

Understanding how the internet has changed young people's attitudes to reading and what can be done about it.

1: The nature of the change

As a background to this paper, it has been known for many years that certain images presented alongside text can be particularly persuasive when one has the attention of a person – even when the images are largely irrelevant to the text and the audience very sophisticated.

In a classic study it was shown that reports of scientific research into brain activity which were accompanied by images of the brain (which had nothing in particular to do with the text) resulted in higher ratings of scientific reasoning for arguments made in those articles, as compared to articles accompanied by bar graphs, a topographical map of brain activation, or no image.

Thus we know that images can have an impact even when irrelevant and when aimed at a highly sophisticated audience already experienced in the subject matter.

However, it is now argued that other changes are making the power of images even greater and this is affecting even further the way people read and how they evaluate what they read.

There is also a suggestion (as yet unproven) that this change is accelerating and will become an increasingly important issue for educators at all levels in the coming months and years. Indeed, even if this change does not continue to evolve it already presents educators with a significant challenge. If it does continue to escalate its implications will force a radical re-think upon educators as to the way in which they present knowledge to both pupils and students.

At its most basic, educators in primary and secondary schools, colleges and universities, as well as employers working with employees aged under 25, are reporting a growing reluctance on the part of many pupils, students, and employees to read anything more than a few lines of text.

This does not mean that these people are illiterate – far from it. Give them any standard reading test and they will gain a range of scores similar to those of their predecessors. But

nevertheless they are showing signs of being unwilling (rather than unable) to read more than short sections of text.

In one way this change in approach to reading matter is something we can all comprehend simply by comparing the presentation of articles in newspapers of the late 19th century with those 120 years later. 19th century newspapers generally provided information in long streams of print with few paragraph breaks or miniature headlines. Today paragraphs in many newspapers are rarely more than a sentence or two long. There are thus many more breaks.

But both academic research and everyday observation suggests that this desire to have text broken into small chunks has now gone much further. And this presents everyone in the world of education with a challenge, because possessing the skills of literacy, along with the willingness (if not enthusiasm) to practise these skills both for work and for personal enjoyment, has long been seen to be a bedrock of education.

In short, if reading is no longer perceived by young people (and within this paper I mean people aged up to 25) to be of fundamental importance in their lives, everyone in education is faced with a challenge.

But worse, if it should be that in reality the practice of reading is something which many young people find they don't actually need in order to conduct their lives (because of the changing world in which they live), then the challenge is much, much greater.

However, I must stress that we are not talking here about people in schools, in further and higher education, and in work, who cannot read. We are considering young people who can read, but simply choose not to, in the same way that they might choose not to go to church or not to watch certain types of TV programmes. This is a change of lifestyle choice, and as such it can be incredibly difficult to overturn.

Such young people pose educators at all levels with a problem, for their view appears to be that they can get all the knowledge they need from non-literary sources, such as TV programmes, YouTube presentations, and websites where illustrations form a major part of the presentation. Also, as is suggested below, in some countries (although not for the moment in the UK) alternative approaches to the presentation of knowledge and entertainment have become as important as, or perhaps more important than, the book or article.

2: The academic research

The informal findings and suppositions noted above have been given greater weight by research carried out by psychologists at Sheffield Hallam University, who investigated how the presentation of information can determine how well students are able to memorise it.

Such studies, of course, have been at the heart of the work of those involved in the psychology of perception for years, but this research went further in seeking to determine whether one particular alternative to the traditional text book (in their case the comic book format) produced better results in terms of student memory.

It should be noted here that, although in the UK the comic book format is generally regarded as something for children and not worthy of consideration in academic circles, this is not the case in other parts of the world. In cultures as diverse as France, Singapore, and Japan the comic book format is considered as a form of education, information, and entertainment suitable for adults and children in a way that it is not considered in the UK. I shall return to this in a moment.

In the Sheffield study the researchers used undergraduate biopsychology material which explained the basics of sleep as test material for the 90 participants. The information was presented in three ways - comic book pages, text-only format, or text with incongruous images. Participants were then tested on the material using ten multiple-choice questions.

The results of the test showed significantly higher memory scores in the comic version compared with both the text-only and the incongruous comic version. The text-only version also showed significantly higher memory scores than the incongruous comic version. This last finding was to be expected and was inserted as a control mechanism. An incongruity between the pictures and the text would be expected to lead to confusion and a dropping in the level of focus and attention, and thus ultimately lower scores. The confirmation of this expectation suggested that the researchers were looking at a real effect in the finding that text plus comic style illustrations was the most effective learning mechanism.

Dr Paul Aleixo, senior lecturer in psychology at Sheffield Hallam University, said, "The findings of our research has provided evidence to support the idea of using comic books to create instructional materials such as text books. As we had hypothesised, memory scores were significantly higher in the comic condition than in the text-only condition."

A different approach has been outlined in the American journal *Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* where research has been cited to suggest that most of us simply do not know how (or even whether) our students read. (Links to each of these research programmes are to be found at the end of the article).

This research shows that there can be resistance to helping students beyond primary level to learn to read – it is considered to be “stooping too low” for a course to do this, rather than get on with its job of teaching the subject in hand. The argument is put that...

“How students read influences how they learn. In particular, in order for students to learn to read more deeply or on a higher level, they need to learn to read actively. While many scholars and teachers appear to take active reading for granted, possibly assuming students will come into such “study skills” on their own, I propose that we should make concerted efforts to help students understand and adopt such habits as underlining, writing comments in the margins, asking questions, rereading, and so forth.

“This can be tricky to do, since student reading happens (or does not happen) “out of sight” and often “out of mind” for us. But my experience has been that it pays off to find ways to bring our attention and our students’ attention to the act of reading.”

In another article Jenny Pickerill, professor in environmental geography at the University of Sheffield, told Times Higher Education magazine: “Students struggle with set texts, saying the language or concepts are too hard.

“I recently had a student suggest an alternative book for a module I am teaching which they found easier to engage with. It was a good book, but it was not really academic enough and I am still unsure if that matters or whether I should be recommending more readable books. There is currently a disjuncture between the types of reading we want students to engage with and the types students feel able or willing to do.”

Jo Brewis, Professor of Organisation and Consumption at Leicester University, also noted in an article that “graduates and postgraduate students seem mainly not to be avid readers.” Recommending whole books would overwhelm them, she added, and she tended not to do so.

The point here is that these reports coming from universities and colleges, are also relevant to teachers in schools in that, if people in their teens and twenties who have chosen to continue their education are unhappy with reading, or unwilling to read, in a way that their predecessors were not, then this is surely going to be an issue with school pupils and students who are at a much earlier stage of their educational careers.

However, there is a problem in having meaningful discussions on this topic, because the notion that students don’t feel comfortable reading can be perceived not as a result of technological and social changes, but as a pejorative statement and this can lead to immediate rejection. Minesh Parekh, Education Officer at University of Sheffield Students’ Union, said: “It’s just not true that students find reading whole books too challenging. The reason some students don’t read whole books isn’t because they struggle to, but because of

problems with how we're assessed, and the over-emphasis universities place on assessment.

"This over-emphasis on assessment—as opposed to genuine learning—means that when writing an essay or preparing for exams it makes more sense to read a journal article or a chapter of a book because we're not given the time or thinking space."

Chantelle Francis, Academic and Inclusions Officer for the Sheffield University English Society, said: "I would argue that it is the time constraints that students struggle with as opposed to the actual material in most cases. I'm sure that if students had longer to read a text, they'd likely understand it better, because they've had more time to engage with it and appreciate it. But to suggest that students' attention spans are low or that we are of insufficient ability is unfair."

Both arguments might be true, but we should note that they are presented not as academic arguments with the backup of evidence and data, but as socio-political viewpoints that fit with a pre-existing agenda. This does not make them untrue, but it does mean that we might care to be cautious in taking them as the key factors in the change that most people investigating the topic of reading among teens and twenties seem to agree is problematic.

However it is possible that we are looking at two different issues here. An undergraduate course such as English Literature has a typical reading list of between 20 and 30 books per term according to the University of Sheffield English Department. That might be considered a lot and so some students might skip some of this. But arguments from other departments where reading is important but less dominant an issue, are suggesting that students are simply not reading much at all and that their whole vision of what academic activity is, and what knowledge is, is changing.

3. How much do you think you know?

In a completely separate study undertaken at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, there was the finding that people in the study with access to the Internet reported feeling as though they knew less compared to the people without access. In one sense this is exactly the opposite of what we might assume. Surely, a person with access to all the information on the internet (who also would have access to libraries and their own books) should feel more informed than a person without the internet.

But it seems people are less willing to rely on their knowledge and say they know something when they have access to the Internet, suggesting that our connection to the web is affecting how we think about our own knowledge and how secure we are in terms of what we think we know.

Professor Evan F. Risko, of the Department of Psychology at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, led a study where the team asked about 100 participants a series of general-knowledge questions, such as naming the capital of a European country. Participants indicated if they knew the answer or not.

Half of the participants in the study had access to the Internet and were required to look up the answer when they responded that they did not know the answer. In the other half of the study participants did not have access to the Internet.

The team found that the people who had access to the web were about 5 per cent more likely to say that they did not know the answer to the question. Furthermore, in some contexts, the people with access to the Internet reported feeling as though they knew less compared to the people without access.

"With the ubiquity of the Internet, we are almost constantly connected to large amounts of information. And when that data is within reach, people seem less likely to rely on their own knowledge," said Professor Risko, Canada Research Chair in Embodied and Embedded Cognition.

In interpreting the results, the researchers speculated that access to the Internet might make it less acceptable to say you know something but are incorrect. It is also possible that participants were more likely to say they didn't know an answer when they had access to the web because online searching offers an opportunity to confirm their answer or resolve their curiosity, and the process of finding out is rewarding.

"Our results suggest that access to the Internet affects the decisions we make about what we know and don't know," said Risko. "We hope this research contributes to our growing understanding of how easy access to massive amounts of information can influence our thinking and behaviour."

4: Academic observations

Dr Drew Gray, Head of History at the University of Northampton, has also noted a decline in a willingness to read books by some undergraduates. As he recently said,

"Of course it does not apply to all students by any means, but we are definitely seeing in a growth in the number of students who are perfectly capable of understanding and responding to the issues raised by our undergraduate courses, but who simply do not want to engage in the depth of academic reading that a rigorous degree programme like ours requires.

“These students certainly have the intellectual capacity to gain a good degree, but unless we can overcome their aversion to reading books and academic articles, they will simply not be able to do justice to their abilities in their exams.”

This observation is important because it distinguishes between intelligence and willingness to read: two factors which are often seen to be closely linked. Indeed just as for many years young people with dyslexia were perceived to be less intelligent because of their inability to spell, so today’s students who are reluctant to read risk getting poor test and exam results at all levels because of their attitude towards reading, which in essence has nothing to do with their understanding of the subject they are studying.

Dyslexia is, of course, a genetic disorder, but what we could be seeing here is an entire lifestyle change where reading simply isn’t what these people do – or at least they don’t do it voluntarily or willingly. It doesn’t apply to everyone, but it applies to a growing number of young people, which means the issue becomes one of deciding whether educators will accommodate this social change, or argue that if young people won’t read, that is their problem not ours.

5: The impact of social media

One cannot say that social media has caused any change in readership – it may simply have evolved in relation to a change in attitude that was happening anyway (perhaps because of the change in the level of television watching by the generation that has had access to programmes via their own personal devices, rather than having to watch in a family sitting room).

But my own experimentation with the effect of different length commentaries on Facebook has repeatedly noted how readership and interaction is increased with a reduction in length of text. Indeed it is also noticeable that Facebook itself originally suggested to advertisers that they should have more illustration than text in their adverts. Now they insist that adverts should be at least 80% illustration.

Further, in the last four years we have seen that companies that are seeking a higher level of “likes” on Facebook are turning more and more to using comic strip format as their prime method of operation. We can’t put figures onto this growth – only Facebook would have that and the information is classified as confidential commercial data – but by and large advertisers make decisions based on results and do not change their approach unless the responses suggest they should. I believe we can conclude that they are clearly getting higher response rates to comic strip presentations than anything else.

Indeed research undertaken by my colleagues at Schools.co.uk has particularly noticed that articles on mental health, including those aimed at people suffering from mental health problems who are seeking ways of improving their lives, increasingly use the comic strip format. Again we do not have access to the commercially restricted data that has led to this view, but once more it is not unreasonable to assume that the evidence (which of course is instantly available when measuring who clicks on what on a website) must point in the direction of comic formats as the best way of providing information.

6: The experience of the comic style presentation in other countries

As has already been noted, the attitude towards comic style presentations in different countries is profoundly different. Research indicating which genre of book people are willing to read undertaken in England in 2013 and France in 2015 showed contrasting figures.

In France, according to a study conducted by the National Book Centre and Ipsos, 70% of French readers enjoyed novels, 55% practical books and 50% comics and mangas.

(Manga is a style of Japanese comic books and graphic novels which is different in form and style from western comics and is generally taken to be something of an acquired taste.)

In England, according to the report 'Booktrust Reading Habits Survey 2013: A national survey of reading habits and attitudes to books amongst adults in England', only 2% of English people said that they found graphic novels enjoyable to read.

7: Drawing conclusions

There is a contrast between the Booktrust survey of 2013, and the finding of academics in Sheffield, and the comments of Dr Gray at Northampton. There is also a contrast between the Booktrust findings and the trends observed on Facebook – trends which are remorselessly driven by results.

However it is possible that people answering the Booktrust survey were less inclined to admit a liking for the comic style because of its association with children's comics, and the fact that there are very few adult comics in the UK beyond the bounds of those now being found in Facebook.

We might also note that on 6 December 2016 the OECD's latest PISA survey was released which showed that Singapore and Japan were top of the literacy league. Both are countries where graphic novels are to be found much more readily than in England.

Conclusions

It is clear that saying “students don’t read” is considered a pejorative view of students, just as using a “comic” approach will be considered to be devaluing the content and pandering to the lowest academic levels by others.

This review suggests that there is evidence that the approach to reading among young people is changing radically and that this is a problem that needs to be examined.

We do not have definitive data to suggest what should be done to resolve this, but we do have some information to suggest that the use of graphic presentations can appeal to pupils and students and help them come to understand the topic they are studying more completely.

It also appears that putting the blame on students for not being willing to read or perhaps not being willing to put in the effort of “proper” study is not helpful in finding a way forward. Even if it were to be true there is no evidence that I can find that shows that simply telling pupils and students that they have to read actually changes anything. What is needed is a practical solution, and such evidence as we have suggests that the one practical solution on offer is to experiment further with adopting comic or graphic style presentations for pupils and students who are in this new generation of reluctant readers.

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