

How Reading Is Being Reimagined

By MATTHEW KIRSCHENBAUM

There is no doubt that it is time for a serious conversation about reading, not least because books themselves are changing.

Google, in cooperation with several dozen research libraries worldwide, is digitizing books at the rate of 3,000 a day. The noncommercial Open Content Alliance is scanning at a more modest pace but gaining ground, especially among institutions who chafe at some of the restrictions imposed by Google and its competitors. LibraryThing, an online book catalog that allows readers to list their books and find other readers with (sometimes uncannily) similar tastes, has almost 300,000 users who have collectively tagged some 20 million books. Newsweek ran a cover story on "The Future of Reading" in their November 26 issue. And on Monday, the same day that the National Endowment for the Arts released *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence*, the follow-up to its controversial 2004 *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America* report, Amazon.com launched Kindle, an e-book reader device that the Newsweek story describes as the "iPod of reading."

My purpose is not to debunk the NEA's most recent report, which synthesizes a number of studies to conclude that Americans — especially younger ones — are reading less, that they are reading "less well," and that these trends have disturbing implications for culture, civics, and even the national economy. The data are significant to anyone who cares about reading and its place in a 21st-century society, and deserve to be treated seriously. But clearly the report comes to us at a moment when reading and conversations about reading are in a state of flux. It's worth taking a moment to account for this broader context. High-profile projects like Google's and new devices like Kindle suggest what I call the remaking of reading, meaning that reading is being both reimagined and re-engineered, made over creatively as well as technologically.

Historically, we've placed very different values on different kinds of reading. The reading of novels and other "literary" works — precisely the core concern of the earlier NEA report — has not always enjoyed the pride of place it has in the current cultural canon. When Cervantes sent poor, mad Don Quixote on his delirious adventures at the beginning of the 17th century, there existed a popular prejudice surrounding the reading of chivalric romances. Until well into the 19th century, novel-reading was regarded in Europe as a pastime fit mostly for women and the indolent — and a potentially dangerous one, since women, especially, could not be trusted to distinguish fiction from reality. But both the 2004 and the current report are curiously devoid of historical awareness, as though there is but a single, idealized model of reading from which we have strayed.

To Read or Not to Read deploys its own self-consistent iconography to tell us what reading is. In the pages of the report we find images of an adolescent male bent over a book, a female student sitting alone reading against a row of school lockers, and a white-collar worker studying a form. These still lives of the literate represent reading as self-evident — we know it when we see it. Yet they fail to acknowledge that such images have coexisted for centuries with other kinds of reading that have their own iconography and accouterments: Medieval and early modern portraits of scholars and scribes at work at their desks show them adorned with many books (not just one), some of them bound and splayed on exotic devices for keeping them open and in view; Thomas Jefferson famously designed a lazy susan to rotate books in and out of his visual field. That kind of reading values comparison and cross-checking as much as focus and immersion — lateral reading as much as reading for depth.

That is the model of reading that seems compatible with the Web and other new electronic media. Yet it also raises fundamental questions about what it means to read, and what it means to have read something. When can we claim a book to have been read? What is the dividing line between reading and skimming? Must we consume a book in its entirety — start to finish, cover to cover — to say we have read it? Pierre Bayard, a literature professor in France, recently made a stir with a naughty little volume called *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read*. When I read it (well, most of it), the book provoked the most intense author envy I have ever felt — not because I too secretly enjoy perpetuating literary frauds, but because Bayard speaks to a dilemma that will be familiar to every literate person: namely, that there are far more books in the world (50

million or 60 million by the estimates I've seen) than any of us will ever have time to read. Reading, Bayard says, is as much about mastering a system of relationships among texts and ideas as it is about reading any one text in great depth. He quotes the extreme case of the fictional librarian in Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* (a book Bayard admits to having only skimmed): The librarian resolutely reads no books whatsoever for fear that undue attention to any one of them will compromise the integrity of his relation to them all.

The structure of *To Read or Not to Read* presents itself as tacit acknowledgment that not all of its own text will likely be read by any one reader, since it is clearly designed to be "not read" in at least some of the ways that accord with Bayard's observations. The report is accompanied by an Executive Summary, a condensed version of the major findings. Its internal organization is carefully laid out, with summary points at the head of each chapter, topic sentences, extensive notes, sidebars, and sections labeled as conclusions.

The authors of the report would doubtlessly insist that the kind of person who reads (or doesn't read) books by French intellectuals writing about books they haven't read (or have only skimmed) is not the kind of reader who has them much worried. It's the people, especially the young ones, who are simply not reading at all that are cause for alarm. But the new report also places extreme emphasis on what it repeatedly terms "voluntary" reading. Reading that one does for work or for school doesn't "count" in this regard. While one can appreciate the motivations here — the NEA is interested in people who read because they choose to, not because they have to — it seems oddly retrograde. How many of us who count ourselves as avid readers are able to maintain clear boundaries between work and leisure anymore?

Likewise, while the authors of the report repeatedly emphasize that they include online reading in their data, the report sounds most clumsy and out of touch when referring to new media. The authors of the report tend to homogenize "the computer" without acknowledging the diversity of activity — and the diversity of reading — that takes place on its screen. Our screens are spaces where new forms like blogs and e-mail and chats commingle with remediations of older forms, like newspapers and magazines — or even poems, stories, and novels. Reading your friend's blog is not likely a replacement for reading Proust, but some blogs have been a venue for extraordinary writing, and we are not going to talk responsibly or well about what it means to read online until we stop conflating genre with value.

The report also fails to acknowledge the extent to which reading and writing have become commingled in electronic venues. The staccato rhythms of a real-time chat session are emblematic in this regard: Reading and writing all but collapse into a single unified activity. But there is a spectrum of writing online, just as there is a spectrum of reading, and more and more applications blur the line between the two. Many electronic book interfaces allow users to annotate their texts, for example; some allow users to share those notes and annotations with others (CommentPress, from the Institute for the Future of the Book, is exemplary in this regard, as is Zotero, from the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University). Alph, a project directed by Nancy Kaplan at the University of Baltimore, is developing new online reading interfaces for children; the ability to leave notes and marks behind for these young readers' peers is a signature design feature. Book Glutton, a Web service still in beta mode, provides adult users with a shared electronic library; readers write notes for other readers in the margins of the books, and this virtual marginalia persists over time, accreting in Talmudic fashion. Moreover, readers can choose to chat in real time with other readers perusing the same chapter that is on their screens.

What kind of activity is taking place here? What are the new metrics of screen literacy? I don't have that data, it's not my field, but anecdotally my instinct is that computer users are capable of projecting the same aura of deep concentration and immersion as the stereotypical bookworm. Walk into your favorite coffee shop and watch the people in front of their screens. Rather than bug-eyed, frenzied jittering, you are more likely to see calm, meditative engagement — and hear the occasional click of fingers on keyboards as the readers write.

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