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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Screen reading can wreck your attention. Here's how to save it.

By **Steven Johnson**

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For Maryanne Wolf, it began “innocently enough.” As her work became more and more digital, emails shortened. She dropped magazine subscriptions. She started leaning on Google searches and weekly summaries for her reading — plenty of time to read more deeply over the weekend.

Then leftover tasks took the weekends, too.

If anyone should have been prepared for the change, it would have been Wolf, a scholar and literacy advocate who recorded her experience in her book “Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World.”

But digital work, of course, spares few Americans. The sheer volume of emails, articles and DMs leads to a “defense strategy,” Wolf said: skimming.

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“You are missing words. You are missing clues. You are missing your ability to put your background information to work in the most productive way,” said Wolf, director of the Center for Dyslexia, Diverse Learners and Social Justice at the University of California at Los Angeles.

Maybe that’s fine for a few texts with friends. But what about the most demanding parts of daily work? Many of the day’s most important tasks involve careful, sequential thinking — functions honed by what scholars call deep reading. Some, like Wolf, have worried that constant digital work threatens those cognitive processes.

“We have already begun to change how we read — with all of its many implications for how we think,” Wolf writes in “Reader, Come Home.”

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The brain’s “reading circuit” is adaptive, Wolf writes. Processes that aren’t used can wither, and the circuit will adjust to the digital environment’s rapid-fire demands.

“What if, one day, you pause and wonder if you, yourself, are truly changing,” Wolf writes, “and, worst of all, do not have the time to do a thing about it?”

To others, the threat isn't so dire.

Daniel Willingham, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia and author of “The Reading Mind: A Cognitive Approach to Understanding How the Mind Reads,” has argued digital work probably can't drastically reshape our cognitive systems. But he agreed there are obvious shortfalls to digital reading.

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A long strand of research has shown that reading comprehension is better on paper than on screens. The reasons are unclear, though researchers have some theories why. Study designs vary (and some find little difference in comprehension, depending on the conditions).

The divide depends on the type of reading, Willingham said.

“Informational” texts are harder to read on screen than “narrative” ones, according to a 2018 review of research by Spanish and Israeli scholars. Reading to memorize complicated facts or to gain a new skill is often easier on paper. Reading a novel for fun, on the other hand, is probably fine either way.

Readers who are pressed for time also tend to show higher comprehension on paper, the review found.

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Willingham prefers to read tougher materials in print, but it's not always convenient. On planes, he's usually stuck with his phone. For work, it's most practical to stick with PDFs. But their highlighting and annotating tools don't compare with good old paper. He'll often find himself with a PDF and a Word document open at the same time, highlighting in one and noting down thoughts and page numbers in the other. "My workaround is pretty clunky," he said.

If screen reading is here to stay, how can it be better? Software designers go about it in different ways.

Some cut down on distractions to imitate the sacred dullness of the printed page — think browser add-ons that chop out ads or phone apps that imitate page turns.

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Others do just the opposite, harnessing notifications and real-time commenting to nudge readers toward good habits. Educators have started using that kind of technology to help students read complex texts, making reading almost like a social platform.

When it comes to comprehension, there could be small, cumulative effects from design tweaks such as virtual page flips, Willingham said. But those effects on their own are “ornaments on the basic architecture of the cognition that gets reading done,” he said. Things including vocabulary, background knowledge and syntactical skills remain larger contributors, he said.

The broader problems with screens, he said, have to do with impatience and boredom. Digital environments are primed for distraction.

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That doesn't mean they're hopeless for thoughtful work.

Rather than see digital reading and print reading as frighteningly different, Wolf writes in “Reader, Come Home,” we should see them as two languages, with different advantages. Tomorrow’s ideal reader will be fluent in both.

So what does this research mean when you’re stuck in a train station or airport with only your phone to read? “It’s probably not exactly the same experience as reading a paperback book, sitting in your easy chair,” Willingham said.

But no need to stress too much. “Look at what those small differences are and use technology for what it affords best,” he said. Good practices for concentration are good practices for reading on-screen.

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1. **When you can, pick the right environment.** “For a lot of us, it’s kind of romantic to read in a coffee shop,” Willingham said. “But if you’re doing difficult reading, that may be pretty distracting.”
2. **Then, cut out remaining distractions.** Turn off WiFi or even put your phone in airplane mode, Willingham said.
3. **Take breaks.** There’s lots of evidence that taking breaks truly refreshes your mind, Willingham said. The best timing for those breaks may vary from person to person.

4. **Don't use breaks for Instagram and email.** "That's not actually very restful, it's just a different type of work," Willingham said. It never hurts to take a walk.
5. **Take mornings or evenings (or both) off-screen.** Contemplation and reflection are just as important as the work you're leaving behind, Wolf said. Get in the habit of bookending your days with an "alternative view of what productivity really needs."

These rules of thumb are all about cultivating attention. "We are most productive when we can have insights that come into our work that allow us to go beyond just what's in front of us," Wolf said. "Deep reading provides that."

The stakes, Wolf said, are higher than how much a person is able to get done in a day.

Immersive reading, with its ability to take on other perspectives and ideas, has implications for the basic stuff of society, Wolf said: empathy and connection. Contemplation. A richer emotional life.

"Sometimes we don't realize," Wolf said, "it's equally productive in our days if we have that within us."

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