In August, the company that owns Reader’s Digest filed for bankruptcy protection. The magazine, first cobbled together with scissors and paste in a Greenwich Village basement in 1922 by De Witt Wallace and his wife, Lila, was a novel experiment in abridgement—in 62 pages, it offered Americans condensed versions of current articles from other periodicals. The formula proved wildly successful, and by midcentury Reader’s Digest was a publishing empire, with millions of subscribers and ventures including Reader’s Digest Condensed Books, which sold abridged versions of best-selling works by authors such as Pearl Buck and James Michener. Reader’s Digest both identified and shaped a peculiarly American approach to reading, one that emphasized convenience, entertainment, and the appearance of breadth. An early issue noted that it was “not a magazine in the usual sense, but rather a co-operative means of rendering a time-saving device.”

The fate of Reader’s Digest would have been of interest to the late historian and Librarian of Congress Daniel Boorstin. In his renowned 1962 book The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America, Boorstin used Reader’s Digest as an example of what was wrong with a culture that had learned to prefer image to reality, the copy to the original, the part to the whole. Publications such as the Digest, produced on the principle that any essay can be boiled down to its essence, encourage readers to see articles as little more than “a whiff of literary ectoplasm exuding from print,” he argued, and an author’s style as littered with unnecessary “literary embellishments” that waste a reader’s time.

Today, of course, abridgement and abbreviation are the norm, and our impatience for information has trained even those of us who never cracked an issue of Reader’s Digest to prefer 60-second news cycles to 62 condensed pages per month. Free “aggregator” Web sites such as The Huffington Post link to hundreds of articles from other publications every day, and services such as DailyLit deliver snippets of novels directly to our e-mail in-boxes every morning.

Our willingness to follow a writer on a sustained journey that may at times be challenging and frustrating is less compelling than our expectation of being conveniently entertained. Over time, this atti-
Intrepid readers browse the charred Holland House library after a London air raid in 1940.

tude undermines our commitment to the kind of “deep reading” that researcher Maryanne Wolf, in 
*Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (2007), argues is important from an early age, when readers learn to identify with characters and to “expand the boundaries of their lives.”

As Boorstin surveyed the terrain nearly half a century ago, his overarching concern was that an image-saturated culture would so distort people’s sense of judgment that they would cease to distinguish between the real and the unreal. He criticized the creation of what he called “pseudo-events” such as politicians’ staged photo-ops, and he traced the ways in which our pursuit of illusion transforms our experience of travel, clouds our ability to discern the motivations of advertisers, and encourages us to elevate celebrities to the status of heroes. “This is the appealing contradiction at the heart of our passion for pseudo-events: for made news, synthetic heroes, prefabricated tourist attractions, homogenized interchangeable forms of art and literature (where there are no ‘originals,’ but only the shadows we make of other shadows),” Boorstin wrote. “We believe we can fill our experience with new-fangled content.”

Boorstin wrote *The Image* before the digital age, but his book still has a great deal to teach us about the likely future of the printed word. Some of the effects of the Internet appear to undermine Boorstin’s occasionally gloomy predictions. For example, an increasing number of us, instead of being passive viewers of
images, are active participants in a new culture of online writing and opinion mongering. We comment on newspaper and magazine articles, post our reviews of books and other products online, write about our feelings on personal blogs, and bombard our friends and acquaintances with status updates on Facebook. As the word migrates from printed page to pixilated screen, so too do more of our daily activities. Online we find news, work, love, social interaction, and an array of entertainment. We have embraced new modes of storytelling, such as the interactive, synthetic world of video games, and found new ways to share our quotidian personal experiences, in hyperkinetic bursts, through microblogging services such as Twitter.

Many observers have loudly and frequently praised the new technologies as transformative and democratic, which they undoubtedly are. But their widespread use has sparked broader questions about the relevance and value of the printed word and the traditional book. The book, like the wheel, is merely a technology, these enthusiasts argue, and thus we should welcome improvements to it, even if those improvements eventually lead to the book’s obsolescence. After all, the deeply felt human need for storytelling won’t fade; it will merely take on new forms, forms we should welcome as signs of progress, not decay. As Boorstin observed in the foreword to the 25th-anniversary edition of The Image, “We Ameri-

This Is Your Brain on the Web

As scientists begin to bear down on the cognitive differences between reading online and off, they are discovering that the two activities are not the same at all. Numerous studies have shown that we don’t so much read online as scan. In a series of studies from the early 1990s until 2006, Jakob Nielsen, a former Sun Microsystems engineer, and Don Norman, a cognitive scientist, tracked the eye movements of Web surfers as they skipped from one page to the next. They found that only 16 percent of subjects read the text on a page in the order in which it appeared. The rest jumped around, picking out individual words and processing them out of sequence. “That’s how users read your precious content,” Nielsen cautions Web designers in his online column. “In a few seconds, their eyes move at amazing speeds across your Web site’s words in a pattern that’s very different from what you learned in school.”

Nielsen recommends that designers create Web sites that are easy to comprehend by scanning: one idea per paragraph, highlighted keywords, and objective-sounding language so readers don’t need to perform the mental heavy-lifting of determining what’s fact and what’s bias or distortion.

It is particularly hard to hold readers’ attention online because of all the temptations dangled before them. Psychologists argue that our brains are naturally inclined to constantly seek new stimuli. Clicking on link after link, always looking for a new bit of information, we are actually revving up our brains with dopamine, the overlord of what psychologist Jaak Panksepp has called the “seeking system.” This system is what drives you to get out of bed each day, and what causes you to check your e-mail every few minutes; it’s what keys you up in anticipation of a reward. Most of your e-mail may be junk, but the prospect of receiving a meaningful message—or following a link to a stimulating site—is enough to keep your brain constantly a bit distracted from what you’re reading online.

What are the effects on the brain of all this distraction? Scientists are only beginning to answer this question. A recent study by three Stanford researchers found that consummate multitaskers are, in fact, terrible at multitasking. In three experiments, they were worse at paying attention, controlling their memories, and switching between tasks than
cans are sensitive to any suggestion that progress may have its price.”

Our screen-intensive culture poses three challenges to traditional reading: distraction, consumerism, and attention-seeking behavior. Screen technologies such as the cell phone and laptop computer that are supposedly revolutionizing reading also potentially offer us greater control over our time. In practice, however, they have increased our anxiety about having too little of it by making us available anytime and anywhere. These technologies have also dramatically increased our opportunities for distraction. It is a rare Web site that presents its material without the clutter of advertisement, and a rare screen reader who isn’t lured by the siren song of an incoming e-mail’s “ping!” to set aside her work to see who has written. We live in a world of continuous partial attention, one that prizes speed and brands the false promise of multitasking as a solution to our time management challenges. The image-driven world of the screen dominates our attention at the same time that it contributes to a kind of experience pollution that is challenging our ability to engage with the printed word.

The digital revolution has also transformed the experience of reading by making it more consumer

those who prefer to complete one task at a time. Clifford Nass, one of the researchers, says, “They’re suckers for irrelevancy. Everything distracts them.” Unable to discriminate between relevant material and junk, multitaskers can get lost in a sea of information.

The things we read on the Web aren’t likely to demand intense focus anyway. A survey of 1,300 students at the University of Illinois, Chicago, found that only five percent regularly read a blog or forum on politics, economics, law, or policy. Nearly 80 percent checked Facebook, the social networking site.

Maryanne Wolf, director of the Center for Reading and Language Research at Tufts University, says it’s not just what we read that shapes us, but the fact that we read at all. She writes, “With [the invention of reading], we rearranged the very organization of our brain, which in turn expanded the ways we were able to think, which altered the intellectual evolution of our species.” When children are just learning to read, their brains show activation in both hemispheres. As word recognition becomes more automatic, this activity is concentrated in the left hemisphere, allowing more of the brain to work on the task of distilling the meaning of the text and less on decoding it. This efficiency is what allows our brains the time to think creatively and analytically. According to Wolf, the question is, “What would be lost to us if we replaced the skills honed by the reading brain with those now being formed in our new generation of ‘digital natives’?”

In the end, the most salient difference isn’t between a screen and a page but between focused reading and disjointed scanning. Of course, the former doesn’t necessarily follow from opening a book and the latter is not inherent to opening a Web browser, but that is the pattern. However, that pattern may not always hold true. Google, for example, recently unveiled Fast Flip, a feature designed to recreate the experience of reading newspapers and magazines offline. Other programs, such as The New Yorker’s digital edition or The New York Times’ Times Reader 2.0, have a similar purpose, allowing readers to see on the screen something much like what they would normally hold between their two hands. And with the Kindle and other e-readers quickly catching on, we may soon find that reading in the future is quite like reading in the past.

Until such innovations move into wider use, the surest bet for undistracted reading continues to be an old-fashioned book. As historian Marshall Poe observes, “A book is a machine for focusing attention; the Internet is [a] machine for diffusing it.”

—Rebecca J. Rosen
oriented. With the advent of electronic readers (and cell phones that can double as e-readers), the book is no longer merely a thing you purchase, but a service to which you subscribe. With the purchase of a traditional book, your consumer relationship ends when you walk out of the bookstore. With a wirelessly connected Kindle or iPhone, or your Wi-Fi–enabled computer, you exist in a perpetual state of potential consumerism. To be sure, for most people reading has never been a pure, quasi-monastic activity; everyday life has always presented distractions to the person keen on losing herself in a book. But for the first time, thanks to new technologies, we are making those distractions an integral part of the experience of reading. Embedded in these new versions of the book are the means for constant and elaborate demands on our attention. And as our experience with other screen media, from television to video games to the Internet, suggests, such distractions are difficult to resist.

Finally, the transition from print reading to screen reading has increased our reliance on images and led to a form of “social narcissism” that Boorstin first identified in his book. “We have fallen in love with our own image, with images of our making, which turn out to be images of ourselves,” he wrote. We become viewers rather than readers, observers rather than participants. The “common reader” Virginia Woolf prized, who is neither scholar nor critic but “reads for his own pleasure, rather than to impart knowledge or correct the opinions of others,” is a vanishing species. Instead, an increasing number of us engage with the written word not to submit ourselves to another’s vision or for mere edification, but to have an excuse to share our own opinions.

In August, Stanford University released preliminary results from its Stanford Study of Writing, which examined in-class and out-of-class writing samples from thousands of students over five years. One of the study’s lead researchers, Andrea Lunsford, concluded, “We’re in the midst of a literacy revolution the likes of which we haven’t seen since Greek civilization.” The study found that 38 percent of their writing occurred outside the classroom. But as Emory University English professor Mark Bauerlein pointed out in a blog post on The Chronicle of Higher Education’s Web site, this so-called revolution has not translated into concrete improvements in writing skills as measured by standardized tests such as the ACT; nor has it led to a reduction in the number of remedial writing courses necessary to prepare students for the workplace. Of greater concern was the attitude students expressed about the usefulness of writing: Most of them judged the quality of writing by the size of the audience that read it rather than its ability to convey ideas. One of the most prolific contributors to the study, a Stanford undergraduate who submitted more than 700 writing samples ranging from Facebook messages to short stories, told the Chronicle that for him a class writing assignment was a “soulless exercise” because it had an audience of one, the professor. He and other students in the study, raised on the Internet, consistently expressed a preference for writing that garnered the most attention from as many people as possible.

Our need for stories to translate our experience hasn’t changed. Our ability to be deeply engaged readers of those stories is changing. For at least half a century, the image culture has trained us to expect the easily digestible, the quickly paced, and the uncomplicated. As our tolerance for the inconvenient or complex fades, images achieve even more prominence, displacing the word by appealing powerfully to a different kind of emotional sensibility, one whose vividness and urgency are undeniable but whose ability to explore nuance are not the same as that of the printed word.

What Boorstin feared—that a society beholden to the image would cease to distinguish the real from the unreal—has not come to pass. On the contrary, we acknowledge the unique characteristics of the virtual world and have eagerly embraced them, albeit uncritically. But Boorstin’s other concern—that a culture that craves the image will eventually find itself mired in solipsism and satisfied by secondhand experiences—has been borne out. We follow the Twitter feeds of protesting Iranians and watch video of Michael Jackson’s funeral and feel connected to the rest of the world, even though we lack context for that feeling and don’t make much effort to achieve it beyond logging on. The screen offers us the illusion of
participation, and this illusion is becoming our preference. As Boorstin observed, “Every day seeing there and hearing there takes the place of being there.”

This secondhand experience is qualitatively different from the empathy we develop as readers. “We read to know we are not alone,” C. S. Lewis once observed, and by this he meant that books are a gateway to a better understanding of what it means to be human. Because the pace is slower and the rewards delayed, the exercise of reading on the printed page requires a commitment unlike that demanded by the screen, as anyone who has embarked on the journey of an ambitiously long novel can attest. What the screen gives us is pleasurable, but it is not the same kind of experience as deeply engaged reading; the “screen literacy” praised by techno-enthusiasts should be seen as a complement to, not a replacement of, traditional literacy.

Since the migration of the word from page to screen is still in its early stages, predictions about the future of print are hazardous at best. When Time magazine named “YOU!” its person of the year in 2006, the choice was meant as a celebratory recognition of our new digital world and its many opportunities for self-expression. We are all writers now, crafters of our own images and creators of our own online worlds. But so far this power has made us less, not more, willing to submit ourselves to the singular visions of writers and artists and to learn from them difficult truths about the human condition. It has encouraged us to substitute images and simplistic snippets of text for the range, precision, and peculiar beauty of written language, with its unique power to express complex and abstract ideas. Recent surveys by the National Endowment for the Arts reveal that fewer Americans read literature for pleasure than in the past; writers of serious fiction face a daunting publishing market and a reading public that has come to prefer the celebrity memoir to the new literary novel.

There is a reason that the metaphor so often invoked to describe the experience of reading is one of escape: An avid reader can recall the book that first unlocked the door of his imagination or provided a sense of escape from the everyday world. The critic Harold Bloom has written that he was forever changed by his early encounters with books: “My older sisters, when I was very young, took me to the library, and thus transformed my life.” As Maryanne Wolf notes, “Biologically and intellectually, reading allows the species to go ‘beyond the information given’ to create endless thoughts most beautiful and wonderful.”

The proliferation of image and text on the Internet has exacerbated the solipsism Boorstin feared, because it allows us to read in a broad but shallow manner. It endorses rather than challenges our sensibilities, and substitutes synthetic images for our own peculiar form of imagination. Over time, the ephemeral, immediate quality of this constant stream of images undermines the self-control required to engage with the written word. And so we find ourselves in the position of living in a highly literate society that chooses not to exercise the privilege of literacy—indeed, it no longer views literacy as a privilege at all.

In Essays on His Own Times (1850), Samuel Taylor Coleridge observed, “The great majority of men live like bats, but in twilight, and know and feel the philosophy of their age only by its reflections and refractions.” Today we know our age by its tweets and text messages, its never-ending litany of online posts and ripostes. Judging by the evidence so far, the content we find the most compelling is what we produce about ourselves: our tastes, opinions, and habits. This has made us better interpreters of our own experience, but it has not made us better readers or more empathetic human beings.
Three Tweets for the Web

Welcome the new world with open arms—and browsers.

BY TYLER COWEN

The printed word is not dead. We are not about to see the demise of the novel or the shuttering of all the bookstores, and we won’t all end up on Twitter. But we are clearly in the midst of a cultural transformation. For today’s younger people, Google is more likely to provide a formative cultural experience than The Catcher in the Rye or Catch-22 or even the Harry Potter novels. There is no question that books are becoming less central to our cultural life.

The relative decline of the book is part of a broader shift toward short and to the point. Small cultural bits—written words, music, video—have never been easier to record, store, organize, and search, and thus they are a growing part of our enjoyment and education. The classic 1960s rock album has given way to the iTunes single. On YouTube, the most popular videos are usually just a few minutes long, and even then viewers may not watch them through to the end. At the extreme, there are Web sites offering five-word movie and song reviews, six-word memoirs (“Not Quite What I Was Planning”), seven-word wine reviews, and 50-word minisagas.*

The new brevity has many virtues. One appeal of following blogs is the expectation of receiving a new reward (and finishing off that reward) every day. Blogs feature everything from expert commentary on politics or graphic design to reviews of new Cuban music CDs to casual ruminations on feeding one’s cat. Whatever the subject, the content is replenished on a periodic basis, much as 19th-century novels were often delivered in installments, but at a faster pace and with far more authors and topics to choose from. In the realm of culture, a lot of our enjoyment has always come from the opening and unwrapping of each gift. Thanks to today’s hypercurrent online environment, this is a pleasure we can experience nearly constantly.

It may seem as if we have entered a nightmarish attention-deficit culture, but the situation is not nearly as gloomy as you have been told. Our culture of the short bit

*Not everything is shorter and more to the point. The same modern wealth that encourages a proliferation of choices also enables very long performances and spectacles. In the German town of Halberstadt, a specially built organ is playing the world’s longest concert ever, designed to clock in at 639 years. This is also the age of complete boxed sets, DVD collector’s editions, extended “director’s cut” versions of movies, and the eight- or sometimes even 10-year Ph.D. But while there is an increasing diversity of length, shorter is the trend. How many of us have an interest in hearing more than a brief excerpt from the world’s longest concert?
is making human minds more rather than less powerful.

The arrival of virtually every new cultural medium has been greeted with the charge that it truncates attention spans and represents the beginning of cultural collapse—the novel (in the 18th century), the comic book, rock 'n' roll, television, and now the Web. In fact, there has never been a golden age of all-wise, all-attentive readers. But that's not to say that nothing has changed. The mass migration of intellectual activity from print to the Web has brought one important development: We have begun paying more attention to information. Overall, that's a big plus for the new world order.

It is easy to dismiss this cornucopia as information overload. We've all seen people scrolling with one hand through a BlackBerry while pecking out instant messages (IMs) on a laptop with the other and eyeing a television (I won't say "watching"). But even though it is easy to see signs of overload in our busy lives, the reality is that most of us carefully regulate this massive inflow of information to create something uniquely suited to our particular interests and needs—a rich and highly personalized blend of cultural gleanings.

The word for this process is "multi-tasking," but that makes it sound as if we're all over the place. There is a deep coherence to how each of us pulls out a steady stream of information from disparate sources to feed our long-term interests. No matter how varied your topics of interest may appear to an outsider, you'll tailor an information stream related to the continuing "stories" you want in your life—say, Sichuan cooking, health care reform, Michael Jackson, and the stock market. With the help of the Web, you build broader intellectual narratives about the world. The apparent disorder of the information stream reflects not your incoherence but rather your depth and originality as an individual.

My own daily cultural harvest usually involves listening to music and reading—novels, nonfiction, and Web essays—with periodic glances at the New York Times Web site and an e-mail check every five minutes or so. Often I actively don't want to pull apart these distinct activities and focus on them one at a time for extended periods. I like the
The Future of the Book

blend I assemble for myself, and I like what I learn from it. To me (and probably no one else, but that is the point), the blend offers the ultimate in interest and suspense. Call me an addict, but if I am torn away from these stories for even a day, I am very keen to get back for the next “episode.”

Many critics charge that multitasking makes us less efficient. Researchers say that periodically checking your e-mail lowers your cognitive performance level to that of a drunk. If such claims were broadly correct, multitasking would pretty rapidly disappear simply because people would find that it didn’t make sense to do it. Multitasking is flourishing, and so are we. There are plenty of lab experiments that show that distracting people reduces the capacity of their working memory and thus impairs their decision making. It’s much harder to show that multitasking, when it results from the choices and control of an individual, does anyone cognitive harm. Multitasking is not a distraction from our main activity, it is our main activity.

Consider the fact that IQ scores have been rising for decades, a phenomenon known as the Flynn effect. I won’t argue that multitasking is driving this improvement, but the Flynn effect does belie the common impression that people are getting dumber or less attentive. A harried multitasking society seems perfectly compatible with lots of innovation, lots of high achievers, and lots of high IQ scores.

With the help of technology, we are honing our ability to do many more things at once and do them faster. We access and absorb information more quickly than before, and, as a result, we often seem more impatient.

If you use Google to look something up in 10 seconds rather than spend five minutes searching through an encyclopedia, that doesn’t mean you are less patient. It means you are creating more time to focus on other matters. In fact, we’re devoting more effort than ever before to big-picture questions, from the nature of God to the best age for getting married and the future of the U.S. economy.

Our focus on cultural bits doesn’t mean we are neglecting the larger picture. Rather, those bits are building-blocks for seeing and understanding larger trends and narratives. The typical Web user doesn’t visit a gardening blog one day and a Manolo Blahnik shoes blog the next day, and never return to either. Most activity online, or at least the kind that persists, involves continuing investments in particular long-running narratives—about gardening, art, shoes, or whatever else engages us. There’s an alluring suspense to it. What’s next? That is why the Internet captures so much of our attention.

Indeed, far from shortening our attention spans, the Web lengthens them by allowing us to follow the same story over many years’ time. If I want to know what’s new with the NBA free-agent market, the debate surrounding global warming, or the publication plans of Thomas Pynchon, Google quickly gets me to the most current information. Formerly I needed personal contacts—people who were directly involved in the action—to follow a story for years, but now I can do it quite easily.

Sometimes it does appear I am impatient. I’ll discard a half-read book that 20 years ago I might have finished. But once I put down the book, I will likely turn my attention to one of the long-running stories I follow online. I’ve been listening to the music of Paul McCartney for more than 30 years, for example, and if there is some new piece of music or development in his career, I see it first on the Internet. If our Web surfing is sometimes frantic or pulled in many directions, that is because we care so much about so many long-running stories. It could be said, a bit paradoxically, that we are impatient...
Another way the Web has affected the human attention span is by allowing greater specialization of knowledge. It has never been easier to wrap yourself up in a long-term intellectual project without at the same time losing touch with the world around you. Some critics don’t see this possibility, charging that the Web is destroying a shared cultural experience by enabling us to follow only the specialized stories that pique our individual interests. But there are also those who argue that the Web is doing just the opposite—that we dabble in an endless variety of topics but never commit to a deeper pursuit of a specific interest. These two criticisms contradict each other. The reality is that the Internet both aids in knowledge specialization and helps specialists keep in touch with general trends.

The key to developing your personal blend of all the “stuff” that’s out there is to use the right tools. The quantity of information coming our way has exploded, but so has the quality of our filters, including Google, blogs, and Twitter. As Internet analyst Clay Shirky points out, there is no information overload, only filter failure. If you wish, you can keep all the information almost entirely at bay and use Google or text a friend only when you need to know something. That’s not usually how it works. Many of us are cramming ourselves with Web experiences—videos, online chats, magazines—and also fielding a steady stream of incoming e-mails, text messages, and IMs. The resulting sense of time pressure is not a pathology; it is a reflection of the appeal and intensity of what we are doing. The Web allows you to enhance the meaning and importance of the cultural bits at your disposal; thus you want to grab more of them, and organize more of them, and you are willing to work hard at that task, even if it means you sometimes feel harried.

It’s true that many people on the Web are not looking for a cerebral experience, and younger people especially may lack the intellectual framework needed to integrate all the incoming bits into a meaningful whole. A lot of people are on the Web just to have fun or to achieve some pretty straightforward personal goals—they may want to know what happened to their former high school classmates or the history of the dachshund.

“It’s still better than watching TV” is certainly a sufficient defense of these practices, but there is a deeper point: The Internet is supplementing and intensifying real life. The Web’s heralded interactivity not only furthers that process but opens up new possibilities for more discussion and debate. Anyone can find space on the Internet to rate a product, criticize an idea, or review a new movie or book.

One way to understand the emotional and intellectual satisfactions of the new world is by way of contrast. Consider Mozart’s opera Don Giovanni.

The music and libretto express a gamut of human emotions, from terror to humor to love to the sublime. With its ability to combine so much in a single work of art, the opera represents a great achievement of the Western canon. But, for all Don Giovanni’s virtues, it takes well over three hours to hear it in its entirety, perhaps four with an intermission. Plus, the libretto is in Italian. And if you want to see the performance live, a good seat can cost hundreds of dollars.

Instead of experiencing the emotional range of Don Giovanni in one long, expensive sitting, on the Web we pick the moods we want from disparate sources and assemble them ourselves. We take a joke from YouTube, a terrifying scene from a Japanese slasher movie, a melody from iTunes, and some images—perhaps our own digital photos—capturing the sublime beauty of the Grand Canyon. Even if no single bit looks very impressive to an outsider, to the creator of this assemblage it is a rich and varied inner experience. The new wonders we create are simply harder for outsiders to see than, say, the...
The Future of the Book

fantastic cathedrals of Old Europe.

The measure of cultural literacy today is not whether you can “read” all the symbols in a Rubens painting but whether you can operate an iPhone and other Web-related technologies. One thing you can do with such devices is visit any number of Web sites where you can see Rubens’s pictures and learn plenty about them. It’s not so much about having information as it is about knowing how to get it. Viewed in this light, today’s young people are very culturally literate indeed—in fact, they are very often cultural leaders and creators.

To better understand contemporary culture, consider an analogy to romance. Although many long-distance relationships survive, they are difficult to sustain. When you have to travel far to meet your beloved, you want to make every trip a grand and glorious occasion. Usually you don’t fly from one coast to another just to hang out and share downtime and small talk. You go out to eat and to the theater, you make passionate love, and you have intense conversations. You have a lot of thrills, but it’s hard to make it work because in the long run it’s casually spending time together and the routines of daily life that bind two people to each other. And of course, in a long-distance relationship, a lot of the time you’re not together at all. If you really love the other person you’re not consistently happy, even though your peak experiences may be amazing.

A long-distance relationship is, in emotional terms, a bit like culture in the time of Cervantes or Mozart. The costs of travel and access were high, at least compared to modern times. When you did arrive, the performance was often very exciting and indeed monumental. Sadly, the rest of the time you didn’t have that much culture at all. Even books were expensive and hard to get. Compared to what is possible in modern life, you couldn’t be as happy overall but your peak experiences could be extremely memorable, just as in the long-distance relationship.

Now let’s consider how living together and marriage differ from a long-distance relationship. When you share a home, the costs of seeing each other are very low. Your partner is usually right there. Most days include no grand events, but you have lots of regular and predictable interactions, along with a kind of grittiness or even ugliness rarely seen in a long-distance relationship. There are dirty dishes in the sink, hedges to be trimmed, maybe diapers to be changed.

If you are happily married, or even somewhat happily married, your internal life will be very rich. You will take all those small events and, in your mind and in the mind of your spouse, weave them together in the form of a deeply satisfying narrative, dirty diapers and all. It won’t always look glorious on the outside, but the internal experience of such a marriage is better than what’s normally possible in a long-distance relationship.

The same logic applies to culture. The Internet and other technologies mean that our favorite creators, or at least their creations, are literally part of our daily lives. It is no longer a long-distance relationship. It is no longer hard to get books and other written material. Pictures, music, and video appear on command. Culture is there all the time, and you can receive more of it, pretty much whenever you want.

In short, our relationship to culture has become more like marriage in the sense that it now enters our lives in an established flow, creating a better and more regular daily state of mind. True, culture has in some ways become uglier, or at least it would appear so to the outside observer. But when it comes to how we actually live and feel, contemporary culture is more satisfying and contributes to the happiness of far more people. That is why the public devours new technologies that offer extreme and immediate access to information.

Many critics of contemporary life want our culture to remain like a long-distance relationship at a time when most of us are growing into something more mature. We assemble culture for ourselves, creating and committing ourselves to a fascinating brocade. Very often the paper-and-ink book is less central to this new endeavor; it’s just another cultural bit we consume along with many others. But we are better off for this change, a change that is filling our daily lives with beauty, suspense, and learning.

Or if you’d like the shorter version to post to your Twitter account (140 characters or less): “Smart people are doing wonderful things.”
The Battle of the Books

In the long history of the book, the mass-produced volumes of our time constitute only a single chapter. More remain to be written.

BY ALEX WRIGHT

In 1704, Jonathan Swift imagined a literary contest for the ages, in the form of a “battle of the books” between the Ancients and the Moderns in the royal library at St. James, where the works of Aristotle, Virgil, and other classical giants were struggling to maintain their place on the shelves against a barbarous onslaught of new books, pamphlets, journals, and other literary ephemera. Almost 300 years before the first Web browser appeared, Swift seems to have anticipated the age of information overload. Imagine what Swift might have made of our present era, when every year human beings disgorge an amount of data equivalent to more than 30,000 times the contents of the Library of Congress? Perhaps the closest corollary to Swift’s heroic Ancients today may be our old ink-on-paper books, those time-honored relics whose cultural supremacy now seems under siege by a binary blitzkrieg of blogs, tweets, social networks, and other emerging forms of digital dross.

Scarcely a day goes by without some writer or other penning a wistful rumination on the decline of books in the digital age. The usual culprits include all things Internet, of course, but also the consolidation of the publishing industry, the decline of modestly selling midlist books in favor of blockbusters, the shuttering of newspaper book review sections, and so on. Whatever the causes and conditions, one fact seems clear enough: Books are on the decline.

From 2007 to 2008, the number of U.S. book titles fell by three percent, to 275,232. While that scarcely qualifies as a Detroit-scale meltdown, it nonetheless represents a painful contraction for an industry that has historically operated on paper-thin profit margins. So it should come as no surprise that the Web has ushered in wave upon wave of literary hand-wringing.

Almost invariably, the defenders of the book invoke a passing golden age that dates back to Johannes Gutenberg’s invention of moveable type. The conventional narrative goes something like this: Before Gutenberg, books were locked away in the monasteries, available only to the educated few; after Gutenberg, printed books—liberated from the confines of the monastic scriptoria—spread like wildfire across Europe, the Age of Reason dawned, and there followed a halcyon era of literary harmony.
The Future of the Book

Alas, like many “golden ages,” the golden age of books turns out to be an oversimplified historical conceit. Books as we know them today—mass-produced popular literature in the form of novels, nonfiction, and other “trade” publications—certainly owe a debt to Gutenberg, but they may owe even more to the Industrial Revolution, during which a confluence of social, economic, and technological change created the conditions that gave rise to the modern book trade. And just as 19th- and 20th-century books took shape in the crucible of industrialization, so their 21st-century descendants are starting to reflect a long-term historical shift away from the manufacturing economy and toward a postindustrial society. We are entering the age of the postindustrial book.

Until the early 19th century, producing a book remained a costly proposition—less costly than generating an illuminated manuscript by hand, to be sure, but far more costly than, say, publishing a dime novel. Books were typically printed one sheet at a time on corkscrew presses that had barely changed in the 400 years since Gutenberg was alive; then they were carefully folded into quartos and octavos, stitched together, and bound by hand. While a handful of books—such as the Bible—received widespread distribution, most were published in small batches. Often, a wealthy book buyer contracted with a printer to buy the pages of a book, then have the pages bound by a professional binder in a custom cover that would signal the buyer’s social standing. For many buyers, books served as status objects as much as they did vehicles for personal enlightenment.

The age of the modern book began in 1810, when a German inventor named Friedrich Koenig patented a steam-powered press that for the first time could create a printed page through mechanical means. In 1833, the American engineer Richard Hoe improved on Koenig’s machine with a rotary press that could turn out millions of pages in a single day, helping to spawn the penny press that dominated American journalism for much of the 19th century. A Victorian information explosion was under way.

By the middle of the century, books, magazines, pamphlets, and all manner of printed artifacts were sluicing through the literary mills, as publishers turned out new literary products at an astonishing rate. Popular novels, how-to books, cookbooks, pamphlets, and modern textbooks all came into their own during this period thanks to the economics of mass production.

In 1800, the library of the British Museum (precursor to the modern British Library) held 48,000 volumes. By 1833 the collection had quintupled, to more than a quarter-million. By 1900, it had surpassed four million (still a far cry from the 150 million items in today’s collection).

Thomas Carlyle, then probably the most famous writer in England, railed against the rapid proliferation of cheap literature. He detested the popularization of literature, which libraries were accumulating with an “eye to the prurient appetite of the great million, [furnishing] them with any kind of garbage they will have. The result is melancholy—making bad worse—for every bad book begets an appetite for reading a worse one.”

Carlyle’s complaint hardly seems out of place today. But from this great literary effluvia emerged some of the jewels of European literature. Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, William Wordsworth, and other popular writers of the day might never have found their audiences if not for the advances of the industrial age. Yet this was also the age that gave rise to cheap, mass-produced pornography, “penny dreadfuls” (such as Sweeney Todd), and thousands of forgotten pulp novels.

How did industrialization shape the modern book? First, the technologies of mass production meant that texts could be standardized. Whereas at one time small publishers had turned out books in modest runs for scholars and bourgeois readers, now the economics of production demanded a more market-driven sensibility. Books no longer went from author to printer to buyer. Now they had to move through the stages of industrial production: acquisition of raw materials, manufacturing, marketing, distribution, and sales. The growth of the book industry thus spawned a vast literary supply chain in the form of literary agents, publishing houses, libraries, public schools, scholarly societies—an interlocking system of institutional gatekeepers that would control the production of literary capital for the next 150 years.
Today, the industrial model of publishing is undergoing a rapid reconfiguration. In a world where anyone can publish freely—and millions do—the old supply chain is coming undone, as publishers see both their economic power and their cultural authority erode. Institutional gatekeepers are giving ground to bottom-up, self-organizing networks of readers and writers.

While the Internet has a great deal to do with these changes, it may be instructive to take a deeper look at the historical forces at work. In 1974 Daniel Bell predicted the rise of the postindustrial society, correctly forecasting the decline of the manufacturing sector and the rise of a service-based economy. Francis Fukuyama has since argued that this era might more accurately be dubbed the information society, as individuals begin to take advantage of new information technologies to renegotiate their relationships with institutions. Trust in institutions has steadily eroded in recent decades; meanwhile, new technologies are providing consumers with the means to create and remix their own cultural artifacts.

As the means of production pass into consumers’ hands, book buyers are demanding more control over
what they read and how they read it. Just as the music industry has seen a rapid disruption of its supply chain as listeners increasingly bypass record companies to interact with musicians and with other fans over the Web—streaming music and sharing files—so readers can now exercise unprecedented control over their choice of reading materials and delivery mechanisms.

While the removal of gatekeepers may create a short-term boon for consumers, the rapid disruption of a long-established economic system is wreaking havoc with the livelihoods of those who depend on the old ways of doing business, such as editors, literary agents, and pressmen. Meanwhile, the creators—musicians, writers, and artists—have started searching for new revenue sources in the online economy.

This is not to say that ink-on-paper books are about to disappear. Last year, even as the total number of books sold declined, the number of print-on-demand titles—books stored electronically and committed to paper on an as-needed basis in small batch runs or even just one by one—more than doubled from the year before, to 285,394. Textbook publishers, for example, now produce custom editions for individual school districts to support local permutations of educational standards. And the growth of public-domain literary repositories such as Project Gutenberg, a long-running volunteer initiative that has digitized more than 30,000 out-of-copyright books, has made vast swaths of classic literature freely available to anyone with a Web browser and a printer.

The Web has also given would-be authors a direct pipeline to industrial-scale printing technology, thanks to self-publishing services such as XLibris, Lulu, Blurb, and iUniverse. Using these services, anyone with a credit card can publish a professional-looking book with custom layouts, typefaces, color printing, dust jackets, cover blurbs, ISBN numbers, and even an order page on Amazon.com, where authors can peddle their newly minted books in

In the 19th century, the invention of the mechanical printing press revolutionized publishing. Men feed paper into a 10-cylinder revolving newspaper press, conceived by engineer Richard Hoe, in this 1847 engraving.
The Future of the Book

printed form or offer a Kindle download—all without the intervention of agents, editors, or publicists.

The book, then, is becoming less of a fixed industrial commodity and more of a fluid entity on the network, capable of flowing into any number of vessels—paper, Web browsers, eBooks, iPhones—depending on a particular confluence of author, reader, and technology.

Given these permutating platforms, it’s natural to wonder at what point a book is no longer, well, a book. The U.S. Postal Service defines a book as a “bound publication having 24 or more pages, at least 22 of which are printed and contain primary reading material, with advertising limited only to book announcements.” What, then, of a book purchased on a Kindle, which doesn’t count pages, but only words? Or an out-of-print title found on Google Books, accompanied by keyword advertising in a corner of the screen? What of the Buffy the Vampire aficionados who upload their fan fiction to the Buffy Fiction Archive (http://archive.shriftweb.org)? Perhaps our definition of what constitutes a “book” needs to evolve.

Even traditional mass-produced books now come to market in an increasingly open, networked environment where their fates are determined not by newspaper reviewers alone, but also by the collective judgment of readers on Amazon and social networking sites such as GoodReads, LibraryThing, and Shelfari, where visitors upload and share lists of books in their libraries, post reviews and ratings, and find like-minded readers, all in a vast Borgesian labyrinth of visible hyperlinks.

As the Web continues to evolve, spurring the transition from mass-market economies of scale to bottom-up networks of interlinked communities, so the book is changing from a fixed unit of commerce into a virtual marker of social capital. Book authors can now measure their success not just in terms of royalties, but also in terms of Google PageRank, Twitter followers, blog traffic, and other forms of attention that not only boost their egos but in some cases lead indirectly to monetary

THE BOOK IS BECOMING a fluid entity that can flow into any number of vessels—paper, Web browsers, eBooks, or iPhones.

Even as the book’s technological underpinnings shift, however, the book itself still seems to take shape in readers’ minds as a kind of platonic object, regardless of the delivery mechanism. In other words, it is more than just a string of text. There is a kind of “thingness” to it (to borrow a term from a colleague, New York Times design director Tom Bodkin). Thingness means more than physical solidity; it implies a certain fixity of time, space, and meaning—a stable reference point in an increasingly ephemeral world of electronic texts. As more and more data get lost in the great miasma of the Web, readers may come to assign growing value to the comforting virtues of thingness.

That value may not always translate into hard sales, however. Even as publishers, clinging desperately to the old industrial model of mass production, manufacturing, marketing, sales, and distribution. Now we live in an era when the old model is coming unhinged and the product lines are contracting (GM scrapping its underperforming brands, publishers paring their midlists to focus on a dwindling number of bestsellers) as consumers exert more choice in a post-industrial economy.

For decades, the major publishers functioned something like the big car companies, turning out the literary equivalent of production-line products. Sure, there were products targeted at particular market segments (Ford Escorts and Stephen King for the masses, Volvo wagons and Joyce Carol Oates for the MFA set), but by and large they relied on the old industrial model of
compensation (such as invitations to speak at conferences). In his 2003 novel *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*, science fiction writer Cory Doctorow coined the term “whuffie,” an imaginary currency based on reputation. In the postindustrial economy, whuffie is the coin of the realm.

Whuffie alone doesn’t pay the bills—as any working author can attest—but the virtual currency of attention and reputation can nonetheless translate into real money: Nonfiction authors who master the art of online self-promotion may parlay their whuffie into speaking fees, consulting gigs, and other forms of paying work. Successful fiction writers, meanwhile, often supplement their dwindling publishers’ advances by accepting teaching positions in the booming market for MFA programs and writing workshops. For many writers, the book is more than just their “product”; it is becoming a totem of accomplishment, a form of social capital that gains its creator entrée to other opportunities.

So will the old dust-jacketed hardcover give way to a virtual facsimile, traded in an ephemeral economy of attention? Not entirely, at least not anytime soon. Some 275,000 titles in print form are unlikely to disappear overnight. But alongside them, a new kind of book is likely to emerge: a unit of intellectual capital that develops from the bottom up, through a dialogue between readers and writers, one that can take physical or electronic form but doesn’t necessarily require the intervention of a traditional publishing company. While that object may sometimes differ in form from the traditional bound volume we know today, it will still embody the virtues of thingness.

Fans of the sci-fi writer Jack Vance recently banded together over the Internet to create the Vance Integral Edition, a 45-volume compendium of the writer’s works, accompanied by a Web site dubbed Totality (pharesm.org) that serves as a virtual concordance to his published works. Here, a self-organizing community of readers coalesced into a network that was able to accomplish a literary feat bridging virtual and physical texts, creating a product that likely never would have found its way to market through traditional publishing channels. And while a self-organizing network of fans with Web browsers will never produce the same kind of work as a solitary author, in this case the network complemented the work of the individual, creating a virtuous circle of literary productivity.

As the Web matures, we will continue to see new models of production emerge, so that over time the distinction between physical and virtual bookmaking may start to blur. And we may yet see a kind of reconciliation between online and offline reading experiences, in which even electronic books start to find new forms of expression in the physical world. The Kindle and other e-readers may mark the first steps toward a new kind of literary object that combines the physicality of the printed book with the lightweight efficiencies of software. When that happens, entirely new literary forms will appear, as the boundaries between one book and another start to shift.

There have been several occasions in our history when a new information technology transformed the intellectual landscape: the advent of alphabetic writing, the papyrus scroll, the codex book, and the printing press, to name a few. In each case, the full effects of the technology took centuries to unfold. A hundred years after Gutenberg, only a relative handful of people had seen a printed book. Yet a mere 20 years after Tim Berners-Lee invented the Web, more than a billion people have used a Web browser.

While it may be too early to make long-term predictions about the Web’s effect on our social, intellectual, and economic landscapes, it hardly seems like an understatement to suggest that we are witnessing the dawn of an epochal transformation. None of us know how any of this will turn out. But perhaps it’s useful to reflect, in closing, on what drew us to books in the first place. There seems to be a particular kind of anxiety that brings readers and writers together on the page, a need to find a shared point of understanding in an uncertain world. In an age of technological transformation, that anxiety is likely to grow. And so our impulse to read and write books—in whatever form they may take—will only intensify. As Swift put it, “A restless spirit haunts over every book.”

64 Wilson Quarterly • Autumn 2009
To the Editor:

Critics of digital text insist that we read *differently* when we read on line, scanning, skimming, jumping hyperactively from link to link in contrast to the deliberate, reflective practice that paper demands. Attention must be paid, they claim, but the sensory overload of the internet gives us all attention deficit.

But plenty of offline texts are also designed to be read, not linearly like a novel, but in fits and starts: our desultory reading of newspapers, encyclopedias, phone books, catalogues, cookbooks, and reports is a function of the genre, not the medium. The common practice of moving back and forth within any text on pages or on screens suggests that reading from beginning to middle to end is but one kind of reading, regardless of the technology encoding the words.

As for extended works of narrative and expository prose, while more of us are porting our reading from page to laptop, Kindle, or big-screen mobile phone, many readers still prefer them on the page, not because pages promote meditation instead of ADD, but because at least for now, books are more convenient than screens, and involve less eye strain.

If scare headlines that we’re reading fewer books are true (and given that books didn’t become big business until the mid-19th century, it’s not clear that “we” ever read a lot of books to begin with), that’s not the fault of either the old or the new technologies. Nor is it caused by some postmodern inability to focus. The decline in books may simply be due to the fact that books aren’t doing what they need to do to hold their market share.

Still, computers don’t seem poised to replace books any more than they’re replacing pencils. Although we may posit a battle of the books, the two technologies are not at war, so maybe as social activists say, we should just get over it, and get on with our reading.

Dennis Baron