

Fragmented Reading in the Digital Publishing Era: Phenomenon and Coping Strategies (Post-print)

Authors: Zhu Mingming

Date: 2023-10-08T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

In the digital publishing era, fragmented reading occupies an increasingly large proportion of public reading. Fragmented reading has both advantages and disadvantages: while it possesses benefits such as universality, convenience, richness, and immediacy, it inevitably exhibits drawbacks including dispersiveness, aimlessness, superficiality, and the induction of mental inertia. To eliminate these drawbacks and avoid a decline in national reading quality, there must be government attention and guidance, as well as a focus on the construction of mobile-phone-based online reading platforms.

Full Text

Fragmented Reading in the Digital Publishing Era: Phenomena and Response Strategies

Abstract: In the digital publishing era, fragmented reading accounts for an increasingly high proportion of public reading. While offering benefits such as universality, convenience, richness, and instantaneity, fragmented reading inevitably suffers from drawbacks including dispersion, purposelessness, superficiality, and induced mental laziness. To eliminate these disadvantages and prevent a decline in national reading quality, government attention and guidance are essential, as is the development of internet reading platforms centered on mobile phones.

Keywords: fragmented reading; deep reading; mobile reading; reading platform

By Zhu Mingming

Digital publishing is an emerging industry built upon advanced internet technologies that integrates and transcends traditional publishing content. Its prod-

uct forms primarily include e-books, digital newspapers, digital journals, online original literature, and mobile publications. On one hand, the rapid development of mobile terminals, represented by smartphones, has transformed people's reading habits, promoted the popularization of digital reading, and contributed to the prosperity of digital publishing. On the other hand, the growing digital publishing industry has provided massive content for digital reading, further driving changes in reading behaviors.

According to the "16th National Survey on National Reading" released by the China Institute of Press and Publication in April 2019, "In 2018, the contact rate for digital reading methods (online reading, mobile reading, e-reader reading, Pad reading, etc.) reached 76.2%...More than half of adult citizens prefer digital reading methods, the proportion of readers preferring paper reading has declined, while the proportion preferring mobile reading has risen significantly (73.7% of adult citizens engaged in mobile reading). Among Chinese adult citizens' online activities, reading news, social networking, and watching videos dominate, with obvious entertainment and fragmentation characteristics, while deep book reading behavior accounts for a relatively low proportion" [1]. In August 2019, the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) released the 44th "Statistical Report on China's Internet Development," which stated: "As of June 2019, China's internet user population reached 854 million...mobile internet users reached 847 million" [2]. These survey data demonstrate that mobile reading has become the main component of digital reading, and the proportion of citizens engaging in fragmented reading via mobile phones is increasing daily, which will inevitably impact the overall formation of national cultural standards. In recent years, experts, scholars, and relevant practitioners in the media and publishing industries have begun paying attention to the issue of fragmented reading, elaborating on its concept, causes, advantages, disadvantages, and countermeasures.

1. The Concept of Fragmented Reading

Fragmented reading is not an entirely new reading behavior; it only became mainstream and a habitual way of reading after the arrival of the digital age. Fragmented time has always existed in people's lives throughout history. Only with the popularization of mobile terminals, especially smartphones, has reading anytime and anywhere become possible. Today, fragmented reading primarily refers to the discontinuous reading behavior that people engage in using fragmented time through mobile devices such as smartphones, tablets, and e-readers. Its connotation includes fragmentation of reading time, reading content, and reading effects.

2. Advantages and Disadvantages of Fragmented Reading

As a new reading trend, fragmented reading possesses several advantages. **Instantaneity** is a key feature—electronic reading devices eliminate restrictions

on time, space, and channels, allowing people to pick up an e-reader or mobile phone for reading anytime and anywhere, thus blurring the boundary between formal and informal reading. **Convenience** is another benefit, as the development of numerous reading applications for mobile phones, extensive content push via web pages and WeChat platforms, and hyperlink functionality enable readers to conveniently and quickly obtain information they wish to follow. The **richness** of fragmented reading allows readers to receive large amounts of information from various fields within short timeframes, helping them understand the world and expand their knowledge and horizons. Finally, **universality** is achieved as fragmented reading centered on mobile phones enables the greatest possible degree of reading popularization, allowing groups that previously had limited access to books, newspapers, and periodicals to now obtain massive reading content without restrictions.

The disadvantages of fragmented reading are also extremely significant, primarily manifested as **dispersion**—within fragmented reading periods, readers typically acquire scattered textual information, and when the interval between two reading sessions is too long, readers often experience the situation of “forgetting what was read earlier.” Sometimes, readers encounter too much fragmented and miscellaneous information within a certain period, making it difficult to form systematic knowledge, and reception of the same information may become confusing due to conflicting opinions. **Purposelessness** arises when excessive fragmented reading causes people to overlook the ultimate meaning of reading, no longer reading to enhance cultural literacy but merely treating reading as an entertainment activity to pass fragmented time. **Mental laziness** develops as the influx of massive fragmentary information overwhelms people—when faced with certain information, before people can form their own thoughts, large amounts of interpretation flood in again, and over time, people’s mental laziness grows stronger while the probability of being misled increases. **Superficiality** is another drawback, as long-term fragmented reading affects readers’ deep reading abilities and reinforces habits of shallow, entertainment-oriented reading.

3. Strategies for Addressing Fragmented Reading

Wei Yushan, President of the China Institute of Press and Publication, stated: “We should not easily deny various new reading methods and behaviors. Whether it is shallow reading, micro-reading, fragmented reading, or mobile reading, they are still reading after all. Compared with people who do not read at all, even ‘micro,’ ‘shallow,’ or ‘fragmented’ reading is worth promoting” [3]. Indeed, as an emerging reading method, fragmented reading has positive aspects and should not be simply negated. We should face this irreversible trend in public reading, promote its advantages while actively taking measures to mitigate its negative impacts. In fact, with proper guidance, fragmented reading can completely develop toward coherent, systematic deep reading. Currently, mobile phones are the main battlefield for digital reading, and building better mobile reading platforms and applications to guide the public

toward deeper reading has become the primary task for reducing the adverse effects of fragmented reading.

3.1 Government Attention and Support for Mobile Reading Platforms

The National Radio and Television Administration explicitly stated its work objectives in the “13th Five-Year Development Plan for Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television” : “Make every effort to improve the level of digital publishing public services··Vigorously increase the national digital reading rate, and support the construction of a batch of digital reading service platforms··” [4]. Relevant government departments and civil organizations at all levels increasingly recognize the importance of digital publishing and digital reading, actively strengthening and promoting the construction of digital reading platforms, especially mobile reading apps. At the 2019 Digital Reading Conference, projects such as the “Study Strong Nation” learning platform, “Party Member’s Little Backpack” smart party building, CITIC Academy App, China Literature’s realistic literature reading project, Dedao App’s “Listen to a Book Every Day” knowledge project, the new generation Wanfang Database knowledge service platform, Migu Literature Academy project, and “Reading Chongqing” national reading comprehensive service platform were awarded the 2018 Top Ten Digital Reading Projects in China. These projects have attracted large numbers of readers and users, playing a positive role in promoting national reading and deep reading.

However, according to Mob Research Institute’s “2019 Mobile Reading Industry Report,” the top 10 mobile reading apps are: QQ Reading, Palm Reading, Migu Reading, Free Novel Tracker, Shuqi Novel, Qimao Free Novels, Midu Novels, Novel Tracker, Yisou Novels, and WeChat Reading [5]. In these apps, online popular literature and comics occupy dominant positions, while serious social science books account for a relatively small proportion. Some apps contain no social science books at all. Even apps with more social science content, such as Palm Reading, recommend classic books suitable for deep reading far less than entertainment and leisure reading materials. When users open the Palm Reading bookshelf, they find multiple online novels have been added. After clicking into the Palm Reading bookstore, all columns are filled with online popular works. Only after clicking “All Channels” can users see the “Publications” column, which contains some formally published social science books, but Chinese and foreign, literature, history, philosophy, politics, economics, and popular science books are mixed together, often leaving readers at a loss. Moreover, some books, though bestsellers or new releases, cannot be proven to be quality works. In today’s era of massive publications, this cannot achieve the goal of high-quality reading for readers.

Therefore, to promote the in-depth development of national reading, relevant departments and organizations must adopt detailed and practical measures, such as: creating public opinion guidance to help the public recognize the drawbacks of long-term immersion in fragmented and shallow reading; advocating for the

public to use mobile phones to read classic works; establishing and promoting more and better public welfare reading platforms that include classic readings as comprehensively as possible to provide reading convenience; strongly supporting highly active mobile reading apps like Palm Reading by providing them with policy conveniences or even financial subsidies to encourage them to increase recommendations of high-quality digital literature, history, and social science readings.

3.2 Reading Apps Strengthening Their Own Construction

In addition to specialized high-quality reading software built by the government, mobile reading apps should also improve their own platform construction and increase the proportion and recommendation of literature, history, and social science readings. Specifically, they can proceed from the following aspects.

Highlight Columns and Refine Categories. “Classic Readings” or “Publications” should be arranged as first-level columns in prominent positions on the app interface. After clicking, secondary columns should further subdivide books into categories such as literature, history, science, and technology. Where conditions permit, third and fourth-level columns can be built to refine classification as much as possible. This allows readers to precisely select their preferred books according to their interests. Simultaneously, apps should pay attention to increasing the recommendation rate of classic readings, such as works like *The Analects* and *Three Hundred Tang Poems*, which are highly suitable for deep reading during fragmented time.

Focus on Quality and Select Preferred Versions. During the conversion of paper publications, especially classical literature books, into digital formats, errors and omissions easily occur, affecting reader experience and even conveying incorrect knowledge to entry-level readers. In such cases, if mobile reading platforms select paper books that already contain many errors and omissions as the basis for conversion, the quality of e-books can be imagined. Therefore, to be responsible to readers and themselves, reading apps should cooperate more with excellent publishers and select versions with good reputations. Meanwhile, based on selecting excellent versions, they should also introduce more versions with annotations and explanatory content to meet the needs of ordinary readers to improve their knowledge level, preventing readers from giving up due to inability to understand.

Enhance Experience and Strengthen Interaction. Social science readings have relatively high requirements for reading experience, mainly because such readings are mostly lengthy and require continuous thinking during reading, belonging to “brain-intensive” reading. If readers encounter inconvenient page-turning settings, difficult-to-adjust background colors, fonts, or line spacing, they will give up reading due to poor experience. Therefore, when designing reading apps, developers should consider reader experience as much as possible and provide comfortable reading feelings through careful design. For exam-

ple, they can respect readers' traditional reading habits by setting related functions on the page to facilitate reviewing, memorizing, and marking. Currently, Palm Reading, WeChat Reading, and Superstar Reading Learning Pass have performed well in this regard. Particularly, "WeChat Reading" has achieved multiple functions including notes, annotations, and comments coexisting on the reading page, effectively enhancing reader experience. Meanwhile, reading apps can strengthen interaction with readers, such as setting up mission tasks and rewarding reading coins to encourage readers to persist in reading long works. Reading apps can also enhance reading interest and motivation through interaction among readers. For instance, "WeChat Reading" mainly promotes social reading: readers can see what books their WeChat friends are reading, recommend favorite books to friends, and interact with friends through likes and comments. This allows readers to both read good books and share reading experiences with others. Such highly interactive apps have played a certain role in improving reader enthusiasm and promoting coherent deep reading.

Genuine Free Content to Attract Users. The "2019 Mobile Reading Industry Report" points out that mobile reading is experiencing a development stage of "pirated free → genuine paid → genuine free." Today, mobile reading can still maintain high growth thanks to free reading. In 2019, among the top 20 mobile reading apps, free apps accounted for 8 positions, all launched in mid- or late-2018, harvesting tens of millions of traffic in just over half a year [7]. Of course, providing free reading poses a significant challenge to enterprises behind paid apps. It is suggested that paid reading apps can learn from video websites by inserting advertisements at appropriate places to cover free costs through advertising revenue. In fact, during the pirated free mobile reading stage, large numbers of readers were already accustomed to reading books for free. If they have to pay when reading social science books, they may develop the mentality that they might as well buy paper books, thus delaying reading plans and making classic and deep reading impossible. For these users, the psychology of "watching ads is better than spending money" exists. Therefore, even if advertisements are inserted in the reading interface, they will not cause users to abandon reading. Today, paid apps like Palm Reading and WeChat Reading have also launched a series of preferential or free activities. It is hoped that in the future, more reading apps can provide free high-quality books to offer quality resources for readers' deep reading.

Innovate Columns and Focus on "Audio." The "2018 China Digital Reading White Paper" shows that in 2017, the audiobook market size reached 4.06 billion yuan, a year-on-year increase of 39.7%. Audiobook software represented by Himalaya FM has been welcomed by many people, with total user scale reaching 530 million [6]. Today, major reading apps have successively opened audiobook columns to provide audiobook services for readers. Audiobook reading can well coordinate with modern life rhythms, freeing people's hands and eyes, allowing everyone to read while doing many things. This objectively reduces fragmented reading time and enhances reading continuity. We have experienced the radio era, when abundant classic audiobook resources could be directly

deployed to reading app platforms for people's appreciation and learning. These resources feature rich forms including storytelling and radio dramas, with high production quality, possessing unique advantages in arousing readers' listening interest. Audio content consumes fewer subjective and objective resources but achieves relatively profound memory effects, enabling readers to achieve deep reading unconsciously.

3.3 Strengthening WeChat Official Account Construction

The three major battlefields of mobile reading are: online literature, web news, and WeChat official accounts. Correspondingly, they are also the three main venues for fragmented reading. The topic of WeChat official accounts is relatively broad and complex, which will not be elaborated on completely and deeply here. Only from the perspective of guiding deep reading will several points be briefly discussed.

Build In-depth Official Accounts. Official accounts such as “Economic Observer Book Review,” “Elephant Guild,” “Tencent Dajia,” “Yixi,” and “Kanlixiang” push 思辨类 articles and comments that conduct in-depth discussions on social, historical, technological, and military issues. The slogan of “Economic Observer Book Review” is: “Read difficult articles, grow a little every day.” Such articles have sufficient arguments and clear reasoning, meeting readers' requirements for deep reading. “Yixi” and “Kanlixiang” also combine related programs, inserting complete videos in articles for readers to choose their reading methods. Such designs help retain readers for continuous reading.

Cleverly Push In-depth Content. Official account articles can follow current hot topics, using increased interest and rich illustrations to attract readers while transmitting deep-level knowledge. For example, topic selections by “Elephant Guild” are usually interesting or novel in angle. Several examples of its past titles include: “Why Do Chinese People Love Cracking Sunflower Seeds?” , “Did the Yuan Dynasty Really Have a Four-Class System?” , and “Why Do Northerners Wash Their Faces with Hands While Southerners Use Towels?” These topics touch on what people are superficially familiar with but unfamiliar upon reflection, easily arousing reading interest. Moreover, articles have clear 考证 and detailed reasoning, giving readers enlightening experiences while reading. Though lengthy, these articles can retain readers. Another example is the official account “Hunzi Shuo,” which uses comic illustrations plus short humorous internet language descriptions to help readers understand knowledge about religion, history, politics, and economics. Each push is not short in length but can educate through entertainment, allowing readers to grasp knowledge while laughing.

Create High-quality Book Recommendation Official Accounts. Official accounts such as “Phoenix Reading” and “Economic Observer Book Review” select excerpts from published books daily for readers' deep reading. “Phoenix Reading” focuses on literary works, while “Economic Observer Book Review” focuses on

economics, society, and philosophy works. Meanwhile, Phoenix Reading also has a “Visit Bookstore” link where readers can click to enter a micro-store to purchase books, greatly facilitating readers. It is suggested that such book recommendation official accounts can build their own e-book reading platforms in the future.

In summary, the high development of mobile terminals and the arrival of the digital publishing era have made fragmented reading a reading phenomenon with era characteristics. The trend of fragmented reading is irreversible and poses challenges to traditional reading and knowledge acquisition habits.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv –Machine translation. Verify with original.