



Long Live the Printed Book: Lego, Ergo Sum!

A Review of

Words Onscreen: The Fate of Reading in a Digital World

by Naomi S. Baron

New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015. 304 pp. ISBN

978-0-19-931576-5. \$24.95

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0039451>

Reviewed by

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It's 5:30 a.m. I glance at my e-mail. I see an interesting article in *Inside Higher Education* (Woodhouse, 2015) about the ways that faculty and administrators (fail to) communicate during difficult financial times. I power browse. I read enough of it to decide it is worth passing on to my Twitter followers and to my university's administrators. I also email it to myself in case I want to print it later. Perhaps, if I remember, I'll actually do so and read it more carefully, in much more depth—and in full. Perhaps. My Facebook feed alerts me to an April 27th article by Oliver Sacks (2015a) about Spaulding Gray's brain injury. I make a mental note to read it in its entirety as soon as I receive my printed copy of the magazine (and to buy and read his new memoir *On the Move* [Sacks, 2015b] recently reviewed in *The New York Times* [Kakutani, 2015]). Alas, I have a pile of printed copies of *The New Yorker* by my bedside—pages crimped with partially read, thought-provoking, articles. Reading sometimes is my soporific. I pass the information about the Sacks article via Facebook to former students who might enjoy it. I know that many will "like" it. I suspect that fewer may actually read it and that most will read it online. I wonder whether digital reading is a different reading experience for them. It definitely is different for me.

In the course of this past hour's "reading" I am interrupted or distracted several times: an alert from my online journaling software cajoles me to update my online diary; a quick visit to Google to validate my Latin translation of "I read, therefore I am." I make a totally unnecessary digression to a Lego web page. I meander to my blog page to see if my students have read the article I posted there. I try to catch up on recent e-mail, skimming messages for the essence of their content and making a quick judgment about the importance of my responding in depth or, more likely, my responding with a few succinct words. So much to read; so little time.

It is 6:30 a.m. now and time to load my books into the car and drive to campus. I pop an audio book into the CD player, but quickly eject it—unfinished after almost a year—to instead listen to NPR.

I am an avid reader (lego, ergo sum!). Sitting on my laptop are 56 (neglected) books in Kindle format, and 16 (forgotten) e-books in other formats. Why do I neglect or fail to reread them? Naomi S. Baron provides some thoughtful, well-considered answers to my questions and insight into my earlier behavior.

Turn off your electronic devices (which, I confess—I initially did not!) and read, reread, annotate, and reflect on the ideas in this insightful book about the past, present, and future of printed and digital reading. What a pleasure it was to read! The author writes well, thinks clearly, carefully defines terms, and informs and entertains the reader as she addresses important questions. What is a book? How has the definition of a book changed with the advent of digital reading devices? How has the nature of reading (once a private experience) changed with online, social reading experiences (e.g., discussion books and online reviews)? What do modern neuroimaging tools and eye-movement tracking devices reveal about similarities and differences of reading online versus from a traditional printed book? How much of the social media “hype” about hyper attention, hyper-reading, brain plasticity and multi-tasking is in fact supported by good empirical research? What reading platform do users prefer? Which users? Why do they show that preference? Are computers and portable reading devices changing how we read? How we write? Does the reading medium (“platform”) matter? Is one reading platform better suited for only some kinds of reading (e.g., lengthy versus short)? For some kinds of readers (e.g., young versus older)? How prevalent is e-reading? How has the amount of e-reading changed across time relative to the amount of reading hard copy? Are these trends likely to continue? Why is online reading preferred by some readers but not by others? What are the relative advantages and disadvantages of physical versus digital books? Are there cultural differences in their relative preference? Generational differences? Gender differences? Is the printed book doomed for extinction? Is the near future of the printed book accurately described by the classic YouTube “Medieval Help desk” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQHx-SjgQvQ>)?

In 10 short, well-documented (over 723 page notes, over 264 references) chapters, Naomi S. Baron carefully addresses these questions and more. The author’s sharing of personal reading and teaching experiences made me laugh, smile and realize that I am not alone in my concerns about the effect of technology on my own reading behavior and that of my students. Her own cross cultural surveys of reading medium preferences of university-age respondents provide a valuable context for the conclusions she draws about the likely fate of the printed book. She makes compelling arguments that though digital reading devices have many advantages (convenience, open access, potential cost savings) they may be more suitable for skimming rather than reading in depth, for power browsing rather than reading and rereading in depth. The author has a witty, wry, self-deprecating sense of humor, and uses clever turns of phrase as she makes trenchant well-considered points. She clearly and fairly articulates the “affordances” of print versus screen and provides a much needed, balanced perspective. She understands the limitations of her data and the rapidly changing nature of technological tools. The book aids in informed discussion of other recent books raising issues of how the Internet and technology is affecting our lives (Carr, 2011; Gardner & Davis, 2013; Terkle, 2012).

This is clearly a book to be shared, to be saved, and to be savored in its printed version. Almost every page of my copy now is adorned with marginal notes, underlining, and comments. I shall widely recommend it to anyone concerned about critical thinking (she models it so well), how reading has changed, and the future of the book as we once knew it.

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