

MINI-POSTER: READING REVOLUTION OR REDUX?
EMERGING READING TRENDS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ACADEMIC LIBRARIES
Barry Cull ♦ April 30, 2009

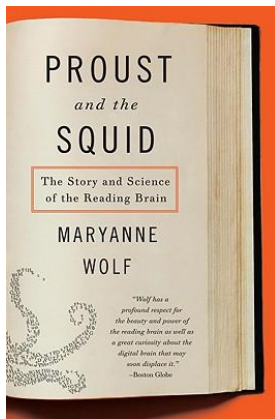
It has been said that societies do not fully realize they are in the midst of a revolution until it is long over. Paradoxically, societal *evolutions* may be easier to see. For myself, I can easily see how some of my social behaviour fits in with my GenX peers, has evolved away from that of my Boomer parents, and is different from the Millennials I teach and the “ƁRQ†Z” Post-Millennial generation of my eight-year-old daughter.

We can also easily appreciate social differences when we move outside our normal socioeconomic and cultural comfort zones. Most of us tend to pursue friendships with people who share our lifestyles, family settings, gender, careers, educational background, leisure pursuits, and faith or morals. Often those socioeconomic and cultural similarities can be more significant than generational dividing lines.

When it comes to *reading*, there are both generational and socioeconomic/cultural dimensions of the societal literacy and reading trends emerging throughout the Western world. Add technology into the mix—specifically, the technology of near universal internet access—and it could be argued that we may be in the midst of not just an evolution, but a more profound *reading revolution*. Some people are reading less today, and *everyone* is reading differently than in the past.

As part of my upcoming six-month sabbatical study, I will interview leading international scholars, from various disciplines, who provide fascinating perspectives on reading trends. Based on those interviews, as well as my own in-depth secondary research, I will do some writing (and hopefully conference presenting) about their ideas, in an attempt to collate a picture of emerging trends, and implications for libraries.

Maryanne Wolf @ Tufts – Cognitive Neuroscience / Child Development
Center for Reading and Language Research Director; John DiBiaggio Professor of Citizenship and Public Service



♦ *A look forward to the digital brain that may be replacing the reading brain*

“Throughout the story of humankind, from the Garden of Eden to the universal access provided by the Internet, questions of who should know what, when, and how remain unresolved. At a time when over a billion people have access to the most extensive expansion of information ever compiled, we need to turn our analytical skills to questions about a society’s responsibility for the transmission of knowledge....I fear that many of our children are in danger of becoming just what Socrates warned us against—a society of decoders of information, whose false sense of knowing distracts from a deeper development of their intellectual potential....The mysterious, invisible gift of *time to think beyond* is the reading brain’s greatest achievement: these built in milliseconds form the basis of our ability to

propel knowledge, to ponder virtue, and to articulate what was once inexpressible.”

Robert Darnton @ Harvard – History of the Book
Carl H. Pforzheimer University Professor; Harvard University Library Director



♦ *“Google & the Future of Books”*

“How can we navigate through the information landscape that is only beginning to come into view? The question is more urgent than ever following the recent settlement between Google and the authors

and publishers who were suing it for alleged breach of copyright....Libraries exist to promote a public good: "the encouragement of learning," learning "Free To All." Businesses exist in order to make money for their shareholders—and a good thing, too, for the public good depends on a profitable economy. Yet if we permit the commercialization of the content of our libraries, there is no getting around a fundamental contradiction. To digitize collections and sell the product in ways that fail to guarantee wide access would be to repeat the mistake that was made when publishers exploited the market for scholarly journals, but on a much greater scale, for it would turn the Internet into an instrument for privatizing knowledge that belongs in the public sphere.....**Here is a proposal that could result in the world's largest library....Yet this is also a tipping point in the development of what we call the information society.**" [emphasis added]

Wendy Griswold @ Northwestern U. / U. of Oslo – Sociology of Culture
Professor of Sociology; Bergen Evans Professor of Humanities



◆ **An emerging “reading class”**

“It appears that the heaviest Internet users are also the heaviest readers....as is true for virtually all forms of cultural participation, some people simply do more things than other people do....Although contemporary commentators deplore the decline of “the reading habit” or “literary reading,” historically the era of mass reading, which lasted from the mid-nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century in northwestern Europe and North America, was the anomaly. **We are now seeing such reading return to its former social base: a self-perpetuating minority that we shall call the reading class.....**Unlike in the past, most people in the developed world will be capable of reading, and will in fact read as part of their jobs, online activities, and the daily business of living. Only a minority, however, will read books on a regular basis.”
 [emphasis added]

I hope to also interview some of the following people:

- Douglas Willms, CRISP, UNB
- Don Tapscott, author of *Grown Up Digital*
- Marc Kielburger, Chief Executive Director of Free the Children
- An individual connected with JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) in the UK, perhaps a representative from the British Library

After looking at the various research perspectives of the above writers, in my own writing and speaking I will contemplate some of the implications for the collections and services provided by academic libraries:

- Do our spaces, services, and collections purposefully encourage students to move from superficial reading to in-depth study and “thinking beyond”, as Maryanne Wolf describes it?
- Has there been too much emphasis, especially in Canada in recent years, on spaces for quick scanning on screens and group work, to the neglect of spaces suited to individual study?
- In our information literacy instruction, do we appropriately engage both advanced student researchers and beginning students who are still developing their deep critical reading and research skills (and, physiologically, still developing their “reading brains”), as well as all those students who find themselves somewhere in between on the skill-level continuum?