BOOKS VERSUS THE INTERNET

Recently, book publishers got some good news. Researchers found that kids who grow up in a home with 500 books stay in school longer and do better than those who don't. They also found that the simple fact of giving disadvantaged students a dozen books of their own choosing to take home before the summer had a very positive effect on their reading scores and their school performance the following year.

Recently, Internet tycoons got some bad news. Another study showed that the spread of home computers and high-speed Internet access was associated with significant declines in math and reading scores. It found that broadband access is not necessarily good for kids and may be harmful to their academic performance.

These two studies feed into the debate between books and computers. On the one hand, the Internet is argued to lead to a short-attention-span culture. It is said to degrade people's abilities to engage in deep thought or serious contemplation. On the other hand, some evidence suggests that playing computer games and performing Internet searches actually improves a person's ability to process information and focus attention.

But perhaps what matters most in the Internet-versus-books debate is the way people think about themselves while engaged in the two activities. A person who becomes a citizen of the literary world enters a hierarchical universe. There are classic works of literature at the top and beach reading at the bottom. Readers immerse themselves in deep, alternative worlds and hope to gain some wisdom. Respect is paid to the writers who transmit that wisdom.

A citizen of the Internet has a very different experience. The Internet destroys hierarchy. Internet culture is egalitarian. The young are more accomplished than the old. The new media is supposedly savvier than the old media. The dominant activity is free, disrespectful, antiauthority disputation.

These different cultures lead to different types of learning. The Internet helps you become well-informed — knowledgeable about current events, the latest controversies and important trends. The Internet also helps you become hip — to learn about what's going on.

But the literary world is still better at helping you become cultivated, mastering significant things of lasting importance. The Internet culture may produce better conversationalists, but the literary culture still produces better students. It's better at distinguishing the important from the unimportant, and making the important more prestigious.

Perhaps that will change. It could be that the real debate will not be books versus the Internet but how to build an Internet counterculture that will better attract people to serious learning.