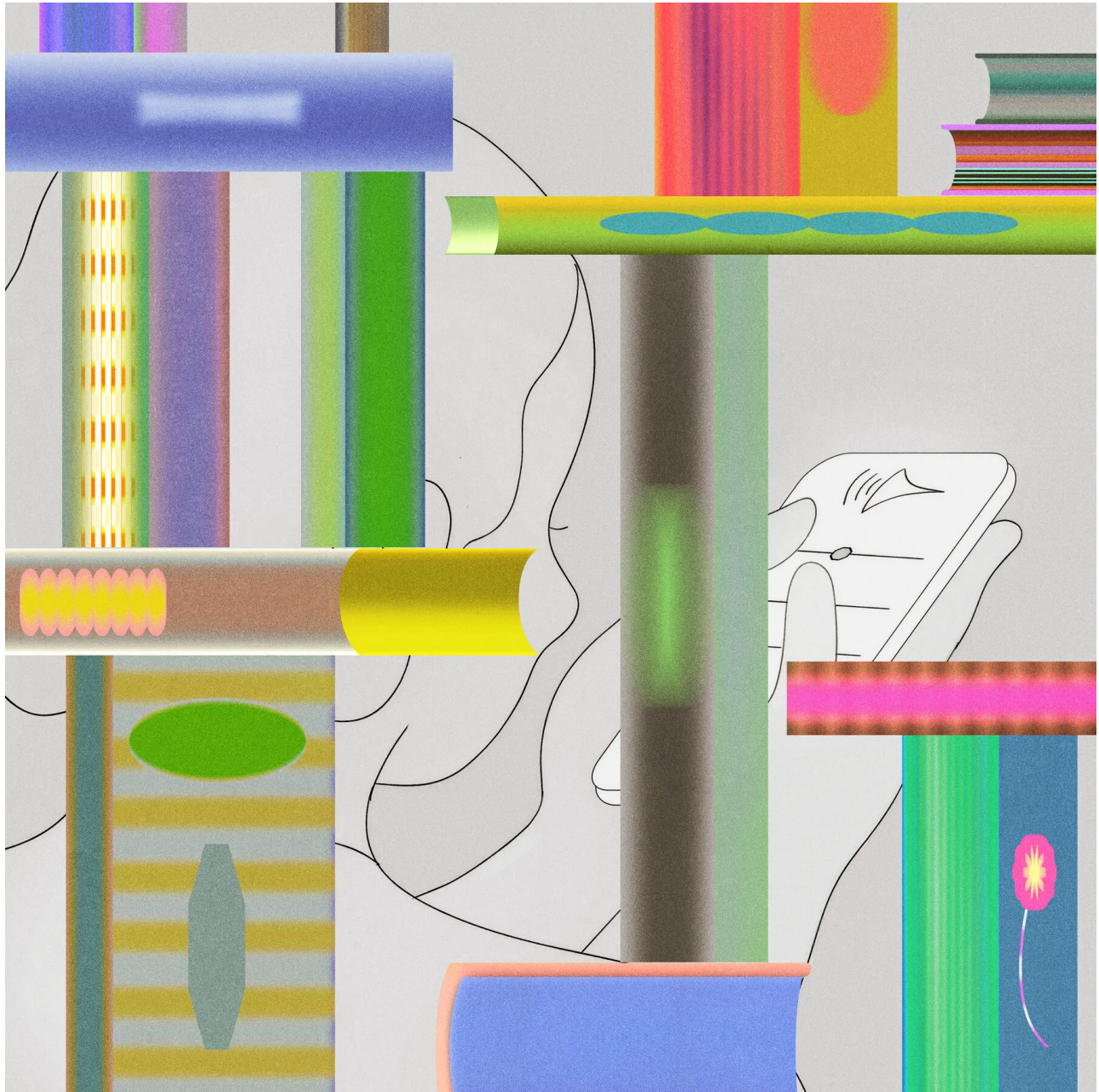


David Wallace-Wells

July 16, 2026

Is This What a Post-Literate Era Looks Like?



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You're reading the David Wallace-Wells newsletter. The best-selling science

writer and essayist explores climate change, technology, the future of the planet and how we live on it.

Few things are more intuitive about the smartphone era than the fact that devices have torpedoed our interest in reading and dragged down the status that books and their authors once seemed to enjoy.

You can tally the signs. Reading scores among both [students](#) and [adults](#) have fallen from where they were a decade ago, and it's hard to find a college professor who thinks freshmen are arriving in class as prepared as ever for the reading. On the subway, people are always on their phones, and nobody appears to be reading anything on them. You probably have a hard time concentrating on books yourself, with so many distractions around. Public discourse seems shaped by podcast clips and short-form video, and if you happen to find yourself reading something longer than an Instagram caption it might well be an essay, like "[The End of Reading Is Here](#)" by Rose Horowitz in The Atlantic last week, studded with incisive observations about the shift from a culture of literacy to one defined by what's been [called](#) a digital culture of orality, in which charismatic narrators make sweeping emotional appeals to their audiences rather than through logical argumentation and careful citation. In a forthcoming book, the essayist James Marriot calls it "the new dark ages."

I've [written](#) about these changes, too, and have spent plenty of time lamenting them. But I've also found myself growing more skeptical of the simplistic story that reading is going extinct. That's because the story of literacy decline echoes so many similar narratives that have blossomed into conventional wisdom over the past few years, and which look to me now, upon closer inspection, a wee bit more complicated.

We tell ourselves that the smartphone has brought about fertility decline, for

instance, though those declines have been going on for three-quarters of a century. We tell ourselves phones have produced a teen mental health crisis, though in global surveys there is no obvious pattern to observe. We tell ourselves social media is the reason we have such intensely polarized politics, while failing to look at the historical patterns around the arrival of [cable TV](#). That's not to say that smartphones aren't affecting any of these things. It's to say that no matter how ubiquitous, phones are just one piece of a very messy social landscape, which rarely shifts uniformly in one direction thanks to one discrete variable, let alone inevitably toward disarray and decline.

And then there's reading. In *The Atlantic*, Horowitz cites an analysis of data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics' American Time Use Survey — often described as the gold standard measure of how the country spends its days — which [shows](#) that fewer Americans report reading for pleasure on a given day, but those who do are spending more time doing so. Overall, the underlying survey tells us, average Americans over the age of 15 read 21.9 minutes on a given day in 2003. They read 18.3 minutes a day in 2010. In 2025, the number was 16.2 minutes a day.

The first thing to note about these numbers is that they are very small: Americans don't read very much now and haven't for at least a few decades, making the intuition that reading has been cannibalized by smartphones a bit of a mismatch with the data. But the second thing is that the decline is relatively small, too — a few minutes shaved off the national average over more than 20 years. Look a bit closer, and even that change appears to be driven overwhelmingly by a particular cohort: older Americans.

You might assume, especially given social stereotypes and caricatures, that the reading decline would be concentrated among the young, with that turn away from books and toward phones therefore spelling doom for future literacy. You might think the problem would be exacerbated by schools and

universities turning away from demanding reading curriculums and the arrival of artificial intelligence to do our reading for us. But in fact, young Americans are — according to this survey, at least — reading more than they did a couple of decades ago.

In 2003, for instance, Americans ages 15 to 24 read 8.4 minutes a day; in 2016 they read 7.8 minutes a day; and in 2022 they read 11.7 minutes a day. Also in 2003, those between the ages of 25 and 34 were reading 9.6 minutes a day; in 2016 that group read nine minutes a day; in 2025 they read 10.2 minutes a day. If these numbers represent a crisis, it doesn't appear to be a new one.

Among Americans 65 and up, the base line is higher and the decline in time spent is larger, too: For decades, at least, the bulk of the country's reading has been done by Americans in their golden years. In 2003, older Americans read on average just under an hour each day — 58.5 minutes. By last year, that had fallen nearly by half, to roughly 32.4 minutes each day, a drop that represents the lion's share of overall reading declines. To the extent that we can talk about the decline of reading as a mass phenomenon, it seems concentrated not among the next generation but among the previous ones. The pattern may seem counterintuitive, but it echoes some other findings about social media use and disinformation: For all the hand-wringing about the effects of new technology on kids, the impacts may be just as corrosive, if not more so, on their grandparents. (Perhaps this is one reason The Wall Street Journal recently [declared](#) that “Dad Books Are a Dying Breed.”)

Of course, the Time Use survey is just one research project, with its own limitations; it's compiled out of data from single interviews in which people are asked to recount what they did the day before the call. But even in other data sets, the decline of reading isn't that obvious, either. In The Atlantic, Horowitch cites a large survey conducted by the National Endowment for the

Arts, which measures participation in various activities from seeing plays to taking pottery classes, listening to music and reading books. You can slice that data in different ways if you're focused on the popularity of fiction, say, or poetry, and certain slices do show declines of, say, eight percentage points over 20 years. But in 2022 the N.E.A. [survey](#) found that 55.6 percent of American adults had read or listened to a book in the previous year. In 2008 the number was 54.3 percent. In 2002 the figure was 56.6 percent, prompting the N.E.A. to publish a hand-wringing report called "Reading at Risk."

Pew asks a similar question, separating print books from audiobooks and e-books but also tabulating them together to produce a running measure of American reading habits. In 2011 78 percent of Americans reported reading a book in some form in the previous year; in 2013 it was 76 percent; in 2021 it was 75 percent; and in 2025 it was 75 percent again.

One survey reports that roughly half of Americans are reading and another reports that roughly three-quarters are, suggesting something about the limitations of this kind of data and the lessons we try to extract from it. But it probably tells us something that neither one so clearly illustrates the intuitive story of significant decline — and neither do other measures. Gallup has been asking Americans how many books they read in the previous year since 1990, when the answer was 15.3 — a number skewed by voracious readers, as surveys like this always are. In 2001 the average was 14.5. In 2025 it [appears](#) to have been 14.6.

And then there are indicators that don't rely on self-reporting at all. Book sales are not in free-fall but [near record highs](#), with more books sold annually these days than a decade ago (if a bit lower than the pandemic record set in 2021). One might look at best-seller lists and lament what kinds of books are thriving, but those lamentations are as old as [those lists](#). The book industry as

a whole is in a period of recovery rather than decline. The number of independent bookstores in the country has grown by 70 percent since 2020, as the website Literary Hub noted [last month](#). Barnes & Noble opened 50 new locations in 2024.

Reading comprehension is indeed falling, but when you zoom out to take in decades of data, some recent declines are [almost invisibly modest](#) and others are [higher](#) than they were 50 years ago. Periodically, you'll hear lamentations that Americans don't spend enough time reading to their children, though the amount of time spent doing so hasn't declined over decades but actually crept up in recent years instead. And if you are imagining an idyllic earlier period in which parents devoted hours reading books to their children each day, you might want to know that in 1968 Nielsen [reported](#) that children under 6 were watching, on average, 54 hours of television each week.

Perhaps that number seems improbably high to you, as it does to me. But in the 1960s, the TV in the average American household was on for more than five hours a day, according to historical reporting. In the 1980s it was on for seven hours. By 2010 it was just under nine hours — a figure which then began to drop, actually, with the mass adoption of the smartphone. Not everybody in all those households was glued to the screen every minute it was on, but the survey data still shows that, these days, American adults are actively watching on average more than two hours of TV on a given day — as they have now for several decades, sometimes scrolling their phones at the same time. Across all those years, screen time of one form or another was five to 10 times as common as reading — sometimes even more so. The medium is the message, the world is awash in short form video and evolving patterns of mass communication do reshape the world; all of that looks pretty hard to dispute. But remind me again when exactly literacy died, and exactly what killed it?



David Wallace-Wells

Opinion writer

That people are reading less than they used to seems like one of those things that's too obviously true to even bother check. You can build whole theories of the contemporary world around the idea that nobody reads anymore — and those theories will seem to offer a lot of explanatory power! But lately I've come across a lot of things like this, which turned out to be, on closer examination, well, not so true. To my shock, the same happened with reading.

Well, Mr. Wallace-Wells brings up some interesting points, but I doubt you'd find many teachers of literature and disciplines that require extensive reading who would agree. In the 20th Century Novel course I took in the mid-'60s, we were assigned 13 novels to read in a 12-week term. Would any professor today dare to expect his students to read that many books in that time period? I think not. It isn't so much that video and online devices have destroyed reading. They've just destroyed patience, cut down on spare time, and destroyed the ability to read deeply. You actually read a lot of words when you're online, but how much of it is really worthwhile?

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