

The Art of Slow Reading

Patrick Kingsley

If you're reading this article in print, chances are you'll only get through half of what I've written. And if you're reading this online, you might not even finish a fifth. At least, those are the two verdicts from a pair of recent research projects – respectively, the Poynter Institute's Eyetrack survey, and analysis by Jakob Nielsen – which both suggest that many of us no longer have the concentration to read articles through to their conclusion.

The problem doesn't just stop there: academics report that we are becoming less attentive book-readers, too. Bath Spa University lecturer Greg Garrard recently revealed that he has had to shorten his students' reading list, while Keith Thomas, an Oxford historian, has written that he is bemused by junior colleagues who analyse sources with a search engine, instead of reading them in their entirety.

So are we getting stupider? Is that what this is about? Sort of. According to *The Shallows*, a new book by technology sage Nicholas Carr, our hyperactive online habits are damaging the mental faculties we need to process and understand lengthy textual information. Round-the-clock news feeds leave us hyperlinking from one article to the next – without necessarily engaging fully with any of the content; our reading is frequently interrupted by the ping of the latest email; and we are now absorbing short bursts of words on Twitter and Facebook more regularly than longer texts.

Which all means that although, because of the internet, we have become very good at collecting a wide range of factual titbits, we are also gradually forgetting how to sit back, contemplate, and relate all these facts to each other. And so, as Carr writes, “we're losing our ability to strike a balance between those two very different states of mind. Mentally, we're in perpetual locomotion”.

Still reading? You're probably in a dwindling minority. But no matter: a literary revolution is at hand. First we had slow food, then slow travel. Now, those campaigns are joined by a slow-reading movement – a disparate bunch of academics and intellectuals who want us to take our time while reading, and re-reading. They ask us to switch off our

computers every so often and rediscover both the joy of personal engagement with physical texts, and the ability to process them fully.

“If you want the deep experience of a book, if you want to internalise it, to mix an author’s ideas with your own and make it a more personal experience, you have to read it slowly,” says Ottawa-based John Miedema, author of *Slow Reading* (2009).

But Lancelot R Fletcher, the first present-day author to popularise the term “slow reading”, disagrees. He argues that slow reading is not so much about unleashing the reader’s creativity, as uncovering the author’s. “My intention was to counter postmodernism, to encourage the discovery of authorial content,” the American expat explains from his holiday in the Caucasus mountains in eastern Europe. “I told my students to believe that the text was written by God – if you can’t understand something written in the text, it’s your fault, not the author’s.”

And while Fletcher used the term initially as an academic tool, slow reading has since become a more wide-ranging concept. Miedema writes on his website that slow reading, like slow food, is now, at root, a localist idea which can help connect a reader to his neighbourhood. “Slow reading,” writes Miedema, “is a community event restoring connections between ideas and people. The continuity of relationships through reading is experienced when we borrow books from friends; when we read long stories to our kids until they fall asleep.” Meanwhile, though the movement began in academia, Tracy Seeley, an English professor at the University of San Francisco, and the author of a blog about slow reading, feels strongly that slow reading shouldn’t “just be the province of the intellectuals. Careful and slow reading, and deep attention, is a challenge for all of us.”

So the movement’s not a particularly cohesive one – as Malcolm Jones wrote in a recent *Newsweek* article, “there’s no letterhead, no board of directors, and, horrors, no central website” – and nor is it a new idea: as early as 1623, the first edition of Shakespeare’s folio encouraged us to read the playwright “again and again”; in 1887, Friedrich Nietzsche described himself as a “teacher of slow reading”; and, back in the 20s and 30s, dons such as IA Richards popularised close textual analysis within academic circles.

But what’s clear is that our era’s technological diarrhoea is bringing more and more slow readers to the fore. Keith Thomas, the Oxford history professor, is one such reader. He doesn’t see himself as part of a wider slow community, but has nevertheless recently written – in the *London Review of Books* – about his bewilderment at the hasty reading techniques in contemporary academia. “I don’t think using a search engine to find certain key words in a text is a substitute for reading it properly,” he says. “You don’t get a proper sense of the work, or understand its context. And there’s no serendipity – half the things I’ve found in my research have come when I’ve luckily stumbled across something I wasn’t expecting.”

Some academics vehemently disagree, however. One literature professor, Pierre Bayard, notoriously wrote a book about how readers can form valid opinions about texts they have only skimmed – or even not read at all. “It’s possible to have a passionate

conversation about a book that one has not read, including, perhaps especially, with someone else who has not read it,” he says in *How to Talk About Books that You Haven’t Read* (2007), before suggesting that such bluffing is even “at the heart of a creative process”.

Slow readers, obviously, are at loggerheads with Bayard. Seeley says that you might be able to engage “in a basic conversation if you have only read a book’s summary, but for the kinds of reading I want my students to do, the words matter. The physical shape of sentences matter.”

Nicholas Carr’s book elaborates further. “The words of the writer,” suggests Carr, “act as a catalyst in the mind of the reader, inspiring new insights, associations, and perceptions, sometimes even epiphanies.” And, perhaps even more significantly, it is only through slow reading that great literature can be cultivated in the future. As Carr writes, “the very existence of the attentive, critical reader provides the spur for the writer’s work. It gives the author the confidence to explore new forms of expression, to blaze difficult and demanding paths of thought, to venture into uncharted and sometimes hazardous territory.”

What’s more, Seeley argues, Bayard’s literary bluffing merely obscures a bigger problem: the erosion of our powers of concentration, as highlighted by Carr’s book. Seeley notes that after a conversation with some of her students, she discovered that “most can’t concentrate on reading a text for more than 30 seconds or a minute at a time. We’re being trained away from slow reading by new technology.” But unlike Bath Spa’s Greg Garrard, she does not want to cut down on the amount of reading she sets her classes. “It’s my responsibility to challenge my students,” says Seeley. “I don’t just want to throw in the towel.”

Seeley finds an unlikely ally in Henry Hitchings, who – as the author of the rather confusingly named *How to Really Talk About Books You Haven’t Read* (2008) – could initially be mistaken as a follower of Bayard. “My book on the subject notwithstanding,” says Hitchings, “I’m no fan of bluffing and blagging. My book was really a covert statement to the effect that reading matters. It’s supposed to encourage would-be bluffers to go beyond mere bluffing, though it does this under the cover of arming them for literary combat.”

But Hitchings also feels that clear-cut distinctions between slow and fast reading are slightly idealistic. “In short, the fast-slow polarity – or antithesis, if you prefer – strikes me as false. We all have several guises as readers. If I am reading – to pick an obvious example – James Joyce, slow reading feels appropriate. If I’m reading the instruction manual for a new washing machine, it doesn’t.”

Hitchings does agree that the internet is part of the problem. “It accustoms us to new ways of reading and looking and consuming,” Hitchings says, “and it fragments our attention span in a way that’s not ideal if you want to read, for instance, *Clarissa*.” He also argues that “the real issue with the internet may be that it erodes, slowly, one’s sense of self, one’s capacity for the kind of pleasure in isolation that has, since printed books became common, been readers’ standard experience”.

What's to be done, then? All the slow readers I spoke to realise that total rejection of the web is extremely unrealistic, but many felt that temporary isolation from technology was the answer. Tracy Seeley's students, for example, have advocated turning their computer off for one day a week. But, given the pace at which most of us live, do we even have time? Garrard seems to think so: "I'm no luddite – I'm on my iPhone right now, having just checked my email – but I regularly carve out reading holidays in the middle of my week: four or five hours with the internet disconnected."

Meanwhile, Jakob Nielsen – the internet guru behind some of the statistics at the beginning of this article – thinks the iPad might just be the answer: "It's pleasant and fun, and doesn't remind people of work." But though John Miedema thinks iPads and Kindles are "a good halfway house, particularly if you're on the road", the author reveals that, for the true slow reader, there's simply no substitute for particular aspects of the paper book: "The binding of a book captures an experience or idea at a particular space and time." And even the act of storing a book is a pleasure for Miedema. "When the reading is complete, you place it with satisfaction on your bookshelf," he says.

Personally, I'm not sure I could ever go offline for long. Even while writing this article I was flicking constantly between sites, skimming too often, absorbing too little; internet reading has become too ingrained in my daily life for me to change. I read essays and articles not in hard copy but as PDFs, and I'm more comfortable churning through lots of news features from several outlets than just a few from a single print source. I suspect that many readers are in a similar position.

But if, like me, you just occasionally want to read more slowly, help is at hand. You can download a computer application called Freedom, which allows you to read in peace by cutting off your internet connection. Or if you want to remove adverts and other distractions from your screen, you could always download offline reader Instapaper for your iPhone. If you're still reading, that is.