



Reading

In the digital environment

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Introduction

- Talk based on huge, robust evidence-base of what people actually *do* in the digital space and not what they *say* they did or *wished* they did. People have problems recalling what they did in digital space; also, nobody wants to admit they do not read.
- Need new methodology, a non-intrusive one, to study behaviour in anonymous, remote virtual space. CIBER obtain data from millions of digital footprints people leave when visiting a website/using a digital service, via mobile, laptop, personal computer and digital television.
- Making sense of these footprints for ten years in media, education, publishing, health and, most recently, in cultural field (Europeana).
- Amassed an enormous evidence base. Know what information seeking and reading behaviour of millions of people looks like and will describe key characteristics.
- Data points to the fact that our behaviour has fundamentally changed as a result of our migration to the virtual space and this includes reading.

The evidence

- Big shock! Nobody does much reading in the virtual space – or certainly not what is traditionally thought to be reading
- Web designers & content providers thought we would dwell
- Logs tell us:
 - a) Most website visits see 1-3 pages viewed & half visitors never come back – promiscuous, preferring to move on;
 - b) Typically, only a few minutes spent on a visit, and 15 minutes a very long time to stay;
 - c) If it is an article then they spend about 3 minutes on it;
 - d) Short articles have much bigger chance of being viewed;
 - e) If article long summary will be read or it will be downloaded -squirreled away for another day



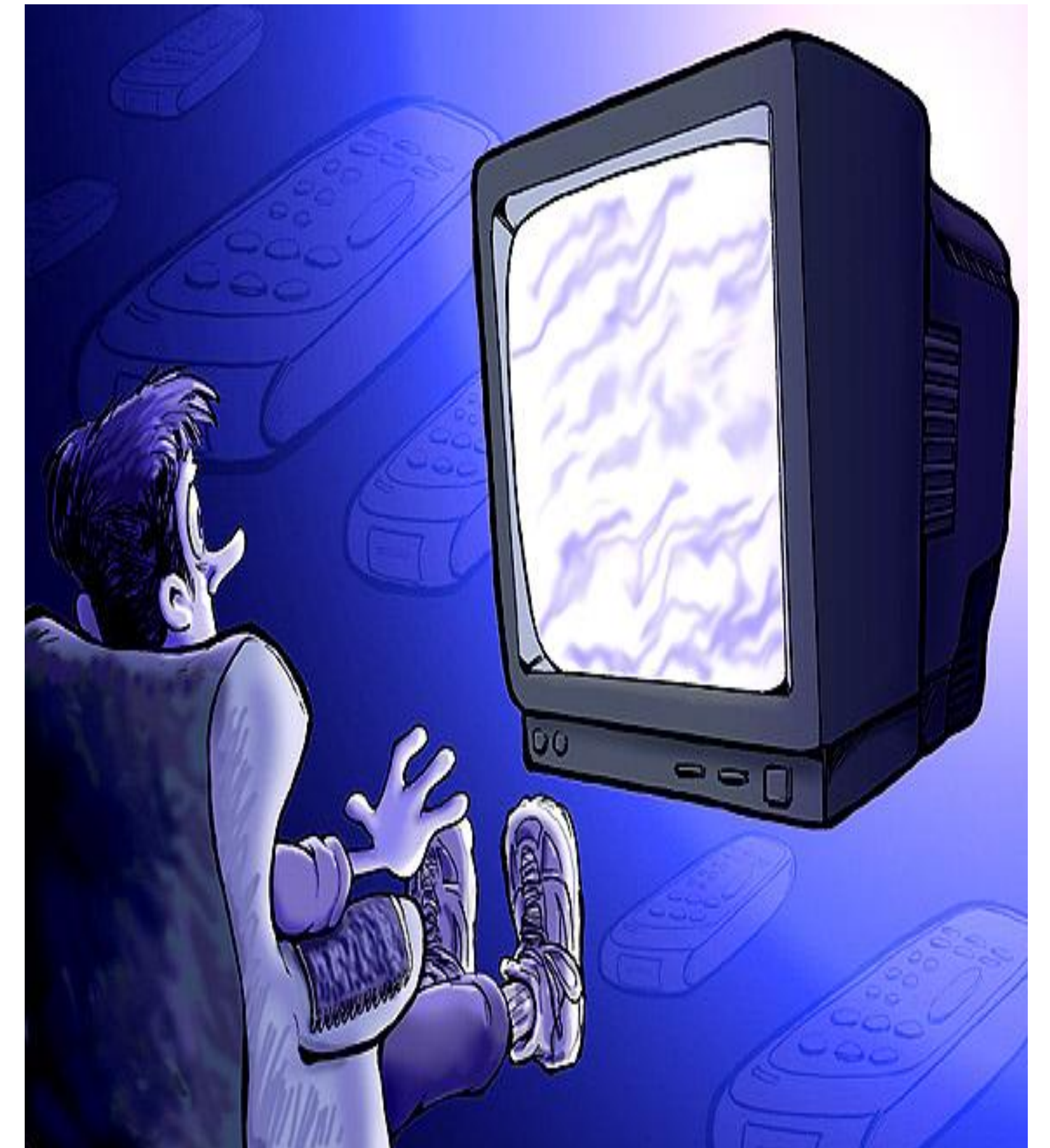
The evidence

- So, how do we know that reading is not undertaken later at a more convenient time and place, or in a more suitable form (on paper, for instance)?
- Firstly, undertaken follow-up interviews & focus groups with digital consumers and majority of articles downloaded never read; kept as insurance for a day when might need them. Digital osmosis!
- Secondly, know from surveys conducted by media regulators, like Ofcom in UK, that people's work and leisure time squeezed in today's pressured environment. Spend most of day, when not eating, sleeping, travelling etc., on computer, on the phone or watching the television; there is very little time left to read!



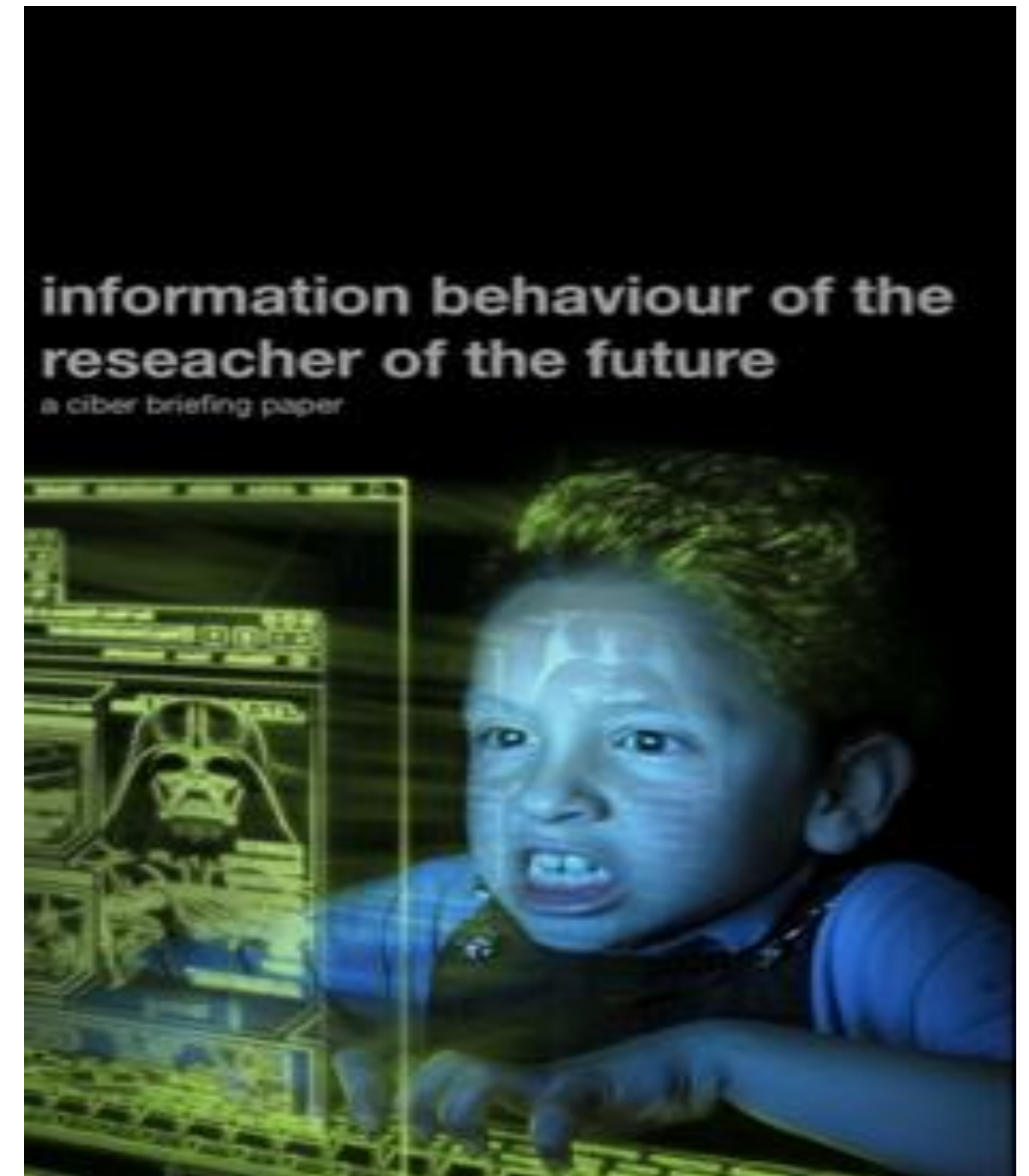
The explanation

- 1) Digital transition has resulted in a move from vertical to horizontal information seeking/reading, which leads to viewing rather than reading
- 2) Behaviour best described as bouncing/flicking/skittering: *moving rapidly along digital surface, with frequent light contacts or changes of direction.*
- 3) Web a visual platform, like TV in many respects, and reading from a laptop or PC is not always pleasurable
- 4) People multitask when online; much prefer it; more interesting
- 5) Conditioned to accept fast information (as have accepted fast food)
- 6) E-books increases prevalence of 'lite' reading behaviour and smartphones taking it to another level (seen nothing yet)



And then there is...the Google Generation

- Those born digital, been conditioned since birth, are those with greatest appetite for fast information and skittering.
- Quickest searchers, spend least amount of time on a question – a fraction of the time spent by adults. By own admission, the least confident about their answers. Lack of confidence explained by their behaviour – view fewer pages and domains and undertake fewer searches in answering questions.
- Search statements much closer textually to the questions posed, making them, not just fast food generation, but also `cut and paste' generation. As for multitasking, which anecdote has it young excel, they do it a lot but not very well.
- Young fast forwarded from a world where the focus was on knowing one big thing really well to a world where you know many things, but not very well.



Big issues

- Propensity to rush, rely on point-and-click, first-up-on-Google answers, along with unwillingness to wrestle with uncertainties and an inability to digest and evaluate information, keeps young especially stuck on the surface of 'information age'; not fully benefiting from the information society and 'always on' information and reading.
- Skittering has negative consequences for fundamental skills. Trouble is brain rewards for finding information. Skittering chipping away at capacity to concentrate & contemplate which leads to reading problems. Speculation that digital makes us stupid – even damaging the brain!
- Deal with consequences that result from what is absent from increasing numbers of our digital users, especially the born digital - lack of a mental map, no sense of what a collection is and have poor idea of determining what is good, relevant and the truth
- Writing been on wall for years about diminution of reading but lulled into complacency by sheer amount of 'activity' taking place in cyberspace.



Big issues

- McLuhan's universe of linear exposition, quiet contemplation, disciplined reading and study an ideal which we bought into and developed educational and information services around. But...
- ...always wanted to skitter and power browse. Difference is that opportunities for skittering are legion and this created more skittering and pace not letting-up.
- Witnessing death of reading? No, just displacement /marginalisation of deep reading, and emergence of power browsing or reading 'lite'.
- Big question will Google Generation turn out to be fundamentally different from older generations in attitudes, expectations and behaviour when become doctors, politicians, lawyers etc.? Will they even 'think' differently?
- And, if so, will existing cultural and learning become obsolete?
- And have we dumbed down? Victoria!

