

Reading vs. Other Distractions? It's a Stalemate

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Publishers like to think of selling books like a football tournament. Each publisher fields the best team they can for the season (their catalog of books) and they compete in the marketplace to see who will come out on top (through sales). What they don't realize, is that for starters, they aren't really playing the equivalent of football, or what we call soccer in the United States – the world's most popular sport, naturally – but something akin to American football – you know the sport, it's the one played by giant men in full padding and helmets. Americans love it, few others do.

The fact is that in today's world filled with myriad electronic distractions publishing, bookselling, and ultimately reading is increasingly a niche interest, rather than a mainstream one. Books are actually competing with every form of entertainment.

Certainly there are parts of the world where reading remains a popular pass time, but very often this is tied directly to education. Finland, which is said to offer the best education system in the world, is perhaps the ultimate example. "Books still have a strong position in Finnish society, and 77% of the population buys at least one book a year," says Sakari Laiho, Director of the Finnish Publishers' Association. In Finland, 75% percent of parents read aloud to their children, a practice proven to establish good reading habits early on. What's more, writing is ranked among the most respected professions.

But education isn't always the answer. to fostering a reading, and as a consequence, publishing culture either. While residents of a country as poor as Cambodia manage to achieve a literacy rate of more than 77.6%, the majority of reading is restricted to the classroom and as a result of years of political oppression and poverty, there remains little or no leisure reading and publishing is moribund. India, on the other hand, is the second largest country in the world by population and has roughly the same literacy rate as Cambodia, but a robust and thriving reading culture.

To foster a reading culture, you need to start at home. Ambitious countries, such as the United Arab Emirates know this and are pouring millions into early education efforts. In the Emirate of Sharjah, the government sends each household a box of selected books every year in an effort to foster better reading habits at home.

Of course, its very difficult to quantify just how much digital material is eroding out time reading. Research last year published by the UK's National Literacy Trust found that for the first-time, children are reading more on computers (and other electronic devices) than they are reading books, magazines, newspapers, and comics. It may sound like a dire statistic, but is it really. A separate independent study by scholars conducted more than five years ago estimated that typical email and internet users can consume as much 30,000 words a day, or half the length of an average novel.

That said, in the United States – which remains the biggest book market in the world – the most recent statistics from the U.S. Department of Education and the National Institute of Literacy, 32 million adults in the U.S. can't read – that's a 14% illiteracy rate. What's more, 21% of adults in the U.S. read below a 5th grade level, and 19% of high school graduates can't read. That statistic hasn't changed in the past ten years. While the situation doesn't appear to be getting worse, it isn't getting better either. Right now, it's a stalemate.

So what can we in the publishing community do about it? Well, for starters encourage parents to buy...bookshelves. Make that two bookshelves. According to a study conducted last year by a team of researchers from Stanford and the University of Munich, "the educational achievements of British children whose parents owned two bookcases differed from children whose parents didn't by 1.5 standard deviations. This equates to three times the amount of what the average kid learns during a year of school."

What's more, they found "Books at home are the single most important predictor of student performance in most countries," wrote the study's authors. And the reason seems to be fairly simple: all other factors aside, it is the influence of "bookish" or well-read literate parents that make all the difference in a child's education.

Or maybe we should all just start hiring Finnish nannies for our kids?