THE VIEW FROM HERE – TOO LONG; DIDN’T READ

Madhumita Lahiri*

It’s been a common question and a shared predicament of English professors everywhere: ‘How do you get your students to read?’ We have shared strategies for reading responses and pop quizzes, scorned the pernicious horrors of Spark Notes and Cliff Notes and other summary services, mourned the indignities of papers written without enjoying the pleasures of our cherished texts, all in the battle against what, today, is an acronym meandering across the internet:

TL;DR: Too long; didn’t read.

What has changed, in the USA, at the end of 2016, is that TL;DR has become a national political concern, and not just the fussy lamentation of the English department faculty lounge. The USA has elected a president whose preferred mode of communication is missives of fewer than 140 characters, and it has done so through an election process that has moved far too quickly for the slow discursivity of traditional journalism. Social media has transformed both the practice and the transmission of reading: the ‘share’, the ‘retweet’, and most obviously the ‘like’ have foregrounded the act of reading as one of endorsement. Not only are we swimming in social media feeds that are algorithmically managed to meet our pre-existing preferences, we are also, I suspect, coming to understand the act of reading itself as an act of appreciation.

As a result, perhaps, the debates surrounding the President have fixated repeatedly on questions of language. Trump’s supporters, after all, have insisted on the need to take him ‘seriously’ but not ‘literally’, even as their candidate’s campaign centred his criticism of Obama’s and Clinton’s handling of violent attacks on their refusal to use a precise three word phrase: ‘radical Islamic terrorism’. Trump’s critics are similar in their linguistic focus, whether in condemning Trump’s use of insensitive language or mocking his usage of nonstandard words like ‘bigly’ and ‘bragadocious’. Issues of language have always been central to politics, but they now occur with a brevity that allows

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the details to stand in for the whole: the sound byte, in contrast, of the mass media age was a phrase taken from a longer address or conversation, seen as an emblem of that larger object. In the USA in 2017, we seem to have moved from synecdoche to metonymy – from the partial substitute to the closely associated one – a formal transformation that may reflect the changing content of mainstream politics.

We are, as scholars of the discipline of literary studies and of the departments frequently described simply as ‘English’, the custodians of an older, deliberative form of reading that is disappearing today even as it may be most needed. To be sure, everyone has always read rather less, and rather less carefully than the English professor would like, but that earlier form of brief and partial reading occurred in a climate of relatively limited access to written material. Today, such skimming occurs as traditional journalism declines and social media increases, and both phenomena converge in what is often bemoaned as ‘fake news’. The proliferation of sources, it seems, has not given us any greater skills of discernment in reading. We may or may not agree that ‘fake news’ caused the election result, but it certainly led a man to drive five hours north to fire his assault rifle in a D.C. pizza parlour.

Whereas US English departments in the 1990s convulsed themselves over what to read – the ‘culture wars’ and their frequent fixation on the canon – the US English department of 2017 may need to be more focused on the question of how to read. Our undergraduate students specialize in skimming, not because they are young and lazy (which of course they may be) but because they specialize in the vertical, extractive, rapid reading that is crucial to functioning in an internet-based reading environment. This is not the close reading that we have long sought to teach – but it is also not the ‘paranoid reading’ that, if recent reports are to be believed, is the truly disastrous scourge of US literary studies. It is also not the ‘distant reading’ championed by digital humanists. Our students are not the machinic readers of literary labs, ranging across a larger corpus in search of broader insights, but the skimming readers of

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2 On 4 December, Edgar Welch arrived in the D.C. restaurant Comet Ping Pong from Salisbury, N.C., armed with a handgun and an assault rifle, to investigate the conspiracy theory known as ‘pizzagate.’

personal screens, bouncing across a seemingly endless textual surface. What seems crucial, here in Michigan in January 2017, is that this commonplace mode bears no relationship to the form of non-fiction reading that was, in most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, foundational to the practice of nationalism (and, as recent scholarship is increasingly demonstrating, internationalism.) Having abandoned the practice of newspaper reading that Benedict Anderson famously theorized as a secular ritual, US students today have gained neither the ‘lateral reading’ of the professional fact-checker, which fixates on the accuracy of the text, nor the hermeneutics of the faithful, which scrupulously resolves contradictions to fill out the text’s contours. Both modes, imperfectly paired here, rely on length. As a consequence, none of the theorizations of reading commonly mentioned in literary studies can adequately speak, for instance, to those critically important phrases known as clickbait.

None of this, of course, is particularly new to English professors. We’ve long lamented the demise of reading among an always disappointing younger generation, and we have proclaimed to the rich and powerful that our pedagogical contributions lay in teaching the ambiguities of reading – in developing that hard-to-define practice known as ‘critical thinking’, on which literary studies has no monopoly, and which was already under attack by established US political authorities.\(^4\) What is new, however, is the ways in which our custodianship, as researchers and as instructors, of an older form of reading – the one pilloried in the acronym TL;DR – might be urgently desired today by people other than our already-converted colleagues.

TL;DR is used by writers and editors to summarize a long online entry, and by online interlocutors to criticize verbose contributions. In the latter usage, it serves as a reader’s expression of initial intent, and then disinterest; in the former, it provides the illusion that one could, without reading, still ‘get the gist’. Unlike a title or an abstract, a TL;DR is used at the end of a longer post: writing it signals *skimming*, even as it claims that one ‘didn’t read’.

This TL;DR practice, of skimming-as-reading, contributes to the curious nominalism of political debates around the Trump presidency. (I realize, of course, that all political phenomena have multiple and complex causes: I focus here on reading practices because these are most relevant to this journal’s readership.) As the presidential candidate and now president continues his 140 character tweets, complete with the chunks of language known as hashtags, the USA erupts repeatedly over language at its smallest and most referential level: the right fumes at ‘black lives matter’ because it might imply that other lives do not, while the left lambasts the *New York Times* for using the term ‘alt-right’ in its reportage. In each case, the metonym on which each side fixates is less a choice quotation or sound byte than a closely

\(^4\) See the 2012 platform of the Republican Party of Texas.
associated term to the content that they condemn: Black Lives Matter has arguably focused more on police violence than on black life per se, while the New York Times’ coverage of the alt-right has repeatedly described its fascist, racist, and anti-Semitic nature. The fixation on the single word is a function of the hash tag, the meme, and the skimming form of reading that is endemic to internet textuality. As a consequence, a 4500 word investigative article on the incoming president’s most controversial advisor, Steve Bannon, generated most attention on social media for its use of a single word, ‘populist’, in its title.5

TL;DR? At least you found a single, controversial, word to seize.

When we aren’t complaining about our students’ refusal to read, we are often lamenting our own inability to read, usually pinned on a lack of time and an excess of obligations. TL;DR is – if I may publish an open secret – a fixture of our own research practice. Faced with an often overwhelming excess of existing research, literary scholars will, with more or less open acknowledgement, read some articles, skim several more, and – to use the kids’ phrase – TL;DR the rest. It is only in front of our students, then, that we insist on the importance of complete reading: whether Fredric Jameson’s symptomatic reading, Eve Sedgwick’s reparative reading, or in the New Critics’ close reading, the English classroom is one in which texts must be read, cover to cover, word for word.6 They must be read, that is, in the plodding sense that TL;DR’s ‘DR’ disclaims. Too long, you say? The model English professor has no sympathy.

Although, of course, this is not what we do as researchers. We skim, though we skim intelligently, and it seems to me that what is urgent, now, in this changed political climate is for us to accommodate and foreground the problem that TL;DR represents – to acknowledge TL;DR, and its distracted, extractive skimming, as intrinsic to the modes of reading that we wish our students to gain. It is easy to disparage TL;DR as the slovenly behaviour of the young, but the reality remains that TL;DR is an intrinsic part of the English professor’s research method.

It is as research method, then, that we might bring TL;DR into the classroom. What differentiates ours from theirs, if you will, is that we use, as

scholars, the art of skimming as a means of determining precisely what to read. Length informs our choices (as we might perhaps admit), but it is hardly the only factor, for every literary scholar undertakes a complex equilibration, of the text itself and of how it fits into what s/he has already read or plans to read, in making those choices of what to read, what to skim, and what to ignore entirely. The long pieces, when read, are treasured for their substantiality; when skimmed instead, they are frequently moved to that long hopeful list of will-someday-read.

This political foregrounding of method, though, need not necessarily entail a disregard for textual selections. It remains likely the texts we assign our students in literature courses will be among the longest, and the most complex, texts that they ever read. We might as well explain how such choices emerge amidst a wide field of books that are, in fact, too long to read. With its careful juggling of the factual and the fictional, and its insistence that language is, always, of necessity, more than pure information, the reading of literature is the training ground for the mode of reading now called ‘longform’ – the mode, that is, which would enable us to learn fully whether political correctness is or is not helpful, or whether or not the alt-right is truly the alt-right. By foregrounding length as a cognitive challenge, and time as a real, albeit external, constraint, we might make the skill of complete and careful reading, the precious skill that we do and must teach, part of the existing transformation of US political life. As we teach our students the forms of reading that we hold dear, in which we have staked our personal and professional lives, perhaps we can teach them, as well, to seek out the long texts that are most worth reading – more worthy than an endless stream of inflammatory and addictively short tweets.

TL;DR: You did read.