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Reading in the Digital Age

Emilia Andreea Motoranu¹

Abstract: The objective of the article is to provide the fact that reading remains just as important even in the age of digitalization. As we can see, the line between learning time and screen time has become very blurred, reaching more than seven hours of connection per day on average. The article is built on concepts such as: education, reading, technology, society, digital. The article highlights in a unique way that reading provides a space for experiencing a broader, more intense present, for connecting with the world and others. Our article represents a public declaration of the benefits of reading for pleasure. The history of reading allows us to understand the modalities that result from them and the civilizational, anthropological and political aspects that now affect our societies. Humanity has invented nothing better than reading to structure thought, organize brain development, and civilize our relationship with the world; reading literally builds the child in its triple intellectual, emotional, and social components. The purpose of my article is to show how reading influence children's mental health, the education, the role of parents. The main methods used in the study are observation and case study. The results of the study highlight the fact that reading must be valued, that pleasure is the key to motivation, that books are now facing fierce competition from ubiquitous recreational screens. The article is important and valuable for teachers, parents, children, but also for scientists, researchers in social sciences and more, because it provides a clear picture of the changes that are taking place globally and a possible perspective on the future.

Keywords: reading; education; technology; society; future

1. Introduction

Reading provides a space for experiencing a broader, more intense present, for connecting with the world and others. Our article represents a public declaration of the benefits of reading for pleasure. Humanity has invented nothing better than reading to structure thought, organize brain development, and civilize our relationship with the world; reading literally builds the child in its triple intellectual, emotional, and social components.

By affirming the essential importance of reading for a child's development and emphasizing how much they need solid family support to become readers, this is in no way intended to stigmatize parents, much less to criticize them, make them feel guilty, or tell them how to raise their children. It is simply a matter of providing them with choices and, in doing so, nurturing their educational freedom.

¹ Assistant Professor, PhD, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, Address: 6 Piața Romană, Bucharest 010374, Romania, Corresponding author: emilia.motoranu@rei.ase.ro.



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2. The Decline of Reading

For over fifty years, the reading habits of younger generations have been intensely scrutinized and analyzed around the world.

Most children encounter books long before they can read. This takes many forms: shared reading, symbolic play, or the manipulation of graphic works. These encounters have a lasting and profound impact on a child's development. They lay the foundation for later uses by making books and reading part of daily habits. They then prepare the brain for the rigors of future formal learning by familiarizing the neural network with the constraints and peculiarities of the written world.

It all starts with excellent news: regardless of age or country, our children love having stories read to them. At least, this is what the overwhelming majority of them say, 85-95% of them agreeing with their parents. The general taste for shared reading is rooted in two factors: the first, emotional, concerns children; the second, more utilitarian, belongs to parents. The child's gender plays a significant role. Several studies suggest that shared reading is significantly more common among girls than boys.

It is now clearly demonstrated that the more household members (children or parents) are exposed to recreational screens, the less time is available for intrafamily interaction, including shared reading. For example, for children aged 0-5, a study found that each daily hour of television viewing erased forty to fifty minutes of human interaction.

As we have just seen, many parents explain that they stopped reading to their children to encourage their independence and stimulate their personal practice. The more a child is exposed to shared reading, the more likely they are to read independently, regardless of age.

3. The Child Reader

Now, we will examine the extent, nature, and evolution of reading practices for school-aged children. Almost all usage studies conducted on the subject are based on an extremely broad view of eligible content and media.

Initially, parents spend more time reading and telling stories when the child is female. "They then perpetuate the dynamic by encouraging girls to read more, even though it is boys who, on average, display the lowest reading time and the highest levels of difficulty" (Merga et al., 2018, p. 112).

Socioeconomic status plays a significant role. Thus, unsurprisingly, there are more readers in privileged backgrounds. It is less economic wealth than cultural capital that seems to make the difference. Readers are becoming fewer in number, but as they grow older, each survivor spends more time reading. Some will undoubtedly find that thirty minutes of daily reading isn't so bad after all.

Teens spend fourteen times more time on their digital toys than on reading; for preteens, the gap is close to ten times. Every day, twice as many 8- to 12-year-olds are exposed to audiovisual content (reality TV, music videos, series, films, videos, etc.) as to reading (84% versus 44%). The ratio rises to almost three times among 13- to 17-year-olds (86% versus 30%). At the heart of their intellectual, moral, social and emotional development, the new generations no longer invite Victor Hugo, Thomas Mann, Stefan Zweig, John Steinbeck, Marguerite Duras, Virginia Woolf or Simone de Beauvoir, but Cyril Hanouna, Dr House, Grand Theft Auto, Koh Lanta and Tik Tok. Surely, we will always find a few good souls to contest this kind of parallel and explain that we can very well use digital technology to read War and Peace in its electronic version, to scour Wikipedia or to gorge ourselves on educational videos dedicated to solving differential equations.

Already in 1972, a report published by the American Public Health Service reported that, “in adults, the purchase of a television led to an immediate drop in the time spent reading books (around 40%)” (Robinson, 1972, p. 105).

A few years later, in 1980, an experimental study extended the observation to children, indicating that primary schoolchildren subjected to restrictions on their audiovisual consumption spent less time watching television than their unconstrained counterparts, resulting in a significant increase in reading time.

It can be said that our children read little and that, when they do read, their choice readily deserts books in favor of magazines, manga or comics. In saying this, it is not a question of establishing a hierarchy of values between these activities; everyone reads what they want. It is simply a matter of emphasizing that these contents do not have the same characteristics, nor the same features, nor the same impacts: the potential contributions of a novel, a fashion magazine or a manga are structurally different. Many studies, which we will return to in the last two parts, have shown that “books have influences on the intellectual and language development of children that are much more significant and positive than other types of content” (Jerrim, 2019, p. 94).

Reading is a practice that continues to decline among the population.”An old trend, observable from the generations that followed the baby boomers, it is now reflected in a readership that has become particularly rare among the younger generations” (Lombardo, 2020).

No one is experiencing this widespread decline in reading more clearly than academia. As recent research indicates, students know it’s important to read, they know the professor expects them to read, and they know it will impact their grade, yet most of them still don’t read their textbooks. One might, of course, find, as one psychology master’s student told me, that reading 20 books a year is a lot.

Perhaps the most alarming scenario to emerge from the research points to the possibility of a recursive cycle of teaching producing large numbers of uninspired students, many of whom then become teachers struggling to inspire in their students a love of reading they (the teachers) never knew. Consistent with this fear, it has been shown that teachers who value literature the most are also the most adept at teaching it and instilling a love of reading in students.

4. Alarming Performance

In France, according to official figures from the Department of Evaluation, Perspectives, and Performance (DEPP), 21% of young people (16-25 years old) are struggling with their reading skills; 10% of whom are unable to read a simple text with comprehension. This percentage rises to 44% among middle school students who left school at the end of their compulsory education (at the age of 16 in France). In terms of academic assessment, the PISA program is by far the most comprehensive and advanced.

In 2009, several Asian countries joined the PISA program. The shock was brutal, and experts described it as a new Sputnik moment for the American education system. For example, in China, the rate of weak middle school students reached 17% compared to 42% in the United States (France was at 41%). Conversely, the proportion of advanced readers was 20% and 10% (9% for France).

For the past forty years, “Western nations have slowly shifted toward an economy of leisure, well-being, image, and consumption” (Fourquet, 2021, p. 88).

Our children are reading less and less, while spending more and more time gorging themselves on recreational screens. This has major consequences, let's repeat, on their language and attention skills, and therefore on their academic performance. In contrast to our decline, China seems to have maintained its course of rigor and discipline.

Unlike their Western counterparts, "Chinese parents instill demanding personal values in their children from an early age, focused on rigor, hard work, self-discipline, and excellence" (Chua, 2011). This explains why children in the Middle Kingdom read more than our Western offspring.

An ingredient that seems to be lacking in many of our children, if we are to believe this professor at the University of Brittany, whose angry email recently referred to "quasi-impaired" students, some of whom are unable to understand the meaning of a simple text and stutter while reading.

Our children's reading level is truly "impaired," if only we were willing to give this word its original meaning: "lacking strength." (CNRTL¹).

Our children's performance is alarming, but nothing is changing. Failing to ensure the development of their intelligence, we offer them devalued diplomas to maintain the illusion. Worse, we crystallize the disaster into a sort of inevitable trap that sees an entire generation of failing readers become teachers.

For decades, scientists have been interested in the fluency of silent reading behavior. Several variables can then be measured. The number of words read per minute offers the most comprehensive view. Technically, this parameter is, of course, calculated within the framework of preserved comprehension of the text read. Quantitatively, it increases with age and skill level. On average, a high school senior reads 1.2 times faster than a sixth-grade student. Strikingly, reading speed has declined considerably over the past fifty years. On average, a high school senior read 192 words per minute in 2011, 45 words less than their counterpart in 1960 (237): a drop of 19%. This phenomenon is all the more significant given that reading fluency is a global marker of text comprehension, academic success and educational level.

Over the past fifty years, the reading level of our children has declined, reaching an alarming low today. Society has adapted by cutting back on academic expectations, the complexity of textbooks, and the lexical richness of children's books.

Assessment after assessment, middle school students in the Middle Kingdom ridicule their non-Asian counterparts to a staggering extent. This superiority reflects the existence of strong and authoritarian political choices and, as demonstrated by the continued high level of overachievement among Chinese children who have emigrated to other countries, the persistence of firmly anchored cultural values based on rigor, excellence, hard work, and academic success. These values are increasingly distant from our Western lifestyles, now focused on leisure, consumption, and profit.

5. The Art of Reading

If our students display mediocre reading performance, it's because they suffer from an unequal school system, insufficiently involved teaching staff, chronic classroom indiscipline, and anxiety-inducing assessment methods focused on punishment.

Seemingly unaware of these realities, many parents seem to consider that a child knows how to read when they can decode, that is, when they manage, as we have said, to transform a sequence of arbitrary

¹ www.cnrtl.fr/definition/débile.

alphabetical symbols (f/a/t/h/e/r) into words (father). But reading is understanding; those who don't understand don't read.

Many students, mainly from disadvantaged backgrounds, have a reading level that is more or less satisfactory and in line with expectations until the third grade of elementary school; then suddenly these children begin to show a significant delay, which only increases with time. The most common explanation suggests that the early years of education are devoted to learning decoding, while later years increasingly focus on comprehension. This means that the words used are deliberately simple, presented in isolation or articulated in short sentences.

“The finding is consistent with the results of numerous studies showing that at the beginning of primary school, when the emphasis is placed on mastering decoding, the student's results depend relatively little on lexical and oral comprehension skills” (Paratore, 2011, p. 56).

The further a child progresses in school, the more their comprehension depends on linguistic and cultural background. By the end of middle school, the link between reading comprehension and decoding suddenly becomes irrelevant for reading, but this is because all students can more or less decipher words, and the limit of comprehension lies in the level of acquired knowledge.

If learning to read is long and difficult, it is largely because human evolution has not had time to integrate reading into the core of hereditary transmission. To reorganize its neural patterns and build appropriate networks, the brain needs to absorb industrial quantities of data. Our brain is not designed to read, play the piano, paint the Mona Lisa, or hit a tennis ball; but it is designed to learn.

Reading is a clear example of this intangible law. It's easy to forget this when you've reached a significant level of expertise, because everything has been automated and seems simple. Deciphering is no longer a constant battle, and except for a few particularly complex or highly specialized texts, comprehension emerges naturally. For the experienced reader, all that remains is a subjective sensation of fluency and intelligibility.

The problem is that by focusing so much on word identification, schools have ended up neglecting the grasp of meaning. To enrich language, writing has also, so to speak, played on its limitations. Whatever it seeks to depict, convey, or express, it can only rely on itself. Regardless of the nature of the narrative, regardless of whether the text deals with landscapes, battles, feelings, emotions, intrigue, sports, science, or ordinary lives, its transmission can only be achieved through words.

One cannot effectively approach a text without the necessary cultural prerequisites. In many cases, the reader's inability to understand that they don't understand results less from a lack of knowledge than from a functional deficiency—that is, an inability to grasp the deep structure of a text whose linguistic and factual material is nevertheless known.

The brain of the experienced reader is a highly precise jewel. Its construction is based on intense and patient practice that alone allows: to switch the neural network, genetically constructed and dedicated in newborns to the visual recognition of objects, into a “brace” for decoding written language; to provide the central actor of this brace (the brain area for word recognition) with the mass of big data it needs to automate its processing; to absorb enough linguistic and cultural knowledge to face the particular complexities of written worlds. Most children and teenagers are capable of deciphering a text, in the sense that they manage to read it aloud without too much apparent difficulty. Unfortunately, this does not mean that they know how to read. Decoding is to the reader what the racket is to the tennis player: an essential element but incapable of establishing expertise. In conclusion, we can say that only reading prepares one for reading.

6. A World Without Books

Books were born nearly four thousand years ago. Four thousand years is a long time, and few human creations can boast of having survived the ravages of time. Of course, the media have changed, from clay to papyrus, parchment, paper, and finally digital, but without any major impact on the original objective: to preserve our collective memory.

Books have now lost their privileged status. They are no longer, far from it, our only memory. Their contribution to the intergenerational process of cultural transmission continues to decline in favor of digital and audiovisual media. A major difference between books and the internet lies in the organization of content.

Books are much less demanding for the reader in the sense that they place all the research and structuring work on the author.

For centuries, books were defined as a collection of printed sheets of paper, forming a bound or paperback volume. Over the past decade or so, this concept has had to be reexamined to include the existence of non-print digital books. The concept of a digital book is typically used to encompass a wide variety of devices (tablets, e-readers, smartphones, computers, etc.) and content (books, comics, manga, etc.).

“Reading a physical book is a multi-sensory experience, much more so than reading the same work in digital form. The limited success of e-readers can likely be explained by their inability to recognize the importance of non-visual information in the reader’s experience” (Spence, 2020).

This is a difficult observation to deny, given that the sensory attributes of e-readers, tablets, and smartphones are sadly lacking compared to those of printed books. Thus, unlike the latter, e-books cannot be opened, touched, felt, or weighed. They have no smell, no shape, no discernible physical boundaries. Yet, without being dominant, these elements are significant sources not only of pleasure but also of information.

Even though books are considered by many to be a dusty archaism, they remain the learning medium best suited to our brain function. Their linear, pre-organized structure and their ability to engage attention give them a substantial advantage over audio or video media and the disjointed formats of the Internet, particularly for the assimilation of complex and demanding knowledge. Paper also greatly optimizes the benefits of shared reading by focusing adult-child interactions not on the functioning of the screen used, but on the verbal and narrative material of the text. Printed works remain the most effective option for wiring a child’s brain. As Umberto Eco, a great scholar if ever there was one, wrote, “The book is like the spoon, the coat, the wheel, or the scissors. Once you have invented them, you cannot do better” (Eco, 2009, p. 12).

Grégoire Borst, professor of psychology at the University of Paris-Cité, believes that: “Intelligence is changing. What I’m simply saying is that from the perspective of language and verbal intelligence, we can indeed see effects from a lack of reading and a number of other factors; on fluid intelligence, the capacity for reasoning independent of our verbal abilities, from this perspective, there is no decline” (Borst, 2023, p. 33). The new intelligence Mr. Borst promotes looks remarkably like a mutilated intelligence.

7. The Benefits of Reading

Language and knowledge are two fundamental pillars of human thought. Reading increases intelligence by developing our IQ, particularly in its verbal dimension. The following lines aim to demonstrate that this contribution of books to intelligence is unique and irreplaceable. In other words, children either read or are condemned to never develop their full intellectual potential.

It is quite logical that reading has a significant impact on verbal development. All areas are then affected, from vocabulary to grammar, including spelling.

Beyond vocabulary, the written word also harbors a high level of grammatical complexity. Books contain sentences that are significantly longer and more elaborate than their oral counterparts. Spelling has a close and reciprocal relationship with reading; learning to decode means learning the spelling of words. Consequently, the more children read, the more likely they are to acquire effective spelling.

For nearly forty years, numerous studies have compared the respective contributions of books, comics, newspapers, and magazines to language development. The results are surprisingly consistent. Books, primarily fiction, have a unanimously and strongly positive impact on the development of vocabulary, spelling, and reading skills.

The more a child reads, the more their general knowledge increases, and the more their general knowledge increases, the more they become capable of handling varied and demanding statements that can enrich their general knowledge. It encompasses all the knowledge without which an individual cannot effectively think about the world and assume their civic responsibility, which obviously adds up to a very long list: history, geography, philosophy, music, painting, cinema, literature, geopolitics, sports, religion, economics, etc.

Books have a positive effect on creativity, on the one hand by expanding the body of general knowledge and, on the other, by allowing greater imaginative freedom than audiovisual formats. Reading not only powerfully improves the writing skills of its readers, but also enhances their ability to express themselves orally in a clear and orderly manner.

A child who doesn't read books is irrevocably condemned to the platitudes of ordinary speech. They will never be able to build the lexical, syntactic, and orthographic foundations of advanced languages, so necessary for optimal thought.

8. Building the Future

Reading is like math, intelligence, and academic achievement. When a child seems to show signs of difficulty or reluctance, many parents explain that they are "not gifted," that it's "not their thing," that their youngest "can't do it, even though they were raised exactly like their sister who loves to read," etc.

"The more books a child lives with, the more they are encouraged to read, both directly in response to parental instructions and indirectly through a social learning mechanism, which promotes the reproduction of family behaviors" (Morni, 2013, p. 123).

In other words, the more a child is surrounded by books and readers, the more likely they are to read, read early, read widely, and ultimately read effectively.

Poor children struggle to obtain books suited to their needs and interests. For one thing, families cannot afford to buy books. For another, lending spaces are few and far between, poorly equipped, and difficult to access in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

The more a child reads, the greater their profits. First, the more a child reads, the more they increase their knowledge, and the more they increase their knowledge, the easier it is for them to acquire new knowledge. Second, the more a child reads, the greater their processing capacity and, ultimately, the faster they read (for a constant level of comprehension); which means that the same minute of reading will be significantly less prolific for sporadic readers than for avid readers.

Therefore, anything that improves academic performance can be considered highly desirable, provided it does not lead to the imposition of unreasonable and harmful psychological stress. Reading “for pleasure” meets this criterion. Its impact on academic success is powerful and unanimous.

Reading is the universal discipline upon which all others are built. Books enrich our entire humanity. Beyond reading, a child’s academic success also depends on their IQ, general knowledge, creativity, and socio-emotional intelligence. Reading has a beneficial effect on all of these areas.

The message is clear: the more children read, the greater their chances of having a favorable academic career and ultimately achieving more peaceful living conditions that align with their aspirations.

9. Conclusion. Making Children Readers

Reading is a social heritage whose transmission is not random and is based on three fundamental pillars.

At the first level, reading must be valued, that is, presented as a crucial and distinctive activity, based on the theme “we are a family of readers; this isn’t the case for all families, but here, reading is important; it’s one of the things that defines us.” The goal is for children to integrate this reality into their identity early on, until they perceive and present themselves as readers. These days, many people see themselves as gamers (video game players) and display a strong sense of community. The idea here is to encourage children to feel like readers and be proud of it. Naturally, to achieve this, parental communication is essential. We must encourage children, congratulate them when they read, emphasize again and again the generosity of reading, insisting on the fact that it makes us grow, enlightens us, makes us intelligent, helps us understand the world, others and ourselves.

Second, what brings us to this is pleasure. It all starts with shared reading. Most parents do an excellent job because the overwhelming majority of children enjoy having stories read to them. Pleasure is the key to motivation, and success is the main foundation of pleasure. For a child to become a reader, you must dedicate time to talking to them, playing with them around language, and reading them stories.

Which brings us to the third point: digital technology. Books are now facing fierce competition from ubiquitous recreational screens. For nearly forty years, these have gradually depleted reading time, and more specifically, book reading time. At the time of writing, both books and reading have lost the battle for leisure time. The best solution is to explain to children what is true: that too much screen time is detrimental to intelligence, sleep, concentration, health, and academic performance, and that it is necessary to limit the daily amount of screen time.

Reading enhances us individually and collectively through its ability to enrich all fundamental aspects of our humanity. In this context, the younger generations’ refusal to read will not be without impact on our common future. In the long run, this trend will cost us much more than a few authors, publishers, librarians, booksellers, and scholars. It will cost us a precious part of our soul, our history, our ability to understand the world.

Before closing, it is perhaps worth recalling, one last time, that culture, language, intelligence, empathy, and tolerance are the fundamental foundations of our humanity, both personal and collective. Without

these roots, barbarism, hatred, and the rejection of others and their differences can only triumph. Reading shapes our cognitive, emotional, and social intelligence.

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