

Where Do Readers Want To Do Their Reading?

Moderator:

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Panelists:

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The Xerox Palo Alto Research Center—home of such technologic innovations as WYSIWYG editing, the mouse, and laser printing—is also the home of two very different research approaches to one of our oldest technologies: reading.

Victoria Bellotti has conducted observational studies and in situ interviews of people in their workplaces. She dispelled several misconceptions about where and how people do their professional reading. First, most professionals do not have a personal assistant who filters their reading material; such assistants have largely been replaced by overworked administrative assistants who provide support to several people. Second, professionals no longer acquire most of their reading material in paper format. E-mail has become the main means of document transfer for professionals, and most of the piles of paper on desks are printouts of e-mail messages and attachments.

Third, most people don't have time to

read material carefully at the office: they use early mornings, evenings, and travel time to do their serious reading because too many interruptions occur during the workday. Bellotti noted that e-mail is the best medium for breaking news, in that people read new e-mail messages as soon as they arrive. She remarked that the prime determinants in getting the attention of a reader via e-mail are the reputation of the sender and the sender's relationship to the reader.

A final misconception is that reading is a focused activity. Many people read in settings with distractions, for example, in meetings or while talking on the phone.

Bellotti said that psychologists usually study how people do careful, detailed reading, but "reading is not just a matter of word-by-word comprehension." Readers skim texts quickly to ascertain their content. She said that "today's readers probably read more documents than anyone in the past, but this doesn't mean they have bigger eyes and brains."

She provided several guidelines for helping readers to get the information they need from online texts quickly: use scannable text, highlight keywords, use meaningful headings (not clever ones), use bulleted lists, provide one idea per paragraph, and halve the number of words.

What can content providers do to offset the information overload that readers are facing? Anticipate your readers' needs and design mechanisms to meet them. Provide better archives and search engines. Support different kinds of reading (filtering, skimming, browsing, and annotation). Provide links to other useful resources; loyalty is scarce online, and it's easy for your readers to go elsewhere if you don't work at maintaining a good relationship with them.

Maribeth Back is involved with a multidisciplinary research group at the Palo Alto Research Center that explores new media genres. She pointed out that we read synchronously (for example, PowerPoint presentations) and asynchronously (for example, billboards), voluntarily (for example, magazines) and involuntarily (for example, the logos on T-shirts or the stickers on fruit). We will continue to read in a variety of formats, so it is important to develop content-appropriate devices and device-appropriate content.

Back's research group developed experiments in the future of reading for an installation exploring the relationship between reading and technology at the Tech Museum of Innovation in San Jose, California. One of the exhibits, "Listen Reader", allowed visitors to play a paper book like an instrument, creating an immersive sound experience to go along with the immersive reading experience. Each page of this children's picture book contained an embedded soundtrack; the visitor controlled the volume of four sounds by moving his or her hands over the page. Another exhibit, "Hyperbolic Reader", allowed readers to move around a comic book on a screen by means of a trackball. The images in the comic book were interconnected in a nonlinear fashion, with over 1000 nodes. Visitors were thus able to browse the context of the image at the center of the screen. Many of the exhibits were surprisingly "sticky" (visitors lingered longer than they usually do at museum exhibits). As Back pointed out, reading is more important than ever in our technologic culture. 