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Reading on Lockdown

By Mirjam Rörsch

The lockdown had an impact on every single person, whether financially, mentally, or on our health (World Health Organization). Some people lost their jobs or had to suddenly teach their children at home; others might have changed their lifestyle, taken up exercising, started eating healthy, or decluttered their homes (Pantony and London). With all the changes we are currently facing, one could assume that they are also having an impact on people's reading behaviors: for example, some might have started reading the newspaper while others bought a Kindle to read digitally, since decluttering became a point of focus for many and switching to digital carriers means that readers do not enlarge their physical book collections. This paper will discuss whether Dutch readers changed their reading carrier during the lockdown in spring 2020 and what the consequences of such a switch are. Do readers notice a difference between text on paper and digital text? If so, does this influence their reading behaviour? Are there indications that the use of digital texts increased during the pandemic, and what does existing research say about differences in reading perception of paper-based reading and the reading of digital texts? To answer these questions, this essay will first focus on research concerning the choice of a carrier and differences between the reading of digital texts and the ones on paper. After these theoretical findings, this essay will present data from an online survey which focused on the reading of narrative books for leisure. The results of the study will then help to conclude if the reading practices of Dutch readers have changed during the lockdown.

The carrier and its influence

In her article from 2019, Kristensen mentions four criteria that influence what carrier or reading medium a reader chooses (the terms 'carrier' and 'medium' will be used interchangeably in this essay): cultural and social belonging; remediation and physicality; technology acceptance and usage of new technology; and, finally, affect and emotions. With respect to cultural and social belonging, Kristensen looks to the field of cultural studies, which claims that media have an impact on people as they give them different experiences and identities. Furthermore, researchers are convinced that consumers are not just passive recipients of content but that they actively appreciate different cultural products, like books, in different ways. As McLuhan argues, the experience of reading is impacted by the medium one uses (Meyrowitz 192). This makes it seem logical that readers choose their carrier wisely. McLuhan states, for example, that the book has always been a display of knowledge (Kristensen); when reading digitally, however, one does not collect books on a bookshelf. This means that cultural capital is not as visible as it would be with paper books, which of course has an influence on how readers are perceived (Kristensen).

Pressman argues that the physicality of a bound book is important as well, not just the knowledge which can be found inside. This means that the collector of the books does not just focus on their content, but also on other factors (Kristensen). According to Kristensen, Bolter and Grusin state that one medium can be represented

in another, which is called remediation. This connects to McLuhan's thought that a medium can transcend the content (Meyrowitz 192). Regarding the physicality, Kristensen states that a book can also display social and symbolic capital. As soon as one puts a book on the shelf, visitors can see it and get an impression about the reader from it. This thought resembles the one regarding social and cultural belonging.

The third aspect is technology acceptance (Kristensen). There are several components to this. First, Davis found that technical difficulties are tolerated by its users, as long as the technology works (Kristensen). Furthermore, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations have an influence on the use of technology. Torres et al. conducted a study to discover more about the motivations one might have regarding the use of an e-reader and found that not only intrinsic and extrinsic motivations add to technology acceptance, but playfulness as well. Additionally, the amount of available content for e-readers has an impact (Kristensen). Besides that, the results of a Japanese study show that compatibility impacts the growth of digital reading too (Kristensen). Naturally, normative influences such as peer groups and mainstream popularity also have an impact (Kristensen). Kristensen sums up four groups in the discussion 'book versus print'.¹ The two most radical groups are the 'book lovers' and the 'technophiles'. They are emotionally attached to the carrier of their choice and the book as a (physical) object. 'Pragmatists', on the other hand, see positive and negative things in both carriers and therefore use both, while the 'printers' like to search for literature on the internet but prefer reading on paper (Kristensen).

The final aspects which impact the choice of a carrier are emotions and affect (Kristensen). While emotions are experienced feelings, affect escapes human awareness. Affect is a type of feeling, but it can often not be distinguished; sometimes

people do not even realize that they are affected by something or someone. The user of a product affects everyone else who is looking at how said product is used. This usage can, for instance, invoke some emotions which affect our adaption behaviors (Kristensen): because we see how people use an e-reader and how much they like it, we might feel like we also want to have this same experience, which is why we end up buying an e-reader ourselves. This makes affect a social and an individual experience, as our individual feelings towards an idea or product create affect on another person (Kristensen).

Kristensen's discoveries clearly show that the choice for digital texts is well-considered, with the image one gains or loses when choosing a medium playing an important role. Furthermore, the use of technology, its user-friendliness, the affect users have on non-users, and the range of products should not be underestimated. In a study conducted by Wilson et al., 56% of the participants favored printed reading over digital reading while 42% said that they were insecure or uncomfortable with the use of e-books, which underlines Kristensen's point (Wilson et al. 12).

In Van der Weel's *Changing Our Textual Minds*, it is argued that printed books form the baseline for judgement, even though there are many new technologies. From a very young age we learn the importance of books, mostly at school, which is why we cannot let that thought go. Therefore, Van der Weel asserts that the importance of the book will not just disappear, but instead remains an important factor when choosing a medium (64). Before looking at the impact of reading carriers, it must be noted that, according to a study conducted by Cai et al. in 2017, gender does not have an impact on technology use, which is an important presumption for this essay (Kristensen). According to Van der Weel (13):

Manuscript, print, radio, television, and the digital medium each have traits that predispose us to particular types of

¹ By this Kristensen touches upon the discussion 'reading on paper versus reading digital'. I would however not use the terms 'book versus print' as a digital text might also be perceived as a 'book' and a 'print' can be interpreted as a paper book.

knowing, and particular types of knowledge, and so ultimately affect the way we see the world and our place in it.

Although Van der Weel later argues that the medium of our choice does not absolutely predispose how we think, as gaining knowledge is a process which combines language, the medium, and cultural differences—the medium can determine our way of thinking and how we see the world (17). What we know is thus partly regulated through the medium and the opportunity it offers to organize and transmit our knowledge. Digital text can shape our understanding in a different way than printed text does (Van der Weel 17), and this is why the next part of this section is dedicated to findings regarding reading on different carriers.

Delgado et al. argue that it is not clear how the carrier affects the reading outcome overall (24). Nevertheless, their study did find that paper-based reading should be favored in educational matters, as it has a positive effect on reading comprehension (33-34). However, as it is not possible to avoid reading on screens, educators must make sure children and students learn to navigate digital texts as well (36). Delgado et al. examined not just educational materials but also narrative texts, although the carrier had no influence on reading comprehension of the latter (34). These conclusions are in line with the Stavanger Declaration, which also found that the reading medium has no impact on readers of narrative texts (1). However, while the results were not significant, Delgado et al. could identify a small preference for reading on computers than on handheld devices and digital texts which require scrolling (34). Furthermore, Delgado et al. determined that the educational level and the age of readers did not impact the participants' understanding (34).

As Mangen and Van der Weel argue, the deep reading we are used to is now changing to a more shallow reading, due to the shift from paper to digital reading (117). This change can be explained due to the fact

that attitudes towards reading are changing and that screens are taking over from printed books (117). There are several studies on reading behaviors and differences between reading off a screen and reading off paper, like Ackermann and Goldsmith presented in 2011 (18-32). However, these all focus on educational reading, like Mangen et al. 2013 or Siegenthaler et al. 2011.

This means that although there are noticeable differences when a person reads an informative text on paper compared to when they read the same text digitally, these differences do not apply to narrative texts read for pleasure. Additionally, gender, age, and previous education do not affect the difference a carrier might have. This paper aimed to discover whether the carrier has an influence on readers and if they notice it. One could say that the first part of this question has now been answered: when reading narrative texts there is no difference, although social and technology acceptance and reading tradition might lead readers to believe that there is. These opinions will be discussed in the following sections, with help of the previously mentioned case study.

Reading on lockdown, a case study

As previously indicated, one could assume that the lockdown had an impact on people's reading behavior. In several conversations people mentioned that they broadened their knowledge about specific topics during the lockdown. They educated themselves about the Black Lives Matter Movement or took up a new hobby which resulted in them reading different genres and topics than before the lockdown, hence the hypothesis that some readers switched their genre of choice. This seemed something worth researching and will be discussed in an essay by G. Sastrosoedjono (2021). This, however, raised the question if just the genres people were interested in changed, or whether they changed more about their reading behavior. This paper aims to find out if people changed their reading medium between the 16th of March

2020 and the 30th of June 2020.² To this end, a survey was conducted between November 2020 and January 2021. It was spread through several social media channels and targeted Dutch adult readers (no younger than 18). 98 people answered the questions. In table 1, you can find some primary information about the participants.

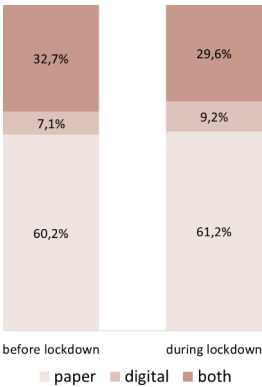
This overview makes it clear that this paper is predominantly based on the reading behaviour of people who have a bachelor's or master's degree in applied sciences. The survey was mostly taken by people between the ages of 18 and 25.

N=98	
Gender	
Female	75,5%
Male	23,5%
Age	
18-25	36,7%
26-35	15,3%
46-55	14,3%
56-65	19,4%
66-75	13,3%
Education	
HBO/WO	76,6%
MBO	10,2%
Secondary school	10,2%

Table 1: Overview of survey participants, split up in gender, age and education.

Of the ninety-eight participants, thirty-eight said that they read more during the lockdown, twelve people read less, and the reading behavior of forty-seven people did not change. In table 2 the used carrier both before and after the lockdown can be found, as well as the changes readers made. In this table the numbers for the people who did not change their carrier are not mentioned.

There were many different answers to the question which type of texts people read digitally or on paper. Most people read their books as a hard copy but chose a digital carrier for the news. There was, however, one person who flipped those two around, preferring paper-based reading for



Changes	
paper to digital	2,0%
digital to paper	1,0%
paper to both	4,1%
both to digital	1,0%
both to paper	6,1%

Table 2: Reading carriers used by participants before and during the lockdown.

news articles and magazines. Most people have carrier and genre preferences: they read fantasy or the bible on paper, for instance, and the rest online. One person mentioned that she reads everything online, except for cookbooks. Although the focus of this paper is leisure reading, many people answered that they prefer digital reading for study materials. Six people said that they read depending on what carrier is at hand: if they have an interesting book on their shelf they read the hard copy, and they read a digital version whenever they see an interesting title whilst they browse online. Four people read digital whenever this gives them a financial advantage, because that version is less expensive than the hard copy. Some people also download the digital text as a free PDF. Three people said that they always buy the physical book from certain authors or genres but do not do so with others. One person reads digital texts

² The intelligent lockdown started on the 23rd of March, according to a speech Premier Rutte gave and which can be found on "Premier Rutte: dit is een intelligente lockdown", NOS News, 23 March 2020, nos.nl/video/2328097-premier-rutte-dit-is-een-intelligente-lockdown.html. Accessed 17 January 2021. However, the schools had to close on the 16th of March and people were urged to work from home. That is why this paper defines the 16th as the starting point of the lockdown. See also: Rijksoverheid.nl. "Aanvullende maatregelen onderwijs, horeca, sport." 15 March, 2020. rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2020/03/15/aanvullende-maatregelen-onderwijs-horeca-sport. Accessed 17 January 2021. As from the 1st of July on most places, like gyms, were open again, and cinemas and restaurants etc. could welcome 100 instead of 30 people, the 30th of June has been chosen as the end date of this lockdown. More information can be found on Wikipedia. "Coronacrisis in Nederland", nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coronacrisis_in_Nederland. Accessed 17 January 2021.

Presupposing	Reason	Answers in numbers (N = 98)
Print because	Digital reading is not good for my eyes/ I already have too much screen time.	11
Print because	I do not have the right hardware.	2
Print because	I love the book and its traits.	28
Print because	I just do not like reading digitally.	8
Print because	I like having the book on my shelf/ like going to the bookstore.	3
Digital because	Digital carriers are easy to take with me/ easy to access.	22
Digital because	More choice/ easier access to digital books.	3
Open	I buy the version which costs less.	9

Table 3: Reasons why participants chose their carrier.

on vacation and paper books at home. One participant has started reading e-books during the lockdown, as bookshops were closed.

There are a lot of different reasons why people decide to read on paper or on screen, and they often have several of them, as can be seen in table 3.

Table 3 does not contain the complete list of reasons. While some people prefer reading digitally because e-readers have lights, other people see that as a disadvantage. Some people just really like their carrier, whether it is paper or a screen. One person prefers screens because they feel it is better for the environment. However, a lot of people just love the feeling of a book: they say that they are more focused when reading on paper and that a physical book also offers more comfort. A large group prefers the practicality of e-books, as they can take a lot of different texts with them. Furthermore, digital texts allow the reader to search for keywords or to mark important parts, which makes texts more accessible for some people. Some participants mentioned that they preferred paper-based reading especially during the times of corona, as they already spend too much time on

screens. Paper-based reading is sometimes also used as a division between work and free time. One person's statement was quite direct and gave an insight into the feelings people sometimes have towards digital reading. The participant said: "I read—therefore paper" ("Ik lees—dus papier.") He does not count digital reading as reading at all.

One question of the survey was whether people feel a difference between reading from paper and reading digitally. Twenty-three people said that they are less concentrated and/or more easily tired out when reading from a screen. Nine people stated that they get problems with their eyes and/or headaches. Several people mentioned their reading speed; while some of them read faster from a screen, others have a higher reading speed when reading from paper. A majority of all the participants said that they just like one of the carriers better, without giving any further explanation.

Six participants mentioned that their opinion towards digital reading changed during the lockdown. One person switched from paper to digital texts as they do not have enough room to store all the physical books. Another person realized that they

could read digital texts during the night whenever they cannot fall asleep. Both these partakers went from reading on paper to reading digitally. One participant went from reading on paper to both carriers, as they got a Storytel subscription, which also allows them to read e-books. Two people did have a more negative view on digital reading after the lockdown, as they did not appreciate more screen time and one of them sometimes gets headaches from digital reading. Someone else mentioned that digital carriers allow the reader to enlarge the font, although this person did not switch from paper to a digital carrier.

The results of this study are in some respects quite interesting and varied, while other aspects, like the influence people feel, are narrowed down to just a few different responses which were mentioned by several participants. In the next section these results will be discussed further.

Discussion

This survey made clear that readers can have feelings towards a reading carrier and there are plenty of reasons why one would switch. This is only logical when looking back at the concepts of affect, emotion, and attitude, which have already been discussed. The impacts people believe their carrier has on them are, however, less in number. At the beginning of the previous section, it became clear that just a small percentage of readers did switch to a new or additional reading carrier. The largest increase can be found in paper-based readers who switched to a more fluid combination of paper-based and digital reading. Two people switched from paper-based reading to digital reading completely. One person switched from digital reading to paper. One reason for that could be that life started to revolve more around online activities during lockdown, as can be found in the answers to this survey. Reading from paper might therefore offer an opportunity to get away from the digital environment. This assumption can be backed up by the

number of readers who went from reading digitally and analogue to just paper, which was 6.1%. There were, however, also other reasons why people changed their carriers. One person mentioned that she does not like to print academic articles for environmental reasons, but she prefers reading from paper.

It became clear that a substantial number of participants have personal reasons for (not) switching carriers, for instance because their eyes have problems adjusting to digital reading. Several people have financial motivations to choose a carrier: they want the lowest price, or they have a subscription to an e-book platform which enables them to take “greater risks” in their choice of text to read, as they can now read a book they are maybe less interested in and do not have to pay extra for it. One participant reads the news online, as they can use the account of their parents for free. There were also a few people who mentioned their bookshelves and collections, which seems to support Kristensen’s claim that choosing a carrier is impacted by factors like cultural and social belonging, remediation, and physicality (Kristensen).

As already mentioned, some participants prefer reading on paper as they can make a better distinction between work and leisure time or because they already use their computers very often. It was interesting to see that some people made a distinction between reading from a laptop/mobile device or from an e-reader. One person said that reading from an e-reader is for them quite the same as reading a paper book, but reading from a laptop or mobile device is more tiring as the screen is different and there are more distractions. This can be explained by the fact that some devices, like a laptop, offer internet connectivity and do not offer an e-ink screen. However, an e-reader offers less connectivity and a more suitable screen for long-term reading. Twenty-three people mentioned that their focus is diminished

when reading on a digital carrier. There is reason to believe that these participants were referring to reading from a laptop or a mobile device as they mentioned that they get distracted by messages, other apps, or the Internet. This makes clear that reading should happen in a quiet environment, without any other distractions, which some participants claim they can experience only with a printed book. An e-reader would be a good solution for people who like to read digitally but get distracted by other functions of their device.

There were several partakers who said that they could not absorb the information when read digitally as well as when they read it on paper. However, there is no data which supports this (E-Read, “Stavanger Declaration”, 1). This means that there must be another reason for this claim. One explanation could be that people who read digitally actually read on a laptop, which offers them more distraction and prevents them from being focused. On the other hand, some people just do not like digital reading or have a very strong preference for the paper book. As Van der Weel (64) already mentioned, people are raised with the idea that they learn from books, which leads to a strong preference for paper reading. This feeling may have led to a perceived disadvantage of digital reading. Readers might think they absorb the information less well, as they do not want to admit that there is a digital replacement for the paper book or because they realize that reading digital informational texts are better understood when read on paper. They connect this experience with leisure reading. This means that the effect they experience might be imagined, or it might be true because it is a self-fulfilling prophecy and people act differently when using a digital carrier.

This study made clear that the choice of a reading medium is often well-considered, even though people might have different reasons to disregard one or the other. The

most important reasons will be summarized in the conclusion, as well as several significant discoveries from other scholars.

Conclusion

The goal of this essay was to identify criteria readers might have when choosing a reading carrier and what influence reading off paper and reading from a screen might have. There are several reasons why people prefer one reading medium over the other; these reasons are influenced by social circumstances, the physicality of the book, technology acceptance, and emotions and affect, as presented by Kristensen. According to her, people want to display their knowledge in the form of books, which might often be a reason why people favor the hard copy. Furthermore, people are used to the book as a reading medium and the carrier of knowledge distribution, which is why people often tend to prefer the printed book. According to several researchers there are, however, no differences in understanding between reading narrative texts from paper or from a screen. This is very different when reading informative texts, where the medium does have a significant impact (Delgado et al. 34). Overall, the medium can have an impact on the way we think, as a book is not just a text alone but a combination of its medium, cultural differences, and language. The carrier might thus have an impact on how we perceive the world (Van der Weel, 17).

In addition to the impact a reading carrier might have on leisure reading, the assumption was made that during the lockdown, when so many things changed, people also might have changed their reading behavior. In the conducted study participants were asked to answer questions regarding the number of books they read before and during the lockdown and if they started using other mediums as well. It became clear that 39,8% read more in the targeted 3.5 months. There were just

a few who changed from paper-based reading to only digital reading and vice versa, yet there were several people who started using both carriers as opposed to one. When asked about the impact they feel the carrier has on them, several people said that they were easily distracted when reading digitally and that it was bad for their eyes. Of the people who did read digitally, a majority said that they value the practicality of digital reading as an e-reader or other reading device weighs less and one can have several books on one gadget.

An interesting finding of this paper was the number of people that read the book for the book. One person said reading is not reading without a book. Some people like flipping the page, others like the smell of it or the possibility to see how many pages they have left. They really value the book for its physical traits.

One could argue that the influence of the lockdown on the choice of reading

carrier was not significant, but it was there. Only six people said that their opinion towards digital reading changed during the lockdown. Three people started to appreciate digital carriers, two were negative about them, and one person did see a positive aspect, although this did not impact their use of them. Some people mentioned that they favored the physical book as they already work a lot on screens, so they use the paper book as a division between work and free time and to relax their eyes. Other people started reading digitally as bookshops had to close. The most important influence the lockdown did have was on the number of books people read. More than a third of all the participants did read more and that is for sure something worth highlighting. Even if the lockdown did change many things, it changed at least some things for the better, as more books got the attention they (probably) deserve. ■

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