new generation of screen hardware has seen improvements in portability, resolution and legibility, lighting, and so on beyond anything imaginable even twenty years ago. More recently the different haptic experience has been under scrutiny. It seems possible that the absence of a haptic experience similar to that of paper hampers immersion, but this has not been conclusively shown. So far, the evidence that the difference in physical substrate really affects the reading experience is mixed. In the absence of decisive outcomes, there has been a tendency to regard all concern about the move from paper to screen as alarmist. There is a distinct risk here of throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

Screens present issues on a more fundamental level: a different picture emerges when we look at the ‘infrastructure’ underlying online screen use. It is below the 24/7 connected onscreen textual surface that the elephant in the room is hiding.

As unconnected devices, books are remarkably straightforward and predictable in terms of interface and navigational possibilities. By contrast hardware and software navigational possibilities differ per device, per operating system, and per software iteration. Research has found that even something as relatively simple as the presence of hyperlinks places attention demands on the user by presenting the need for a decision whether or not to follow them. This so-called cognitive overhead disadvantages weaker readers. Something similar may be said about the enhancement of children’s books with multimedia. Unless the enhancement clearly supports the narrative, clicking for an instant reward may easily become just a distraction from the effort of comprehending the story. Cognitive overhead adds to the already often noted existence of an economic digital divide. Enriching e-books with digital enhancements, often presented as the future of books, is therefore to be approached with caution.

Also, the screen is a natural temptation space anyway, with promises of newness and excitement ever a mere button click away. Something better—a text, a solution, a new source of entertainment—might always be on the next page. The screen holds out a constant promise of novelty that print lacks, but thereby also that particularly modern anxiety, FoMO. Attention and concentration are thus easily dissipated. Even the very presence on the table of a turned-off smartphone has been shown to be a source of distraction.

Most alarming—but in the light of the preceding not surprising—is a substantial body of evidence showing that digital forms of text tend to be taken less seriously by readers than printed text (Singer and Alexander 2017; Delgado et al. under review [2018]). This shows itself in, for example, a reduced willingness to engage in metacognitive learning regulation when reading texts on screens. In an educational setting especially, this is of course problematic. While the precise cause remains unclear, the fluidity and ephemerality of screen text must be one prime factor. The association with distraction—and perhaps in particular distraction by less serious and more entertaining screen uses—is probably another likely factor. So is the greater onus on the reader to evaluate every snippet of information found in the confused jumble of the Web: who is its author; who published it; is it an opinion or a fact; how reliable is it? The largest digital platform, Facebook, for example, is not in the business of providing ‘content’ (including reading matter). It is in the business of selling consumer attention. Facebook can do this by creating user profiles on the basis of the time spent on the platform. Therefore it is imperative for the company to make users stay as long as possible. Crudely speaking, to Facebook veracity and quality of information are irrelevant; popularity (a prevalence of click bait) and addiction (to dopamine-generating behaviour such as collecting likes) are. That the need to evaluate and discriminate represents an increasing challenge to readers was well illustrated by a noticeable revival of the appreciation of conventional, print-based journalism after the outcome of the 2016 US presidential elections.

Moreover, the perception that less has been invested in screen texts gives rise to the ‘cheap speech’ phenomenon. When Eugene Volokh first described this phenomenon as

early as 1995, he cast it as an exciting and democratizing effect of the digital medium. It would give everyone a voice, not silenced or even muted by intermediaries like editors, publishers, and booksellers. More recently, it has become increasingly evident that this ‘cheapness’ comes with unintended darker side effects. These range from what Andrew Keen has called ‘the cult of the amateur’ (Keen 2008) to the debilitating political effects of fake news (Hasen 2017).

Lastly, digital text is characterized by fluidity and impermanence. Cutting-and-pasting and remixing make it hard to think of it in terms of ownership, either by a named and attributed author or on the part of the consumer. (The terms of service tend to emphasize that what the ‘purchase’ grants the consumer is only ever a temporary licence to access.) Although this has not yet been investigated, such a tentative hold on the text may not be conducive of learning. In fact, the trend—which *has* been found—from just-in-case (learning to memorize) to just-in-time (looking up, searching for) knowledge seems unstoppable (Sparrow et al. 2011).

Another outcome of the digital turn has been that, paradoxically in view of the unprecedented and much vaunted wealth of readily accessible ‘content’ on the Web, digital reading actually reduces diversity. This is chiefly the result of the algorithmic means by which this wealth of content is usually accessed. Most of these means are designed, for commercial or other reasons, to please. One of the main criteria by which Google ranks its search results, for example, is by ‘popularity’, whether measured by your own previously divulged interests or by other people’s. Similarly, Amazon’s recommendations are meant to cause sales, and will favour the most popular titles based on their capacity to generate them. Already back in 2008 UK economists Will Page and Andrew Bud found that in the case of music, of 13 million ‘songs’ available for sale, a staggering 10 million had *never* been downloaded, and a paltry 52,000 songs (4 tenths of one per cent) created 80 per cent of income (Page and Garland 2009). If the long tail exists, it is found only by those who actively set out to find it. Even reading for academic research has shown itself not to be immune to such narrowing effects. Counterintuitively, ‘as more journal issues came online, the articles referenced tended to be more recent, fewer journals and articles were cited, and more of those citations were to fewer journals and articles’ (Evans 2008).

Being so diffuse, and affecting society in such diverse ways, the effects of these and other infrastructural differences between paper and screens on reading are not always easy to measure. It also requires defining what we expect from reading, both as individuals consciously and deliberately engaging with text to a particular end (say, a temporary escape from reality, reflection on life, learning something new) and as a complex society in need of means of efficient communication. The number of variables in reading research is large. Prominent among them is the ever-changing combination of age and digital experience, which makes extrapolation towards the future particularly hazardous. Yet there can be little doubt that in their long-term consequences the introduction of digital text will surpass even the invention of printing almost 600 years ago. It is more likely to resemble the transmogrifying effects on human culture of the introduction of writing some six millennia ago.

CULTIVATING READERSHIP

Screen reading clearly comes with a number of distinct challenges to the publishing industry. The publishing industry is and always has been a Janus-headed one, with (often longer-term) cultural considerations and (usually shorter-term) economic imperatives often fighting for the upper hand. Given the structural nature of the digital transformations, the challenge will be to bring both imperatives into harmony in the industry's response to sweeping changes in reading patterns. As is only natural—and healthy in a largely profit-driven industry—economic considerations are usually taken care of first as a matter of course. What needs more conscious cultivation is the social responsibility that comes with the territory of it also being a creative cultural industry. If each new cohort of younger readers reads less than the preceding one, how can new readers be cultivated? What can the book industry do in particular to stem the decline of long-form reading, whether E or P?

In view of the fast changes and the contingent status of reading in society, it makes sense to treat reading and readers as a much more dynamic phenomenon than they have historically been recognized as being. In addition to thinking of readers as demographically discrete markets (including micro-target groups) it is vital also to study closely readers' development over their lifetime, with particular attention to adolescence when so many readers are currently abandoning reading and the crucial role of education in the socialization of reading.

The unwonted responsibility for fostering a future readership can only really be borne collectively. In many countries there are already forms of collective reading promotion, whether instigated by governments or by the industry. But the current massive changes in reading patterns demand an even broader strategy of developing not just a market for (long-form) reading as such, but a culture in which such a market can thrive. In particular, trade publishing is increasingly supply driven as title production keeps accelerating. Customary commercial book marketing, focused on titles, authors, characters, series, imprints, is necessarily in direct competition with other publishers. The ever increasing competition among publishers resulting from this is inevitably more wasteful than is spending resources on the marketing of reading as a collective interest.

Books being relatively cheap, the marketing of reading is a matter less of competing for consumer spending than for that rarest of commodities: attention and time. What is needed to do such marketing effectively is demographic research on time spending habits and purchase behaviour, especially on media; (non-)reading motives; and the perceived status of books and reading for various purposes, such as leisure and entertainment or as an information source. The book trade may not be a match for Silicon Valley's ability to transform itself into an addiction industry—not all that different from the tobacco industry. Nevertheless, data should clearly play a more important role in strategic thinking than they have hitherto, and again, except in the case of a moloch like Amazon, this can only be achieved in a more collective scenario.

A greater emphasis on the cultural importance of reading—as against book buying—also legitimizes an appeal to other than industry resources. Obvious existing partnerships are with reading promotion agencies (insofar as they operate independently from the book industry) and libraries. Partnerships with libraries have traditionally suffered from a vague notion that libraries service consumers who are not, or at least not necessarily, buyers. Because lending tends often to be regarded as a natural competition to sales, collaboration has on the whole remained low key. Concentrating on reading promotion as a common goal would offer a subtle but productive change of perspective.

Less obvious partnerships that are tentatively beginning to be explored are with a diffuse range of organizations promoting health, democracy, responsible citizenship, etcetera. A traditionally strangely neglected but essential partner is the educational field. Given the contingent nature of reading, education clearly plays a formative role in fostering a book (as against a mere reading) culture. School is one of the most pivotal because authoritative means for the socialization of young people as readers—although the way it currently goes about it may be counterproductive to judge by the massive desertion of adolescent readers. The parental example may be equally conducive, but this is much harder to influence. Students are a captive audience. It should be a matter of some concern—not just to the book industry—that the chief impetus for the current mushrooming of digital learning environments seems to be coming from the tech industry. By skilfully exploiting the widespread fear of educational policy makers that their field may be ‘left behind’, it manages to gloss over the fact that there is scant evidence if, and if so how precisely, technology aids learning (Selwyn 2016). If anything the evidence, as we have seen, goes the other way. As book use in schools diminishes, one of the two chief sources for the socialization of book reading threatens to fall away. This is a cause for alarm.

One hopeful recent trend that the industry has been quick to play into is that of younger readers fleeing the online herd. Although it is early to say, this may well augur a broader movement in which reading could even become imbued with a new social chic. Many young and dynamic startups in publishing have already begun to cater to this. At first blush somewhat surprisingly, they emphasize the very materiality that digerati would have been inclined to spurn as Old Skool. In an age of mindfulness and individual development, reading is being (re-)discovered as a ‘technology of the self’. There seems to be a growing sense that much online time is being frittered away on idle pursuits whose only fleeting reward is a hit of dopamine in the short run, leaving one feeling empty and drained of energy when its effect subsides. Offline reading may thus be pitched successfully as an antidote to an unhealthy addiction to the screen world and its cheap online thrills. Contemplative and ‘slow reading’, including of books that challenge the reader and need savouring, may be an unsuspected hole in the market.

The unique selling points (USPs) of paper books that may thus be profiled more are the fact that they are offline (the absence of distraction aiding concentration); that they may be owned (e.g. they can be annotated, so as to appropriate the intellectual content; that they can be archived as a physical record of cognitively and emotionally meaningful memories; that they can be shared (lent out) in a way that digital rights management

(DRM) does not permit; and that they have an aesthetic, a weightiness, a visibility, capable of representing symbolic capital as much as satisfying our haptic needs as embodied people. A likely but so far unresearched USP of paper books is the value perception resulting from the very need for a serious economic investment to be made, in the purchase of course, but even more so in the very production of the book, making it worth purchasing (Van der Weel 2018). For convenience, utility, and disposability there is digital text; for symbolic value, ownership, and emotion there is the material book. There is a great deal of scope here for the industry in that only for the latter are people prepared to pay premium prices. By contrast, consumer demands for convenience and utility—epitomized by the e-book—command little opportunity to add value that can easily be turned into profit.

Collective efforts aimed at the marketing of reading rather than books also demand a recalibration of marketing efforts by individual publishers. In this connection facilitating reading and book communities, highlighting the social role of reading, are perceived as a particularly valuable contribution by publishers and booksellers as cultural middlemen. A continuing emphasis on curation as a service is likely to be particularly welcome and valuable to new readers.

CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS VERSUS ECONOMIC IMPERATIVES

The future of the book industry ultimately demands a healthy economic basis no less than a strong cultural one. That brings us to the subject of the economic issues of e-reading—and e-commerce at large. One major factor here is the value of E. E-books have been most popular as replacements for the mass market paperback, characterized by disposability. Given that e-book pricing tends to be distinctly lower than that of paper books, the promotion of e-reading in the short term reduces turnover and perhaps profitability. Someone reading a 5 euro chicklit or 1 euro self-published e-novel (never mind a fragment of free fiction) is spending attention and valuable reading time that could also have been spent on a more expensive title, whether E or P.

Much more significantly, in the longer term, the undeniably lower value perception consumers have of E services compared to that of P products could compromise the value perception of books and writing as a whole. Another factor is the reduced visibility of digital books and reading to a potential readership in society at large. For reading to be marketed and 'branded', it must be visible. To be seen to be reading is (still) a proxy for being regarded as a cultured person. However, the act of reading on screens is not easily identifiable as such. Also, as more bookselling moves online, not only will booksellers experience greater difficulty surviving in the main street, but it reduces the presence of books and reading in society overall, making them less a natural part of our habitat.

Some say that for e-reading to come into its own it needs to develop the ‘true’ strengths inherent in the digital form, and that these have yet to be discovered. A few years ago gamification and other forms of bells-and-whistles thinking dominated talk about the future direction for publishing. However, the tremendous investment that such treatment of an authorial text requires means that only an exceptional popular success could possibly repay it. Moreover, readers do not seem to be clamouring for bells and whistles, which are perceived as a hindrance rather than an attraction in the reading process. The prediction that hypertext novels were to be the natural evolution for literature was never fulfilled (Mangen and Van der Weel 2017). What reasons are there to assume that enhanced books are the answer to real reader needs? That is not to say that there will not be a place for enhancement; just that enhanced books may be more in the nature of a remediation, like games or films, resulting in what would be perceived as a type of medium distinct from text for reading.

For the continued health of the book industry as part of the ‘content industry’ there is no need to eschew multimediality. There is a healthy performance in audiobooks—although we have seen that their consumption cannot technically be called reading. Bookshops usually carry a variety of entertainment media, including DVDs (as long as that format lasts). Especially the larger, internationally operating publishing conglomerates have long been part of a tendency toward the horizontal convergence of media and modalities. Yet this only serves to accentuate the industry’s central quandary: which distinct identity—both of itself and of its market—should it be (does it want to be) promoting. Is that the textual reading experience, or that of a media industry? As the theory of disruptive innovation suggests, the industry might find it challenging to compete on such alien territory and might risk alienating the faithful core readership that sustains it. Also, the more the book industry evolves into a content industry, the less it will be a force for a book reading culture in the long term.

Mere figures and statistics do not do justice to the disruption and complications the digital revolution is bringing. Identifying the reader with the (potential) buyer no longer suffices. In the face of such transformations, it is not enough to care about a *reading culture*: both the book industry and society at large need to aim at fostering book reading in a *book culture*. Reading is as unstable as human culture, and there is no doubt that we will adapt to any new reality. However, we may consider (aspects of) a book culture to be worth preserving, such as, in particular, the benefits of long-form reading on paper. That paper books persist when other media have long turned almost completely digital; that books are beginning to be considered as a welcome counterbalance to the fragmentation and more superficial consumption of digital text, and that students and even children brought up in a digital world continue to have a clear preference for paper, are all signs that there *are* such aspects (Baron 2015: ch. 4).⁴

Beyond its purely economic perspective, the industry has to consider seriously how it can continue to make itself relevant as an intermediary, taking seriously the cultural side

⁴ Cf. Scholastic’s finding that ‘nearly two-thirds of children (65%)—up from 2012 (60%)—agree that they’ll always want to read print books even though there are ebooks available’ (Scholastic 2015).

of its two-faced nature. To take co-responsibility for maintaining and creating an audience is a new and unaccustomed role for the industry. Beyond the traditional foci of reading promotion this requires collaboration. If not active lobbying, it requires at least strong support for fostering a reading culture that supports the presence of books and reading in the streetscape, in particular shops and libraries, but also in schools. The good news is that the industry's interests turn out to align very nicely with those of society at large. As reading research shows, letting the digitization of reading simply run its course would not be in society's best interests, but in the longer term it may also not be the most helpful policy for industry.

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