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## LA Times

op-ed

### **Killing the written word by snippets**

**Students are trading in books for search-and-seizure learning on the Internet, and real literacy is getting lost along the way.**

By Naomi S. Baron

NAOMI S. BARON is a professor of linguistics at American University in Washington.

November 28, 2005

A FEW YEARS BACK, I asked my undergraduates to read Robert Putnam's "Bowling Alone." The class was discussing the effects of the Internet on social interaction, and Putnam's carefully documented analysis of the breakdown of Americans' connections to one another offered a good frame of reference.

The students balked.

Was I aware that the book was 541 pages long? Didn't I know Putnam had written a précis of his argument a couple of years earlier, which they easily found on the Web? Why did they have to slog through so many examples of the same point?

One memorable freshman sagely informed me that people shouldn't be reading entire volumes these days anyway. He had learned from a high school teacher that book authors (presumably fiction excepted) pad their core ideas to make money and that anything worth writing could be expressed in an article of 20 or 30 pages, tops.

Has written culture recently taken a nose dive? These are the students who grew up on Spark Notes, the popular study guides. Many of this generation are aliterate — they know how to read but don't choose to. And abridgment of texts is now taken to extremes, with episodes from micro-novels being sent as text messages on cell phones.

To be fair, my own era had CliffsNotes, not to mention Reader's Digest Condensed Books. We also relied on introductions and secondary sources when we were too busy (or too lazy) to work through primary texts.

But today's college crowd has a tool we did not: the search engine. Want to learn tap dancing in Austin? Lessons are just a few clicks away. So are the words spoken by the White Rabbit in "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" or every reference to dogs in "The Canterbury Tales." Between Microsoft Word's "find" function, Project Gutenberg, Amazon's "Search Inside" feature and Google Print, seeking out precise fragments of information has become child's play.

Search engines are a blessing. Unquestionably, they save all of us vast amounts of time

and shoe leather, not to mention their democratizing effect for users without access to substantial book collections. But there is a hitch.

Much as automobiles discourage walking, with undeniable consequences for our health and girth, textual snippets-on-demand threaten our need for the larger works from which they are extracted. Why read "Bowling Alone" — or even the shorter article upon which it builds — when you can lift a page that contains some key words? In an attempt to coax students to search inside real books rather than relying exclusively on the Web for sources, many professors require references to printed works alongside URLs. Now that those "real" full-length publications are increasingly available and searchable online, the distinction between tangible and virtual is evaporating.

Admittedly, back in the days when research necessitated opening dozens of books in hopes of finding useful information, no one read each tome cover to cover. It is also fair to say that given how scattershot our searches sometimes were, we often missed what we were looking for. But that said, we also happened upon issues that proved more interesting than our original queries. Today's snippet literacy efficiently keeps us on the straight and narrow path, with little opportunity for fortuitous side trips.

Google's recent foray into massive library storage has led the publishing industry to cry foul on the grounds of copyright infringement. If users can procure just the lines of text they need, why lay out good money to buy a whole book? In response, online advocates argue that access to these extracts will fuel print sales. Moreover, short written segments (a chapter, a recipe) can be sold like songs from the iTunes store.

Although this debate is important for the law and the economy, it masks a challenge that some of us find even more troubling: Will effortless random access erode our collective respect for writing as a logical, linear process? Such respect matters because it undergirds modern education, which is premised on thought, evidence and analysis rather than memorization and dogma. Reading successive pages and chapters teaches us how to follow a sustained line of reasoning.

If we approach the written word primarily through search-and-seizure rather than sustained encounter-and-contemplation, we risk losing a critical element of what it means to be an educated, literate society.