The Abysmal State of Reading Habits in America

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Abstract

What is the current state of personal reading habits in America? Reading for pleasure is declining amongst the popularity of alternate forms of entertainment presented by technology. However, reading is important and can provide benefits for the reader without he or she even realizing. It is obvious that technology has had an effect on the act of reading, but is the effect good or bad?

While technology has provided alternative forms of entertainment, reading a physical book still holds prescience over electronic books and audiobooks, which signifies that there is something special about the act of reading a physical book. Reading literature is important and the decline in reading amongst Americans has yielded unfavorable results with no sign of improvement.

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What is the current state of reading in America? This is a broad question that can seem insignificant. With the presence of movies, social media, and television, reading is often traded in for these easier forms of entertainment. This can be seen as simply a way of adapting to the times. However, people’s reading habits can have either beneficial or detrimental effects on both their education and abilities. People are often skeptical of technology and its negative effects, which means it is important to establish that there is a real problem before assessing these negative effects. In order to do so, the researcher sought to answer this question: is there a decline in pleasure reading among Americans? The answer seems to answer this question with a definite yes, which then allows for a justified analysis of technology and its effects on people’s reading habits. In America, the amount of time people devote to reading literature is rapidly declining due to technology, and this decline is negatively affecting people reading and writing habits.

After observing the decline of reading for pleasure in a selection of individuals, the researcher decided to conduct a study in order to assess the reading habits of Americans and their change over the past few decades. As the first step to assessing the reading habits of America, the researcher gave a survey to a class at Dalton State College in order to gain information about the reading habits of college students. Since the college study only contained respondents between the ages of nineteen and twenty-five, the researcher conducted a Facebook survey to acquire responses with a wider age range. Each survey inquired about the respondent’s reading habits by asking them about the time they spend each week reading for pleasure and how many books they have read in the past 12 months. These questions were asked in order to gain a baseline for the reading habits among Americans. The survey also contained questions about the
use of electronic books and audiobooks opposed to physical books. These questions were asked in order to assess the effect of technology on people’s reading habits. If Americans are truly reading less, this could have devastating effects in the workplace. In order to assess these issues, the researcher conducted an interview with Brittany Stolaski, the head of the editing department at Wilkins Research Services. This interview included questions about the patterns in reading and writing that she has observed over the years through her process of testing applicants for the editing team. After establishing the current state of American reading habits, the researcher obtained studies that address the issue and articles that observe the effects of the changing status of people’s reading habits in order to make these results applicable to everyone. The search for studies was limited to the changes seen in the last twenty years.

While opinions differ on the effects of technology on people’s reading habits, scholars seem to be in agreement that reading for pleasure is decreasing in popularity. A study conducted by Leddy (2008) revealed that reading for pleasure among 17-year-olds is down 9% since 1984. Perrin (2016b) observed that this statistic was not exclusive to teenagers in his observation that leisure reading among adults is down by 10% since 1982. The college survey echoed these results with only three out of twelve respondents listing reading as one of their top two leisure activities (College Survey, personal communication, 2017). In the college survey, the researcher also found that students spend an average of 3.25 hours a week reading for pleasure (College Survey, personal communication, 2017). This average was taken from the staggering answers given by respondents (see Figure 1). In the Facebook survey, which provided a wider range of respondents ranging in age from 19 to 56, only one person out of ten listed reading as one of their top two leisure activities, which yielded an average of 1.5 hours a week of leisure reading on average (Facebook Survey, personal communication, 2017).
While this may seem a small change, this can have devastating effects on people’s reading and writing abilities. Rosen (2009) observed that 38% of employers claimed that their employees were deficient in reading skills while 72% say they are deficient in writing skills. In an interview with Brittany Stolaski, the head of the editing department at Wilkins Research Services, revealed similar sentiments. Stolaski is in charge of testing applicants for the editing team. The test includes and writing and typing test. When the researcher inquired about the results of these tests and their consistency over the years, Stolaski revealed the decline she has seen over the years: “In the ten years I have been doing this job, I have seen a decline in the results of both the reading and writing tests. People are thrown off by seemingly simple tasks and their level of formality is increasingly lowering to the level of conversation. Formal speech and writing have become almost non-existent” (Brittany Stolaski, personal communication, 2017). Mrs. Stolaski’s observation echoes the percentages that Rosen observed.
The reason for this decline seems to be technology because of the way it changes the process of reading and the way it is shaping people’s mindsets. Rosen (2009) claims that technology has shortened attention spans by providing abbreviation as the preferred alternative while also providing distraction. Rosen (2009) also observes that the image culture brought about by technology has caused people to grow accustomed to information that is easily accessible and digestible while reading requires more involvement and commitment. However, technology has provided an alternative reading experience through the production of electronic books and audiobooks. In his study, Perrin (2016a) said that electronic book readership is up by 11% since 2011 with most of the readership consisting of college students, which suggests that technology might bring in more modern readers. However, technology is far from replacing the act of reading a physical book. In the college survey, 83% of the respondents prefer a physical book to an electronic book or an audiobook with respondents claiming that they focus better on a physical book (College Survey, personal communication, 2017). In the Facebook survey, all of the respondents claimed to prefer a physical book to an electronic book or audiobook (Facebook survey, personal communication, 2017). These echo the findings of Perrin (2016a), who found that Americans are twice as likely to pick up a physical book than an electronic book and four times as more likely to do so over an audiobook.

The college survey confirms the observations made by scholars about the decline of reading for pleasure. While a majority of the respondents claimed to like reading, the average hours a week spent reading for pleasure was extremely low (an average of 3.25 hours) with a majority of the students claiming they had not read an entire book for pleasure in the past year (College Survey, personal communication, 2017). However, the students were asked to eliminate class reading, which takes up a student’s time and can therefore account for a bit of their lack of
pleasure reading. However, the Facebook survey, which consisted mostly of respondents without college degrees, showed that the respondents spent an average of 1.5 hours a week reading for pleasure, which is less than half of the average rate of the college students. Therefore, the time constraint does not appear to be the main factor in reading habits. However, this difference in background makes comparisons difficult. Future studies can observe the reading habits of college graduates before and after college in order to better deduce the reading habits of college student and graduates and compare them to people without college degrees. This would eliminate the time availability difference.

With the cause being technology and the change to an image-based way of thinking, the effects for these declines in pleasure reading are evident in the reading and writing deficiencies shown in the workforce. Technology has abbreviated information to such a degree that longer and more difficult sources of information are losing popularity. More importantly, people seem to be losing their ability to undertake the task of reading more difficult pieces of literature. As Mrs. Stolaski and Rosen observed, these deficiencies are showing up in the workforce in the form of deficiencies in reading and writing and an inability to engage in formal reading and writing. The alarming percentages and observations of a workforce that is deficient in reading and writing serve as evidence that people are having less exposure to reading and writing, which statistics show in the decrease of reading for pleasure among Americans.

While the loss of pleasure reading seems to be a small loss to many Americans, it can have serious consequences that are already appearing in Americans today. Research shows a steady decline in reading habits among Americans in the last two decades, which is echoed by both college students and people who did not graduate college. With other distractions made readily available by technology, reading literature is losing its popularity and is being traded in
for abbreviated texts and easy to digest information. However, with less exposure to text and
different writing styles, people can end up deficient in both reading and writing abilities. If the
reading habits of Americans continue to dwindle, these deficiencies will only grow in frequency
as people desire to read literature and harder to digest forms of information. However,
technology has not eliminated or taken the place of the action of reading physical books. While
electronic books are easily accessible and might bring in younger readers, a majority of people
still prefers a physical book when they choose to read. This suggests that there is something
about reading a physical book that sets it apart. When reading on a tablet that also provides easier
forms of entertainment, it is easy to be distracted. However, when reading a physical book, it
provides a different experience, and this experience is one that should be preserved in order to
carry on the long-running tradition of reading literature and to preserve the reading and writing
abilities of Americans that are currently declining.
References


