

It's the end of reading as we know it

By Hannah James



Our obsession with technology has affected our ability to read long-form books.

I COULD say I'm blonde. I could say I'm a Brit who fled the rain for the lucky country a decade ago. I could say I'm a traveller, a writer, a horserider, a hiker, a lover of wild places and loud music, and silk shirts and pink lipstick. But mostly, if called to describe myself, I say I'm a reader.

There are family legends about how lost in books I became as a child. Deaf to calls to the dinner table, I read for hours lying on my belly on the lawn, or sprawled, a tiny human trip hazard, up the stairs. I read in the car, at friends' houses, while walking. Aged seven, I attempted — unsuccessfully, would you believe — to read in the shower. Sponge-like, I absorbed the emotions of my favourite characters, unable to disentangle my real world from my book world.

When I went to university at Oxford, I stood inside the time-hallowed hush of the Bodleian Library and discovered — with a half-thrilled, half-horrified shiver — that stretching beneath me were miles of underground stacks filled with literally millions of books. During my three years of study, I honestly believe I made a good dent.

Reading is Marcel Proust's "divine pleasure", Stephen King's "uniquely portable magic", Nora Ephron's "escape, and the opposite of escape". In one of my favourite books about books, *How Reading Changed My Life*, author Anna Quindlen said, "Books are the plane, and the train, and the road. They are the destination, and the journey. They are home."

These days, I read for my job; I read for pleasure. I read on the train and the bus, at traffic lights, while cooking (sometimes), while eating (almost always). I listen to audiobooks when I run or hike. When I went travelling for six months, I bought a Kindle, knowing I couldn't rely on the tattered flotsam of hostel bookshelves.

And yet, in the past few years, something has shifted. Once I would sink into a book for hours at a time, but now I struggle to read for more than 10 minutes without a distraction. You know what I'm going to say because you do it, too. I grab my phone.

In Australia 89 per cent of the population own a smartphone, and we restlessly tab from one mode of absorbing information to another; juggling phones, laptops, tablets, the TV. We notice how much shorter our attention spans are and wonder if our brains have been rewired by the ever-available, never-ending distractions of the internet.

Researchers have been sounding this alarm for years. As far back (in internet time) as 2008, Nicholas Carr wrote an article for *The Atlantic* entitled 'Is Google Making Us Stupid?' He later expanded it into a book, *The Shallows: What The Internet Is Doing To Our Brains*.

The movable feast of the ever-present internet, he warned, "is so much our servant that it would seem churlish to notice that it is also our master".

He mourned: "Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a jet ski."

It's true: our attention spans, say researchers examining brain scans, have shortened. Frequent internet users show heightened activity in the prefrontal cortex, used for information processing, memory and decision-making. When activity is high here, we're skim-reading. This isn't what Maryanne Wolf calls "deep reading" in *Proust And The Squid: The Story And Science Of The Reading Brain*, or sophisticated comprehension and analysis, but the rapid assessment of vast quantities of information, followed by almost instantaneous forgetting. But is this damaging or simply efficient?

“We know that the brain has a lot of plasticity, and that staring at screens for long periods of time can change your brain,” explains professor Anthony Hannan, from The Florey Institute of Neuroscience and Mental Health.

“People who use digital technologies such as the internet a lot, which continually shift the user’s focus, may develop a reduced attention span.”

Not only that, but the “Google effect” erodes our memories. Studies show our brains outsource the task of remembering facts, knowing that most information is only a few keystrokes (or a spoken question) away. We also retain less information when we read on a screen rather than on paper. That’s leaving aside the whole problem of “digital addiction” and the possibly associated rise in depression and anxiety disorders, and the sheer guilt of knowing our lives are slipping away while we stare at our phones.

REACTING TO NEW TECHNOLOGY WITH MORAL PANIC ISN’T NEW

Yet while all this paints a bleak picture, and while technology has doubtless infiltrated our lives at an extraordinary rate in recent decades, it’s nothing new.

Humans relentlessly pursue invention, yet we’ve always reacted to new technologies with moral panic. Both Plato and Socrates complained about the invention of writing – they believed (correctly) it would damage our memories.

Every advance has been greeted with hand-wringing about the death of communication and the social graces: the printing press; the telegraph; the telephone; the movies; and now the internet. Last I looked, though, we all still speak to each other.

The reports of the death of the book are certainly exaggerated. Last year saw the first increase in Australian book sales for years, and Amazon has joined forces with online retailer The Book Depository to begin shipping Australian titles locally, indicating an undiminished literary appetite.

Reading, we tend to forget, was invented only a few thousand years ago, and isn’t an innate skill. It’s a tribute to our brains’ plasticity that we ever learn how to read, and reading itself changes our brains forever.

“Large amounts of time doing anything, including reading a book, can rewire aspects of the brain,” agrees Prof Hannan.

Lifelong reader, literary journalist and author of *By The Book: A Reader's Guide To Life*, Ramona Koval cheerfully admits: "I'm a tech-head." Really?

"I love my weather app, my trip planner app, my Kindle. I'm not hung up on the olden days," she says. "Certainly, we are distracted by all the machines we've got, but I was always a bit distracted anyway. I think we'll get used to the input of information."

She reads online for work and, like me, loves her Kindle when travelling. But, "I still adore lying on the couch with a book."

In many ways, Koval believes, nothing has changed: "We're wired for stories. It's the way we think, it's the way we learn about the world. A good story well told is what we love, whether it's sitting around the fire in the Stone Age listening to someone speak, or reading on paper and now on screen."

Jennifer Byrne, host of the ABC's First Tuesday Book Club, is also sanguine about the impact of technology on our reading habits.

"You know what? It's a choice. There's always time — you just choose what to fill your time with."

The devoted reader isn't immune to the charms of the net: "I, too, idle parts of my day away — I must admit I have a softness for Solitaire and Words with Friends — and I, too, have spent time chasing what Cate Blanchett was wearing or what Beyoncé said about Jay Z. But I seriously don't think it's diminished my attention span. It's really simple, but if you want to retain your attention span, you've got to read more than tasty little chunks. If you choose to go down the internet rabbit hole, that's your call. The books won't stop because of you."

It really is that simple. To read more books, read more books. "We can't reverse technological advances," explains Prof Hannan, but the good news is, "None of this is hardwired." The brain can recover. The "deep reading" neural pathways we've allowed to grow over can be cleared. Nothing has been lost forever. We can always pick up a book and find our way back home.

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