

Why We Don't Read Enough?

This is probably the first period in history since writing was developed, in Kemet, where people have had free access to reading material and yet reading is in steady decline. So what's going on?

I will briefly describe some of the major drivers behind this 'reading famine', concluding with some suggestions as to how we can practically address this issue.

We now read different things in different ways

The first thing to note is that we are not only witnessing a quantitative decline in reading, but also a qualitative change in the type of reading taking place. In 'the West' we now consume much of our 'written' material via electronic media such as email, internet, text messaging etc. This type of reading is qualitatively different from reading books. It promotes fragmented language, reduced concentration and patience and the inability to relax, in quiet peace.

The 'Need' for Background Noise

Many people now actually feel uncomfortable and even distressed by the prospect, let alone actuality, of quiet. Stop for a moment and consider all the background noise around you. Noise pollution is rarely discussed and it is only when city dwellers go somewhere relatively remote that they recognise this reality. This 'need' for constant background noise is part of the growing need for 'hyperstimulation' and is contrary to the ideal conditions and disposition for reading books, which are peace, quiet and focused concentration.

Television – The One Eyed Idiot Box

Television, in and of itself, is not a bad thing. It can act as a medium for the transmission of useful information. The problems arise through *over-consumption*, *unregulated consumption* (for children) and *mindless consumption*. Africans in the US consume more television than any other group in that nation. The television has become the European babysitter for too many African families, saturating our children with images of sexual degeneracy and violence. Similarly, many adults use television as an electronic sedative. Television should be consumed like books, **actively, consciously and critically**. Instead it is generally consumed **passively, subconsciously and non-critically**. It is the primary tool for changing social values and yet is treated by most people like *electromagnetic wallpaper*.

Other forms of Electronic Entertainment Media

When I was a child we had a Black and White TV. We eventually graduated to a colour TV with three channels, and a remote control. Today, children have MP3 players, iPods, the internet on telephones etc which provide a range of distractions which make books seem dull and unexciting by comparison. This barrage of electronic stimuli has created a generation of children (and adults) who have turned their backs on books.

The Disintegrating Afrikan Family

The journey from extended family, to nuclear family, to isolated sub-atomic survival units has dramatically changed family dynamics, increasing stress levels and encouraging the process of adults seeking ways of pacifying their children via playstation, computer games, MTV Base etc. Anything to keep the children relatively quiet and out of our hair!

How can we reverse this non-reading trend?

- **Electromagnetic downtime** – Let's pledge to have some time when all the electronic equipment is switched off and we read, or dare I say it.. talk to each other!
- **Join or start a reading club** – This will motivate and support your reading.
- **Be the example** – Let your children see you reading so that they will read.
- **Budget for books!**
- **Multi-task** – e.g. get your children to read to you whilst you are cooking.

- **Support Afrikan writers and bookstores.**

It is a sad irony that for over 350 years the penalty for Afrikans reading was a severe whipping or even death, whilst today; with Afrikans voluntarily turning our backs on reading the penalty is still death....through ignorance.

Paul Ifayomi Grant is a writer and consultant. Contact him at ifayomi@ntlworld.com or via his website www.houseofknowledge.org.uk

May 2006