The 'Bi-literate' Brain: The Key to Reading in a Sea of Screens

By Manoush Zomorodi, producer of “Note to Self,” a weekly podcast show on WNYC-FM
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Paper or screen? There's a battle in your brain. The more you read on screens, the more your brain adapts to the "non-linear" kind of reading we do on computers and phones. Your eyes dart around, you stop half way through a paragraph to check a link or a read a text message. Then, when you go back to good old fashioned paper, it can be harder to concentrate.

"The human brain is almost adapting too well to the particular attributes or characteristics of internet reading," says Maryanne Wolf of Tufts University.

She says we have to develop a 'bi-literate' brain if we want to be able to switch from the scattered skimming typical of screen reading to the deeper, slow reading that we associate with books on paper. It is possible. It just takes work.

One person who has done it well is Maria Popova, founder of Brainpickings.org. In this episode, Manoush visits her home, marvels at the piles of books everywhere, and learns how Maria manages to read about a dozen books a week and still retain the information, organize ideas around a myriad of themes, and churn out multiple smart, insightful, original posts every day. She does it using a mix of digital and analog tools and techniques to help her read better.

Quotes from this episode:

- On why a 'bi-literate' brain is important: "There are things in our lives, whether they be novels, short stories, mortgage documents, whatever, that actually need our slow reading," Mike Rosenwald, Washington Post staff writer.
- "In the old days before the internet, reading was a linear event," Mike Rosenwald.
- On ideal reader: "What we're after is a discerning 'bi-literate' brain: A child who knows when to allocate attention to those deep reading processes and when to play and move from one interesting thing after another," Dr. Maryanne Wolf.
- The internet is not making us dumber but it is changing us: "I don't worry that we will become dumb because of the internet, but I worry that we will not use our most preciously acquired deep reading processes because we are given too much stimulation," Dr. Maryanne Wolf.
- On the eventual convergence of screens and paper reading: "It's a very young medium. My hopes are that its imperfections will be addressed such that the medium is not of any difference," Maria Popova.
- "I actually prefer electronic reading in some regards," Maria Popova.

Resources mentioned in the audio:

- Mike Rosenwald's excellent Washington Post article on how serious reading is harmed by online reading.
- Anne Mangen's University of Norway study comparing plot retention when reading a Kindle vs on paper.
- Maryanne Wolf's recent article about the brain's plasticity. (Full report)
- Book by Ziming Liu of San Jose University, "Paper to Digital: Documents in the Information Age"
- Also by Ziming Liu, a report on how reading behavior has changed in the past 10 years.
- As far as visual fatigue goes, e-ink is a lot like paper according to this study in PLOS.
- And The New Yorker dove in too: "Being a better online reader."