

## A Case for Slow Reading

*Our century, which began and has developed under the insignia of industrial civilization, first invented the machine and then took it as its life model.*

*We are enslaved by speed and have all succumbed to the same insidious virus: Fast Life, which disrupts our habits, pervades the privacy of our homes and forces us to eat Fast Foods.*

*To be worthy of the name, Homo sapiens should rid himself of speed before it reduces him to a species in danger of extinction.*

*A firm defense of quiet material pleasure is the only way to oppose the universal folly of the Fast Life.*

*May suitable doses of guaranteed sensual pleasure and slow, long-lasting enjoyment preserve us from the contagion of the multitude who mistake frenzy for efficiency. . . .<sup>1</sup>*

Thus begins the Slow Food Manifesto, which was approved at the founding conference of the International Slow Food Movement in Paris in 1989.<sup>2</sup> Founder Carlo Petrini would later write that his movement “is not just a question of opposing slow to fast, but rather of highlighting more important dichotomies, like carefulness and carelessness or attentiveness and haste.”<sup>3</sup>

The insidious “fast life virus” is not only a concern of foodies reflecting on how we too often consume calories. It also correlates to the way many people today receive and process information. Or so it seems to me as I reflect upon the way those around me treat the 21st century’s information smorgasbord.

Recently Clay Johnson made a similar connection in his new book *The Information Diet: A Case for Conscious Consumption*.<sup>4</sup> Johnson suggests that the small nuggets of information served up most (in)famously by our online social networks are the mental equivalent of trans fats. They often provide short-term satisfaction, yet leave us craving more and more. And ultimately they result in an epidemic of mental unfitnes; one that Johnson maintains is every bit as threatening to our future as physical obesity.

To extend this metaphor even further, there are increasing discussions about the *biological* impact of the way we consume information. Much of this research was popularized by Nicholas Carr in his book: *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brains*. He claims we are physically adapting to the constant barrage of information bits and bytes that endanger our capacity for sustained attention. Carr argues, “The Net’s cacophony of stimuli short-circuits both conscious and unconscious thought, preventing our minds from thinking either deeply or creatively. Our brains turn into simple signal-processing units, quickly shepherding information into consciousness and then back out again.”<sup>5</sup> Or, as the Slow Food people said, “We first invented the machine and then took it as our life model.”<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Carl Petrini, *Slow Food: The Case for Taste* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2001), xxiii.

<sup>2</sup> Petrini, xxiii.

<sup>3</sup> Petrini, 33.

<sup>4</sup> Clay A. Johnson, *The Information Diet: A Case for Conscious Consumption* (Sebastopol, Ca.: O’Reilly Media, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 119.

<sup>6</sup> Petrini, xxiii.

The present essay will make a case for “slow reading”. What I’m calling slow reading (and others call “deep reading”) requires us to pay attention to a text and read and re-read with care. Slow reading starts on page one and carries through to the end of the book. It requires us both to seek out quiet places and to engage in conversation. Slow reading takes a keen interest in structure and allusion. It can follow lengthy arguments and narratives. It is not characterized by skimming or browsing. Slow reading does not necessarily require lengthy reading sessions but it does require focus and attention. It is not primarily pragmatic; its objective is not merely to harvest quotes or data. In these respects it deliberately challenges some of the common assumptions of our age. David Ulin writes of this practice in *The Lost Art of Reading*:

Reading, after all, is an act of resistance in a landscape of distraction, a matter of engagement in a society that seems to want nothing more than for us to disengage. It connects us at the deepest levels; it is slow, rather than fast. That is its beauty and its challenge...<sup>7</sup>

Taking my cue from the Slow Food movement (in its resistance to the ascendancy of speed by celebrating the taste, the pleasure, the beauty of “slow”), I will try to apply such principles to reading. First, I will explore how information, like food, came to be thought of as a commodity, and argue that we need a new narrative that connects careful reading to human flourishing. Second, I will argue that just as the Slow Food movement needed to educate people on the taste and flavors of non-industrial food, we need to help inculcate skills that will open up to those we serve the pleasure of reading. Third, I will conclude by arguing that we need to cultivate a “reading culture” to counter the myth that reading is dead, and to welcome young people who are tired of merely *using* books and want to slow down and *read* them.<sup>8</sup>

## What is Information?

The case for slow food starts with exploring the meaning of food. It refuses to reduce eating to simply acquiring the necessary calories and nutrients. Food is also about time and place; it is about friends and family; it is about pleasure. Likewise the case for slow reading must start by looking at the meaning of information. Is it just about acquiring new facts? Why do we read and why might it matter how we read?

## Information as a Mathematical Concept

James Gleick recently wrote a large book called *The Information: a History, a Theory, a Flood*.<sup>9</sup> It traces the evolution of human communication, from African drums to the alphabet, printing press, and ultimately Wikipedia. According to Gleick the word “information” as we use it today is of relatively recent coinage. It was first used in the modern sense by Ralph Hartly in 1927.<sup>10</sup> Engineer Hartly and his Bell Labs colleague Harry Nyquist were working on “the speed of transmission of intelligence” on telegraph and telephone wires during the 1920s and they wanted some quantifiable item that would be inclusive enough to cover the dots and dashes of the telegraph and spoken words of the telephone. They chose the term information. Hartley defined the amount of information mathematically as the number of symbols transmitted as a log of the possible symbols. Thus a Morse code dot carries less information than an English letter, which in turn is less information than a Chinese character because of the expanding number of possible symbols.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> David L. Ulin, *The Lost Art of Reading: Why Books Matter in a Distracted Time* (Seattle, Wa.: Sasquatch Books, 2010), 150.

<sup>8</sup> I do need to make one caveat before going further. When I first presented some of these ideas, ironically in a CATLA “lightning talk”, I spoke of “promoting traditional reading”. I want to repent of this sin. There is no “traditional” way to read. People have read and do read in a lot of different ways, and that is as it should be. By advocating slow reading I do not wish to claim that all other forms of reading should be banished. There is a time for skimming and a time for key word searching. I’m also chastened by Petrini’s warning against nostalgia. Although we can learn from and draw inspiration from the past, I’m not here to romanticize a pre-digital utopia. The goal is not to defend a tradition but to serve our students by giving them the richest, most redemptive and ennobling experience possible.

<sup>9</sup> James Gleick, *The Information: A History, A Theory, A Flood* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Gleick, 200.

<sup>11</sup> Gleick, 199ff.

But the Bell Labs engineer who is the hero of James Gleick's history of information is not Ralph Hartly. It is Claude Shannon (1916-2001). Shannon's genius at applied mathematics allowed him to make a number of significant contributions to twentieth century thought. As an MIT student in the 1930s, Shannon worked on combining electrical engineering with Boolean logic, demonstrating that "any operation that can be completely described in a finite number of steps using the words *if, or, and*, etc. can be done automatically with relays."<sup>12</sup> This was a key breakthrough in the development of modern computers. He followed that with his doctoral dissertation, "An Algebra for Theoretical Genetics." Written before the discovery of DNA, when genes were theoretical constructs, this dissertation would foreshadow the eventual breadth of Shannon's influence.<sup>13</sup>

For our purposes, Shannon's most significant writing is his 1948 article, "A Mathematical Theory of Communication."<sup>14</sup> Shannon came to this topic fresh from his war work on mechanically targeting anti-aircraft guns, and especially in cryptography. These projects impressed upon Shannon the need to process data rapidly, and the presence of patterns in communication. In a "Mathematical Theory of Communication", Shannon alters Hartley's definition of information. Shannon defined information as "uncertainty, surprise, difficulty, and entropy[.]"<sup>15</sup> Shannon was very interested in the redundancy of language. This can be illustrated in different ways. For example you can remove the vowels from many English sentences and a literate reader will still be able to instantly understand the message: a fact that is borne out regularly on Facebook. According to Shannon, the vowels that can be implied are not information: only the letters that surprise or that we find uncertain really add information.

Shannon analyzed the frequency of letters, and their combinations. He would perform experiments while reading detective fiction with his wife to observe how, given a certain amount of context, how often she could guess the next letter or word in the book.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, he concluded that the English language has a built in redundancy of about 50 percent.<sup>17</sup> Not only did this have implications for detecting and deciphering codes, but Shannon's work demonstrated that it was possible to create algorithms that could effectively compress messages. This would not only create space for more messages, but messages that could be sent further without being obscured by noise, and messages that could contain more content, such as photographs and television broadcasts.<sup>18</sup>

Having defined information as surprise — the unknown and unpredictable — Shannon coined a new term to measure unpredictability and thus information. The term was "bit." Shannon understood one bit to represent the level of uncertainty in flipping a coin.<sup>19</sup> The bit allowed for information to be quantified, and gave us a way to compare the amount of information in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* with the information in an hour of television, and in turn compare these numbers to the information in a human chromosome.<sup>20</sup> The establishment of a consistent way to measure information makes it possible to exploit the redundancy in human communication, which in turn makes it possible to save a significant number of bits, and thus greatly increase the efficiency of sending and receiving messages.

<sup>12</sup> Gleick, 175.

<sup>13</sup> Gleick, 175.

<sup>14</sup> Claude Shannon, "A Mathematical Theory of Communication," *The Bell System Technical Journal* 27 (July-Oct. 1948) 379-423, 623-656. <http://cm.bell-labs.com/cm/ms/what/shannonday/shannon1948.pdf> (accessed June 2, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Gleick, 219.

<sup>16</sup> Gleick, 230.

<sup>17</sup> Gleick, 229. Shannon thought English becomes even more redundant when you look at the statistical models for sentences and paragraphs.

<sup>18</sup> Gleick, 230.

<sup>19</sup> Gleick, 229. Shannon would later cite Matthew 5:37 (But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.) when explaining bits on the lecture circuit.

<sup>20</sup> Gleick, 231-2. Discusses Shannon's estimates for the number of bits for the three items listed. He thought the human genetic code had the least number of bits, and then the encyclopedia, and finally an hour of TV contained the most.

## Information as Commodity

This idea that we can become increasingly efficient in our use of information has reverberated powerfully throughout our culture. Nicholas Carr describes increasingly efficient access to information as the “religion” of Google. He writes,

In Google’s view, information is a kind of commodity, a utilitarian resource that can, and should, be mined and processed with industrial efficiency. The more pieces of information we can “access” and the faster we can distill their gist, the more productive we become as thinkers. Anything that stands in the way of the speedy collection, dissection, and transmission of data is a threat not only to Google’s business, but to the new utopia of cognitive efficiency it aims to construct on the Internet.<sup>21</sup>

Carr describes Google’s obsession with collecting data about how people use the Internet. These data are used to build its impressive search algorithms that we all routinely use to find quickly all sorts of information. And that Google uses to sell advertisements. Irene Au, user experience director at Google, in a *Businessweek* interview claimed that, “Google cares about being fast, so we want our user experience to be fast.” Later in the interview Au is quoted as saying, “Our goal is to get users in and out really quickly. All our design decisions are based on that strategy.”<sup>22</sup> The quest to save users time is not simply altruistic. The more clicks people make, the more opportunity there is for Google to make money. Carr writes, “The last thing [Google] wants is to encourage leisurely reading or slow, concentrated thought. Google is, quite literally, in the business of distraction.”<sup>23</sup>

The commoditization of information is the current that the slow reading advocate strives to resist. Like the current of a broad river, its pull is not always apparent on the surface, and yet I suspect that many of us sense it disrupting our habits, pervading our libraries, and forcing us to ingest fast information. Step number one in the defense of slow reading is to understand the factors in our world that make it such an alien concept to so many. However, we must go beyond naming the obstacles. We must provide a counter narrative about information, one that maintains that merely counting and compressing bits, in pursuit of cognitive efficiency, is not the only way (or the wisest) to think about appropriating information.

## Information and Reality

Shannon’s “Mathematical Theory of Communication” brackets at the outset one important aspect of communication: meaning. He writes, “Frequently the messages have *meaning*; that is they refer to or are correlated according to some system with certain physical or conceptual entities. These semantic aspects of communication are irrelevant to the engineering problem.”<sup>24</sup> This observation did not stop intellectuals in many fields from appropriating Shannon’s ideas and applying them to their work. This “bandwagon” both excited and troubled Shannon.<sup>25</sup> However, slow readers will here part ways with the engineers. The correlation of information to physical and/or conceptual entities *is* relevant to us. However, in an information age, drawing connections between the messages that threaten to engulf us and objective reality is an increasingly arduous task. Philosopher Albert Borgmann discusses this task in his book *Holding on to Reality: The Nature of Information at the Turn of the Millennium*.<sup>26</sup>

Borgmann argues that information is related to reality in one of three possible ways. There is information *about* reality, information *for* reality, and information *as* reality.<sup>27</sup> To illustrate these relationships he asks us to imagine a concert. The account of the concert written by the local music critic is information *about* reality: the critic is describing an event that

---

<sup>21</sup> Carr, 152.

<sup>22</sup> “Google’s Irene Au: On Design Challenges.” *Businessweek Online* (March 19, 2009): 7, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bth&AN=37032438&site=bsi-live> (accessed June 6, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Carr, 157.

<sup>24</sup> Shannon, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Gleick, 263.

<sup>26</sup> Albert Borgmann, *Holding On to Reality: The Nature of Information at the Turn of the Millennium* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

<sup>27</sup> Borgmann, 1-2.

took place, and offering her observations on its success. The score that the musicians performed would be an example of information *for* reality: the score is a “cultural text” that allows the musicians to create, to perform the music. In 1999 Borgmann wrote that the compact disc represents the third, and distinctly contemporary, use of information: information *as* reality. The CD could be understood as a compressed stream of digital bits — thousands of ones and zeroes; however, that is not the way we typically encounter it. Rather than thinking of the CD as information *about* a performance, or as a means for us to create something, we equate the CD with the music. We listen to a Beethoven symphony, or a Bieber pop song on our iPods, rather than listening to information *about* those compositions. The CD is an example of *information as reality*.

Borgmann’s definition of information reads “INTELLIGENCE provided, a PERSON, is informed by a SIGN about some THING within a certain CONTEXT.”<sup>28</sup> The important flow here is intelligence, person, sign, thing, and context. Information is a sign that connects us to some reality. For Borgmann our experience of information is rooted in the natural world and the experiences of our earliest ancestors. It begins in the tracks that indicate the presence of game, or the altar Jacob builds to signify the presence of God. Here the signs are intimately connected to the reality they inform us of. They demand our attention and engage our senses. This, to Borgmann, is the paradigm of information about reality.

Closely related to this is cultural information: information that allows us to create. Cultural information includes scripts, songs, and stories; recipes, sewing patterns, and blueprints. These are all examples of signs that point us to a potential reality that we must act upon with skill in order to realize. Borgmann writes,

Nothing so engages the fullness of human capabilities as a coherent and focused world of natural information. . . . Analogously, nothing so concentrates human creativity and discipline as the austerity of cultural information, provided the latter again is of the highest order, consisting of the great literature of fiction, poetry, and music.<sup>29</sup>

Here information is measured not by the congruency of the message from point A to point B, or by the speed by which a user can conjure up the necessary fact. Rather, information is discussed in terms of its ability to engage our capacities to the fullest, and to call forth discipline and creativity from us.

In Borgmann’s view, technology is often appropriated to unburden us from the struggle of realizing cultural information, and often obscures the presence and contingency of natural information. When we adopt self-realizing technology, such as a CD player, information is allowed to take the place of reality, resulting in world of people and signs, where intelligence, things, and context are all removed.<sup>30</sup> He writes,

As long as we remain in a cocoon of virtual reality or behold and control actual reality chiefly through information technology, the world out there seems light and immaterial. But once we take up the challenge of a natural area or the invitation of a truly urban space, material reality reappears in its commanding presence and engages bodily exertion and spiritual pleasure to the limits of our capacities.<sup>31</sup>

This brief survey of Borgmann’s thought is offered as a counter narrative to the forces that treat information as a commodity, abstracted from any correlation to physical and/or conceptual entities. It provides an alternative to thinking about information solely as the transmission of a message, by introducing words like skill, creativity, discipline, and pleasure to use when evaluating how information is appropriated. Establishing the vocabulary is an essential step. To return to our food metaphor, so long as we are discussing food in terms of convenience and monetary cost, the fast food case is strong. It is everywhere, fast and cheap. However, once we broaden the conversation to include not simply the effects of food on our health but also the cultural and social meaning of food (and most significantly how pleasurable food can taste), the case for slow food case becomes much more compelling. By way of illustration, let’s revisit the issue of redundancy.

<sup>28</sup> Borgmann, 22. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>29</sup> Borgmann, 220.

<sup>30</sup> Borgmann, 183.

<sup>31</sup> Borgmann, 221.



## Redundancy and Slow Reading

As mentioned above, one of Claude Shannon's contributions to information theory was devising mathematical ways to exploit the redundancy of human language to compress messages, thus economizing in the use of bits. While few of us may be able to express this redundancy mathematically, its presence is commonly acknowledged in the way our students often handle the texts they find in our library. I first started to think about how we read when I read these haunting lines in the 2008 British study "Information Behaviour of the Researcher of the Future":

The average times that users spend on e-book and e-journal sites are very short: typically four and eight minutes respectively. It is clear that users are not reading online in the traditional sense, indeed there are signs that new forms of 'reading' are emerging as users 'power browse' horizontally through titles, contents pages and abstracts going for quick wins. It almost seems that they go online to avoid reading in the traditional sense.<sup>32</sup>

The study makes it clear that the "power browse" is increasingly popular with both students and faculty<sup>33</sup> and is corroborated by many other studies on the use of academic information.<sup>34</sup> I believe this behavior has a direct connection to the availability of an abundance of sources and limited time, but it also betrays an implicit belief that much of what is being viewed is redundant, at least from the perspective of the searcher.

To advocate for slow reading is to challenge this belief, and to embrace actively what may wrongly appear to be redundant. The slow reader will invite us to view reading as more than merely discovering a fact, key point, or "money quote." Adopting Borgmann's perspective instead, we can view reading as a skill requiring creative engagement and discipline. It is a skill mastered through practice, and one that brings about deep satisfaction and pleasure. A musician doesn't attempt a challenging piece only once and then move on, nor would a golfer feel adequately prepared after making a lone putt. Athletes, musicians, artists, chefs, and pastors all understand that excellence is a result of practice. That repetition is neither an annoyance nor an obstacle to avoid, but a necessary part of their craft.

If we only read *Moby Dick* with no purpose beyond discovering what happens to Ahab and the crew of the *Pequod*, we could skip many, many pages. But of course we read the Melville masterpiece not just to discover the fate of the white whale (who doesn't appear until page 600 in my version); we read it to enter into the world of the nineteenth-century whaler. As we perform the work in our imagination we build upon and expand our previous experiences. Borgmann writes: "To read is to gather our past and illuminate our present. ... Intelligent reading of fiction and poetry, far from being an escape, is a tacit conversation with actual reality."<sup>35</sup> And I believe that Borgmann's argument can be taken further. To read theology or history intelligently is likewise an opportunity to engage another's view of the world that will require us to call upon our prior experiences, and to engage critically our current beliefs. But to realize fully this benefit we must be interested in more than simply how it satisfies our immediate need. If we open ourselves to how another describes the terrain, and are willing to follow the trail that they blaze, our world can expand in unexpected and exciting ways.

Thus far we have suggested that the case for slow reading starts with questioning the nature of information. We've seen that the popular definition of information as a quantifiable piece of communication has resulted in an ongoing quest to increase the speed, and lower the cost, of communicating. Information has become a commodity to be consumed in pursuit of some separate goal. The assumption that faster, more efficient information is better information has been largely unquestioned. However, this assumption can be challenged as we explore the ways in which information connects us to a world outside of ourselves, and contributes to (or detracts from) our flourishing.

---

<sup>32</sup> "Information Behaviour of the Researcher of the Future." University College London. (January 11, 2008): 10, [http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/programmes/reppres/gg\\_final\\_keynote\\_11012008.pdf](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/programmes/reppres/gg_final_keynote_11012008.pdf) (Accessed April 7, 2012).

<sup>33</sup> "Information Behaviour of the Researcher of the Future," 8.

<sup>34</sup> For an especially pessimistic summary of many studies see Mark Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2008).

<sup>35</sup> Borgmann, 92.

As librarians, we possess opportunities to strengthen the popular view, and encourage our patrons to see efficiency as an important goal. Alternately, we are in a position to challenge views that would “commodify” information. We can encourage library patrons to embrace opportunities to absorb cultural information skillfully, and approach reading as a practice that can enrich one’s understanding of reality. Slow Food gained traction when its members started asking questions about how the consumption of food was influencing the quality of life. However, this was only a start.

## Pleasure

The education of taste is the Slow way to resist McDonaldization. It is not so much a question of fighting a fundamentalist war against the spread of the hamburger as it is of informing, stimulating curiosity, giving everyone the opportunity to choose. To train the senses, refine perception, restore atrophied dimensions of sensory experience — these are the objectives of Slow Food.<sup>36</sup>

The Slow Food movement does not want to be known primarily as the opponent of fast-food franchises. Instead they have chosen to direct their energies at educating people about the taste of different types of food, and at championing the idea that food should be pleasurable. One of the early Italian initiatives was the creation of taste workshops, where visitors could experience local food. The popularity of these events refuted the claims of skeptics who believed that young people were “wedded to fast food,” and thus helped propel the Slow Food movement into the international spotlight.<sup>37</sup>

Reading can be many things, but we need to remember that one of the most important things about reading is that it can be pleasurable. Professor Alan Jacobs begins his recent book *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction* by asking, “Why should [books] be read?” To which he answers, “The first reason ... is that reading books can be intensely pleasurable. Reading is one of the great human delights.”<sup>38</sup> Jacobs uses the classic *How to Read a Book* by Adler and Van Doren as his foil, and suggests that their prescriptive tact can backfire and discourage would-be readers. Jacobs argues that they propagate “the idea that reading is so good for you, so loaded with vitamin-rich, high-fiber information and understanding, that it can’t possibly be pleasurable — that to read for the joy of it is fundamentally inappropriate.”<sup>39</sup> The mistake here is not the affirmation that reading is metaphorically rich in vitamins and nutrients; rather it is in not seeing pleasure as an essential good that reading delivers. Failing to make that connection may not inhibit people from reading, but their reading will be done with all the enthusiasm of the five-year-old eating just enough peas to be excused from dinner. Not expecting to delight in the experience, they will have little inclination to linger with the text, to unlock or savor what it has to offer. The objective is simply to get through the experience, capturing what nutrients they can. Jacobs adds:

I believe that most people read quickly because they want not to read but to have read. But why do they want to have read? Because, I think, they conceive of reading simply as a means of uploading information to their brains. ... [T]hough few people realize it, many books become more boring the faster you read them.<sup>40</sup>

A crucial task for librarians is to celebrate the pleasure of reading. Like Jacobs, I am fully aware that reading in an academic setting cannot always be either slow or pleasurable.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, like the pleasures of eating, the pursuit of intellectual pleasures ought to be embraced with gratitude for God’s bounty that allows time and ability to read, as well as the wisdom to avoid gluttonous excess. Yet, I think that we must encourage our students to seek the joy that can be found in reading. By both modeling and teaching we can encourage them to view reading as an important part of living well and not simply preparation for a well-lived life.

<sup>36</sup> Petrini, 69.

<sup>37</sup> Petrini, 60.

<sup>38</sup> Alan Jacobs, *The Pleasure of Reading in an Age of Distraction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 10.

<sup>39</sup> Jacobs, 17.

<sup>40</sup> Jacobs, 72, 74.

<sup>41</sup> Jacobs, 114. Jacobs suggests that the educational reading should be primarily about “skimming well” and that slow reading ought to be left for leisure hours.

One practical step to assist our students down this path is to give them permission to read slowly by freeing them from the burden of keeping up with all the new literature. As librarians, we are naturally excited about the many new volumes we acquire, but to the student (if I may generalize from my experience) it quickly becomes discouraging to think of how many “essential” works one should master. It seems to me that often the goal of life-long reading is better served by allowing a student to take time to master and ideally to enjoy one work, rather than demanding of them to rush through four or five.<sup>42</sup>

But it is not enough to insist that “people should enjoy reading.” A palate accustomed to salty French fries and fatty cheeseburgers may struggle to find pleasure in more diverse and subtle flavors, or may remain satisfied with the pleasures of fast food, limited though they may be. The Slow Food taste workshops don’t simply assert the superiority of their fare. They bring into play the wisdom of farmers and chefs to teach people about differences in how food is produced and prepared, and to explain what they can expect to taste and why — all leading up to the sampling of a variety of sausages, wines etc.<sup>43</sup>

A similar educational effort is necessary if we are going to help students migrate from reading on the scale of Twitter and text messages to engaging with substantive theological texts. This is especially true, if like me you work with a significant number of undergraduates. University of Chicago sociologist Andrew Abbott writes of his smart, motivated undergraduate students, “They have no real reading skills at all. Moreover, they don’t know that they have no reading skills, but think quite the contrary that they are pretty good with texts. But their model of reading and indeed of knowing comes from the Internet, and is worthless when applied to complex texts.”<sup>44</sup> He describes how his students approach texts by searching for key statements to extract, often because their high school assignments expected this of them. Abbott continues, “They simply don’t understand that books have arguments and that arguments have logic and direction. The Internet has taught them that you can enter a text anywhere for any reason.”<sup>45</sup> Although he reports that his graduate students are somewhat further along, he still finds significant gaps in their preparation for serious research. The good news in Abbott’s address is that he found his students, like the young consumers of Italy, eager to escape “the commodity approach to knowledge” when given an alternative.<sup>46</sup>

In my view, this captures our next great information literacy challenge — teaching students to follow complex arguments in texts. The ability to read a 200-page non-fiction book is not something we should take for granted, but is something that needs to be acquired through instruction and practice. Borgmann writes, “Reading of whatever sort is a many-storied skill, both in the sense that you must read many stories to acquire it and in the sense that it is composed of many layers.”<sup>47</sup> Helping others acquire this skill calls for wisdom and care. Jacobs cautions, “First lessons must be in humility. If you haven’t read a novel in the past five years, it might not be best to start with *Anna Karenina*.”<sup>48</sup> He suggests that many people may want to start with poetry, not only because poems are often short, but because they require us to stop, concentrate, and read multiple times. They slow us down.<sup>49</sup> Sermons may also be a starting place for a theological librarian introducing students to the nuances of argument. Wherever we start, we need to be prepared for it to take time for patrons to acquire the skills and taste for slow reading. We should be prepared to celebrate victories, no matter how small, whenever possible.

Rethinking the tasks we assign students and how we evaluate them is also in order. For example, I think we should be cautious about handing out grades based on the number of sources a student can marshal. Abbott provides some

---

<sup>42</sup> Again, to be clear, there may be other goals that trump this one and necessitate taking in various works in a relatively short time.

<sup>43</sup> Petrini, 76-81.

<sup>44</sup> Andrew Abbott, “The Future of Knowing” (lecture, University of Chicago Alumni Association and the University of Chicago Library, June 6, 2009) 12, <http://home.uchicago.edu/~aabbott/Papers/futurek.pdf> (Accessed on June 6, 2012).

<sup>45</sup> Abbott, 11.

<sup>46</sup> Abbott, 13.

<sup>47</sup> Borgmann, 86.

<sup>48</sup> Jacobs, 97.

<sup>49</sup> Jacobs, 94-96.



helpful pedagogical techniques that he employs to intentionally slow students down, such as asking them to memorize and meditate on portions of their course books. His students are also asked to outline the arguments of primary sources, and keep a journal of their interaction with the ideas they read about.<sup>50</sup> I'm sure other ideas will emerge as we move information literacy from being solely about finding information to include being a skilled and attentive user of information.

Let's not deny that there is a certain pleasure in reading a Facebook stream. However, reading even at this level can be a gateway to many more profound pleasures. Our students need experienced, enthusiastic mentors who can patiently explain ways to read that unlock the treasures of literature, and then offer some well-chosen and suitable samples. I can't think of anyone who is better positioned for this opportunity than we are, as librarians.

## Community

The first lesson libraries can learn from the slow food movement is to establish a vocabulary about information that counters the narrative that information is a commodity. A second lesson is to emphasize the pleasure of reading and to give people the training and encouragement to discover that pleasure for themselves. And a third is that cultivating a community of slow readers will be crucial to our long-term success.

Community and food intersect at many points. The production of food is often a community event that connects the members in an annual agricultural rhythm, and results in unique regional flavors and dishes that help identify a place. Consuming food is often a community activity as well. We gather around the table to share food and conversation or did until television, microwave, and drive-through restaurants made meal time a more solitary and faster experience for many of us.

The Slow Food movement has worked with both farmers and the proprietors of local family-owned restaurants to preserve traditional produce, livestock, and dining experiences. This is not an exercise in nostalgia. Petrini writes, "We are not museum curators, and it is not our intention to bring a dying breed of business tied to rural society of the past (or the urban one, before consumerism) back to life."<sup>51</sup> Instead, Slow Food advocates work to create space in the contemporary world, using modern media and science to continue and increase the practice of slow, life-enriching culinary practices.<sup>52</sup>

At first blush, reading has little of the communal associations that surround food. Reading is something we mostly do alone in quiet, solitary places. Yet I would contend, as I suspect librarians well know, that books have a lot to do with community. They are produced and distributed by communities, just as prized Italian cheeses are. Many find that books, like food, are also more enjoyable in community. From *pottermore.com*, to book clubs, to the shelves of commentaries and criticism in our libraries, book communities are plentiful if you know where to look. But many people don't know where to look.

In 2008, Steve Jobs was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying, "The fact is that people don't read anymore."<sup>53</sup> This is not true. Book reading and the Kindle he was dismissing are both quite alive. However, the belief that no one reads, especially not young people, is oddly persistent. There is real danger in this becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, if educators decide they can no longer expect young people to read, and if young readers come to believe that they are alone. I believe there are a handful of things libraries can do to constructively counter this claim.

First, we need to identify and celebrate the readers in our midst. Local bibliophiles, be they student, staff, or faculty members who can testify to the pleasure and satisfaction of slow reading, can become important role models, especially for students who may have had little previous exposure to literary joys. We also need to recognize and encourage those students who frequent our libraries most actively. While it is understandable to direct some of our outreach at people who are not using the library or struggle to navigate our sources, I would contend that we also need to reach out to

<sup>50</sup> Abbott, 8-16.

<sup>51</sup> Petrini, 52.

<sup>52</sup> Petrini, 90-98 describes several creative Slow Food initiatives.

<sup>53</sup> John Markoff, "The Passion of Steve Jobs," *New York Times* Jan. 15, 2008, <http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/01/15/the-passion-of-steve-jobs/?ex=1358226000&en=dc35254b0fcd5490&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland&emc=rss>.

the advanced users, tapping into what one of my colleagues calls “the library cult.” These are the students who can help market the library’s services on campus, and provide a critical mass for library programming. They also provide a valuable feedback channel to think about how to advocate most effectively for engaged, more reflective reading on our campuses.

Second, librarians need to expose people on our campus to the broader scholarly book community. The book review can be a powerful tool to initiate people into the breadth and depth of book publishing, and model ways of engaging with texts. Making both print and online sources of quality reviews highly visible can help others discover and connect to reading communities. This past year my library bought a number of local literary journals and ‘zines that we left laying around the library for people to pick up and read a poem or short story, getting a glimpse of the creative writing scene in Chicago. Library programming can also be used to expose people to campus authors. At North Park this year we hosted the release party for the campus literary magazine, and several of the students read their poetry in the library.

Third, we need to design physical library spaces that lend themselves to slow reading. Winston Churchill reportedly said, “We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us.”<sup>54</sup> I think this aphorism can be applied in at least two ways. Distraction is commonly cited as the number-one enemy of slow reading and we will do well to consider how to create spaces that limit the amount of distractions our readers will face. I also think that it is helpful if our buildings communicate that reading is an important activity. It should be clear to people who enter our buildings that among the expected and privileged uses is careful, attentive, reading.

This final section grew out of my reflection on my own reading habits. My aspirations as a reader often outpace my practice. As I reflected on this, I realized that when I subscribed to scholarly journals and socialized with friends and colleagues who were actively reading, I tended to read much more. Yet when I invested more in relationships and life with peers off campus my reading suffered. Ultimately Mark Baulerlein saddles the under-30 crowd with the label “The Dumbest Generation” not because their individual intelligence is lower but because he believes they lack the social structures that allow for serious debate and ongoing scholarly conversations amongst people from different backgrounds. He writes:

However serious their ambition and disciplined their reading, the would-be young intellectuals of today lack a vital component that earlier intellectuals enjoyed from their teens through college and that they credited for their later successes. It is a youthworld of ideas and arguments, an intellectual forensic in the social settings of the young.<sup>55</sup>

The presence of a vibrant intellectual community can be a powerful catalyst. The challenge is to cultivate just such a community in our libraries.

## Conclusion

When I was discussing this topic and the opportunity to present it to you with my father, he asked with his own unmistakable candor, “What do you hope to accomplish by writing a paper for a library conference?”

I hope I have accomplished the following:

First, I want to encourage you to think about what information is and why that question is important.

Second, if you agree that information is not just a commodity to be consumed but “one of the great human delights,” I hope that you will think about what is necessary to educate others to experience that delight.

Finally, I invite you to join me in trying to figure out how librarians can not only facilitate access to information, but help build a community that embraces the beauty and challenge of a way of reading that resists distraction, that connects us at the deepest levels, that is slow.

<sup>54</sup> The Churchill Centre and Museum at the Churchill War Rooms, London, “Famous Quotations and Stories,” <http://www.winstonchurchill.org/learn/speeches/quotations> (accessed June 9, 2012).

<sup>55</sup> Baulerlein, 224.

## Select Bibliography

- Abbott, Andrew. "Future of Knowing." Presented at Brunch with Books sponsored by the University of Chicago Alumni Association and the University of Chicago Library, June 6, 2009. <http://home.uchicago.edu/~aabbott/Papers/futurek.pdf> [accessed June 26, 2012].
- Bauerlein, Mark. *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future (or, Don't Trust Anyone Under 30)*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2008.
- Borgmann, Albert. *Holding on to Reality: the Nature of Information at the Turn of the Millennium*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Carr, Nicholas G. *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. 1st ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 2010.
- Darnton, Robert. *The Case for Books: Past, Present, and Future*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2009.
- Gleick, James. *The Information: a History, a Theory, a Flood*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2011.
- Jacobs, Alan. *A Theology of Reading: the Hermeneutics of Love*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001.
- . *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Johnson, Clay A. *The Information Diet: A Case for Conscious Consumption*. 1st ed. Beijing: O'Reilly Media, 2012.
- Petrini, Carlo. *Slow Food: The Case for Taste*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.
- Shannon, Claude. "A Mathematical Theory of Communication." *The Bell System Technical Journal* 27 (July/October 1948). <http://cm.bell-labs.com/cm/ms/what/shannonday/shannon1948.pdf> [accessed June 26, 2012].
- Ulin, David L. *The Lost Art of Reading: Why Books Matter in a Distracted Time*. Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 2010.
- University College London. "Information Behaviour of the Researcher of the Future." UCL, January 11, 2008. [http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/programmes/reppres/gg\\_final\\_keynote\\_11012008.pdf](http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/programmes/reppres/gg_final_keynote_11012008.pdf) [accessed June 26, 2011].