

### Books still hold the upper hand

My two cents

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- 1 When the UK's National Literacy Trust announces that tablet computers help disadvantaged children to read, liberal-minded book lovers like me sit up and listen.
- 2 The NLT published research suggesting that "touchscreen technology can be more effective in engaging children aged three to five with reading than books", and that these effects are amplified in low-income households.
- 3 The research is a collaboration with Pearson, the multinational currently extending its corporate tentacles into every aspect of education. The Trust is now part-funded by Pearson, which aims to make digital products and services 70% of its sales by 2015.
- 4 Thus the cosy connotations of 'literacy' and 'trust' are here being used to introduce the very technologies that are killing reading and writing. Digital and online technology is fragmenting our attention spans and demolishing the publishing industry.
- 5 For the most part, the media has run with the headline findings about literacy and inequality, cheerleading big business's exploitation of poverty as a fig leaf for market expansion. But these headlines are derived from marginal and contradictory data. The majority of the report demonstrates the enduring primacy of books. Children are much more likely to enjoy stories in books than stories on a screen. Children are 34 times more likely to read storybooks daily than stories on tablets daily. Children are four times more likely to read stories in a book for more than 30 minutes. Children are more likely to read stories on tablets on their own, losing out on the huge benefits of reading with a parent.
- 6 New technology makes amnesiacs of us all, so it can create the conditions for its own apparent necessity. Let's not forget that the moguls of Silicon Valley send their children to Steiner-Waldorf schools, where they play with junk modelling in the open air and are not allowed to use computers, even at home. The men who design our gadgets know that children need to learn about the world from first principles. They need to explore with their hands and do sums in their heads.



*The Guardian Weekly, 2015*