

How Video and Online Reading Is Undermining Cognition. Protecting and Sustaining Classroom Teaching

By [Prof. Robert Abele](#)

Theme: [Culture](#)

Global Research, August 11, 2020

As the Coronavirus rages uncontrolled in the United States and elsewhere, in education we are once again relying on online delivery of courses. That of course is really the only sensible alternative we have. However, as we ramp up for another school year online, it behooves us to pause just for a moment to reflect on the serious downside of overplaying this emphasis on technology as a long-term educational method.

Over the past twenty years, Western culture in particular has become technology-addicted. We rely almost exclusively today on our cell phones and computers to tell us what we want to know, in quick-answer bursts of information bits. But with the Coronavirus, Western culture at large has been thrust overnight and headfirst into an almost-exclusive world of reliance on online and in particular video information. While there are many—especially the tech giants such as Facebook, Google, and Microsoft—who celebrate this radical change and support it, what we are not seeing are some clear warning signs about its negative impacts on our culture. These have been argued for the last twenty years, but now perhaps we should pay more attention to the warnings, since we are now in the video world. Generally, there are two issues that we can discuss when warning against becoming too immersed in the online and video culture. (Both of these categories online cognitive decline have been [empirically documented](#) since at least [2014](#), and have been discussed in philosophy more intensely since [Jacques Ellul](#) started writing on it in the late 1960's. This issue is now becoming more intensely discussed, as in the documentary “[Stare into the Lights My Pretties](#)”. Gayle Green also has a great article demonstrating the overplay of technology in education and its effects, in her article “[Ed Tech Cashes in on the Pandemic](#)”).

Given that there are good grounds for taking seriously the deleterious effect of too much online and video “learning,” for this purposes of this essay we will hold that there is both a reading and comprehension issue involved in tech learning. First, the reading issue.

1) Unless you are good at spending your online time seeking in-depth articles and sorting through the chaff, the online reading experience tends to be of writing that is quickly finished and impressionistic: you must get to your point quickly, and provide any salient detail you have, and end it. That's why Twitter, for example, has such a stringent limit on texts, and while many online websites also limit response inputs and also limit articles about what they will publish (many requires limits are at 1,000-2,000 words. That is also what makes *Global Research* unique: its limit is 3,000 words, but even that can be flexible). But one can't exactly develop any significant knowledge or a full argument with Twitter and other website limitations.

2) More in-depth reading, such as we engage in the formal classroom setting, is reading that

involves more depth and directed thinking about ideas contained in the depth analyses. Electronic technology does not do this. For example, watching a video about a book instead of reading the book is actually worse than reading sparks notes instead of reading the book, because at least with sparks note your brain is taking in cognitive information that inherently involves thinking to sort and remember information in the process of reading. At best, that type of cognitive use is superficial on online media.

3) I have seen it happen over and over again where some student will watch a video or read an online snippet on a topic, and others read the entire book chapter or article, or a transcript of a video or about the reading assigned, and immediately afterward take a memory test of what they took in. Under the assumption of average memory capacities of each party, whom do you think would have a better grasp of the content of what they took in? Why? Because one's mind doesn't have to be fully involved when you watch something on a screen, as opposed to when you have to read a longer text that connects a series of thought together in an extended argument or prosed, or even literature. The screen is cold; the text is hot: the screen you scroll; the text you flip. In both cases, mind-drift is inevitable, but in which case is it easier and does it occur more often? If the screen is cold, it's the screen that encourages the mental drift, especially a video.

4) Without reading extensively and studying what one reads, the complexity and details of actual events and social issues are ignored and dismissed. In its place, simple pictorial and "sound bite" information leads to a "one-issue answer" to any complex problem. This "simple issue" fallacy is directly encouraged by reliance on electronic media alone. But as anyone who studies any issue or event knows, one answer explanations of events hardly captures the true depth of any issue. Yet that is precisely what reading, critical thinking, and analysis does: captures the depth. Video clips and quick answers in Twitter postings can never do this.

As a result of this, electronic media relegates input to limited time through limited bits, limited characters permitted, and limited time video clips (not necessarily by policy, but by the demands of the medium for minimal effort to grasp its content before losing attention). This inherently shortens the attention span of those who consume information largely or exclusively through video or limited input platforms such as Twitter. As circumstantial evidence, as the use of cell phones became more and more prominent among my students, I heard increasing complaints about our class text being "too wordy," and "taking too much to read;" in other words, the text is too thorough and too detailed in investigating an issue or topic. This is in sharp contrast to electronic media (video in particular), where the end game is either to obtain a computer bit of information or to be entertained, and the means is to get it quickly and passionately, the latter in partial fulfillment of unexpressed assumptions and expectations, particularly when it comes to real world events. Not so in reading books or articles. This leads to the second category.

The second issue is the cognitive one:

5) A whole cultural movement into the online and video-based world, and more critically, the move of academic classes to online format represents is quite likely the end of an era in which detailed knowledge and logical and formal rigor die out and are replaced by the image and impression; in which memory and critical thought ,with evidence sought to support views, becomes instead more a matter of visceral reaction to what stimulates the eyes and ears.

Opposed to that, the defenders of the tech move say it is just a move to a different way of learning, a different way of communication. Defenders will always try to show its more pragmatic advantages, such as ease of access to information and the speed of access to any info bits one wants. However, the evidence, although incomplete, does show that a much more deleterious effect occurs as the price to be paid for such ease and speed: it is a move to a more superficial way of thinking and learning, and with it comes the erosion of the ability to interact in the flesh and in verbal conversation, or at least in reading what someone has thought out over time and rehearsed. You can't know an issue in detail if all you have are visceral images of it and/or informational bits about it. The images and info-bits should both express and *support* an already attained and prior in-depth knowledge and analysis, not replace it. Are scientists going to create a vaccine for the Coronavirus by watching YouTube videos on biology?

6) Technological information can reduce the intellect because it encourages simple absorption of "information bits" and at best stringing those bits together. No critical analysis; no fact-checking; just pure sensory bombardment and consumption of bits, and even absorbing and processing less information in the case of video bits. It encourages the belief that "it must be true because my senses took it in through this (magical) electronic device!" In the case of the world of ideology, news is the same way: reporting has no real analysis and videos are carefully edited to sway the viewer, and both are engaged with a certain point of view in mind, and a visual and speedy manipulation of opinion. This directly encourages consumers to watch news and videos based on desire-fulfillment rather than a need to *know, be informed, and critically and thoughtfully analyze* the visual information. These all require reason and tools of analysis to be done. Contrary to the video world, the more you think critically about information, the more you want to do so, and the sharper your tools are with which to deal with the information you do take in. The online world does not encourage this, being a *visceral* world and the world of the info bit. In fact, the degree to which analysis is done is proportional to the amount of time it takes for a viewer to click it off.

While the objection to this view is that the same manipulation occurs in print, the response to that is that reading, being closer to engagement with thinking, is also a far more decisive way to avoid being manipulated. Reading encourages thought, and that encourages pursuit of what is true. Video watching does not engage those capacities—or at least only engages them superficially, and not necessarily in an easy and natural way, either.

7) Videos in particular and the image-input method in general have to *keep moving*—no time to stop and think about what one is taking in; no space for *immersion* in it; no detailed look or examination of what one sees, because the medium *by its nature* eschews detail: it is impressionistic on all levels.

8) Visual and electronically-oriented media has to be visually stimulating, not prosaic; not precise; not even necessarily true to facts. This also makes it limited in depth. Rather, videos, being titillating by nature, reduce news, politics, and even the brutality of war not only to moving images that have visceral appeal or disdain, *evoking*, not arguing for, approval or disapproval, but in particular reduces them all to the level of sports. This is especially true of war, where "shock and awe," Donald Rumsfeld's term for what we would see in the Iraq invasion, captures nicely what we now desire and expect to see *and hear*—i.e. *be entertained by*—in our war-viewing.

All of this concerns just the effects of electronic (especially video) media on the human mind

(not brain). However, we have so far missed the most important point of all regarding this technology: through the use of the same electronic technological immersion, we can now *create our own realities*, with no inherent or necessary connection to facts or “real world” reference. Creating a shocking video that is produced simply on someone’s computer and posted as “news,” frequently gets taken as “true,” without questioning its source in the facts, events, or the creator and his/her intent.

As we begin another school year, we would do well to keep some of these points in mind, so as not to fall prey to the capitalist culture-vultures, who are pushing hard to replace classroom education with tech-ed—especially Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, and Mark Zuckerberg, all of whom have their “tech ed” solutions, even though none of them has studied education. Many of these programs attempt to replace the teacher and the classroom with their own version of “education,” which is anything but that.

Those with a depth of knowledge, expertise, and analytic capabilities will always be with us, but in an online and video culture they will be alienated from the masses of superficially-informed people who “saw it on YouTube” but don’t know much more detail about “it” than that. You will be unlikely to find the knowledge experts doing a daily podcast, or at least relying on it as the primary way of expressing or engaging others in their studied views. Rather you will have to read what they have to say by going to the other institution that is dying in its traditional form: the library! It is important to resist a full reliance on online and video technology before we do lose what’s left of an informed and thoughtful citizenry. Or, as Thomas Jefferson put it: “In a republican nation, whose citizens are to be led by reason and persuasion and not by force, the art of reasoning becomes of first importance.”

*

Note to readers: please click the share buttons above or below. Forward this article to your email lists. Crosspost on your blog site, internet forums. etc.

Dr. Robert Abele is a professor of philosophy at Diablo Valley College, located in Pleasant Hill, California in the San Francisco Bay area. He is the author of four books: A User’s Guide to the USA PATRIOT Act (2005); The Anatomy of a Deception: A Logical and Ethical Analysis of the Decision to Invade Iraq (2009); Democracy Gone: A Chronicle of the Last Chapters of the Great American Democratic Experiment (2009); and eleven chapters for the International Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Global Justice. He and has written numerous articles and done interviews on politics and U.S. government foreign and domestic policies.

The original source of this article is Global Research
Copyright © [Prof. Robert Abele](#), Global Research, 2020

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Prof. Robert Abele](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca