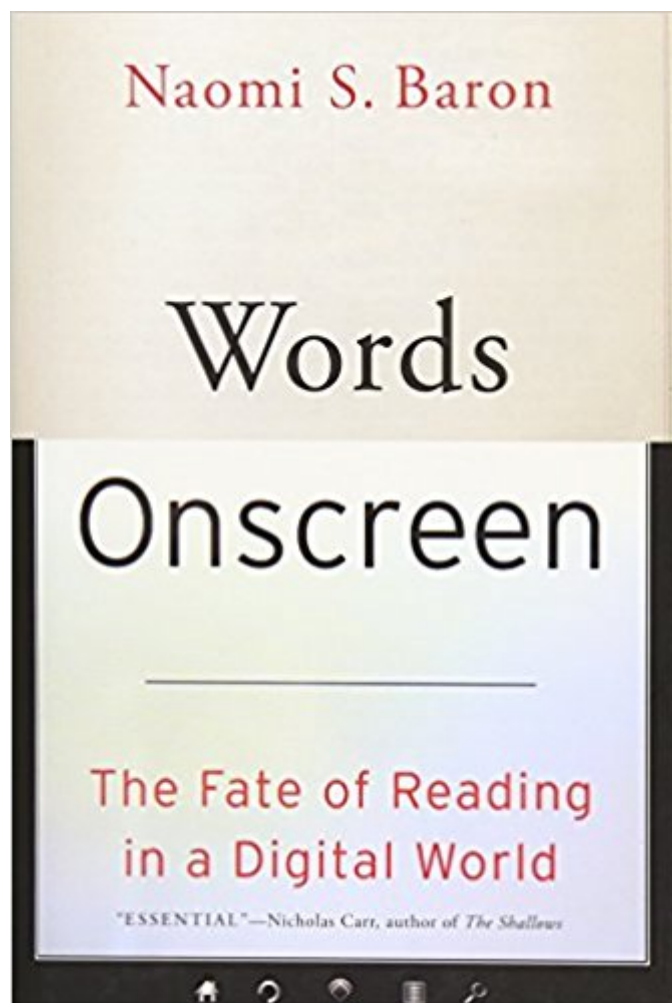


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Words Onscreen: The Fate Of Reading In A Digital World



Synopsis

People have been reading on computer screens for several decades now, predating popularization of personal computers and widespread use of the internet. But it was the rise of eReaders and tablets that caused digital reading to explode. In 2007, introduced its first Kindle. Three years later, Apple debuted the iPad. Meanwhile, as mobile phone technology improved and smartphones proliferated, the phone became another vital reading platform. In *Words Onscreen*, Naomi Baron, an expert on language and technology, explores how technology is reshaping our understanding of what it means to read. Digital reading is increasingly popular. Reading onscreen has many virtues, including convenience, potential cost-savings, and the opportunity to bring free access to books and other written materials to people around the world. Yet, Baron argues, the virtues of eReading are matched with drawbacks. Users are easily distracted by other temptations on their devices, multitasking is rampant, and screens coax us to skim rather than read in-depth. What is more, if the way we read is changing, so is the way we write. In response to changing reading habits, many authors and publishers are producing shorter works and ones that don't require reflection or close reading. In her tour through the new world of eReading, Baron weighs the value of reading physical print versus online text, including the question of what long-standing benefits of reading might be lost if we go overwhelmingly digital. She also probes how the internet is shifting reading from being a solitary experience to a social one, and the reasons why eReading has taken off in some countries, especially the United States and United Kingdom, but not others, like France and Japan. Reaching past the hype on both sides of the discussion, Baron draws upon her own cross-cultural studies to offer a clear-eyed and balanced analysis of the ways technology is affecting the ways we read today--and what the future might bring.

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Customer Reviews

"A darkling view of what our world--and what we--will be like if codex reading eventually surrenders to the flickering screens of e-readers." --Kirkus Reviews
"A must-read for all Americans concerned with having future generations skilled in critical thinking." -Nat Hentoff, *The Daily Herald*
"From kindergartens to universities, schools are being pressured to replace printed books with electronic ones. But is reading from a screen the same as reading from a page? Naomi Baron provides the most thoroughgoing answer yet to that crucial question. *Words Onscreen* is an essential book for educators, parents, and everyone who loves to read." --Nicholas Carr, author of *The Glass Cage* and *The Shallows*
"Naomi Baron has written a tour de force on the changes to reading in a digital milieu. It includes and then goes beyond the work before it, including my own. It deserves our "deepest reading" and re-reading in either, or perhaps, both mediums!" --Maryanne Wolf, Tufts University, author of *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*
"Anyone who loves reading about reading will love reading *Words Onscreen*. Baron goes back in history to place current trends in context, gives a tremendously clear-eyed view of the present, and points towards a future for those who prefer printed books that is both perilous and hopeful. What's particularly amazing is that a book so impeccably and thoroughly researched should also be so fun to read." -Will Schwalbe, author of the New York Times bestseller *The End of Your Life Book Club*
"The book is an engaging history of reading as well as a provocative argument about its future."
--Wall Street Journal

Naomi S. Baron is Professor of Linguistics and Executive Director of the Center for Teaching, Research & Learning at American University in Washington, DC. She is the author of *Always On: Language in an Online and Mobile World*.

The book presents informed insights not only about the future of reading, but also about its present and past. I read it from cover to cover (to the extent that this is possible in digital format) and would recommend to anyone in the business of reading (formally, educators and publishers, and informally, casual readers who will find cause to reflect on their own reading practices). As my own sum-up of the book, I read it on tablet out of convenience and used the annotation function to

underline, but would have preferred to read in print form and highlight with pencil and annotate in margins. My only criticism is that some sections were repetitive of previous ones, just citing additional research - probably result of writing over a four-year period.

This book reminds me the advantage of reading the printed books.

I can't remember the last time I enjoyed a book as much as this while disagreeing with practically everything the author said. In *Words Onscreen* linguistics professor Naomi Baron details her concerns about the effect that digital devices are having on reading and learning. One of her arguments is that reading a book deeply, with no distractions, enables you to have a conversation with the author, which is less likely when the internet is only a finger swipe away. I read *Words Onscreen* on an iPad with an internet connection and can assure Professor Baron that I had many conversations with her as I read the book. Baron concedes that certain kinds of reading are better for onscreen reading than others. Newspapers and airport novels that are read once and discarded fit into that category. But she thinks that textbooks and literature require more concentration -- concentration that is undermined when reading pixels rather than ink on paper. She cites many studies and cites many of her students in their preference for paper over screens. In making her case, Baron throws every possible argument against digital reading, not just the distraction argument. You see this in some court cases, where there is an airtight case for manslaughter, but the prosecution goes for murder one, assault, illegal possession of a weapon, and tax evasion. The defense picks away at the weak edges of the case, and the jury acquits because they now have doubts about the whole case. So we get charts and statistics, but we also get the serendipity of browsing in a bookstore, the smell of the book, the ability to collect and lend books, and have them autographed. I'm sure we've all been down the rabbit-hole of an internet search and that can be as serendipitous as a bookstore browse. As for the smell of the book, well, if I can smell a book, I toss it because it's mildewed or has cigaret smoke on it. The smell of paper and ink I find to be as subtle as the scent of a Kindle. The number of books I plan to re-read is quite small and even if I want to read a book again in five years, I feel confident I can find it again in a bookstore or online rather than lugging it around with me through two or three moves. Some of the arguments have a recycled feel about them as well. In her concern that young people will lose the ability to socialize face-to-face after excessive internet socializing, Baron echoes the arguments of parents after the invention of the telephone. Her arguments about internet distractions while reading sound much like the worries over whether TV should be allowed while students are doing their homework. Even if you could

eliminate all distractions, students (or drivers or neurosurgeons) will still find themselves daydreaming or suddenly remembering to make that dentist appointment just when they should be concentrating. One concern I do share is that of privacy and the fact that Apple or Kobo or The New York Times or the National Security Agency can monitor what you are looking at and how much time you spend on certain pages. I did quite enjoy Words Onscreen and it certainly inspired me to think about what it means to read and even what a book is. It's been the subject of a lot of conversation around our house the past few days and it's a subject that is going to continue to get people talking for some years to come. I don't expect print books to go away a la buggy whips. I think they'll be more like the radio, which did not disappear with the advent of talking movies or television, or even now with podcasts and Spotify. The paperless office never arrived, and paperless books won't kill off the print book. The important choice we have is not which format to read in, but whether we think what we are reading is worth our attention.

Great read!

I was excited to read this book, as titles like this promise to keep me current on recent research and trends in reading behavior and preferences. There is some good information in this book. But where the author lost me was in her apparent obliviousness about basic publishing economics. This undercuts the book, making it seem much more superficial and lightweight, depriving it of depth and insight. It began to feel like a clipping service instead of a thoughtful distillation of insights. I finally gave up, disappointed.

Although it treats a very important subject, this book is rather tedious to read. It's organized into dozens of tiny mini-chapters, and thus it seems to stop and start and stop and start, over and over. It's also largely a "just the facts" kind of book, and if you're already interested in the subject, it doesn't really tell you much new. It may have been a mistake to present the material in the form of a printed book with long lead time. It was verging on obsolete the day it was printed.

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