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THE DEATH OF READING;

WILL A NATION THAT STOPS READING EVENTUALLY STOP THINKING?

By Mitchell Stephens, a journalism professor at New York University and the author of A History of News, who read 2 books on his recent vacation.

WHAT'S MISSING FROM THESE PICTURES?

\* THREE PEOPLE SIT in a doctor's waiting room. One stares at the television that rests on an end table, the second fiddles with a hand-held video game; the head of the third is wrapped in earphones.

\* A couple of kids, waiting for bedtime, lie on the floor of a brightly painted room, busily manipulating the controls of a video game.

\* Two hundred people sit in an airplane. Some have brought their own tapes, some doze, most stare up at a small movie screen.

What is missing from these pictures, and increasingly from our lives, is the activity through which most of us learned much of what we know of the wider world. What's missing is the force that, according to a growing consensus of historians, established our patterns of thought and, in an important sense, made our civilization. What's missing is the venerable, increasingly dated activity that you -- what's the matter? bored with all your CDs and videotapes? -- are engaged in right now.

Ironically, but not coincidentally, reading has begun fading from our culture at the very moment that its importance to that culture is finally being established. Its decline, many theorists believe, is as profound as, say, the fall of communism, and some have taken to prophesying that the downturn in reading could result in the modern world's cultural and political decline.

"A mode of thinking is being lost," laments Neil Postman, whose book, "Amusing Ourselves to Death," is a warning about the consequences of a falloff in reading.

"We are losing a sort of psychic habit, a logic, a sense of complexity, an ability to spot contradictions and even falsity." Postman, a professor of communication arts at New York University, believes this loss is now being felt in our cultural activities and in our politics, as well as in our children's SAT scores, and that it could get worse. But of course such prophecies are delivered in print, so no one pays much heed.

The anecdotal evidence that reading is in decline is copious and compelling. "When I go out socially in Washington," confides Daniel Boorstin, a historian and former librarian of Congress, "I'm careful not to embarrass my dinner companions by asking what they have read lately. Instead I say, 'I suppose you don't have much time to read books nowadays.' "

That is a courtesy, alas, for which most of us would be grateful. The fact is that few of us, and few of our friends and few of our children, have the time to read as much as we would like. We're too busy working or working out or playing or -- OK, let's admit it -- watching TV. \* Our homes barely make room for reading. Those old islands of quiet -- libraries, studies and dens -- long ago were invaded by flat screens and Nintendos. Now they are called "family rooms" or, more accurately, "television rooms." And our architects seem to have given up providing us with bookshelves; instead they busy themselves designing "entertainment centers."

So we haven't quite gotten around to Stephen M. Hawking's "A Brief History of Time," yet. We're saving Amy Tan's latest novel for vacation, maybe. And that pile of unread New Yorkers or Rolling Stones or Los Angeles Times Magazines keeps growing, each unread issue an additional piece of anecdotal evidence. \* Those whose livelihoods depend on our reading suggest, optimistically, that the widespread notion that it is in decline is an oversimplification. "I believe that people who used to read a lot of books read less now," concedes Alberto Vitale, chairman of Random House, the nation's largest publisher of trade (nontext) books. "But in my opinion, there are many more people reading books."

The optimists do have some statistics on their side. Books, the oldest form of print, seem to be doing reasonably well. Publishers, in fact, are churning out more and more of them: 133,196 new titles listed in "Books in Print" in the past year. That is about 16 times the number of titles printed 40 years ago (one of the reasons "keeping up" may seem so much harder for us than it did for our parents and grandparents). And publishers are selling more, too: about 2 billion books in 1990, an 11% increase over 1985. Reports of the death of the book seem greatly exaggerated.

Ah, but are those books actually being read? Not, in many cases, from cover to cover. A recent Gallup Poll found many more people in 1990 than in 1957 who say they are currently reading a book or novel, but many fewer now than in 1975 who say they have completed a book in the past week. In a society where professional success now requires acquaintance with masses of esoteric information, books are often purchased to be consulted, not read. About 15% of the new titles in "Books in Print" are scientific or technical books.

Fiction and general-interest nonfiction works would seem to be designed to be read, but lately these books also serve other functions. Their authors often employ them as routes to movie contracts or to tenure or to the intellectual renown that apparently comes with having catalogued definitively, in two or three dense volumes, how George Bernard Shaw, say, spent each of his evenings. Their publishers increasingly see these books not as collections of sentences and paragraphs that might be clarified and sharpened but as product that must be publicized and marketed so the balance sheets of the large conglomerates they now work for might tilt in the right direction.

Given the pace of modern life, the readers of these books, too, may have other purposes in mind -- a quick, conversation-enhancing skim perhaps. "People tend to read too rapidly," moans Russell Jacoby, author of "The Last Intellectual." "They tend to read while commuting, watching a game on TV or playing Nintendo." Jacoby, who recently taught history at UC Riverside, keeps threatening to open "slow-reading centers."

And books increasingly have another function for those who purchase them. They have begun replacing the bottle of Scotch or the tie as gifts -- giving them about the same chance of being opened as those ties had of being worn. The number of bookstores in the United States has been growing in recent decades, at a rate second only to that of fast-food restaurants, but according to statistics supplied by the American Booksellers Assn., more than one quarter of all their sales are in November and December -- for the holidays.

In 1985, Michael Kinsley of the New Republic conducted an experiment. Notes offering a $5 reward to anyone who saw them and called the magazine were hidden about three-quarters of the way through 70 copies of the hottest nonfiction books in Washington, D.C., bookstores. These were the books that all of Washington seemed to be talking about. "Washington" was apparently basing its comments on the reviews and maybe a quick skim. No one called.

"Fortunately for booksellers," Kinsley wrote, "their prosperity depends on people buying books, not on people actually reading the bulky things." (Kinsley's advice to authors who would like their words actually to be read: "Cut out the middleman, and just write the review.")

Those of us with less disposable income, or less inclination to dispose of it in bookstores, can still get our books from libraries. "You can't say people take books out of the library just to put them on the coffee table," says Simon Michael Bessie, chairman of the Center for the Book at the Library of Congress.

And library use is up. Public-library circulation in the United States has grown from 4.7 "units" per capita per year in 1980 to 6.1 in 1989, according to a study by the Library Research Center at the University of Illinois. However, the "units" we are checking out of the library now include not only lots of school and business readings but also cassettes, CDs and videotapes.

Here is perhaps the most frightening of the statistics on books: According to the Gallup Poll, the number of Americans who admitted to having read no books during the past year -- and this is not an easy thing to admit to a pollster -- doubled from 1978 to 1990, from 8% to 16%. "I cannot live without books," Thomas Jefferson, whose collection helped start the Library of Congress, told John Adams. More and more of us apparently can.

MAGAZINES WOULD APPEAR TO BE BETTER suited to our hectic lives, if for no other reason than that they require much less of a time commitment than do books. Gathering evidence to confirm or deny this surmise, however, is not easy. There are too many different kinds of magazines and too many individual variations in their popularity. We do know that the magazine business has been in dire straits lately, but this has been caused by a falloff in advertising, not necessarily in circulation.

The best indicator of whether we are spending more or less time with magazines may be "time-use" studies such as those compiled at the University of Maryland. These show that the proportion of the population that reads a magazine on a typical day dropped from 38% in 1946 to 28% in 1985. Magazine publishers, however, can take some encouragement from the fact that most of that drop had occurred by the 1950s.

The statistics on newspaper readership are much less ambiguous and much grimmer. According to the University of Maryland time-use studies, the share of the adult population that "read a newspaper yesterday" has declined from 85% in 1946 to 73% in 1965 to 55% in 1985. The numbers on per capita newspaper circulation and the percentage of American homes that receive a daily newspaper form similar graphs -- graphs you could ski down.

"What has changed is the strength of the habit of reading a newspaper," notes Al Gollin of the Newspaper Advertising Bureau. "It used to be one of those things that almost everybody did." No more. Americans on average now read newspapers much less frequently than they did 30 years ago, 20 years ago, even 10 years ago.

And young people have been losing the newspaper habit even faster than their parents. "We are developing a generation that has no interest in reading except insofar as it is assigned in school," concludes Daniel Kevles, professor of humanities at Caltech. "They don't read newspapers or magazines. I sense a general lack of interest in public affairs among my students." A recent Times Mirror survey found that only 30% of Americans under the age of 35 said they had read a newspaper the previous day, compared to 67% in 1965.

The Gulf War provided further evidence of how far the newspaper has fallen. According to a survey by Birch/Scarborough, a grand total of 8.9% of us said we kept up with war news primarily through newspapers. The days when we found most of our news set in type on a page are long gone.

Those time-use studies actually discovered a slight increase from 1965 to 1985 in the amount of time people said they spend reading books and magazines: from 1.7 to 1.9 hours a week. But if you throw in newspapers, the total time people spent with reading as their primary activity has dropped more than 30% in those years, from 4.2 hours a week to 2.8.

And this drop has occurred at the same time that the amount of education Americans obtain has been rising dramatically. The percentage of Americans who have completed four years of high school has more than tripled since 1940, according to the Bureau of the Census Current Population Survey, and the percentage of Americans completing four years of college has more than quadrupled.

If education still stimulated the desire to read, all the statistics on reading would be shooting up. That they are not may say something about the quality of our educational system and about the interests of the students it now attracts. It certainly says something about reading and its future. If dramatically increased exposure to an educational system based on the printed word cannot get us to read, what will?

READING'S TROUBLES ARE NOT DIFFICULT to explain. A hundred years ago, on days when no circus was in town, people looking for entertainment had three alternatives: fulfilling biological needs, talking or reading. Those looking for information were restricted to the latter two. Many of our ancestors, to be sure, were unable to read, but those who could relied upon it, as Thomas Jefferson did, with a desperation that is difficult for us to imagine.

Books, in those days, had a unique power to transport. "There is no Frigate like a Book," wrote 19th-Century poet Emily Dickinson, "To take us Lands away." Now, of course, there are many easier ways of getting there.

"Our society is particularly ingenious at thinking up alternatives to the book," notes Boorstin. Indeed, we have thought up an entire communications revolution, and there have not been many of those in human history. The first such revolution was the development of language hundreds of thousands of years ago; the second, the development of reading and writing in the Middle East about 5,000 years ago; the third, the invention of the printing press 500 years ago.

The fourth communications revolution -- ours -- began, perhaps, with the experiments of Samuel Morse, Guglielmo Marconi and Thomas Edison in the 19th Century, and it has been picking up steam ever since. Movies, recordings, radio, telephones, computers, photocopiers and fax machines are all part of it. But, of course, the most powerful product of this revolution, so far, and the one that has posed the largest threat to reading, has been television.

Some print lovers have taken heart from the recent troubles of the TV networks or from the fact that the amount of time the average American family keeps the TV on each day, as measured by Nielsen, finally leveled off in the mid-1980s -- at about seven hours a day. But, of course, we have since supplemented broadcast and even cable TV with other equally diverting forms of programming.

The first television wave washed over us in the 1950s and '60s. But then, while we were still getting used to having this perky new friend in our bedrooms, a second wave hit. In 1982, only 5.5% of American homes had videocassette recorders. Now 72.5% of them do, and, according to Nielsen, videotapes keep the set on an average of an extra half-hour each day in those homes. Add still more minutes for video games. So much for that leveling-off.

Russell Jacoby and his wife have found a sure way to protect themselves and their two children from the siren songs of the tube: When their set was stolen a number of years ago, they simply didn't replace it. But most of the rest of us now share our homes with one or more TV sets, which we turn on more than we would like to admit. "Everyone lies about how much time they and their families spend watching TV," Jacoby asserts. It is a wonder that we manage to find the time to read even as much as we do.

"There are only so many hours in the day," says Alberto Vitale of Random House, wistfully.

AS A YOUTH, ABRAHAM LINCOLN IS REPORTed to have spent so many hours buried in his books that the neighbors labeled him lazy. When Lincoln arrived in Congress, his fellow congressmen, by one account, dismissed him as a "bookworm." That insult is not heard much nowadays, nor are readers disparaged as lazy.

Instead, the more dedicated parents among us feel guilty if we don't manage to read to our children each evening, hoping the kids will pick up the habit we parents are rapidly losing. The First Lady campaigns for literacy. We end TV shows with pleas to read books. And, according to the Gallup Poll, 61% of us proclaim reading "more rewarding" than watching television; 73% lament that we read too few books; 92% attest that reading is a "good use" of our time. And 45% of the poll's respondents believe, against all the evidence, that they will be "reading more in the months and years ahead."

Reading certainly is well loved now that it is in decline. Yet it is no longer something that we ache to do. How many kids today surreptitiously finish books by flashlight under the covers? Instead, reading, like eating broccoli, has now become something that we feel we should do (always a bad sign).

Some teen-agers and -- says Michael Silverblatt, host of KCRW's "Bookworm" show -- some Southern Californians actually find it hip to pretend to read less than they really do, but the vast majority of us sincerely, vigorously and guiltily genuflect in front of the printed page. Never in human history has reading been more respected.

This is not surprising. One of the characteristics of any technological revolution is nostalgia for the old order. Socrates, who lived a few hundred years after the invention of the Greek alphabet, when writing was transforming Greek culture, strenuously argued the superiority of the oral culture it was replacing. According to Plato's (written) account, Socrates predicted that the use of writing would weaken memories and deprive "learners" of the chance to question what they were being taught.

Such nostalgia for the methods of oral tradition -- memorization, rhetoric, recital -- kept them alive in the schools well into this century. Now similar calls are going out to defend the schools against the incursions of the new information technologies so that our educational institutions can serve as repositories of another fading tradition -- reading.

WE DID NOT REALIZE THAT WE WERE LIVING in the age of print until it began to end. Only then did we gain the perspective to see the effects of reading on our thoughts. Those effects are profound, as anthropological studies of societies without reading have begun to show.

For example, the following statements were presented to members of a mostly preliterate tribe in a remote area of the Soviet Union: "In the far north, where there is snow, all bears are white. Novaya Zembla is in the far north, and there is always snow there." Then these people were asked what color the bears are in Novaya Zembla. A typical response, as reported by Father Walter Ong in his book "Orality and Literacy": "I don't know. I've seen a black bear. I've never seen any others. Each locality has its own animals." These people could not solve this simplest of logical problems.

It is not that such preliterate people are less intelligent than we are. They simply think differently -- "situationally." When words are written down, not just enunciated, they are freed from the subjective situations and experiences ("I've seen a black bear") in which they were imbedded. Written words can be played with, analyzed, rearranged and organized into categories (black bears, white bears, places where there is always snow). The correspondences, connections or contradictions among various statements can be carefully examined. As investigators such as Ong and anthropologist Jack Goody have explained, our system of logic -- our ability to find principles that apply independently of situations -- is a product of literacy. This logic, which goes back to the Egyptians, Hebrews and Greeks, led to mathematics and philosophy and history. Among its accomplishments is our culture.

And when written words are set in print, they gain additional powers. Our sentences grow even less connected to our persons as they are spelled out in the interchangeable letters of movable type. Our thoughts grow more abstract, more removed from the situations in which we happen to find ourselves. Superstitions, biases and legendary characters like dragons and kings have difficulty fitting into these straight, precise lines of type. Charts, maps and columns of figures can be duplicated exactly for the first time. According to seminal media theorist Marshall McLuhan and historian Elizabeth Eisenstein, the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment were both products of the printing press.

"Reading is central to our culture," states Ong, a professor of humanities at Saint Louis University. "It is connected to virtually all the forces that shaped our culture." Among those who ponder such matters, there is no longer much controversy about that. The question, as we leave the age of print for the uncharted waters of this new electronic age, is whether we risk losing much of what reading enabled us to gain.

Neil Postman, for one, fears that the answer is yes. "New communications technologies giveth," he proclaims, "and they taketh away." On the debit side Postman would place recent developments in art, education, religion, journalism and politics -- all of which, in his view, are losing the seriousness and intellectual content print gave them as they are transformed into "show business" to meet the needs of electronic media.

Reading demands that we sit still, be quiet and concentrate hard enough to decode a system of symbols and follow extended arguments. This is an injunction that increasingly is falling on earphone-plugged ears. Television and its electronic brethren are much less strict. We can be cleaning, daydreaming or half-dozing; they don't seem to care. All television demands is our gaze. Dazzling collages of imagery and rhythm are assembled just to get us to open our eyelids a bit wider.

Kings used to turn thumbs down on spectacles that bored them; we simply press thumb to remote control, zapping any scene, exposition or argument that takes much more than a fraction of a minute to unfold. "Thinking," Postman writes, "does not play well on TV."

Our entertainers, pundits, professors, ministers and leaders, therefore, are judged not so much on their ability to reason but on their ability to project a diverting image. Amuse us or we'll change the channel. Whether or not the points being made are valid is of less importance. Somehow this does not seem what Jefferson and the other founders had in mind when they entrusted us with governing a country.

Pessimists like Postman do not have much difficulty convincing us that life on a late-20th-Century couch can be frivolous and vegetable-like. We already feel guilty that we are watching "the boob tube" rather than reading. However, making the case that life in that supposed golden age of reading was really much more noble than life today is more difficult.

As his example of political discourse before TV, Postman chooses those astoundingly literate, three-hour-long debates between Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas in 1858. But 18th- and 19th-Century American politics was not all conducted on this level. The slogans with which William Henry Harrison made his case for the presidency in 1840, for example -- "Log Cabin and Hard Cider," "Tippecanoe and Tyler, too" -- are as vacuous as anything concocted by Ronald Reagan's media wizards.

The arguments against TV are based on a certain amount of such false nostalgia. People then did not read quite so much, and their reading material was not quite so exemplary as those pining for a lost golden age suggest. "We have no figures on how much or how well books were read in the past," Ong notes. "All we have are the comments of bibliophiles. There is no evidence, for example, that all the copies of the books printed in the 16th and 17th centuries were read. There is plenty of evidence that a lot of them were not read." Nevertheless, the doomsayers do have some harder evidence on their side.

There is, to begin with, the decline in writing skills, much fretted over by educators in recent years. Written language demands stricter rules of syntax and grammar than spoken language, and these are the rules, first codified in printed dictionaries and grammar books, that we learn (or now fail to learn) in school. The sentences of the electronic age, because they are supplemented by images, can get away with playing by looser rules. Try, sometime, to diagram the sentences of a TV-football "analyst."

It is not surprising, therefore, that students who watch and listen more and read less are losing command of their writing. As anyone who has seen that rare thing, a letter written by a student, knows, young people today often have considerable difficulty filling a page with clear, exact sentences. Their performance on recent SATs raises the question of whether they also have difficulty producing clear, exact thought.

The average score on the SAT verbal test, taken by a large number of college-bound high school students, was 466 (on a scale of 200 to 800) in 1968. Then, as the first TV generation began taking the test, scores began tumbling. The average score leveled off from 1978 to 1987, but now, with the arrival of the MTV kids, it has begun skidding again -- down to 422 this year.

The College Boards do not test a representative sample of American teen-agers. More -- and perhaps less qualified -- students are now going to college and therefore taking the test, which may be driving scores down. Still, the correspondence between verbal scores and the two waves of TV's assault upon reading is hard to overlook.

"The decline in SAT scores has a lot to do with not reading," asserts College Board President Donald M. Stewart. Why? "The ability to read is linked to the ability to process, analyze and comprehend information," Stewart explains. "I guess that's called thinking."

Michael Silverblatt of "Bookworm" uses an analogy that young people might find more persuasive: "Just as people who don't work out can't do certain things with their bodies, people who don't read can't do certain things with their minds."

Boorstin puts the problem even more bluntly. He calls people who do not read "self-handicapped" and says, "A person who doesn't read books is only half-alive." And if the members of a society stop reading? "Then you have a half-alive society."

FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF enthusiasts of the new culture of videos, videotapes, video games and CDs, all this must sound like the whining of a ragged, nearly defeated old order. Not everyone is convinced that all that is deep and serious in our society is in fact under siege. "I know a number of extremely intelligent adults who don't read more than a book or two a year but still remain healthy, active contributors to society," says Wendy Lesser, editor of Three Penny Review, a respected Berkeley literary publication. "I think if you can get people to learn to discriminate between good and bad TV programs, you've done more for them than you would by simply forcing them to read a book, however trashy."

And even those who believe that the decline in reading does herald some profound cultural changes are not convinced those changes will necessarily be for the worse. Perhaps, they might argue, the logic inculcated by writing and print is not the only way of processing information about the world. Perhaps an immersion in electronic forms of communication might lead to different but equally valid ways of being smart -- forms of intelligence that go unrecognized by SAT tests. "I'm listening to that argument with more and more sympathy," concedes Stewart of the College Boards.

It is possible, moreover, that electronic forms of communication have more potential than is currently being expressed in either the vapid fantasies of Madonna videos or the static talk shows and costume dramas of public television. These media might be capable, given time, of creating a culture as profound and deep as that of reading. These technologies might, in other words, have more to "giveth" than we can yet imagine.

It took 2,000 years of writing before an alphabet was developed. It took a century and a half of printing before someone thought to print a novel or a newspaper. New communications technologies do not arrive upon the scene fully grown; they need time to develop the methods and forms that best exploit their potential.

Our communications revolution, from this perspective, is still quite young. TV has been around for only half a century. Most of its programming is still recycled theater -- mini-dramas and comedies; its more stylistically adventurous forms -- commercials and music videos -- are little more than demonstrations of the visual capabilities of the medium.

Television's technicians have mastered the art of mating laugh track to quip; they can make everything from cats to toothbrushes dance. But TV still may not have stumbled upon the grammar and syntax of video -- the patterns and relations of images and sounds that will enable us to communicate complex ideas with clarity and exactness. Television may not yet have discovered the forms that will do for that medium what the novel and the newspaper did for print.

TV today grapples with difficult subjects only by getting slow and boring. It is possible to imagine a television program that would be difficult for the opposite reason: because it is too fast, too busy, too full of information. Perhaps such super-dense television would be able to plumb depths quickly enough to fit the video generation's short attention spans, or perhaps this TV would be stimulating enough to stretch those attention spans.

Does television really have such potential? Does a whole culture's worth of new perspectives, new ideas, new creations in fact lie slumbering in our television sets, just waiting for programming capable of awakening them? "Possibly," Daniel Kevles comments with some skepticism, "but I think any more intelligent programming will still have to coexist with MTV and action dramas."

Still, if the electronic media can, even intermittently, transform themselves into vehicles for ideas with the reach and capacity of print, it would be good news for our society. The Postmans of the world could rest easy: We would not go giggling off into decadence and dictatorship. But such a development would represent still more bad news for reading.

IS READING LIKELY TO survive the electronic age? Of course, Daniel Boorstin says. He scoffs at the notion that books, magazines or newspapers are going to disappear any time soon. Boorstin calls this the "displacement fallacy" and points out that radio survived and prospered after the introduction of TV, despite many gloomy predictions to the contrary. "New technologies tend to discover unique opportunities for the old," Boorstin maintains.

Not every outdated communication technology succeeds in finding such an opportunity. Consider smoke signals, for example, or town criers or the telegram. Nevertheless, Boorstin has a point.

Books already have found some new functions for themselves -- as reference manuals, for example. Magazines have survived in part by discovering audiences too small and specialized for TV to reach. And newspapers? Well, maybe USA Today, with its brief, snappy stories, is responding to a new opportunity presented by the TV generation's shortened attention spans. Or maybe newspapers are still searching for their niche in the electronic age.

Print and electronics also collaborate more than is generally recognized. According to the preliminary results of a study by Robert Kubey, a communications professor at Rutgers University, words appear in about 20% of the images in a sample of 30 channels available on cable. And the alphabet has recently found a new life for itself on the keyboards of computers.

"I'm using about 20 times as much paper since I started using a computer," Ong adds. "A new technology does not wipe out what went before; it transforms and enhances it. When people started writing, they didn't quit talking." Indeed, they probably spoke more logically.

However, the introduction of writing undoubtedly did cause people to spend less time talking -- because of the old not-enough-hours-in-the-day problem. And it probably did cause them to rely less on speech for communicating important information. So, whatever new forms print may assume in response to electronics, it is unlikely that print will regain its position as our major source of information or entertainment.

Reading still plays and, for the foreseeable future, will continue to play, a crucial role in our society. Nevertheless, there is no getting around the fact that reading's role has diminished and likely will continue to shrink.

This does not mean we should begin turning first-grade classes over to video lessons. Until the new technologies grow up a bit, it would not hurt any of us to read more to our children or take a book with us the next time we must sit and wait. And perhaps it was not a bad idea that you chose, instead of watching the Rams game or renting "Dances With Wolves," to make it through this article.