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From Greek Scroll to E-Reader

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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When an elderly Russian literary legend heard about the e-reader, which has already acquired the nickname "chitalka" in Russian, he said: “Will books really disappear? What a horrifying thought!”

Others, on the contrary, are delighted by the prospect of screens replacing paper. The Internet is full of blogs and articles promoting a “new type of reading.” Whereas books once contributed to the development of thoughtful minds, screens are conducive to a more practical way of thinking. The point is no longer to “follow the intellectual thread” to the end but to determine a piece of information’s practical application, forward it and paste it into one’s own work.

It seems reasonable to assume that a new method of delivering texts will be accompanied by a new psychology of reading. The printed book, which replaced handwritten manuscripts, brought quite a few significant changes.

I can easily imagine a discussion in the ancient Greek city of Pergamon when this innovative

technology — the book — was gaining traction.

“Earlier,” reasons a bearded wise man in a toga, “we read in an entirely different fashion. To find out how a text ended, you had to read through the entire scroll sequentially. Now you can just take a bound book, flip through it and instantly jump to the next chapter.”

But don’t worry. Books aren’t going anywhere. Television didn’t kill movie theaters, and the appearance of DVDs, the Internet and video torrents didn’t kill television.

Every technological innovation has a dual effect on the previous one. While it crowds out old technology, it also enhances and creates new possibilities for it. Paradoxically, the printed book is sometimes even associated with a unique pleasure and relaxation because most of the text that we spend our working day reading is on a computer screen, making us long for printed text. This strengthens the appeal of books, making them both desirable and personal.

Some people would argue that screen reading was actually formed a long time ago — not by technological novelties but by socio-economic political neoliberalism and the corresponding culture that prizes information over knowledge; novelty, discoveries and pragmatism over values; instant benefits over long-term reflection; and the quest for the true nature of things.

In this culture, ideas and thoughts are not fully developed but used like materials, in search of an easy application. The less we get bogged down in searching for the gist of an idea, the easier it is to work with and the faster it can be grasped. A thought becomes a sign, and a sign becomes a brand — already meaningless, except in a self-referential sense. It’s like the Che Guevara T-shirt that becomes more popular the less that people know and think about the life and ideas of the Latin American revolutionary.

Pragmatic readers will use books as though they were screens, while intellectual readers will treat e-readers as they once treated books.

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