

THE READING CULTURE IN THE INTERNET AGE

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Abstract

Since Marshall McLuhan's prediction of the emergence of a global village in 1964, the world has further shrunk into a closed Internet community. One of the major fallouts of putative globalisation is the fundamental change to reading habits and culture, with the strong emergence of electronic books in different forms (laptops, kindles, mobile phones, blackberry and other mobile gadgets). Thus, an entire library can be accessed on a palm-top device at the touch of a button. This has led to the facile conclusion that the physical book may have steadily given way to the electronic book, with vast implications for changes in reading habits and culture. However, as this paper goes ahead to argue, the physical book, with its aesthetic and psychological values, still holds the key to the revival and promotion of the dying reading culture and a more enduring and dependable form of literary documentation. The paper also goes on to provide useful hints on play reading as a uniquely different literary experience and advocates for the preservation of the physical book format as the most stabilising factor in promoting reading and intellectual communication in the shifty and ephemeral literary culture of the Internet Age.

Introduction

As far back as 1995, UNESCO (The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation) declared April 23 as the World Book and Copyright Day, the very first of which was observed that year. The choice of this date was informed by a number of factors including the fact that it is the anniversary of the birth or death of notable world artists such as William Shakespeare of England, Miguel de Cervantes of Spain, Inca Garcilaso de la Vega (a Peruvian-born Spanish writer), Vladimir Nabokov, an outstanding Russian American literary artist and critic, among others. It is important to stress the duality of the celebration. It is not just the World Book Day, but the World Book and Copyright Day, because of the recognition of the fact that the ultimate survival of the book depends on the effectiveness of the copyright protection it enjoys. Thus the Day is meant to draw attention to the significance of the Book as the primary purveyor of knowledge, as well as to encourage the writing of books by protecting the right of authors, and thus promote the reading culture through the provision of good and beneficial books. For, without an effective copyright protection, there can be no good books, and without good books, there can be no healthy reading culture. Apart from an official speech by the Director-General of UNESCO meant to be read throughout the world, the World Book and Copyright Day is expected to be observed locally through a variety of activities such as lectures, symposia and workshops on issues relating to the Book and Copyright, the launching or presentation of new books, the award of literary prizes and the promotion of the reading culture. Faculties of Arts and Humanities, the custodians of the Book in

tertiary institutions, as well as associations of authors the world over, are obliged to observe the World Book Day.

The antecedents of the Book

How did the book evolve? Before the book came to be, writing and writing materials had first to be invented. Historians trace the invention of the paper to the papyrus of Ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome, while the hieroglyphics of Ancient Egypt, a system of iconic visual representation, was a rudimentary stage in the evolution of writing. However, the biggest boost in the development of the book was the major breakthrough in printing technology made by a renowned German goldsmith, Johannes Gutenberg, around 1450 AD, the Holy Bible being the very first book to benefit from that invention. Thus, the growth of mass literacy can be traced to this great invention of the fifteenth century, prior to which time, only very few people the world over could really claim to be literate. On the literary front, while poetry and drama had long existed from Classical times, the novel, the art of extensive prose narrative, had to await the invention of printing before it began to blossom in the sixteenth century. Predominantly oral cultures began to witness transformation into literary cultures, while calligraphic art (the art of beautiful handwriting) retained a pride of place as an important school subject. Thus, writing, printing and reading flourished together as complementary arts up till the closing stage of the twentieth century when the invention of the computer ushered in the Internet Age, literally changing the face of the earth.

Reading in the pre-Internet Age

As the printed book remained the sole purveyor of knowledge and information in the decades leading to the Internet Age, bibliocentric reading (by which I mean reading centred on the physical book) was the principal mode of access to communication during the period, which may be termed the golden era of reading. Books were priceless possessions in those days, and the reading culture was relatively high. Popular novels, short stories, comic strips, newspapers, magazines and journals were particularly highly subscribed to. But reading intellectually taxing books for sheer pleasure and personal development still lagged behind reading for the sake of formal examinations. The easiest way to market such a book was to get it on the reading list of an institution or a public examination body. Authors had to be good not only in the art of creativity, but also in the politics of marketing to promote their works, while the idea of full-time creativity exclusively dependent on royalties was hardly conceivable even by celebrated authors, who were largely at the mercy of publishers. This was also the period when reading promotion campaigns were launched to highlight the dignity of the book and to demonstrate the intrinsic values of reading. The present writer was personally involved in one such campaign between 1995 and 1996 as the part-time Programme Officer (South-West Zone) for the Reading Promotion Campaign of the Nigeria Book Foundation (NBF), when Professor Chukwuemeka Ike was the President of the Foundation and Mabel Segun was the National Co-ordinator of the Campaign. The emphasis then was on book reading in its original and conventional format, which was the printed mode.

Book Reading in the Internet Age

The Internet Age, variously referred to as the Information Age, the Computer Age, or the Digital Age, effectively dates from the late 1970s with the introduction of personal computers. Already, the computer, described as 'a programmable machine designed to automatically carry out a sequence of arithmetic or logical operations' (*Wikipedia Encyclopedia*), had evolved through a combination of the technologies of automated calculation and sequential programming in the middle of the twentieth century, climaxing the series of experiments which began as far back as the 1830s. But the Internet, the global network of personal computers, hit a critical mass in the 1990s with the creation of the World Wide Web (www.) in 1989 by British scientist, Tim Berners-Lee. This effectively launched the globalisation era, which technologically compressed the world into what Marshall McLuhan had foreseen as a 'global village' some three decades earlier. With globalisation came a new concept of the book, and a new interpretation of the notion of reading rooted in semiotics or semiology, the study of signs and symbols and their deployment in human communication. The book now exists in both hard and soft copies, while reading is defined as the decoding of encoded signs and codes, whether visual or aural, iconic or arbitrary, intellectual or mundane. The conventional library or resource centre similarly dissolved into the abstraction of virtual reality such that the global network of libraries can now be accessed on a single laptop or palmtop. This vast, limitless access to knowledge and information has had tremendous implications for the reading culture as well as the standard and quality of education in the modern and post-modern periods. The consequent revolution in communication technology,

has thrown up entirely new perspectives on the pedagogical process, most especially at the tertiary level.

Implications of the Internet Age on the Reading Culture

Just as the Internet Age ushered in a conceptual change in the book format, it also brought about a paradigm shift in reading habits the world over, particularly here in Africa where the reading culture has been relatively poor. Some years ago, a cruel joke was making the rounds in the Internet to the effect that the best way of hiding something from the black man was to put it inside a book. What this implies is that the average black person hardly reads, and is dependent essentially on the oral culture for all their communication needs. It may not be entirely true to state that the average black person does not read; what is perhaps open to question is the *quality* rather than the *quantity* of reading materials. A huge volume of junk materials by way of soft-sell journals, popular magazines and pedestrian literature is consumed on a daily basis as pure entertainment, with little or no benefits, whether moral or intellectual, to the readers concerned. The focus of reading has also shifted from the hard copies to the soft copies (the so-called e-books or electronic books) accessed through the Internet and read in digital form, at minimal or no cost. Apart from being relatively cheap and readily accessible, e-books require no storage space such that the entire volumes of the Library of Congress, the world's largest library, can be accessed through a browsing phone, a laptop or a notebook. This has led to the widespread speculation that e-books are most likely to supplant the printed book in the course of time, as the days of the latter appear to be numbered. Furthermore, most high-impact international

journals are already available on-line where they are accessed by millions of readers throughout the world. For instance, AJOL (African Journals On Line) with its Secretariat in South Africa, hosts over four hundred African journals in its website, with Nigeria having the largest share of them. One of the many implications of the Computer Age is that emails and text messages (with their cryptic, offensive and ungrammatical abbreviations!) have replaced the conventional modes of communication – the greeting card, the printed letter, the invitation card, notice of meeting, and so forth. The question as to whether the printed book will survive this electronic onslaught or not will be taken up presently.

The use and abuse of the Internet

The Internet is capable of being employed either in a positive or a negative manner. In spite of their undeniably positive values, Internet materials need to be handled with absolute discretion. As the present writer remarked elsewhere, the Internet is 'a veritable salad of the good, the bad, and the ugly, which implies that only about a third of the materials published online could be readily classified as being of reasonably good quality. Much of the material posted on the net is unedited, uncensored and devoid of peer review' (Umukoro, 2009: 115). Nevertheless, the Internet offers unrestricted access to information such that individual scholars, unlike in the past, can no longer lay claim to a monopoly of knowledge, and the serious-minded student may be one or two steps ahead of his or her tutor in the awareness of latest developments in research and scholarship. The myth that the Internet is the ultimate repository of knowledge where virtually all issues under the sun may be accessed has resulted into a certain

form of intellectual indolence which manifests in a number of ways. One of these manifestations is the discouragement of original and primary research, based on actual field reports or archival discoveries. The lazy scholar expects to find all relevant materials in the Internet, unmindful of the fact that the Internet has no magical wand for manufacturing information, but also has to depend on facts and figures fed into it by other scholars through primary research and physical field survey. Thus, the Internet is erroneously treated as being absolutely infallible. Another consequent manifestation of intellectual indolence is what I have come to term as 'cut-and-paste scholarship', in which lazy students indiscriminately cut materials from the Internet and paste them on their projects and essays, quite often without due acknowledgement. This amounts to mass plagiarism which has, unfortunately, become the bane of tertiary scholarship in many places. Supervisors have to be extra-vigilant to detect or discourage the commitment of this literary crime which will be examined further under Copyright.

Copyright and the Internet

As pointed out earlier, the World Book Day is also the World Copyright Day in which the rights of authors and the protection of intellectual property are focused upon. The survival of books, whether in hard or soft copy, and the promotion of creativity depend on the effectiveness with which a nation's copyright laws are enforced. Intellectual property falls under three broad categories: technological inventions, artistic works (literary, visual, performative, etc), and brand words, slogans or symbols used to distinguish products and services for unique or individual identity.

Accordingly, scientific inventions are covered by patents; artistic works are protected by copyright; while brands are taken care of by registered trademarks, all governed by specific laws, which vary from one country to another. The transient arts, such as dance, drama and music are more vulnerable to piracy and plagiarism and more difficult to protect than the more permanent literary, visual or tactile arts. The current Copyright Act in Nigeria was promulgated in 1990 and amended in 1992 and 1999. The University of Ibadan recently set up a committee to develop an Intellectual Property Policy for the University, which has been published in its website, and on which comments and suggestions were invited to be forwarded to ippdraft@ui.edu.ng latest by 04 May, 2012. The policy seeks to establish guidelines for the optimal utilization, harmonization and commercialization of intellectual property developed by staff and students on the basis of equity and fair play without compromising the rights of the owners concerned. This is a laudable objective aimed at creating the enabling environment for the flourishing of Intellectual Property in the University of Ibadan. Meanwhile, concerted efforts must be made to stamp out the twin evils of piracy and plagiarism from the entire university system in the interest of inventiveness and creativity.

Piracy and Plagiarism

At this juncture, it is appropriate for us to take a closer look at the menace of piracy and plagiarism currently ravaging the book and publishing industry in Nigeria and elsewhere in the world. The tenuous relationship between these two sides of the fraudulent coin has been extensively treated in my previous papers on the issue. In my article in *The Guardian* of Tuesday, 14 November, 2006 (p.77), I distinguished between the relative havocs being caused by

both enemies of intellectual property: the pirate robs the author of his or her royalties but keeps his or her identity intact, while the plagiarist robs the author of *both* his or her earnings and identity. In a subsequent lecture, I went ahead to describe plagiarism as 'intellectual murder, pure and simple. The plagiarist kills off the original author and appropriates his or her work' (Umukoro, 2009:27), which makes plagiarism a more grievous crime than piracy, although neither should be condoned in an enlightened community. Plagiarism starts from appropriating an author's uniquely crafted phrase or sentence and graduates into lifting whole passages or chapters without proper acknowledgment. Tutors of research methodology and documentation at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels should spare no effort in stressing the need to maintain academic honesty and scholarly integrity in the preparation of their various projects and semester papers. Stealing is stealing, whether it involves physical property or intellectual property, and no decent person should be remotely associated with the obnoxious act.

The educational paradox of the Internet Age

One of the intriguing paradoxes of the Internet Age is the often made claim that, in spite of the massive advancement in communication technology, the standard of education has continued to fall, and is now considered to be at an all-time low. Educational standard, in the pre-Internet Age, when all we could boast of was a strictly limited access to the printed book and journal (which often came in belated editions), was generally thought to be much higher than now. How has it come to be that educational standard apparently failed to keep pace with the great

advancement in computerisation when a limitless volume of information is readily available on the touch of a button? The answer depends on our conception or misconception of educational *standard*, which is quite often confused with educational *quality*. The standard of education is dependent on two factors: the availability of knowledge and the effective utilisation of it for quality attainment. The paradox actually resides in the fact that the high exposure and knowledge of the Information Age does not translate into a proportionate increase in the quality of education. Thus, rather than speak of falling standard, we should more appropriately be talking of falling quality of education, in an era of rising standard of educational facilities. Our problem today is not with access to educational information, but with the effectiveness of information management and utilisation. The average secondary school student today has access to a much greater quantity of knowledge than his twentieth century counterpart, but with very little to show for it by way of quality. What is urgently required is the effective canalisation of the volume of information available towards an appreciable improvement in both quality and overall standard of education.

Book publishing in the Internet Age

The plight of the printed book which faces the frightening prospect of extinction in the era of the electronic book has earlier been mentioned, although this is an arguable proposition. New inventions tend to displace, or threaten to displace, the previous ones. Printing technology has effectively displaced calligraphy, the art of beautiful handwriting, which has given way to the scrappy and sloppy paper marks that we hurriedly make these days in the name of writing. Not many of us can boast of beautiful

handwriting today since our laptops have effectively displaced the pen, in the same way as the computer has displaced the manual typewriter. If the electronic book were to push the printed book out of circulation, then all bookshops, physical libraries as well as book printers and publishers would also be put out of business. But this is a mere bugbear which is not likely to occur in the foreseeable future. The printed book or the hard copy fulfils a need which the e-book or the soft copy of documents can never satisfy. A copy of the printed book in one's hand is worth dozens of electronic books in the Internet which cannot be fully trusted because they are capable of vanishing in the twinkling of an eye. The crashing of computers with the attendant loss of valuable documents yet to be printed out is a frequent occurrence. An author's sense of fulfilment remains incomplete without the transformation of the soft copy into hard copy, colourfully designed and beautifully bound, providing additional aesthetic pleasure. Even the reader finds the hard copy more flexible and more pleasant to handle than the ordeal and visual strain associated with reading direct from the bright screen, and the ocular health hazard that goes with it, although this is often underplayed for obvious reasons. Thus, the printed book, the fundamental book format, will continue to exist alongside the electronic copy, just as the film can never serve the same purpose as the physical stage, which remains the legitimate theatre. Printers and publishers therefore need not fear being rendered redundant by the electronic revolution as their services will continue to be needed by writers and readers alike.

Towards a sustainable National Book Policy

To complement the Copyright Act which protects the author, there is the urgent need to evolve a National Book Policy aimed at facilitating book production and distribution, thus promoting the reading culture. Printers and publishers are business people who wish to make rapid turnovers on their investment, and thus tend to avoid speculative or experimental publishing. Hence, they prefer to tread the well-beaten paths by restricting their publications to prescribed school texts with ready marketability. Yet, reading promotion depends on the provision of cheap books of very high quality for the general readership, requiring substantial support from the government. This is one policy which should be rigorously pursued by the national body of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) in its drive for the sustenance of writing and reading in the country. For instance, the government should set up a quality control body or liaise with the Nigerian Academy of Letters (NAL) to assess literary and creative works, to ensure the maintenance of high standards and discourage mediocrity. A particular quantity of books which pass the quality control test should then be bought by the government and distributed to schools, colleges and public libraries (every local government area is expected to have at least one) for easy access by the general reader. In this way, the financial interests of writers and publishers will be protected, while an endless stream of good books will be available for the reading public. An enlightened reading public will invariably translate into a knowledgeable citizenry and a flourishing book industry.

Conclusion

In the course of this paper, we have traced the genesis of the book and the development of the reading culture from time immemorial, as well as the significance of reading in intellectual development and social progress. If music is the food of love, as Shakespeare claims, then reading is the food of the mind. Reading is the cheapest and safest form of travel, offering vast, limitless exposure to global information provided through the printed word. Reading and learning are two sides of the educational coin: by learning to read, we become capable of reading to learn. Through reading, we learn vicariously from the experiences of characters and personages whom we encounter regularly in both fiction and non-fiction. An autobiographical or biographical encounter with great men and women of history can be particularly inspiring. Reading is the surest route to knowledge and creativity; a prolific writer must, first and foremost, be a voracious reader. Improvement in the reading habit is the most effective antidote to the falling quality in education. As Professor Ayo Bamgbose once remarked, 'the time has come for Nigerian students to return to the reading culture which produced the first set of Nigerian scholars.' This should have the added advantage of improving the appalling standard of both spoken and written English in Nigeria today. Reading for knowledge and self-improvement should replace the unhealthy habit of reading solely to pass examinations. One of the many ways of enhancing the reading culture is the use of the Library Reading Record which I introduced in the Department of Theatre Arts about a decade ago, and which I later turned into a booklet form in 2006. Each booklet takes as many as twenty-five or thirty entries of books that have been read, and the students are

encouraged to read as many as fifty books within one academic session, totalling at least two hundred books at the end of the fourth year. The positive cumulative effect of this is better imagined than described. In a brief Introduction to the booklet, I provided useful hints on how best to read plays, as opposed to reading prose or poetry. Unlike the novel, a play is meant to be visualised while being read, and the reading time must correspond to the staging time, for the total impact to be felt. To round off, the reading culture in the Internet Age will continue to depend on both the printed book and its electronic version, existing side by side, for the provision of specialised knowledge and valuable information for scholars and the general readership.

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