
Reaction to "The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age"

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The Problems Court panel members argued effectively that electronic media have blocked the development of orality which is the foundation of literacy. Electronic media, primarily television, has interfered with verbal interactions between parents and children; children have not practiced language in the way that earlier generations did. Sanders (1994) makes this argument; the panel members agreed, leaning most heavily on his arguments during the discussion.

Panel members discussed the need for a radical change in society to overcome the influence of the electronic media. The panel argued: "That champion (of reading books) is us. Reading people. People who read" (Otto, 1997).

Erickson (1997) agreed with Sanders in stressing that reading ought to be fun—that we take reading and language too seriously. Instead, the mantra that pervades the schools is "Reading is work that produces meaning." Teachers (and teacher educators), in our striving for correctness in reading and writing, ignore the play of language, making literacy development a tedious task for children. Erickson sees the standards movement as fostering the mantra of reading as work and actually working counter productively against good reading instruction and lifetime reading habits.

Smith (1997) followed up by describing Birkerts' *Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (1994) as "one person's love affair with reading." The problem, according to Smith, is that other people are

not living in that world. He pointed out the various purposes for reading, especially reading for information, and that the computer is an important tool for accessing information. In fact, he argued that the computer becomes important to those who do not live in the world of books—that they can develop literacy skills through electronic media rather than through books.

Hayes (1997) countered that, with electronic media, "one can wade out further but can't swim as deep." The Internet provides meaningful reading, but not indepth experiences with literacy. He stressed that children must see themselves individually as readers. Unfortunately, mass media markets everything except reading and discourages children from seeing themselves as readers.

Randlett (1997) identified 1950 as the watershed between generations in terms of attitudes toward reading. She pointed out, in response to Smith, that technology is not neutral—that the trend has been toward less reading with more dependence on electronic media. She blamed ourselves (reading teachers) as being complicit in giving in to technology (e.g., television, reading machines) and in fragmenting reading into discrete skills.

The discussion that followed became nostalgic at times for the "good old days" of radio (another of the electronic media) when listeners, like readers, had to use their imaginations to visualize the characters and action. Sanders, (1994) participants agreed, had no real solutions to the dilemma; his suggestion that women should stay home to breast feed their children was not well received. Likewise, the other authors also offered no solutions to declining book readership.

Smith, (1997) on the other hand, continued to point out the greater interactivity for users of the Internet. He stressed that it encourages nonlinear thinking which is positive. However, one can also access linear text, such as *Sherlock Holmes*, electronically (which most people would download and print for convenience to read as a book).

While the tenor of the discussion (with the exception of Smith) was generally negative toward electronic media, it appears that we, in the 1990s, are in the midst of a paradigm shift. Turkle (1995) uses the phrase invented by anthropologist Victor Turner (1966) to label this shift a "liminal moment." Turner envisioned a liminal moment as a temporary transition, but Turkle believes it is our new permanent reality. She describes liminal moments as "...times of tension, extreme reactions, and great opportunity (when) ...we are simultaneously flooded with predictions of doom and predictions of imminent utopia" (p. 268).

In this liminal moment, we need to take the best of the past into the future of reading instruction. Technology and books are not incompatible. For example, you can e-mail the National Public Radio's *Car Talk* web page and list your favorite book with an explanation of why you like it. Furthermore, the single largest sales item on the Internet is books!

We can use technology, especially the Internet, to teach and encourage thinking and problem-solving skills. Children, in searching the Internet, can experience nonlinear as well as linear thinking and literacy development. Alvarez (1996) describes this opportunity as it can happen in classroom instruction: No longer is the textbook the single resource for high school students. Students are now able to access the Internet through multiple pathways of inquiry. Most textbooks present information in a linear format, while the Internet allows students to access information from multiple perspectives in a nonlinear format (p. 18).

Perhaps Clinton's *America Reads* program is an attempt to do what the panel called for—marketing reading to children at the early stages of reading development. Since the President is calling for college tutors, this is a marvelous opportunity for teacher educators as well as teachers to jump in and provide conceptual leadership to this program. My hope is that the Problems Court discussion inspired some participants to get involved.

References

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