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Analog and Digital Reading – Thoughts from the Field of Reading Promotion

Digitalization is changing the everyday lives of children and young people – also in terms of what they read – and is reviving the book as a beautiful object.

The everyday media life of children and young people has changed fundamentally in the last 40 years. When I went to school, cassettes were the first story companions in the children's room, followed by the children's hour on the radio and on television. In the teachers' room of the primary school, there were large, brown wooden boxes from the Swiss National Library, today's Bibliomedia, full of books. This was our temporary school library.

Reliable figures only since the turn of the millennium

As an expert on children's and young people's literature, I am often asked whether children and young people still read at all. It's a question that suggests we were in reading heaven just a few decades ago. Yet we have only had reliable figures on the reading skills of children and young people since the turn of the millennium. Weak or unmotivated readers were simply left out during my school years. After formal schooling, there were plenty of apprenticeships and jobs for these youngsters, who were unlikely to have had solid reading skills, where reading and writing were not a prerequisite.

Since then, solid reading skills have become an indispensable prerequisite for professional success and participation in society. Functional illiterates have a very difficult time in the job market because almost every job requires reading and computer use.

Something else has changed fundamentally. While reading promotion in German-speaking

countries used to aim at turning children into readers who turn to the „right“ literature, i.e., classics and fiction for adults, this maxim was thrown overboard after the first PISA study on reading in 2000. Magazines and booklets, comics, nonfiction, and serialized literature are now agreed to be just as much a part of children’s everyday lives as narrative children’s literature. Learning to read is possible in and with all media that are based on writing.

Is reading being democratized via the internet?

Digitization poses a new challenge for reading. On the one hand, I’m aware of voices lamenting the decline of Gutenberg culture, because children and young people no longer read printed books, but only use their smartphones for orientation. (That they are doing so more frequently and for longer periods of time is shown by the [JAMES Study 2020](#) of the Zurich University of Applied Arts. In 2020, Swiss young people spent an average of three hours a day on their cell phones, and five hours over the weekend). On the other hand, I hear the experts who are convinced that, thanks to the digital revolution, more people are writing and reading today than ever before.

One representative of the first camp is U.S. literary scholar [Maryanne Wolf](#), whose book „Fast Reading, Slow Reading“ is a pamphlet about reading analog literary texts. For Wolf, sinking reading is the cultural technique par excellence that moves us forward as individuals and humanity.

[Gerhard Lauer](#) of Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, representing the other side, is firmly convinced that digital forms will lead to a democratization of reading. Something that the representatives of an educated bourgeois reading ideal have never really succeeded in doing since the Enlightenment.

Both sides agree on one thing: A good reading competence remains the prerequisite for reading literature with pleasure, but also for being able to move critically and reflectively on the internet.

Reading in printed books

I am currently reading Amos Oz’s great autobiographical novel „A Story of Love and Passion“ in print. I am holding a brick in my hands. The haptic nature of this form of reading goes hand in hand with other sensory impressions such as the smell of the paper. I know from neurological research that other areas in my cortex are activated when I read analog, including the same brain areas that also help me orient myself in space.

Especially for weaker readers, this spatial orientation that analog reading offers is very important in order to find one’s way around a text in terms of content. It is missing when reading on the e-reader – the scroll bar that shows me how far my reading has progressed cannot replace reading in space. When I’m researching on the internet, reading a friend’s chat message, or looking over my son’s shoulder while he’s playing a computer game to see what challenges await him on the next station of his adventure game, I’m challenged by reading in a completely different way.

Net reading

On the internet, I’m not only confronted with characters, but also with a lot of visual information, pictures, graphics, videos... Quickly I have to decide whether a content is essential and credible, have to be able to assess the factuality of my finds, because misinformation quickly takes on a life of its own here and can unintentionally lead to difficult situations (such as the Covid debate or the denial of Joe Biden’s election victory in the USA).

The [Stavanger Declaration 2019](#), in which a good 100 European researchers set out their con-

clusions on the changes in reading in the face of digitalization, expresses the fear that faster, more superficial types of text processing could prevail over screen readings. Learners must therefore not only be taught strategies for reading critically and reflectively on digital devices.

The highly regarded statement also notes that it is absolutely central for students, especially in the early grades, to continue reading print books in order to acquire basic reading skills that are also essential for reading online. This includes being able to engage with a story and not be constantly distracted. The happiness of reading doesn't just happen – we have to actively do something for it. On the internet, however, bonuses beckon quickly and almost everywhere.

An [English study](#) of 150,000 schoolchildren of all ages revealed that boys in particular tend to skim literary texts and skip entire passages. The assumption is that these are longer narrative sections that are perhaps not as exciting, and that the „faster“ reading is probably along dialogues that often drive the plot forward and are also easier to read.

Innovative book market

Publishers and authors are responding to this reading behavior, which is oriented toward entertaining digital reads. Children's and young adults' books have not only become much more colorful in the last 20 years, they also include more pictures that can support the reading. Pictures provide variety and give the feeling that there's actually not that much reading to be done. I'm also noticing a clear tendency toward stories told in short chapters. In addition, there is the „bookishness“ of many narrative children's and young adult books, the careful decoration with ribbons, laminations, cut decorations and spot colors on the covers.

The publishing industry also benefits from passionate readers on social media such as [BookTube](#), Bookstagram #BookTok (read Knud Wassermann's [blog](#) of June 8, 2021) or [Wattpad](#). These platforms are mainly used by young women aged about 12 to 20. Their Likes can help a book become a bestseller or lead to a traditional publisher taking notice of an author and printing the digital story.

Although I was socialized analog and still much prefer reading literary texts in print than digitally, I believe that polarizations in the debate around analog and digital reading will get us nowhere. As a reading promoter, it is important to me that we give children and young people the skills they need for both forms of reading – reading stories, in books or on the screen, and dealing confidently with information on the internet.

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