

MARTIN'S PHILOSOPHICAL NOTES

Browsing the Internet

Martin Cohen



I came across an old black-and-white image recently that I found both surreal and striking. It shows four men in suits and tweedy hats quietly browsing the bookshelves of a bombed-out library, a scene taken sometime during the Second World War. The most surreal aspect of it was the careful way each of the four are intent on their particular sections of shelf, before picking out books to browse, even whilst all around them is destruction and chaos.

The quiet and earnest way the figures regard the books is familiar to all readers, even though these ones stand amidst a scene of utter devastation. One man stands nonchalantly, hands-in-pockets as he browses, seemingly oblivious to the collapsed roof just behind him; while another balances on the rubble, lost in the pages of one of his finds....

I think that the picture was originally used to make a propaganda point about how the British were shrugging off the Blitz; but let us put it round another way and ask how the image talks about the ways in which books (and I include in this sense printed magazines like *Self & Society*) free us from our particular surroundings, and transport us into a world of aspirations and ideas.

Is the same true of reading online? Well, yes and no. There's plenty to explore out there. But equally, the nature of reading online is that you are easily distracted. To pick up a book or magazine is to make a commitment that could easily be for an hour. But online? Often the commitment is for only a fleeting minute. In 2008, researchers at University College in London conducted a study titled 'Information behaviour of the researcher of the future',¹ the results of which suggested that students' research habits in the age of the Internet tended towards skimming and scanning rather than in-depth reading.

In the same year, in August, the magazine *Wired* published an article entitled 'Is Google making us stupid?', by Nicholas Carr, a technology writer.² The article was highly critical of the Internet's effect on cognition. Carr's main argument was that the Internet diminished the capacity for concentration and contemplation. Appropriately, Carr expanded

his argument later in a book, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*.³

In Carr's view, reading on the Internet is generally a shallower form in comparison with reading from printed books in which, he believes, a more intense and sustained form of reading is exercised. A few academic studies have provided some support for the thesis, but others, using functional MRI scans, claimed to find that the Internet actually facilitated reading and comprehension.

However, let's just stick to books and 'literary reading'. In 1994, an American academic, Sven Birkerts, published a book titled *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*,⁴ based on his experiences with a class he taught where the students had little appreciation for the literature he had assigned them, due to the 'long-term cognitive effects of these new processes of data absorption' that, he hypothesised, had led to 'an expansion of the short-term memory banks and a correlative atrophy of long-term memory'.

Likewise, in 2007 the developmental psychologist Maryanne Wolf took up the cause of defending reading and print culture in her book *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*,⁵ together with several linked magazine articles. One of Wolf's concerns is that children who are heavy users of the Internet become mere 'decoders of information who have neither the time nor the motivation to think beneath or beyond their googled universes'. She writes that the web's 'immediacy and volume of information should not be confused with true knowledge' and (in an essay published by Powell's Books) that some of the reading brain's strengths could be lost in future generations 'if children are not taught first to read, and to think deeply about their reading, and only then to e-read'. In short, what is lost, she says, is 'deep reading'.

Put another way, online is a wonderful potpourri, but it can equally well become a

meaningless whirl. There is everything there, and so what we actually read dwindles in significance to the extent that it can seem that we actually emerge having read almost nothing.

Online databases record the dominance of sites like Youtube, Wikipedia, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (X)... – and Amazon, in that order. As I put it a couple of years back, actually in a talk to the makers of a video on Wikipedia, these sites are like 'Big Macs'. They're certainly convenient, they seem tasty – but they consist of highly processed ingredients that come with a risk to our health – in the Internet's case, our mental health.

Take Twitter. There's a reason why the app, now mindlessly called 'X' by its billionaire owner, consumes much of my reading time these days; it is because superficially, I need only invest a glance at each item (tweet) of reading. However, it's a trick, because if the measure is not 'tweets' but time on the site, then I invest hours every week reading it. How much of that is doing something that's actually interesting, and how much is just aimlessly browsing? The proportions are not defensible, really. But then, let's be kind: the men in the bombed-out library were probably not looking up anything in particular. There's a joy in discovery and exploration.

Let's go back to Amazon. The year before Amazon, that is in 1994, Americans bought 500 million books, worth some \$19 billion, and seventeen bestsellers each sold more than a million copies. Today, it is predicted that, by the end of 2025, Amazon will sell 80 per cent of all books in the USA. And so too, today, Jeff Bezos is himself worth some ludicrous sum, and certainly in excess of \$25 billion. It's an extraordinary shift of resources – from publishers and authors to hedge funds – and Bezos. Amazon, unlike Google, which got its start on an academic campus and pays lip-service to certain values, began its story on Wall Street, where Mr Bezos worked as an analyst at a hedge fund that pioneered the use

of computers to exploit patterns in global markets.

It is this background that explains the reasoning behind Bezos's idea of an online 'everything store' and Amazon's ruthless attitude towards competitors. According to one of Bezos's biographers, during negotiations for access to their back catalogues, the small independent publishers were nicknamed 'the gazelles' by Amazon – meaning food for the lion.

Nowadays, though, the big transnational publishers are threatened as well. Take academic publishing by companies like Taylor and Francis (T&F) – who published my book, *101 Philosophy Problems*, 25 years ago, eventually selling over a quarter of a million copies and presumably making several million pounds of profit from the book. (I myself emerged with rather more modest but still significant royalties!) Nowadays, T&F simply doesn't 'do' bookshop books; they only produce ones for a narrow academic market where they hope to sell a few hundred hardbacks to universities. (Amazon, meanwhile, is targeting even this meagre market with its policy of reselling academic books – for pennies!) Authors are not going to see much of the sales, but are sometimes pleased merely to add the book to their CV and perhaps then be eased into a nice college job.

But what else does this shift mean? Well, first of all it means that books are written not for general readers but for narrow academic courses. I think this move is bad for society in general, as knowledge dissemination is reduced – but it's also bad for the specialists, as the approach encourages introversion, over-narrow specialisation and actual bad writing.

A magazine like *Self & Society*, by contrast, was not addressed to a particular kind of reader but a range of interest. The articles in it had to be accessible to this wider audience. Additionally, when we picked up such

magazines, we weren't sure what we would come across – and so we were encouraged to look at topics and ideas we hadn't thought about before.

However, Richard, our editor, explained to me recently that the closing of S&S is not, on the face of it, about different reading habits, but rather about the membership level of the Association for Humanistic Psychology in Britain. In the (comparatively) free cultural era of the 1970s and 1980s, both the AHP organisation and Humanistic Psychology more generally were thriving – with loads of innovation, experimentation, free thinking, anti-institutionalism and so on. At its peak in the early to mid-1980s, there were well over 1,000 members of the association.

However, some time in the 1990s, credentialism and regulation-mindedness crept on to the scene, coinciding with the rise of what Richard calls 'the toxic Audit Culture' across society more generally.⁶ These new values and practices were anathema to Humanistic Psychology (HP) – yet as part of society, HP itself was of course adversely affected by this cultural trend, to the extent that, in the early 1990s, the association split somewhat acrimoniously into two: the AHPb and the Association of Humanistic Psychology Practitioners – the latter embracing credentialism and accreditation.

The rise of 'regulation-mindedness' was anathema to many humanistic psychologists,⁷ but while the society and its magazine did try to carry on after the acrimonious split, it never recovered from the fragmenting of the membership base. Perhaps inevitably, given the inexorable cultural trend, the society's membership entered a steady decline starting in the early 1990s.

Humanistic Psychology became an increasingly minor branch of psychology in general (with the latter increasingly dominated by positivistic / empiricist /

materialistic approaches), and so it seemed that there just wasn't the demand for a journal like *S&S* in the psychology world any more.

Revealingly, although a well-resourced publisher, Routledge, did in fact buy the journal in 2015, and promote it for two years – in the process having the whole 45 years of the journal digitised – they too eventually concluded that interest in broader Humanistic Psychology was too weak in the academic world to make it viable. (At least one upside of this is that the whole *S&S* archive is available at <https://ahpweb.org/> – underlining the old adage, 'If you can't beat 'em, then join 'em...'.)

But what is being lost in this brave new online world? *S&S* was always a much-praised journal/magazine – Richard told me how he would get emails from members saying that it's by far the best journal in the therapy world. But anti-regulation/accreditation was not a fashionable position to take with fear saturating modern culture, and Richard came to see the demise of both the association and its journal as a symptom of modern cultural circumstances and trends – a point he and his then co-editors elaborated upon in a 2017 book.⁸

In a sense, then, this final issue of *Self & Society* represents the triumph of 'credentialism and regulation-mindedness' and the rise of 'positivistic / empiricist / materialistic' thinking. If so, it is a victory ushered in via changing technology and media habits. An irony, perhaps, is that *Self & Society* failed to keep up with changes in social life and the way people see themselves.

There are indeed huge changes to books and the way we read. But what is being lost? The most important thing, I think straightforwardly, is diversity. Andy Hunter, Founder and CEO of Bookshop.org, wrote in a piece online (yes, I know...) recently that 'shopping online' means the vast majority of

people read the same top-selling books, as determined by Amazon.⁹ As the *New York Times* put it in an article titled, 'Best sellers sell the best because they're best sellers',¹⁰ the Amazon algorithm means that the books people see there are the ones already selling well. That privileges big publishers with marketing over small publishers, and new authors over already successful ones. Have you noticed how often, if you do a search by topic, you often come up with books from the major publishers that were published in the last century?

It makes it very difficult for new authors to build audiences, and for unconventional books to reach readers who might appreciate them. In short, Andy Hunter says, 'it narrows our national conversation down to a very fine point, and sands the edges off of human ideas and creativity. It excludes marginalised voices. It does to our culture what loss of biodiversity does to our environment.'

Let's go back to the words of the journalist, Sonny Yap, who once described the library as 'perhaps the best antidote to the insidious influence of the suburban shopping mall... – a chance to browse in a marketplace of ideas instead of a marketplace of goods and services'.¹¹ Revealingly, today books are just 'goods' for publishers and websites. The starting point of Amazon originally was to sell books as non-perishable packages which would entice buyers to then buy other things in the 'everything store'. And there's still money in books. Amazon rakes in perhaps \$20 billion each year from them!

It would be nice to say that this means that ideas are still worth something. If only! No, the problem is that the same forces that have made Amazon huge are not only eating dainty small publishers and nibbling at whole industries – but shutting down conversations and diverse ways of thinking. Perhaps the departure of *Self & Society* reflects a world in which the space for ideas and free exchange is shrinking, replaced only by an impersonal and

sometimes incomprehensible electronic whirl of information.

Notes and References

- 1 See, for example, I. Rowlands, D. Nicholas, P. Williams & 7 others, 'The Google generation: the information behaviour of the researcher of the future', *Aslib Proceedings*, 60 (4), 2008, pp. 290–310; see also David Nicholas, Ian Rowlands and Paul Huntington, 'Information behaviour of the researcher of the future' (Power Point file); available at <http://tinyurl.com/ycknm43> (accessed 28 December 2023).
- 2 Available at <http://tinyurl.com/28je98zn> (accessed 28 December 2023).
- 3 W.W. Norton, New York, 2020 (updated edition).
- 4 Ballantine Books, New York.
- 5 Icon Books, London.
- 6 See, for example, Michael Power, *The Audit Society: Rituals of Verification*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997.
- 7 See, for example, R. House and N. Totton (eds), *Implausible Professions: Arguments for Pluralism and Autonomy in Psychotherapy and Counselling*, PCCS Books, Ross-on-Wye, 1997; 2nd edn, 2011.
- 8 R. House, D. Kalisch and J. Maidman (eds), *Humanistic Psychology: Current Trends and Future Prospects*, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, 2017.
- 9 See Andy Hunter, 'From IT to bookshop.org, the underdog taking on Amazon', *Welcome to the Jungle*, 24 November 2020; available at <http://tinyurl.com/sah8ucbk> (accessed 27 December 2023). See also Alison Flood, "'This is revolutionary": new online bookshop unites indies to rival Amazon', *The Guardian*, 2 November 2020; available at <http://tinyurl.com/yj4mtkm7> (accessed 27 December 2023).
- 10 19 September 2020; available at <http://tinyurl.com/yymy79m8v> (accessed 27 December 2027).
- 11 See Martin Cohen, 'The knowledge revolution', *University World News*, 22 August 2014; available at <http://tinyurl.com/3924xev6> (accessed 27 December 2023).

About the contributor



Dr Martin Cohen is a journalist, editor and author specialising in popular books in philosophy, social science and politics. His writing ranges widely, as he likes to make connections between different areas and ideas. As well as his book *Paradigm Shift*, featured in a previous issue (*AHPb online magazine* no. 7), his

books include *101 Philosophy Problems*, *Critical Thinking Skills for Dummies*, *I Think Therefore I Eat*, and even a book on nuclear economics called *The Doomsday Machine*. His latest book is *The Leader's Bookshelf: 25 Great Books and Their Readers* (2022), about ideas and inspirations, and how even quite ordinary books can be 'intuition pumps' sending their readers off to achieve extraordinary things. The 2nd edition of his *Critical Thinking Skills for Dummies* will be published in mid-2024. Martin has previously taught philosophy and social science at a number of universities in the UK and Australia. An activist environmentalist, he wrote an influential series of articles in *Times Higher Education* (London) about the politics of the climate-change debate, and has written discussion papers on environmental concerns for the European Parliament. He is currently based in Aquitaine, France, but travels often to the US and UK.