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Ebooks, Deep Reading, and Cultural Lag

Keith Doubt

In the FAMA documentary, "The Siege of Sarajevo," the owner of a used bookstore in Sarajevo says that philosophy books were the most popular during the war. Customers frequented bought books by Aristotle, Hegel, and Kant. Deep concentration is required to read these works. The reader takes the role of the philosopher, reconstructs the philosopher's arguments, and internalizes the philosopher's world view. Reading these books provided relief from the horror of war. Immersing oneself in Aristotle, Hegel, or Kant's rationality was an effective counter to the war's irrationalities.

If the owner of the used bookstore, however, had sold not printed books, but digital copies of Aristotle, Hegel, and Kant, would readers have gained the same benefit? Would reading with digital media have been different? Would texts by Aristotle, Hegel, and Kant on computer screens have provided the same relief from the trauma of war?

There has been a dramatic change in the material culture of publishing. Ebooks now dominate reading culture. Print books are becoming obsolete. As is often the case when there is rapid change in society's material culture, society's non-material culture, that is, its values and beliefs, changes less quickly. For example, despite the wars in former-Yugoslavia and subsequent political changes, the values of Tito's time still linger. In former-Yugoslavia the principles of socialism rather than nationalism still exist. In the context of this paper, despite rapid changes in the reading culture due to breathtaking technological advances, the values and beliefs of a previous culture lag. Despite rapid development of digital media and its dominance in the publishing industry, the assumptions that support the advantages of print media still linger. How should librarians and publishers understand this cultural lag?

If there is a difference between reading a text on a computer screen and reading a text on a printed page, how do we account for this difference? Let us say there are two ways to read. The sociologist, George H. Mead, says there are two parts of the self. One part he calls the "I." The other part he calls the "me." The "I" represents the self's immediate relation to others and the world. The "I" reflects the impulsive and instinctive nature of the self. The "I" thinks concretely. In contrast, the "me" represents the self's ability to take the role of another. As self develops, it takes the role of a larger group or community. When a person engages in rational thinking, it is the "me" of the self doing the rational thinking. If there are, indeed, two ways to read, one employs the "I" of the self and the other employs the "me" of the self.

The assumption here is that digital media encourages reading with the self's "I" and print media encourages reading with the self's "me." For example, ebooks encourage reading that

reflects efficiency, productivity, and enjoyment. Readers are more quick, more impulsive, and more free to explore the text and its surrounding hyperlinks and advertisement in the digital world online. The life of activity and the life of enjoyment are reinforced. Reading becomes a skimming activity. Readers browse.

In contrast, print media encourages reading with the self's "me." Readers take the role of different characters in a work of fiction as well as the role of the author who develops these characters. Readers put themselves in the place of the other so as to understand the other's argument. Readers internalize the worldview of the author and engage in this worldview in a dialogical way. They engage in the construction of meaning in their interaction with the text. The life of contemplation is reinforced. Readers are slower and more reflective.

To compare these two ways of reading, when the self's "I" is reading, one projects, as they say in psychology. One projects one's immediate self interests. One quickly finds what one is looking for or what one already has. One absorbs what one reads with little or no mediation. In contrast, when one reads with the self's "me," one takes the role of the other. One comes to know another such that another becomes a part of one's self. Relation is established. Finishing a good book is like losing a good friend.

Understanding in these two distinct ways of reading is achieved differently. With the self's "I," one decodes. One decodes signs, pictures, and graphs. Instinct guides understanding. In contrast, with the self's "me," one interprets symbols and metaphors. Reflection guides understanding. With "I," thinking is concrete, based on likes and tastes that are important at that moment or circumstance. With "me," thinking is systematic, comparative, and abstract.

The manner of reading is also different. With digital media we do not need to read every word in the text. We skim, picking up key phrases to catch the gist of the text. We do not read an essay; we read a post. With print media, we read every word, sometimes re-reading pages and paragraphs that we do not fully understand. With digital media, self enters on a fast-paced information highway. The faster self drives the better self reads. With print media self enters a quiet sanctuary, a solitary place where the written words of the author and the reader's self-reflection are primary.

One ironic consequence of this change from print media to digital media is that there is now more reading. More people read; people read more. People spend a lot of time on the internet, and this time on the internet is spent reading. The significance of this change, however, is not just quantitative. It is also qualitative. People are reading more with the "I" of the self and less with the "me" of the self.

To be honest, it is not that reading with the "me" does not occur with digital media. Either way of reading may occur with either print or digital media. Kindle, for example, transfers the idea of the book from print media to digital media. The book as a structure in which reading interaction occurs still exists. Kindle is a simulacrum of what the book is. Words are pixels rather than ink.

There are, though, differences. For example, if a reader is borrowing an ebook from a library and the borrowing period has expired, the ebook is removed from the reader's device. Digital media disappears. In contrast, a print book sits on a bed stand as long as it needs to. Print books are permanent. Such is the historical function of the library, to preserve the permanence of printed books and journals. What is the function of the library when print media

becomes obsolete?

When the publishing industry publishes digitally rather than in print, it publishes abundantly. The problem of books going out of print no longer exists. Scarcity is not the problem. Abundance is the problem. An abundance of books is available through digital media, and this abundance encourages reading with the "I" rather than with the "me." The digital media is vast, and the self's "me" cannot possibly take the role of all these authors. There is not a canon of literature; there is a crowd of textual voices.

As Nicholas Carr (2013) thoughtfully points out, Friedrich Nietzsche is an example worth considering. When Nietzsche started to compose on the typewriter rather than by hand due to poor eyesight, it changed the way he wrote philosophy. His prose changed from arguments to aphorisms, thoughts to puns, and rhetoric to telegram style. If we significantly change how we write, it significantly changes what we write. If we significantly change how we read, it significantly changes what we read. Can we read Aristotle, Hegel, and Kant with the self's "I"? No, we cannot. People become too easily distracted and unable to focus for the required time on the text. If philosophy books were only available through digital media during the siege of Sarajevo, they would not have been so popular. Readers would not have become immersed in these works; the war would have been even more agonizing.

The broader question is what does this change in the material culture of reading mean not just for librarians and publishers, but also for society? What does the transition to digital media over print media mean, not just for the economics of publishing, but also for civilization? Will there be masterpieces given the hegemony of the digital media? Will it be possible for a written work to become a masterpiece given the effervescence of the digital media? Digital media is itself an agent of social change. Even if we are powerless to influence these changes, we have an obligation to reflect on what these changes mean and their consequences. Does digital media, for example, make readers more narcissistic? The "I" of the narcissist's self is strong and the "me" is weak. The narcissist is unable to take the role of another; this inability can be pathological. Moreover, the narcissist lives parasitically off of others who are expected to do the work of taking the role of the narcissist's self, and the narcissist is either unable or unwilling to reciprocate.

While reading on computer screens, reading is easily interrupted. More importantly, readers are likely to self-interrupt. It is not just that another person or a new hyperlink interrupts the reader. It is that the reader interrupts himself or herself. Readers are restless. The "I" responds to the external stimuli which undercut the "me" from sustaining an engaged relation with the text and the reflection necessary to take the role of the text's author. Readers are suggestible. The reward is gratification. The reader becomes not engaged, but addicted. Readers cannot detach, that is, cannot put the printed book down without it disappearing.

According to Aristotle, a society can be judged according to how it pursues three lives: the life of activity, the life of enjoyment, and the life of contemplation. How do we judge our society in light of these changes we are discussing? As a cultural phenomenon, digital media influences the lives of people and the ways people pursue their lives. Digital media strengthens the life of activity and the life of enjoyment but weakens the life of contemplation. Socrates lamented the development of writing and the change from oral culture to written culture. Socrates feared that as people became dependent on written culture they would become less intelligent. He feared that the skills of people's memories would fade, and they would become

forgetful. Socrates, however, did not anticipate the benefits of written culture. Socrates did not anticipate that written culture would develop the labor of identifying with others, with others other than oneself and thus building a more broad, more universal self. Writing contributed to the growth of civilization.

There is an irony here. Although digital media is in part written culture, it represents a speedy return to oral culture. Oral culture celebrates and expresses the "I," the glorious and particular "I" of the speaker. Authors become speakers rather than writers. The character of this oral culture, though, is different from oral culture in ancient times. In ancient times, memory was crucial. In our times, memory is not crucial. Google remembers and records everything and, at the same time, makes everything available. While oral culture that digital media promotes produces a strong, glorious, unique "I," it is nevertheless an "I" that has not developed memory. It now is unnecessary to do so.

What is the fear behind the resistance to digital media? What principle supports the cultural lag? Why might we hold onto the advantages of print media? Does the waning of print media and the development of digital media result in the human race becoming less mindful? If so, what does this mean for civilization? One answer is wars and violence. Socrates, though, was fixated to the advantages of oral culture and could not anticipate the advantages of written culture. He could not take the role of what written culture offered humanity. Are there then advantages that I have not anticipated that the digital world will develop with respect to humanity? How do we best take the role of society itself as it changes from print media to digital media? How does digital media benefit humanity?

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