

Author: Richard Johnson, Head of Biblical Studies and Library Supervisor, Redcliffe College.

Rebecca West once wrote about a group of women that she met in the former Yugoslavia:

None of these women could read. When a boy passed by carrying an advertisement of Batya's shoes they had to ask a man they knew to read it for them. They did not suffer any great deprivation thereby. Any writer worth his salt knows that only a small proportion of literature does more than partly compensate people for the damage they have suffered by learning to read. (*Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 1993 [1st pub 1942], p329)

I sometimes wonder whether a future novelist might one day write something similar about the internet: 'Only a small proportion of the internet does more than partly compensate people for the damage they have suffered by learning to use it.' However, for many of us the internet has become an inescapable part of life. Undoubtedly, like a garden spade, there are certain things that it can do better than anything else. For example, if I wanted to know the average life expectancy of left-handed men in Norway, or the latest estimate for how many unreached people groups there are in Turkmenistan (always assuming that we could agree on what these words actually meant) I would not think of looking anywhere other than the internet. In other words, it's extremely good for basic information (however meaningless or irrelevant 99% of that information is).

The problem, to my mind, comes when we try to use a garden spade for tasks for which it was not designed - such as surgery. The most probable result will be the death of the patient. And however good at providing information the internet might be, when it comes to more important aspects of life, such as growing in knowledge, wisdom, maturity, and holiness, better tools are available. One of those tools might, for example, be human contact with wise people, with mentors who know what it is to stand in the presence of God. Another might be similar contact with the poor, with those who know what it is to be crushed by the presence of oppression. And another might be contact with the thoughts and dreams of wise men and women throughout history, by a process known as reading (which I guess you are doing at the moment, although on this occasion not the words of anyone with great wisdom). And I dare to suggest that reading, true reading, as distinct from 'looking up information', is far better done from books than from the internet – even if the entire text of every book ever written were available online.

There are some very obvious reasons why this is so, and some less obvious ones. The obvious ones can be easily listed as follows:

- Sitting in front of a computer for a long time is bad for the health – physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual;
- Reading speed is measurably slower when reading from a screen;
- Reading comprehension is reduced. You need to re-read passages more often, and the text needs to be broken up into smaller chunks;
- The binding, typeface, illustrations, quality of paper and general formatting of a book tell you a lot about it (such as its age) before you even begin reading it; whereas you cannot tell from online text whether it was originally written 300 years ago or yesterday;

- You can't read online in the bath, or the result might be much like performing surgery with a spade. You can't read online half-way up a mountain, or in a desert, or at the bus-stop, or lying down, or even curled up on the sofa in front of an open fire.
- More seriously, in a situation of oppression one can never know who else might be monitoring the sites that are being logged on to from a particular computer.

All this is obvious; but it's the deeper symbolism of each activity that interests me more. For it seems to me that we have here a symbolic battle between the 'network' and the 'narrative' as the controlling metaphor of human life and consciousness. The network is of course represented by the internet – everything links to everything else; there is no beginning and no end, and nothing is stable - what you read today might have been anonymously changed by tomorrow – who knows? You can never say, 'It is finished', for the internet is never finished; all you can do is 'log off'. Every journey around the internet is different, and for that reason is frustrating, because human beings are not designed to cope with constant novelty.

The narrative, in contrast, is represented symbolically by the book, which has the comfort of covers, and a story (whether fictional or not) between them, and a beginning and end; and, most importantly, chapters. One can experience the delight of turning actual pages, rather than scrolling down a screen. Because we are physical beings, the sheer physicality of all of this incarnates the narrative structure of our lives more profoundly than a website can ever do. I can more easily think of myself metaphorically as a book (albeit unfinished as yet, and with joint authorship) than as a website, for our lives do have a narrative structure; we talk about the 'story' of our life, or 'beginning a new chapter', or even 'turning over a new leaf'. The same parallels might be 'intellectually' true if the content of the book is available online, but my hands and heart do not believe it. A book breaks up its content into manageable pieces, as does my life, and simply scrolling through a long, seemingly never-ending document is never quite the same as turning over pages. And I have never 'logged off' with the same emotional satisfaction that I have experienced when turning the final page of a book. (Of course, there is an emotional satisfaction I sometimes feel when logging off; it's the same emotion that one would feel when walking out of a prison and breathing fresh air once more.)

The act of reading a book is always more than 'gaining information' about its content. It's more like beginning a friendship. As one rereads a book, there is a history that you both share, and a familiar backdrop, for the words remain in the same place on the same page each time you take the book from the shelf. However, in re-reading the words one can begin to move beyond them and allow your intuition to ponder anew their deeper significance. Reading and rereading a book over a period of years becomes a meditative, reflective, liturgical experience in a way that reading the same text on a screen can never be; and although it may not necessarily lead to wisdom, it lays some important foundations.

I would suggest that there are important parallels here with mission, for mission is also more than merely communicating 'information'. Whatever their value may be in particular situations, information about 'the gospel' communicated by radio, television or internet can never be as effective as seeing it incarnate in the life of a person.

Of course, a person is more personal than a book. But a book, for me at least, is inherently more personal than a website. I can relate to it in a completely different way. When I look at a book on my shelf, it has a history. I mean that that particular copy has a history distinct from all other copies of the book. It has a history that often predates my birth, which is reflected in the names and annotations of previous readers. And then there is a moment when its own history intersected my history. I can remember when I bought it, where I bought it from, the

difficulties of getting there, the conversation I had with the book-seller, the internal debate about whether I could afford it or not, and the occasional serendipity of finding an unexpected treasure in an unlikely place – like a certain man finding a pearl in a field, or like finding (as I did last month) a first edition of Tolkien's 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' for £1 in a charity shop. It might be that the text is available on the internet, but frankly I really couldn't care. A part of reading (and I'm talking about academic books here, not just novels or poetry) is to bring pleasure – and reading a book brings a great deal more pleasure than reading the same text online.

When I look at my bookshelves, I see a record of my past, and an agenda for my future. I see books I first read many years ago, and books I've never read but still hope to one day. I am powerfully reminded of the things that have been, are, or (I hope) will be important to me, in a more tangible, tactile way than any list of 'favourite' web-sites could ever do. Seeing a book on a shelf is like seeing an old friend in the distance; or perhaps, at times, an old enemy. Life becomes that little bit more real once more. One is taken out of one's immediate preoccupations and reminded of the bigger picture once more.

A website is simply not sufficiently incarnate; the word remains abstract, somewhere out there in cyberspace, rather than 'becoming flesh'. I can love a book in a way that I cannot love a website, even though both may have the same content. I do not want 'the text' in the abstract; I want this particular incarnation of the text, something I can hold, and touch, and even love. Similarly, I do not want an abstract expression of the love of God; I want someone I can touch, and love; although of course we can only groan while we hope for those things that are yet to come. And love has a great deal to do with how we grow in wisdom and knowledge. (Any teacher worth their salt would far rather instil a love for a topic in their students than merely give them information about it.) And love is always concrete, and incarnate. It cannot be abstract, or it is not love.

The books that I hold, and touch, have an aesthetic quality that a website I can only observe can never have; and, because I am a human being rather than an angel or a robot, that is important to me. The medium is at least a part of the message. There are books that I have read purely because of the quality of the production, because they have been beautiful, because I can see that someone has taken great care with them, and I am interested in finding out why they have taken that care. Bill Thompson writes (on the BBC website!), 'in the end, whatever technology may offer us, we will make our decisions as humans, living in the physical world, with aesthetic considerations sometimes trumping the hard-edge practical ones... I suspect the same will apply to the book in years to come, and we will continue to choose them for reasons that defy the market but reinforce what it means to be human.'

To return to the battle of the metaphors, when I read a book I want a narrative and not a network. I do not want my reading surrounded by adverts, interrupted by pop-ups, with words colour-coded to indicate links to hundreds of other sites – I actually want the possibility of closure. Of course, there are obviously some situations in life for which the metaphor of a 'network' is more appropriate than that of a 'narrative'. Spades do have their uses. The problem comes when it tries to be a controlling metaphor; because ultimately we live within a meta-narrative in which reality will, eventually, break in, and this part of the story will come to an end. Within the universe there is time, as well as space; and in the end the narrative, I predict, will be continuing long after the network has gone the way of all dinosaurs.

Incidentally, the most feeble argument in favour of the internet is that it provides 'choice'. But frankly, who cares? I simply don't want that degree of choice. I do not want to go into a restaurant and be given a 50-volume menu with 100,000 items in it, all for the sake of 'more choice'. I am human, and I am mortal. There are a finite number of books that I can read, or will read between now and the end of my life; and quite a lot of them are on my shelves

already. I simply do not need hundreds of thousands of others. I can only imagine that this virtual Tower of Babel is another example of human hubris, whose builders have the same motivation as the builders of the original.

I suspect that a generation of children educated solely on the internet will prove, paradoxically, to be the generation that is most ignorant about the real world, for the simple reason that all the time they are on the internet they are not in the real world, but in a virtual world. The real world is a world of flesh and blood, of wind and rain, of incarnation, of love. And one day, when what is even more real breaks in, all that is virtual will pass away.

Please Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of Redcliffe College.

If you would like to respond to this article, please use the 'Voice your comments' form on the [Encounters](http://www.redcliffe.org/encounters) website (www.redcliffe.org/encounters). You may prefer to email your response to mission@redcliffe.org, in which case please remember to include your full name, your organisation/role and whether you would like your comments posted on the [Encounters](http://www.redcliffe.org/encounters) discussion board.