

FROM DEEP THINKERS TO SKIM READERS



The steady diet of digital content is turning us into a world of skim-readers, which is bad news for our brains.

Here's a stat to mull over: the average human mind will consume around 34GB of data every single day. That data comes in the form of TV, music, adverts, videos, emails, websites and apps. It's a huge amount of information, especially when you consider that consuming those 34GB is equivalent to reading 100,000 words.

The report, published by the University of California, highlights a fundamental shift in the way the human mind absorbs and understands information. Where a few decades ago you would have a limited choice of media to read or watch, now there's a huge variety of content available on a huge range of platforms, and the human mind has had to adapt in order to process it all.

MEDIA MULTITASKING

Harvard academic and children's literacy advocate Maryanne Wolf is fascinated by the way people are having to adjust to this new 'media multitasking'. In her recent book, *Reader Come Home: The Reading Brain In A Digital World*, she seeks to understand what's happening to our brains at a time when the amount of digital media vastly outweighs the traditional.

What she finds is that, thanks to a diet of digital content, people have developed a skill to skim-read, to read the first line then quickly spot certain words or phrases that pique an interest, rather than take in the whole text. While this may be fine for an online article about celebrity pets, it makes it more difficult to understand and process longer, more complex pieces of text.

The problem with being unable to 'deep read' – the process of reading, absorbing, understanding and analysing text – is that people accustomed to skim-reading digital content will avoid reading anything that appears difficult or hard to understand. For adults this is a serious problem; for students it could be disastrous.

"In this hinge moment between print and digital cultures," the academic wrote in a recent *Guardian* comment piece, "society needs to confront what is diminishing in the expert reading circuit, what our children and older students are not developing, and what we can do about it."

THE BI-LITERATE BRAIN

But rather than painting a bleak image of humankind being irreparably damaged by digital media, Maryanne Wolf sees a solution to this neurological change: print. She cites a number of studies that state that reading print improves comprehension, analysis and recall, as well as helps the reader develop empathy with the subjects or characters.

The writer goes on to recommend that early childhood education focuses on the use of print materials, with digital technology added over time. "We need to cultivate a new kind of brain," she writes, "a 'bi-literate' reading brain capable of the deepest forms of thought in either digital or traditional mediums."

But whether you're talking about a class of five year-olds or a train full of commuters, reading print provides an escape from the 34GB of data bombarding you every day, and a deep-reading experience that will stretch and exercise the mind.

"There's an old rule in neuroscience that does not alter with age," says Maryanne Wolf. "Use it or lose it."

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