

VOICES



I screen, you screen, we all screen

By Alex Beam, Globe Staff | June 19, 2009

Do we read differently on the computer screen from how we read on the printed page? It's an interesting question.

Before hearing from the experts, let's review what we think we know. Even the best computer screens are harder on the eyes than the paper page is. Jakob Nielsen, a Web usability researcher, reports that we generally read 25 percent more slowly on the screen. I read more quickly on the screen and edit out about 40 percent of what appears before my eyes. If you haven't told me what you want by line four of your e-mail, trust me, I didn't get the message.

A Norwegian researcher, Anne Mangen, recently weighed in with an interesting paper in the *Journal of Research in Reading*, asserting that screen reading and page reading are radically different. "The feeling of literally being in touch with the text is lost when your actions - clicking with the mouse, pointing on touch screens, or scrolling with keys or on touch pads - take place at a distance from the digital text, which is, somehow, somewhere inside the computer, the e-book, or the mobile phone," Mangen writes.

Her conclusion: "Materiality matters. . . . One main effect of the intangibility of the digital text is that of making us read in a shallower, less focused way."

When writing about digital reading - blogger Danny Bloom is pushing the neologism "screening," for reading on the screen - Mangen, Nielsen, and others focus on the issue of distractibility. How can schoolchildren really read at computer terminals, scholars argue, knowing that more interesting Web pages are just a few clicks away? But don't dedicated reading devices like the Sony Reader or the Amazon Kindle change this equation?

Nielsen agrees that Kindle is trying to out-book the book. He argues that Kindle reading can be even more immersive than book reading: "All you are aware of is the next page, you don't get this feeling that you are coming to the end of the book. It's like being plunged directly into the author's content."

I asked Mangen via e-mail if she thought there might be a future convergence of Kindle reading and Gutenberg reading. "Reading digital text will always differ from reading text that is not digital (i.e., that has a physical, tangible materiality), no matter how reader-friendly and 'paper-like' the digital reading device (e.g., Kindle etc.)," she answered. "The fact that we do not have a direct physical, tangible access to the totality of the text when reading on Kindle affects the reading experience. When reading a book we can always see, and feel with our fingers and hands, our progress through the book as the pile of pages on the left side grows and the pile of pages on the right side gets smaller. At the same time, we can be absolutely certain that the technology [the book] will always work - there are no problems with downloading, missing text due to technical or infrastructure problems, etc."

She says the e-reader experience introduces "a degree of unpredictability and instability" that influences reading, even if we are not aware of it.

Two years ago, media critic William Powers wrote a romantic defense of the ancient medium I publish in. His essay, "Hamlet's BlackBerry: Why Paper Is Eternal," was widely quoted by journalists, of course. Mr. Paper - he not dead, Powers wrote: "There are cognitive, cultural, and social dimensions to the human-paper dynamic that come into play every time any kind of paper, from a tiny Post-It note to a groaning Sunday newspaper, is used to convey, retrieve, or store information."

Paper will never die, Powers concluded: "It becomes a still point, an anchor for the consciousness. It's a trick the digital medium hasn't mastered - not yet."

Two years ago, I might have agreed. If I had a daughter, yes, I would send out her wedding invitations on paper, not on Evite. (America has many daughters, hence a future for mail carriers.) But for books, magazines, and newspapers, “eternity” is a long time. When Kindle-like readers cost less than \$50 and the e-Ink technology is not just very good, but excellent, there may be more “screening,” and less reading, in our future.

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