

Are Screens Robbing Us of Our Capacity For Deep Reading?

Johann Hari on the Symptoms of Atrophying Attention

By Johann Hari

(January 31, 2022)

<https://lithub.com/are-screens-robbing-us-of-our-capacity-for-deep-reading/>

The proportion of Americans who read books for pleasure is now at its lowest level ever recorded. The American Time Use Survey – which studies a representative sample of 26,000 Americans – found that between 2004 and 2017 the proportion of men reading for pleasure had fallen by 40 percent, while for women, it was down by 29 percent. The opinion-poll company Gallup found that the proportion of Americans who never read a book in any given year tripled between 1978 and 2014. Some 57 percent of Americans now do not read a single book in a typical year. This has escalated to the point that by 2017, the average American spent seventeen minutes a day reading books and 5.4 hours on their phone.

Complex literary fiction is particularly suffering. For the first time in modern history, less than half of Americans read literature for pleasure. It's been less well studied, but there seem to be similar trends in Britain and other countries: between 2008 and 2016 the market for novels fell by 40 percent. In one single year – 2011 – paperback fiction sales collapsed by 26 percent.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has discovered in his research that one of the simplest and most common forms of flow that people experience in their lives is reading a book – and, like other forms of flow, it is being choked off in our culture of constant distraction. I thought a lot about this. For many of us, reading a book is the deepest form of focus we experience – you dedicate many hours of your life, coolly, calmly, to one topic, and allow it to marinate in your mind. This is the medium through which most of the deepest advances in human thought over the past four hundred years have been figured out and explained. And that experience is now in free fall.

Anne Mangen is a professor of literacy at the University of Stavanger in Norway, and she explained to me that in two decades of researching this subject, she has proved something crucial. Reading books trains us to read in a particular way – in a linear fashion, focused on one thing for a sustained period. Reading from screens, she has discovered, trains us to read in a different way – in a manic skip and jump from one thing to another. “We’re more likely to scan and skim” when we read on screens, her studies have found – we run our eyes rapidly over the information to extract what we need.

But after a while, if we do this long enough, she told me, “this scanning and skimming bleeds over. It also starts to color or influence how we read on paper... That behavior also

becomes our default, more or less.” It was precisely what I had noticed when I tried to settle into Dickens when I arrived in Provincetown and found myself rushing ahead of him, as if it was a news article and I was trying to push for the key facts.

This creates a different relationship with reading. It stops being a form of pleasurable immersion in another world and becomes more like dashing around a busy supermarket to grab what you need and then get out again. When this flip takes place – when our screen-reading contaminates our book-reading – we lose some of the pleasures of reading books themselves, and they become less appealing.

It’s a spiral – as we began to move from books to screens, we started to lose some of the capacity for the deeper reading that comes from books, and that, in turn, made us less likely to read books.

It has other knock-on effects. Anne has conducted studies that split people into two groups, where one is given information in a printed book, and the other is given the same information on a screen. Everyone is then asked questions about what they just read. When you do this, you find that people understand and remember less of what they absorb on screens. There’s broad scientific evidence for this now, emerging from 54 studies, and she explained that it’s referred to as “screen inferiority.” This gap in understanding between books and screens is big enough that in elementary-school children, it’s the equivalent of two-thirds of a year’s growth in reading comprehension.

As she spoke, I realized that the collapse in reading books is in some ways a symptom of our atrophying attention, and in some ways a cause of it. It’s a spiral – as we began to move from books to screens, we started to lose some of the capacity for the deeper reading that comes from books, and that, in turn, made us less likely to read books. It’s like when you gain weight, and it gets harder and harder to exercise. As a result, Anne told me, she is worried we are now losing “our ability to read long texts anymore,” and we are also losing our “cognitive patience... [and] the stamina and the ability to deal with cognitively challenging texts.”

When I was at Harvard conducting interviews, one professor told me that he struggled to get his students there to read even quite short books, and he increasingly offered them podcasts and YouTube clips they could watch instead. And that’s Harvard. I started to wonder what happens to a world where this form of deep focus shrinks so far and so fast. What happens when that deepest layer of thinking becomes available to fewer and fewer people, until it is a small minority interest, like opera, or volleyball?

In the 1960s, the Canadian professor **Marshall McLuhan** talked a lot about how the arrival of television was transforming the way we see the world. He said these changes were so deep and so profound that it was hard to really see them. When he tried to distill this down into a phrase, he explained that “the medium is the message.” What he meant, I think, was that when a new technology comes along, you think of it as like a pipe – somebody pours in information at one end, and you receive it unfiltered at the other. But

it's not like that. Every time a new medium comes along – whether it's the invention of the printed book, or TV, or Twitter – and you start to use it, it's like you are putting on a new kind of goggles, with their own special colors and lenses. Each set of goggles you put on makes you see things differently.

So (for example) when you start to watch television, before you absorb the message of any particular TV show – whether it's Wheel of Fortune or The Wire – you start to see the world as being shaped like television itself. That's why McLuhan said that every time a new medium comes along – a new way for humans to communicate – it has buried in it a message. It is gently guiding us to see the world according to a new set of codes. The way information gets to you, McLuhan argued, is more important than the information itself. TV teaches you that the world is fast; that it's about surfaces and appearances; that everything in the world is happening all at once.

This made me wonder what the message is that we absorb from social media, and how it compares to the message that we absorb from printed books. I thought first of Twitter. When you log in to that site – it doesn't matter whether you are Donald Trump or Bernie Sanders or Bubba the Love Sponge – you are absorbing a message through that medium and sending it out to your followers. What is that message? First: you shouldn't focus on any one thing for long.

The world can and should be understood in short, simple statements of 280 characters. Second: the world should be interpreted and confidently understood very quickly. Third: what matters most is whether people immediately agree with and applaud your short, simple, speedy statements. A successful statement is one that lots of people immediately applaud; an unsuccessful statement is one that people immediately ignore or condemn. When you tweet, before you say anything else, you are saying that at some level you agree with these three premises. You are putting on those goggles and seeing the world through them.

I like the person I become when I read a lot of books. I dislike the person I become when I spend a lot of time on social media.

I realized one of the key reasons why social media makes me feel so out of joint with the world, and with myself. I think all of these ideas – the messages implicit in these mediums—are wrong. In fact, the world is complex. To reflect that honestly, you usually need to focus on one thing for a significant amount of time, and you need space to speak at length. Very few things worth saying can be explained in 280 characters. If your response to an idea is immediate, unless you have built up years of expertise on the broader topic, it's most likely going to be shallow and uninteresting.

Whether people immediately agree with you is no marker of whether what you are saying is true or right – you have to think for yourself. Reality can only be understood sensibly by adopting the opposite messages to Twitter. The world is complex and requires steady focus to be understood; it needs to be thought about and comprehended slowly; and most important truths will be unpopular when they are first articulated. I realized that

the times in my own life when I've been most successful on Twitter – in terms of followers and retweets – are the times when I have been least useful as a human being: when I've been attention-deprived, simplistic, vituperative. Of course there are occasional nuggets of insight on the site – but if this becomes your dominant mode of absorbing information, I believe the quality of your thinking will rapidly degrade.

After thinking all this, I would return to the printed books I was piling up against the wall of my beach house. What, I wondered, is the message buried in the medium of the printed book? Before the words convey their specific meaning, the medium of the book tells us several things. Firstly, life is complex, and if you want to understand it, you have to set aside a fair bit of time to think deeply about it. You need to slow down. Secondly, there is a value in leaving behind your other concerns and narrowing down your attention to one thing, sentence after sentence, page after page. Thirdly, it is worth thinking deeply about how other people live and how their minds work. They have complex inner lives just like you.

I realized that I agree with the messages in the medium of the book. I think they are true. I think they encourage the best parts of human nature – that a life with lots of episodes of deep focus is a good life. It is why reading books nourishes me. And I don't agree with the messages in the medium of social media. I think they primarily feed the uglier and shallower parts of my nature. It is why spending time on these sites – even when, by the rules of the game, I am doing well, gaining likes and followers – leaves me feeling drained and unhappy. I like the person I become when I read a lot of books. I dislike the person I become when I spend a lot of time on social media.

From the book *Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention – and How to Think Deeply Again* by **Johann Hari**. Copyright © 2022 by Johann Hari. Published by Crown, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.