

Millennials Love Digital, But They Also Love Print, Despite Rumors To The Contrary

The [Mr. Magazine™](#) Interview With Naomi Baron, Executive Director, Center for Teaching, Research and Learning, World Languages and Cultures, American University

“Now if you ask over 400 students from 5 different countries if costs were the same, and we’re talking about reading materials for schoolwork; would you prefer to read in hard copy or digital, if costs were the same, overall for schoolwork 87% said I’d rather read hard copy.” Naomi Baron

“What’s the easiest medium for them (students) to concentrate on, and they had a choice of hard copy, computer, tablets, or e-readers or mobile phones. And 92% said it was easiest for them to concentrate when they read on hard copy. And to me that’s an astounding figure from this generation.” Naomi Baron



Are critical thinking and comprehension and retention impaired when we or our children read onscreen? Are we doing them and ourselves a disservice by encouraging digital devices when it comes to actually reading and doing their schoolwork or their for-pleasure entertainment online?

These are questions that Dr. Naomi Baron, Executive Director, [Center for Teaching, Research and Learning, World Languages and Cultures, American University](#), asked and answered in her

latest book “Words Onscreen.”

Naomi is interested in electronically-mediated communication, writing and technology, the history of English, and higher education. A former Guggenheim Fellow and Fulbright Fellow, she has published seven books. Her book, *Always On: Language in an Online and Mobile World*, won the English-Speaking Union’s Duke of Edinburgh English Language Book Award for 2008. Her latest book, *Words Onscreen: The Fate of Reading in a Digital World* came out in early 2015.

I spoke with Naomi recently and we talked about the pros and cons of both print and digital and about the opportunities both offer our children and ourselves today. As an educator, Naomi has many concerns about the cost of print versus digital, especially when her research has shown that other than the cost, overall students would prefer their reading both for school and pleasure to be in print. It was a highly informative and eye-opening discussion.

Just don’t believe everything you hear about what millennials prefer and don’t prefer when it comes to their choice for media consumption.

So, without further ado, the Mr. Magazine™ interview with Dr. Naomi Baron.

But first the sound-bites:

On what she based the alarm on that she has sounded about the detriments to comprehension and critical thinking when it comes to reading online: Based on over 400 university student responses from five countries to a questionnaire that I administered. And the results surprised me enormously in terms of their understanding of what works well for them in print and what works well for them about digital media.

On why media companies are missing the boat and focusing only on digital when trying to reach millennials: What we see

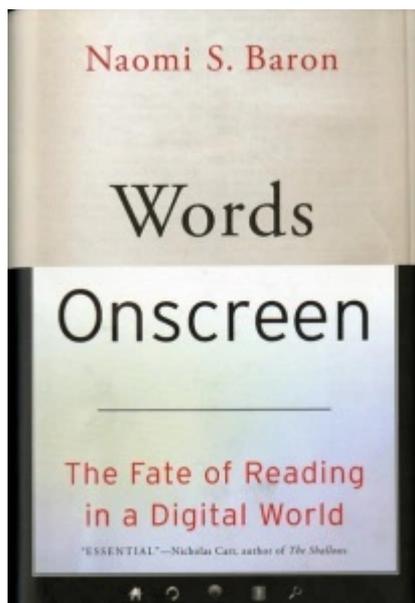
happening, and I talk a little bit about this at the end of my book, and it's become increasingly true, is that people would like to be able to choose their medium depending upon their needs of the moment; depending upon their interests in particular genres, so there are enough people who are saying I want both digital and print. I'll use my son for example. He's in economics. So, he wants the hard copy, the book, for studying, reading, whatever, but when he goes to class he wants the digital version because he has his computer with him. And that's true of a lot of people even reading novels. While I'm on the road I'm happy to read and willing to read on my portable device, but when I get home I want to curl up with a good book.

On whether she's worried about our younger generation and the future in general when it comes to reading comprehension and retention: Every once in a while I get hopeful that, at least in some places, that's not quite the case. I do have a lot of concerns about, instead of faculty members teaching to the test, faculty members are increasingly teaching to what they think students will do. So the project that I'm just about to launch is to look at the kinds of assignments that faculty members are making now, as opposed to what they made five or ten years ago. And in part our college population is changing. I understand that it's not one simple variable.

On whether a new media project proposed by a major media company today could survive without a print component: What is relevant is what do people do in their spare time? If I read magazines in my spare time, I can read them in print or I can read them on a screen. But my question is, what is that age cohort reading, and obviously it's a broad range. You look at the enormous growth in comic books and in graphic novels. To my knowledge, in the United States those are heavily done in print. In Japan, as you may well know, the growth in E-reading is overwhelmingly from comics. Not for books. So, there are some cultural issues as to what one accesses how.

On what someone would find her doing if they showed up unexpectedly to her house: The first thing that you'd see, and this is largely due to my husband, is probably about 30,000 books in the house. You would probably see me sitting at my computer and either working on the computer itself or reading from print. I do an awful lot of my writing by hand; "Words Onscreen is probably half written by hand and the other half on the computer, it depends on my mood and what I have handy.

On what keeps her up at night: Regarding my research, that educators from K through graduate school are sufficiently naïve about the consequences of their well-meaning actions in terms of what they're recommending to students and in terms of the medium for reading and what to do with what they read, that are causing harm to the next generation. And that does keep me up at night.



And now the lightly edited transcript of the Mr. Magazine™ interview with Naomi Baron, Executive Director, Center for Teaching, Research and Learning, World Languages and Cultures, American University.

Samir Husni: Do you think that you're too late in sounding the alarm about online reading and comprehension, that not only is it hurting our ability to retain information and utilize critical thinking, but we also may be pushing our audiences, whether they're students or readers of magazines or books, in the wrong direction? What are we doing wrong when it comes to reading online and why are you sounding the alarm now and based on what?

Naomi Baron: Based on over 400 university student responses from five countries to a questionnaire that I administered. And the results surprised me enormously in terms of their understanding of what works well for them in print and what works well for them about digital media.

We tend to assume that because these are university-aged students – 18 to 26, and I now have more countries included than were in my book; we've added Slovakia and India, to the United States, Germany and Japan, but you see how much this age cohort is on digital media. They sit in our classes with computers; they're taking notes right? Wrong. They're purchasing items; they're checking out Facebook posts; they're just doing many things. They're texting on their phones in our classrooms; we know this because they admit this to us if you ask them not in front of the professor whose class it is.

And they run out of power on their phones from being on them all day and what do universities do; they have power stations everywhere so they can recharge their devices. So, you would assume that they are really interested in doing as much as possible digitally.

But what my surveys show and the interviews that I've done and the class lectures, guest lectures and so forth; what they all show is an understanding as to what it is people find really useful about reading on digital media and what it is they find less so.

For example, the major attraction on digital media is cost. That by and large, if you're talking about new materials, cost is lower for the kinds of course materials that you use in an university course or that you buy for pleasure reading; it's lower for digital than it is for print. So, we're not talking about secondhand print; we're not talking about three people going in and buying the book together; we're talking about buying individual copies.

And there are a lot of students, especially in the United States, for whom money is a very major issue. We're working very hard in the United States to make universities open to a broader cohort economically, that has been the case. And whether it's a community college, where textbooks cost more than your tuition does, or a medium-sized private university, such as American University, where there are students who say I wait until the middle of the semester to see if I really have to buy a book because if I don't have to, I don't have the money to buy it. Or if I have the money, we don't even use the book enough to buy it; I'm going to use my money for something else.

So, finances are the major stumbling block as far as I can see, in terms of the future of print versus digital. And I think we have to be aware of that in a way that we haven't been before.

Now if you ask over 400 students from 5 different countries if costs were the same, and we're talking about reading materials for schoolwork; would you prefer to read in hard copy or digital, if costs were the same, overall for schoolwork 87% said I'd rather read hard copy.

Samir Husni: Wow.

Naomi Baron: And if costs were the same when it comes to reading for pleasure, 81% said they'd rather read hard copy. These are millennials. And this is what they're telling us.

Samir Husni: So why do you think all of these media people, supposedly some of the most creative people on the face of the earth, are missing the boat when they're focusing on digital when it comes to reaching millennials? And free digital, at that. There's no cost.

Naomi Baron: I'll answer that in just a moment, but let me give you one more statistic and this is the other major finding from my research as far as I'm concerned. And this

number didn't change when they added in more countries. The question was: what is the medium on which it is the easiest for you to concentrate when you read? And I did not separate out reading for pleasure versus reading for school. What's the easiest medium for them to concentrate on, and they had a choice of hard copy, computer, tablets, or e-readers or mobile phones. And 92% said it was easiest for them to concentrate when they read on hard copy. And to me that's an astounding figure from this generation.

So, going back to your question; what do I think is going on with the media companies? A couple of strands, first the Internet became easily accessible, relatively speaking not expensive and readily searchable. So, they began to put a lot of stuff onto the Internet, this is back in the old fashioned days when, at least in the United States, we were doing most of our work on computers.

Then in late 2007 the Kindle comes along. And because Bezos is a real marketer, he priced the books as loss leaders, almost everything with a digital book was a loss leader for him; he was paying the publishers more than he was taking in for sale. It was all \$9.95. It's the same thing that happens at the grocery store when you want to bring people in and you say, oh by the way, you can also buy some of this or that while you're here. It's a marketing tool, right?

Then what happens is the iPad comes along in 2010; Smartphones become increasingly ubiquitous, so I think the statistics are two-thirds of adults in the United States have Smartphones. And billions are selling internationally.

We now have lots and lots of devices that are increasingly mobile and that make it easy to access stuff. And stuff is from soup to nuts; the entire range of things, whether it's information or amusement or work-related; it's all because of the device in your hands. So, media producers are attempting to figure out how they follow a revenue stream. And if sales

are going down on newspapers, well maybe they'll read digitally. When you look at the transition for how many people are reading digitally versus how many people are reading print newspapers, there is a shift.

And part of the shift isn't because of people who like print; it's your standing in line and you're waiting for the bus or whatever, and I read The New York Times on my phone; I get the paper medium at home and I love it, but if I'm standing and waiting for something or at an airport, I want to use my time in a way that's meaningful for me. And once I can do that; how are you going to keep them down on the farm once they've seen Gay Paree as the song used to go. It becomes harder to say that you're going to wait until you get home to read the print.

I can do it online; I can print it out; I can save it. When I do research, it's funny. I save my article in a newspaper in print, or in a magazine in print. I go to my computer; I look it up online because I want to save it for research purposes or I want to send it to somebody. And the digital component becomes convenient. What we see happening, and I talk a little bit about this at the end of my book, and it's become increasingly true, is that people would like to be able to choose their medium depending upon their needs of the moment; depending upon their interests in particular genres, so there are enough people who are saying I want both digital and print.

I'll use my son for example. He's in economics. So, he wants the hard copy, the book, for studying, reading, whatever, but when he goes to class he wants the digital version because he has his computer with him.

And that's true of a lot of people even reading novels. While I'm on the road I'm happy to read and willing to read on my portable device, but when I get home I want to curl up with a good book. And that's why a lot of the marketing now is

charging just a smidge more and you get both.

And it's the same thing with audio books. People are not saying that it has to be audio; I think the recent statistics that came out from the Association of American Publishers in Washington; they came out with sales for 2015 and audio books went down this year. They really shot up in 2014, but they fell comparatively speaking in 2015. And that probably depends on what's the bestseller. Print sales went up because of Harper Lee's books; digital sales went up because of 50 Shades of Grey and Twilight. So these numbers are not always reflections of the complexity that goes into people's decision-making.

Samir Husni: Are you worried about our future as a country, as a young generation that the more we dive into digital; the more we may suffer in the areas of comprehension and retention? Our education system from the very beginning trains our children to answer the questions, don't think. Just give me the answers.

Naomi Baron: Every once in a while I get hopeful that, at least in some places, that's not quite the case. I do have a lot of concerns about, instead of faculty members teaching to the test, faculty members are increasingly teaching to what they think students will do. So the project that I'm just about to launch is to look at the kinds of assignments that faculty members are making now, as opposed to what they made five or ten years ago. And in part our college population is changing. I understand that it's not one simple variable.

In part, the students are changing not just in terms of what their aspirations are, but also in what kinds of other extracurricular activities that they have. When I was in college a million years ago, people didn't have internships. We weren't supposed to do volunteer work; we were supposed to go and study. And we studied a lot of hours per week.

The students at those same institutions now have fewer hours available to devote to what they're doing; we didn't have a job 10 hours a week. We didn't have a job 30 or 40 hours per week, plus go to school full time as many students do now.

So, what's pretty clear to me anecdotally, but I'm looking to document it, is that we're changing the sorts of things that we're asking of students because students weren't doing the things we were asking when we were asking more. We now have opportunities to, instead of them having a written research paper, to have a video. If there's a lot of research with the video and you do the writing somewhere else, that may be OK. But we're assigning articles and chapters, rather than full books because people weren't reading them.

At my university we were encouraged to put as much material as we could online in case we had to close the university, we and Cambridge closed for the plague way back when. (Laughs) And it was not clear whether we would have to close the university from month to month; were we still going to have education, whereas if you put materials online, you could do that.

To some extent we've changed our patterns, sometimes for good reasons, sometimes because we knew our students weren't doing the work anyway, maybe through no fault of their own, maybe their fault, and as a result we change our goal structure. I don't think we're looking to make students dumb; I think we haven't figured out what we want to accomplish and how to make it happen.

And the same I'm sure goes for K-12, in particular, attempts to figure out three things. First, how do you have enough money when the state legislatures are not funding public schools? Or the county legislatures aren't funding public schools? How do you have enough money to buy course materials? And if digital materials are less expensive than print texts; guess what's going to happen? Arnold Schwarzenegger started this in California back in 2007 at the beginning of the Great

Recession because it hit California first in some ways. Finances are real and you can't deny them.

The second issue is with the attempts to build a Common Core curriculum, which makes a certain amount of sense if you know what should go into it. People are trying to figure out how to get students engaged and one of the ways that you get them engaged is by not having to read whole books apparently. (Laughs) That's part of the plan with the Common Core from what I have seen.

The third issue is parents and teachers should ask themselves what kind of skills their children have and how much is knowing something digital going to be important to them? Should they know everything digital or just some things digital? The really smart teachers, and there are bunches of them, are writing books on such things as a book called "Connected Reading" by Kristen Hawley Turner from Fordham University.

And what she's looking at doing as a co-author is asking how do we intelligently mix digital and print? And I've read most of the book now and I met her at a conference a few months ago. She's a smart woman. And she herself has been a teacher in the middle school level, I believe. And she lays out a number of really intelligent ways to take advantage of the good things that digital can do that print doesn't and the good things that print can do that digital doesn't.

The reason that I haven't totally despaired is there are at least some people who are seriously asking the question: how do we learn best and how do we learn what's best? One of the discussions that hasn't taken place yet seriously; the research has not been done, is to ask are there some subjects and some materials that are best done in print? Or are there some things that can work very well digitally?

If I wanted to show you how the double helix works, to see

that move; that's something that you can't do in print. If I want to look at meaningful videos of ecological disasters; a video is actually a good thing to have and to be able to embed that in textual material is not a dumb idea. But we haven't figured out what is best learned how. We haven't done research on this and we haven't even asked ourselves the question to sit and ponder over. That's what I'm meaning to do in my coming research.

Samir Husni: That's what I think even the industry is starting to discover, that they saw what I call this beautiful seductive mistress named digital walk up onto the scene and they jumped in for a one night stand that ended up being a love affair and then they discovered that our faithful spouse print was and is still making the money. And now we're trying to get our spouse and our mistress to talk to each other.

Naomi Baron: Right.

Samir Husni: My question to you is, if you were to be hired by a media company, whether it's Time Inc. or Hearst Magazines or Meredith, and they tell you they have this idea for a new media project, whether it's a magazine or something else, and the age group is 18 to 30 years old. Can I survive without print or do I still need that print component, if the costs are the same whether it's print or digital?

Naomi Baron: That is a big issue. For example, I can now go into The New York Times digitally and get their full archives without paying a penny, once I know how to do it. I have a print subscription and on one of my devices, with that subscription, I can get unlimited articles and on another I get five a month, or whatever it is. But I can give anyone in my family my login information, or my friends, or a thousand different people. Take The Atlantic, Harper's; I don't need a subscription to get everything from them.

So money actually is an issue because I just wrote my check

for renewing my Harper's and Atlantic; it's not a huge amount of money, but I paid for it. I don't think money is going to go away as an issue and it's not going to go away as an issue in students' minds in the 18 to 35 range.

What is relevant is what do people do in their spare time? If I read magazines in my spare time, I can read them in print or I can read them on a screen. But my question is, what is that age cohort reading, and obviously it's a broad range. You look at the enormous growth in comic books and in graphic novels. To my knowledge, in the United States those are heavily done in print. In Japan, as you may well know, the growth in E-reading is overwhelmingly from comics. Not for books. So, there are some cultural issues as to what one accesses how.

If you were to ask me what's happening on your campus; do you see people reading magazines; I don't see them reading magazines, either digitally or in print. And our campus store has shrunk the number of magazines that it has available just because they don't sell.

But we have to figure out what are the things that people would read. And I'm not the expert on that. I'm really interested to learn what people are reading. What I do know is that sometimes we get surprised as to media habits. I don't have the data now, but I heard probably two years ago that a fairly large number of teenagers or young adults listen to the radio. Who knew?

Samir Husni: That's one reason my latest book was called "Audience First." Before you determine whether it's going to be digital or print or TV or radio, you have to know who your audience is. Who are those people and what do you know about them? And I think that's why your statistics are so important and essential for the media industry to understand. When you tell me that 87% or 91% can concentrate more when they're reading print that's important. And if we really want to take people off of that Welfare Information Society that we put

them on, it's a good argument. I read your book "Words Onscreen" and I read the part about nobody wants to be reading tea leaves about the future of print, but you give the example of Jeff Bezos buying the Washington Post.

Naomi Baron: You have to read the tea leaves if you want to plan. (Laughs) It's as dangerous as it's always been, but that doesn't make it unnecessary. What is my own take on all of this? Digital is not going away anytime soon and there is a lot of encounter. You can call it reading, and sometimes it actually is, but sometimes it's just an encounter to get information or to check sports scores or restaurant reviews. And to me reading those five-line restaurant reviews does not count as reading.

But that's not going to die away. Therefore, the smart thing as far as I'm concerned is for us to figure out what kind of people do we want to be? How do we want to educate people; what kinds of values do we want them to have; are contemplation and analysis among those values? And we have to ask: what's the best way to accomplish this today? There are all sorts of technologies, print is a technology. We have all sorts of technologies; what are the best ones?

One of the reasons, and I think I spoke a little bit about this in a chapter of the book; one of the reasons in Japan that people don't read a lot of novels on phones is the books themselves are small enough to carry around and they have discreet covers that doesn't tell everyone what the person is reading. So there is already a cultural artifact, namely a small book that makes it unnecessary to take some of the affordances of a digital device and read digitally on it. It's all of these things that we have to think about.

The French have had livre du poche for over a century, probably more. But they're small books. And they're easy to carry around. And that's probably one of the reasons, in addition to other aspects of books in France and prices of

books, all the pieces of the book culture being small and portable contributes to reading habits. I'm guessing, but to me it's worth asking.

Samir Husni: If I show up unexpectedly at your house and I knock on your door, what will I find you doing? Reading a magazine? Your iPad? Watching television?

Naomi Baron: The first thing that you'd see, and this is largely due to my husband, is probably about 30,000 books in the house. You would probably see me sitting at my computer and either working on the computer itself or reading from print. I do an awful lot of my writing by hand; "Words Onscreen is probably half written by hand and the other half on the computer, it depends on my mood and what I have handy. You'd see me printing a lot of stuff off and reading from hard copy if it's something that I actually want to be serious about. And you'd see me shuffling stuff back and forth.

Samir Husni: My typical last question; what keeps you up at night?

Naomi Baron: Regarding my research, that educators from K through graduate school are sufficiently naïve about the consequences of their well-meaning actions in terms of what they're recommending to students and in terms of the medium for reading and what to do with what they read, that are causing harm to the next generation. And that does keep me up at night.

Samir Husni: Thank you.