

MAGAZINE READING IN THE DISTRACTED, MULTI-TASKING ATTENTION ECONOMY

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Background and Data Sources:

As Tom Davenport and John Beck pointed out in their 2002 book *The Attention Economy*, attention has become the rarest and most precious consumer resource. Considering that their book pre-dated the smartphone and the tablet app, the themes introduced in that work would seem to be increasingly relevant in the society and economy of 2013. Indeed, the 24-hour day remains a constant, even as consumers parse out their increasingly fragmented attention among competing and overlapping activities and stimuli. In recognition of this, some media researchers have focused in recent years on the ways that simultaneous media use either enhances or diminishes engagement and attention. Some of these studies have attempted to score media according to the amount of time that consumers spend with each medium. While this is a reasonable approach, it begs the question of how much attention is being paid: when is a medium “front and center” and when is it remotely running in the background? What consumers are attending to two or three media simultaneously, is communication enhanced or thwarted? If media are being consumed in social settings or in conjunction with social media, are advertising messages amplified or muted?

Though these questions are very difficult to resolve, researchers have attempted to address them using measures of time allocation. Alas, since print media tend to claim fewer minutes per consumer day, compared to other media, they have tended to fare poorly in most studies organized around time-based metrics. For example, the Middletown Media Studies used ethnographic “shadowing” methods to follow consumers through their media days; they showed magazines and newspapers to be the weakest media in terms of reach and minute durations (Figure 1). Based on such evidence, the champions of digital media (and more recently of mobile media) have argued that there is a mismatch between consumer attention and advertising spending that can only be corrected by taking money out of print budgets and shifting it to digital/mobile budgets (Figure 2). Predictably, these arguments have met objections from advocates of print media. For example, in a paper presented at the 2009 PDRF, one of the authors of this paper showed that magazines are more efficient in their ad delivery than other media and that net recall levels remained comparatively superior (McDonald & McPheters, 2009). Elsewhere, evidence has been marshaled demonstrating high levels of consumer receptivity to print advertising – either because it is seen as relevant and part of the pleasure of reading magazines (White, 2003) or because magazine advertising is not intrusive and thus does not challenge the consumer’s control of their media consumption experience (Olsen & Zaltman, 2005; McDonald, 2005). These studies insisted that the quantity of time spent with a medium was not a good surrogate for the quality of the ad exposures associated with that time. And recent research on the poor viewability levels of web display ads has only underscored that very point.

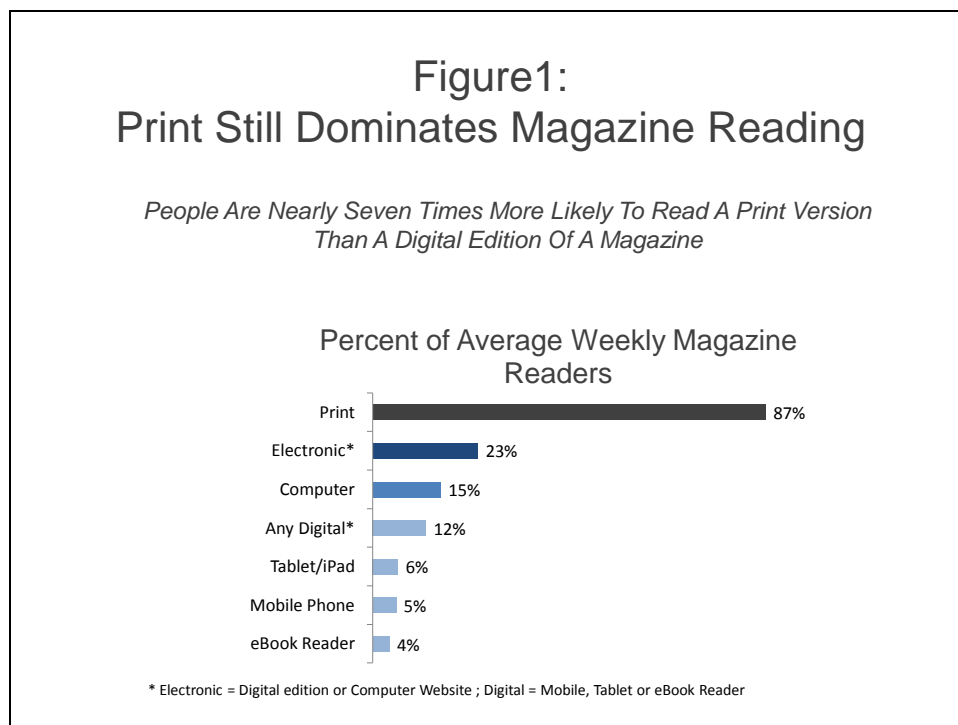
However questions about the relationship between “time” and “attention” remain very much contested. In the meantime, the landscape of media options and distractions gets ever more cluttered. One can scarcely walk down the sidewalks of our major cities without literally bumping into pedestrians who are looking more closely at their smartphone screens than at the other pedestrians in their path. But there is no turning back from the successful launch of the iPhone in 2007 – followed closely by the equally successful launch of the iPad tablet in 2010. Since then we have seen a proliferation of devices and gadgets, all of which afford us additional ways to stay online and thus be subject to a steady stream of images and messages. As such, the advent of wearable media (e.g. Google Glass) is only the next logical step in the process of media colonization of the 24-hour day. The growth of social media has abetted this trend by creating highly popular ways of using these devices for ongoing communication with friends both known and virtual, just as social media have provided a low-cost means of publishing for every willing consumer. All of this point to increasing – and perhaps even accelerating levels of distraction and fragmentation of attention. No wonder that Attention Deficit Disorder has become such a common diagnosis among clinical psychologists.

In this paper, we make a modest effort to locate magazine reading in this complicated and cluttered landscape. Our tool is the USA TouchPoints study, introduced by one of the authors at the 2011 PDRF in San Francisco (Spaeth, 2011). As you may recall, the USA TouchPoints sample is composed of 2000 adults aged 18-64 drawn from the GfKMRI Survey of the American Consumer, a highly respected multi-stage area probability sample. Recruits to TouchPoints are outfitted with a smartphone app that prompts participants to register their media consumption in half-hour intervals every day for one full week. The app also records their location, their social settings, their activities, and their mood states, regardless of whether media are present or not. We undertook this inquiry with full recognition that the magazine reading time was still going to be small relative to the time spent with other media. Our goal however was to try to locate magazine reading behavior in the context of the increasingly complex media ecosystem. When are magazines read? When are they the exclusive medium for a consumer, and when are they used in conjunction with other media? When are they read in solitude and when are they read in social situations? What kinds of moods are associated with different kinds of reading occasions? What kinds of other activities accompany magazine reading occasions? Though time use studies like TouchPoints have addressed similar questions for other media, this study focused specifically on magazine media. Importantly, the 2011 USA Touchpoints study for the first time asked respondents to report what kind of device was being used for each magazine reading occasion: a printed magazine, a desktop computer, or a mobile digital device (which in 2011 consisted almost entirely of tablets). Though incidence levels were low

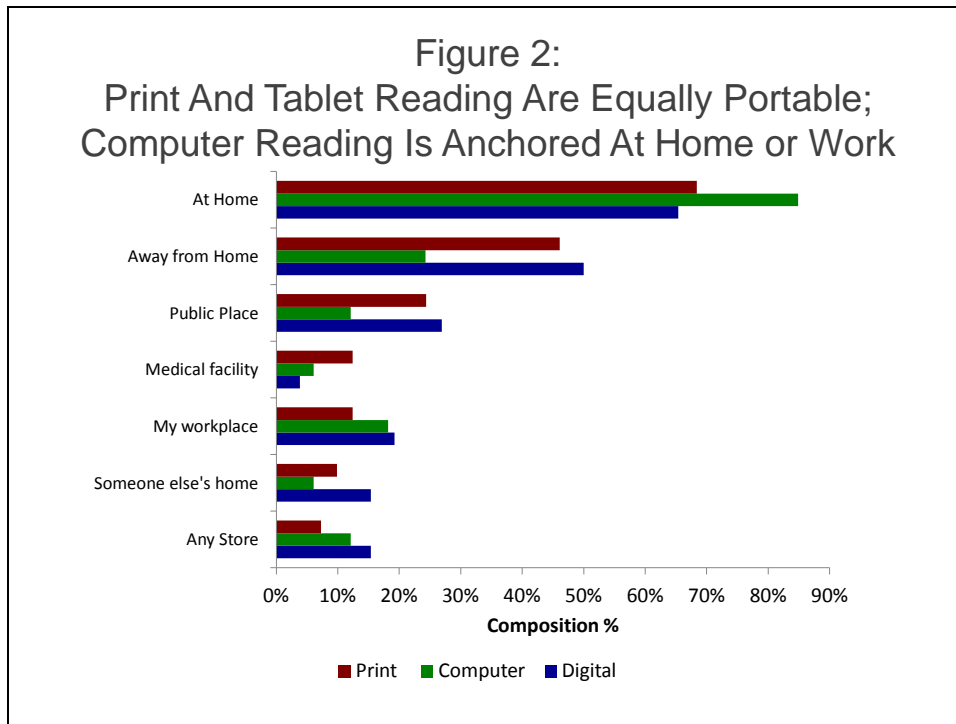
enough to thwart our hopes of investigating specific magazines (or even specific magazine genres), samples were sufficient to make broad category-level observations about how magazine reading situations might be evolving as delivery platforms and devices multiply.

Findings:

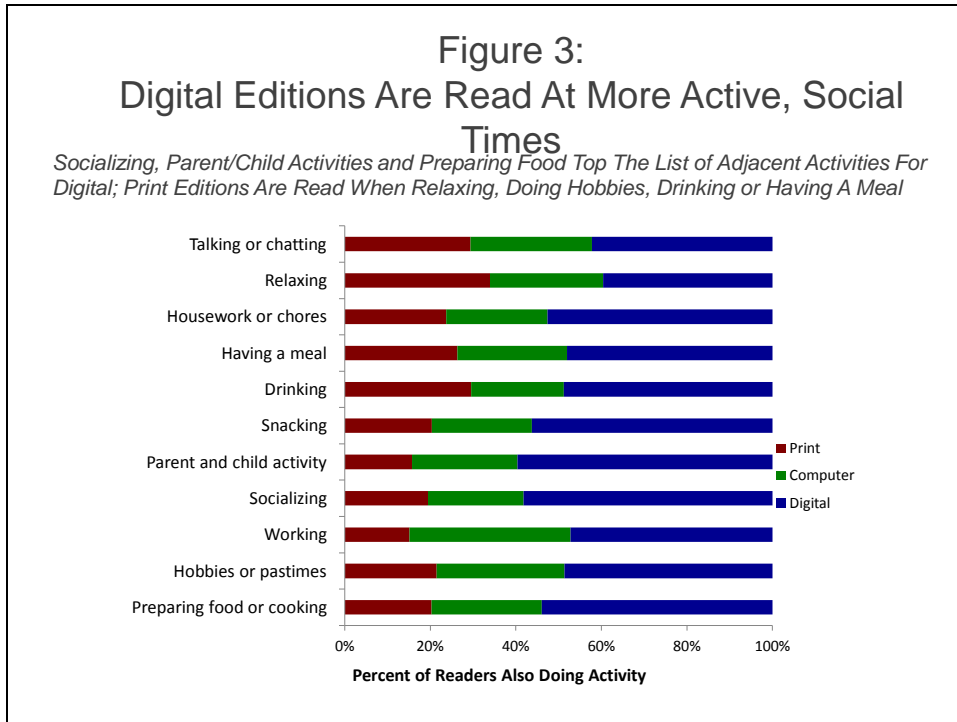
As Figure 1 shows, most consumers still are most likely to read magazines in their printed form. 87% of those who reported reading any magazine during a week claimed to have done so from conventional printed editions. However 23% claimed to have read magazines from some kind of electronic device. Desktop computers are the most frequently cited devices for such magazine reading, though this probably represents some degree of confusion among consumers since few magazines are available in their entirety through magazine-branded websites. Rather it is more frequently the custom for publishers to provide excerpts from their publications or ancillary material on their free websites. Given this confusion, it is likely that actual magazine reading from desktop computers is overstated in our data. Another 12% of respondents reported reading magazines on mobile digital devices – 6% of tablets, 5% on mobile phones, and 4% on e-book readers. Again, it is difficult to reconcile these incidence levels with existing distribution patterns since most of the digital editions of magazines in 2011 were distributed to the Tablet/iPad category, rather than to other mobile digital devices.



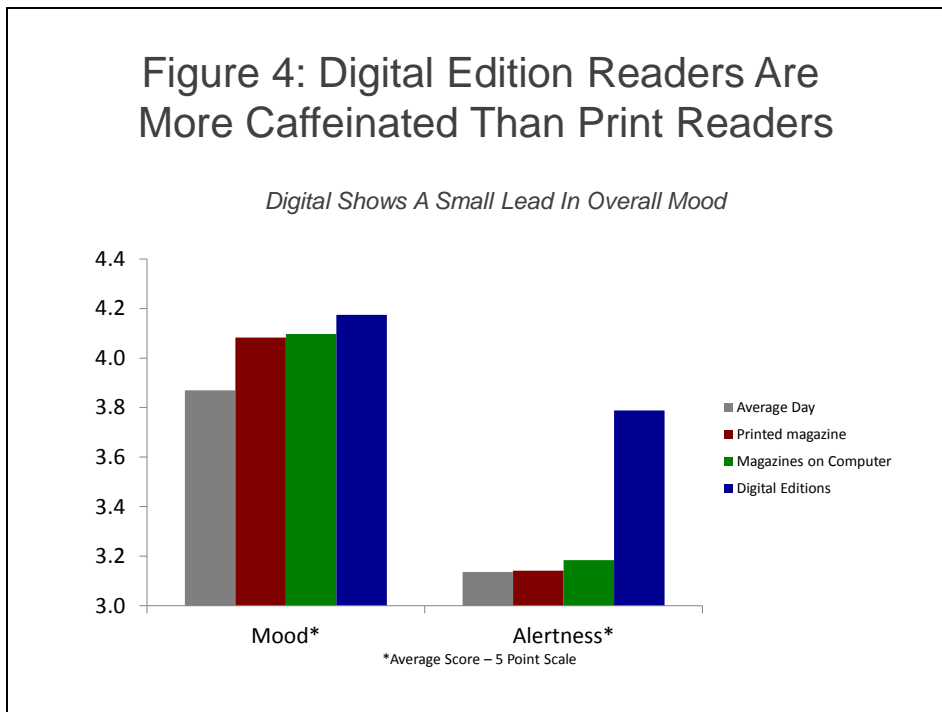
Magazine reading has long been understood to be an activity that happens both in home and out of home. The migration of magazines to mobile media does not appear to changing that much, at least according to TouchPoints data. However the distribution of out-of-home locations for magazine reading may shift a bit in the post-tablet world. Printed magazine reading skewed toward medical offices while tablet-based magazine reading was more likely in workplaces, in someone else’s home, and in retail locations. Not surprisingly, the reading of magazine content on desktops was anchored more inflexibly at actual desks – either in the home or in the office.



A perhaps more surprising finding comes from Figure 3 and concerns the social context of magazine reading on different devices. Readers who consumed their magazines on tablets were far more likely to be engaged in the same half hour in some kind of activity, including such social activities as talking, eating and drinking, preparing food, parenting or just “socializing”. We cannot tell from the TouchPoint data whether the reading was happening simultaneously with the other activity (e.g. eating a meal while reading a magazine) or whether it merely happened within the same half-hour interval. In either case, it suggests that as magazine content migrates to mobile devices, it is likely to be interspersed more densely into other activities. This likely will favor short-form content, photographs, and editorial features that provoke comment (or encourage being shared with others).

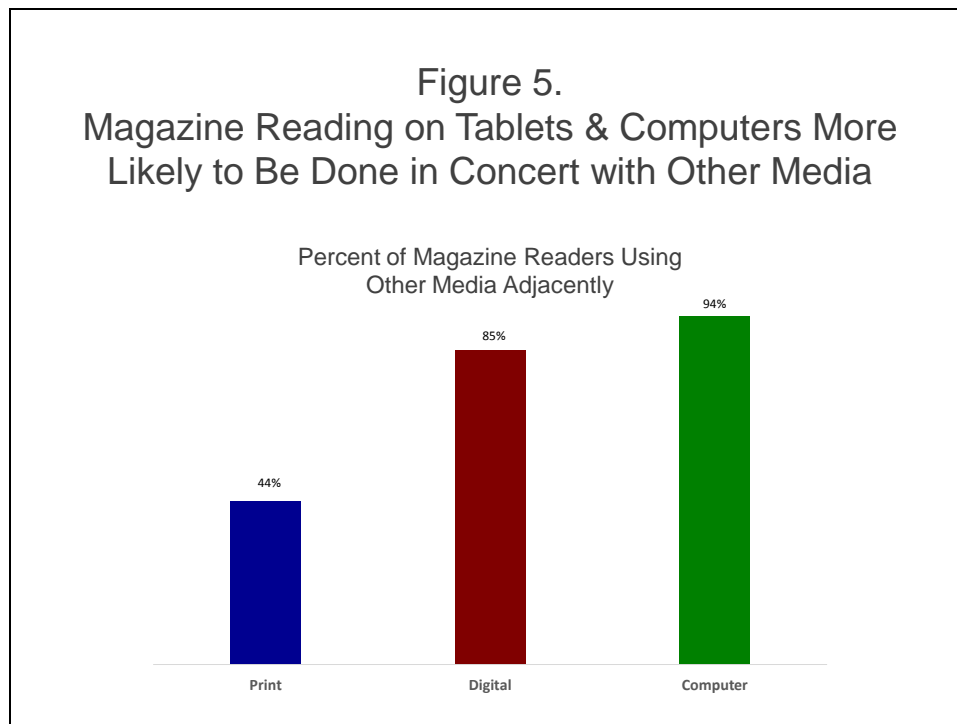


This image of multi-tasking readers is also reflected in Figure 4’s finding that those who report reading magazine content on mobile devices also report being in a more elevated mood state and a higher state of alertness, compared to readers who consumed their content from printed magazines. Does the era of tablets portend a less drowsy, more caffeinated public?



Perhaps the sharpest difference found between reading on printed platforms and on electronic platforms emerges from Figure 5. Here we look at situations where magazines are the ONLY media being consumed in the half hour interval – or rather we look at the inverse of this – when magazines are being consumed “adjacent” to other media. While only 44% of printed

magazine reading takes place during half-hour intervals that include other media, that number doubles for tablet-based magazine reading, and is even a bit higher for reading magazine content on a desktop computer. In other words, 85% of the tablet-based magazine reading reported by TouchPoints respondents occurred during half-hour intervals that included the consumption of other media. For both the tablets and the desktop computers, this could have included any other use of those devices – say to watch a video, check email, play a game, look up a fact, book a reservation, or any of the other functions that are afforded by those devices. For better or for worse, magazines in digital environments contend for attention amidst conditions that are more competitive. Though we can't divine it from TouchPoints data, but the reading occasions themselves might be composed of shorter bursts – a pattern that again would be more congenial to short-form content, photography, and captions than to long-form logocentric journalism.



So the impression that emerges from these data suggests that mobile-based magazine reading may take place in contexts that are more social, more active, more ebullient, but also more interspersed with other media. Certainly the increasing integration of social media tools into magazine articles – those tools that allow readers to share, comment, email, or “like” an editorial feature or an advertisement – abet this trend toward a less passive, more active style of reading. Indeed, it may develop that magazine reading becomes more differentiated from book reading – less immersive, more browsy and chatty, perhaps more fun and less serious, in this more saturated, multi-tasking context.

Before you all get depressed at this prospect, let us hasten say that did suggest that there are many different types of reading occasions and that the emergence of mobile platforms is probably encouraging further diversification of those types. Our “base case” is the classic immersive reading occasion -- at home, alone, with no other media distraction: in this study that represented 40% of all magazine reading occasions. However there were other types of occasions too. Reading at home with some background media present (e.g. music or TV) represented 41% of reading occasions. 34% of the reading occasions could be classified as at home & social, with some other household member present. About 12% of the reading occasions were at work, perhaps more than we might have expected. About 5% of the magazine reading took place while commuting – perhaps less frequently than those of us who live in New York City might have predicted. And a whopping 26% of reading occasions took place in public places – in stores and airplanes and waiting rooms and other places where one read while in the presence of strangers. Interestingly, these public place reading occasions appeared to be more solitary when the reading was done in print, but more social and active when the reading was done on a mobile device. I say “appear” because our sample sizes were limited enough to prevent us from offering up more specific percentages. However the “directional” indications align with the broader narrative of tablet-based reading as more social, more active, and more excited.

As noted at the outset, our results here are modest. Our data do not permit direct inquiry into the broader questions of which types of reading occasions afford the highest levels of attention, the strongest affinities with editorial or advertising, and the greatest levels of enjoyment for the readers. However by describing the varieties of reading occasions observed and the differences that seem to be suggested between printed magazines and digital magazines, it is hoped that we will encourage further investigation into what may be emerging varieties of increasingly differentiated reading experiences.

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