This essay argues that the primary value of books lies in the practice of emancipative reading not the stored knowledge they contain. The success of the book publishing industry since the sixteenth century has been founded on a business model in which the spread of high-level literate knowledge through reading and the maximization of profit from the sale of individual copies of written works in which knowledge was stored were so conjoined as to seem sides of an identical--almost magical--coin. With the advent of digitization and the communicative technologies it makes possible the two activities no longer represent a unity assuring Enlightenment-derived democratic world historical development.

Digitization permits the meditative, contemplative time of reading’s knowledge creation and internalization to be commercialized in the form of the disrupted, continuous partial attention of consumers looking at screens and sold to advertisers. This argument about reading and value is explored below and a thought experiment through which an alternative model of book publishing might come about is proposed at the end.

Good publishing was always a capitalist venture. By the year 1500, within fifty years of the invention of the first press to use moveable type, the pursuit of profit had given rise in Europe to approximately 1,700 presses in over 250 printing centers that had already collectively published some 27,000 known titles in editions
whose combined print runs added up to a total of more than ten million individual copies. [Fischer, p.210] Two related effects of this revolution by which “the world of orality” was replaced by “the society of writing” were a new conception of self and a notion that it was the role of the profession of printers to connect authors to a public made up of individual “general” readers. [Fischer, p.207; Henri-Jean Martin]

The Enlightenment as an emancipative project for a now imaginable universal humanity defined by the free subjectivity of autonomous individuals depended upon this conception of writing, reading, and publishing. The public good was to come about through the widest and freest possible exchange of the best ideas. Reading at a high level was seen to be a self-fashioning project through which autonomous individuals were to create both their own freedom and a better world. Interpretive communities of reading were thought to cut across the oppressive and invidious social distinctions of the past. The republic of letters was understood in many quarters as the anticipatory form of a just future society made up of equal citizens.

Throughout this essay I will use the phrase “emancipative reading” in the sense of literacy’s historical enabling of the concept of a modern democratic reciprocity and disciplined self-reflective consciousness on the part of modern subjects. This is the dimension of literacy and book culture I think matters most in contemporary debates about the fate of reading and the future of publishing.

In her book on the neuroscience of reading, *Proust and the Squid*, the neuroscientist Maryanne Wolf suggests a reframing the question of reading in our present moment of digital communicative culture along lines analogous to the way
Walter Ong presciently reframed the question of reading in relation to orality in his book, *Orality and Literacy* (1982). She notes that Ong posed the issue as one of the transformation of consciousness of human beings “steeped in both worlds.” Wolf quotes Ong at length:

The interaction between the orality that all human beings are born into and the technology of writing, which no one is born into, touches the depths of the psyche. It is the oral word that first illuminates consciousness with articulate language, that first divides subject and predicate and then relates them to one another, and that ties human beings to one another in society. Writing introduces division and alienation, but a higher unity as well. It intensifies the sense of self and fosters more conscious interaction between persons. Writing is consciousness-raising. [See Maryanne Wolf, *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), p.219, and Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London: Methuen, 1982), p.178.]

Wolf emphasizes that the “higher unity” Ong speaks of here is the change reading made possible in the way the human mind could think about thinking and the integrative advance reading’s alienation brought about through the mind’s new objective ability “to see another’s thoughts.” Wolf credits Marcel’s Proust’s 1906 essay “On Reading,” with characterizing with uncanny neurological accuracy the effect reading produces on cognition through its reshaping of the circuitry of the open neuronal architecture of the brain. Proust names reading as “that fruitful miracle of a communication in the midst of solitude.” The importance of literate consciousness is that it allows us “to study the thought processes across 3,000 years [and to] internalize the consciousness of human beings we could never otherwise imagine.” [Wolf, p.219] Wolf undertakes her analysis of reading’s effect on the brain at the very moment she believes that we are “in the midst of a transition from a reading brain to a digital one.”
At the heart of the new digital technologies’ impact is their disruptive effect on reading’s literacy-derived capacities of emotional and intellectual imaginative identification and internalization of other minds’ knowledge and thought across the divisions inherent in the individual alienation produced by modernity. She writes, At a time when over a billion people have access to the most extensive expansion of information ever compiled, we need to turn our analytic skills to questions about a society’s responsibility for the transmission of knowledge... Will unguided information lead to an illusion of knowledge, and thus curtail the more difficult, time-consuming, critical thought processes that lead to knowledge itself? Will the split-second immediacy of information gained from a search engine and the sheer volume of what is available derail the slower, more deliberative processes that deepen our understanding of complex concepts, of another’s inner thought processes, and of our own consciousness? [Wolf, P&S, p.221]

Wolf warns that the emancipative dimension of reading cannot be taken for granted as part of the contemporary literate brain's inevitable cognitive repertoire within digital culture. What is most threatened is the capacity of the modern literate subject to use reading “to go beyond the given” of things as they are and “think for oneself.” “The secret at the heart of reading,” Wolf states, “is the time it frees for the brain to have thoughts deeper than those that came before.” “The mysterious, invisible gift of time to think beyond [Wolf's emphasis] is the reading brain’s greatest achievement; these built-in milliseconds [neuronal time of reflexivity, analysis, inference, emotional identification produced by fluent reading] form the basis for an ability to propel knowledge, to ponder virtue, and to articulate what was once inexpressible.” [Wolf, p.229]

Let us return to the sixteenth-century world of book publishing to understand the digital communications revolution we are now experiencing. Think of the latter now from a capitalist publishing perspective as a new, enhanced way of
profiting from knowledge creation and exchange through the commercialization of the time and space of reflection, self-consciousness and self-fashioning of the autonomous individual’s own freedom. “In the Google universe of my children,” Wolf suggests, “the constructive component at the heart of reading” will change and perhaps “atrophy as we shift to computer-presented text in which massive amounts of information appear instantaneously.” “In other words,” she asks, “when seemingly complete visual information is given almost simultaneously, as it is in many digital presentations, is there either sufficient time or sufficient motivation to process information more inferentially, analytically, and critically?” [Wolf, p.16]

Around 1490, the Venetian classical scholar and printer, Aldus Manutius, with the financial backing of two princes, hit upon an inspired entrepreneurial scheme. Rather than print the usual one hundred to two-hundred-and-fifty copies of a work and price each copy at a figure in keeping with its status as the rare and prized material possession it was, Aldus resolved from the outset to produce a series of books that would be “‘scholarly, compact, handy, and cheap.’” [Fischer, AHR, p. 211 quoting S. H. Steinberg, Five Hundred Years of Printing, 2nd Edition (London: Harmondsworth, 1961).] He purposely printed no fewer than one thousand copies of each edition in order to assure himself a profit from an affordably priced commodity.

What were the book titles he had figured out he could sell in such quantities that he could price them within the reach of non-aristocratic, lay readers? The answer was editions of Ancient Greek and Latin classics—Aristotle, Plato, Sophocles, Thucydides, Virgil, Homer and Ovid. He knew they would sell in such numbers
because as a scholar on the cutting edge of intellectual developments of his day he was in touch with all the leading classicists and knew there was a guaranteed student market for authoritative editions of original-language classical texts through which his generation of teachers were determined to restore the knowledge and wisdom of antiquity to their own day. (Venice was the place to be in publishing in 1490. One hundred and fifty of Europe’s 1700 presses were located there. The city was home both to the exile community of leading scholars of Ancient Greek learning who had fled Constantinople in the wake of its capture by the Ottomans in 1453 and to the exile community of the leading German printers who had recently fled the turmoil of their own lands.)

There was an intellectual and incipiently democratic commitment entailed in Aldus publishing scheme: he and his colleagues were determined that the knowledge to be had from the classical authors should be encountered directly by contemporary readers “without intermediaries” and in the original language in which it was originally formulated. Aldus said he wanted the readers of his editions to be able on their own “to converse freely with the glorious dead.” Until this moment classical Greek thought had largely been taught in Europe third-hand by clerics lecturing orally on the basis of Latin translations of Arabic translations of the original Greek texts. A historian of the book has recently summed up the historical meaning of the new printing technology in the following way: “By making almost unlimited copies of identical texts available by mechanical means, it brought society from limited access to knowledge to almost unlimited access to knowledge. Printing actually enabled modern society.” [Fischer, AHR, p. 213]
As we have seen, Wolf sees the breakthrough literacy represented at the cognitive level to be its ability to “reenact the brain’s capacity for cognitive breakthroughs” through its capacity to enable individuals “to form new thoughts” on the basis of encountering and interiorizing through reading the thought of others.

She emphasizes above all else the confirmation neurological understanding of reading now gives to Proust’s insight in his 1906 essay that reading represents “that fruitful miracle of a communication in the midst of solitude.” Wolf explains this neurologically: vastly complex and myriad mental operations in the reading brain combine to produce a few added milliseconds of unused consciousness for inference making and insight. Reading fluency, she writes, “gives enough extra time to the executive system to direct attention where it is most needed—to infer, to understand, to predict, or sometimes to repair discordant understanding and to interpret a meaning afresh.” [Wolf, p.131] “The most important contribution of the reading brain,” she writes, is “time to think.” It is this contemplative moment in which the solitary literate mind creates and is responsible for its own coherence that constitutes “the generative capacity of reading.” It is this generative capacity, “along with the fundamental plasticity in the circuit wiring of our brains” that “permit us to go beyond the particulars of the given” and create the capacity and the desire “to reach beyond the specific content of what we read to form new thoughts.”

Here is Proust’s account of the same creative moment of modern literate reading:

“We feel quite truly that our wisdom begins where that of the author ends, and we would like to have him give us answers, while all he can do is give us desires. And these desires he can arouse in us only by making us contemplate the supreme beauty which the last effort of his art has permitted him to reach. But by a singular and, moreover, providential law of mental optics (a law which perhaps signifies that
we can receive the truth from nobody, and that we must create it ourselves), that which is the end of their wisdom appears to us as but the beginning of ours, so that it is at the moment when they have told us all they could tell us that they create in us the feeling that they have told us nothing yet.” [Proust, “On Reading,” p. 36-37]

Aldus Manutius’s successful capitalist business model of book publishing worked to expand and disseminate this protected space of emancipative, original thought. The contemporary business models of digitized communicative technologies now depend upon print literacy as a necessary competency but also profit by disrupting its once protected time of reflection and self-reflection through the sale of consumers’ “continuous partial attention” to advertisers. How many of us are really aware of the extent to which our thought is disrupted, distracted, and left incomplete by the increasing amount of time all of us spend sitting in front of our increasingly mobile electronic screens?

The present crisis of book publishing is finally not a crisis of falling sales of good books. It is a crisis of reading as a generative intellectual practice that enables individual subjects to go beyond the constraints of things as they are and to think for themselves.

In the communication business models of the digital world we now inhabit, “information” can be and is sold independently of any necessary relation to its articulation as knowledge. Intellectual “content” is deliverable and saleable without being accountable to interpretive communities or standards of rationality and truth grounded in deliberative freedom. Knowledge and its representations are valued primarily for their ability to deliver human attention to advertisers. Digitization under the present capitalist logic of the global communications industry
undermines the emancipative dimensions of Aldus Manutius’s fortuitous publishing innovation.

We who are in publishing talk a lot about numbers—especially sales figures. These are easier to talk about than reading. One range of numbers that haunts presses today is eerily close to the 100 to 250 figure for copies of books printers used to produce and sell in Europe before moveable type and Aldus’s winning business-model gamble. 250 to 350 is now the range of net sales of copies of many titles published by scholarly presses—and these are not necessarily sales to individual readers. The majority of these sales are to libraries.

There is indeed something quite wrong here, but the answer to the problem of how to increase emancipative knowledge available through reading is not necessarily—as it was for Aldus—to increase the number of copies of good books sold. The answer lies in constructing within contemporary media culture interpretive spaces of emancipative self-fashioning derived from the protected communicative time of individual autonomy and imaginative freedom available through the cultivation of high-level meditative reading as a sustained practice.

There is an extraordinary moment in George Eliot’s 1872 novel *Middlemarch* that I want to invoke as emblematic of the kind of emancipative time of reading I am arguing we need to cultivate within digital culture. This moment comes precisely at the point in the novel in which Dorothea has to face directly the collapse of her illusions concerning the narrative of her life’s value by which she has lived up to the present. Everything I have been saying depends, in a sense, upon how a reader today reads the following passage:
Some discouragement, some faintness of heart at the new real future that replaces the imaginary, is not unusual, and we do not expect people to be deeply moved by what is not unusual. That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear very much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity.

The violence of Dorothea’s disillusionment, Eliot tells us in this passage, comes not from the moment’s tragic enormity or singularity. It comes from its ordinariness—its unbearable, unspeakable inevitability within an endlessly repeated pattern of middle-class private experience in which treasured, hopeful self-fashioned versions of redemptive secular individual meaning are dashed with an annihilating finality. Central to the experience itself is the utter isolation of its subject. Dorothea herself, in this moment, cannot benefit from the author’s statement of her condition. And yet, reading this passage, the reader registers that Dorothea’s existential defeat is also the vehicle by which Eliot and the reader together—across time and space—can accurately and eloquently give voice to the psychological violence and harm of the communicative silences surrounding and underlying the enormous general violence underlying everyday middle-class Victorian life. Hidden in plain sight in this passage is an interpretive space calling for a revolution in the valuation of experience that continues to demand responsive action by the reader.

I am assuming that the roar on the other side of silence from which we will die if we actually attended to all of ordinary human life fully with all our senses is the sound of actual history. Reading Eliot gives us a way of hearing the sound of that
history from within the complicity of middle-class denial—and so, in effect, of hearing it with an intellectual and emotional accuracy and immediacy that produce new ground for thought and action not available before engaging her prose. The protected time and interpretive space of reading creates the knowledge that the silence within and against which the communication of reading the novel takes place comes at the cost of a real violence whose accurate interpretation may be that it is unbearable.

Reading this passage of prose in this way throws the reading self back on itself in a radical, meditative way that digital culture not only does not support but works against. Yes, *Middlemarch* is still read and this passage is now available to more readers of the English language than ever before. This passage has even appeared in a completely truncated and deformed way on New York City subway cars in Barnes and Noble-sponsored “Poetry in Motion” billboard cards. But hasn’t the “silence” Eliot announces as a veil between the reading self and the violence of history now been turned into an even more alienated time of permanent distraction promulgated by digital media’s permanent projection of spectacle? Haven’t the meditative time and interpretive social and interior spaces of reading’s emancipative potential been compromised in fundamental, even irreparable, ways by the time of digital culture we now inhabit? Has the value of the non-commercialized time of literate meditative reading through which new knowledge is created and disseminated been capitalized through the use of digital technologies to electronically package “information” and “content” by means of which the attention of consumers can be held by entertainment and sold to advertisers?
I offer the following moment from my own life as an editor to illustrate the encroachment of digital culture’s commercial time upon reading’s protected space of interpretive freedom and new knowledge creation as described by Proust and Wolf. Some years ago, as a senior editor at a university press with a substantial backlist, I was invited to attend a presentation by a representative from Google. Google offered to incur the expense of digitizing the entire backlist of the press in exchange for gaining search access to its intellectual content. The press would receive copies of the digital files of its own works, but, more importantly, would eventually receive the benefit of Google’s ability “to monetize the page.”

Google knows, the representative proudly yet modestly stated, that people now achieve knowledge primarily through Google internet search, but it also knows that a great deal of the world’s knowledge is still not available to their search engines. The backlist of the press, the representative explained, represented not a “gold” but “a platinum” standard of intellectual value as authoritative scholarly knowledge, but that that value in its present form was “locked up” and therefore, it was implied, useless in age and culture in which “if it doesn’t exist online it doesn’t exist at all.”

By having the press books appear in searches, the book would be given the potential of an added sales life. Links would allow the Internet user to purchase the entire book having been given access by Google to a limited number of pages surrounding the search term the user had typed in. But more intriguingly, Google’s representative offered us the vision that in the future Google intended to share with the press some of the revenue it received from its auctions to advertisers of display
space next to the popularity-ranked results from consumer searches of specific terms and subject matter. The amount of the revenue would be based on the number of hits and length of time consumers spent looking at the content to which the press held copyright.

This is what the phrase “monetizing the page” really meant, I finally realized. The time of reading and writing as a time of constructing and proposing intellectual and moral coherence was being broken into and sold off in discontinuous bits and pieces as distracted consumer attention to advertisers. Once knowledge was turned into information through digitization, the real commercial potential of books no longer lay in their sale as long-form texts whose structures of authority and coherence derived from their independence from the immediate coercions of the market through reader participation in interpretive communities deliberately set apart from it. Books were now reduced to the status of containers of valuable display results generated by searches within which advertisers could place their distracting and disruptive roar of commercial presence. The response to the Google representative’s proposal from those around the table seemed to me to be guided by the assumptions of Aldus’s world that anything that offered the promise of increasing the sales of books on the press’s list or of generating additional revenue was good for the creation and dissemination of knowledge. The press accepted Google’s offer with disheartening enthusiasm.

I believe it is up to all of us to develop an alternative model of book publishing that places the emancipative experience of reading at the center of a successful financial design. My immediate suggestion is that all of us who have the
most direct stake in the Enlightenment legacy of high-literate emancipative reading
undertake the thought experiment of imagining how in the midst of digital culture
we would place emancipative reading and not book production at the center of our
activities.

We need to try to imagine Authors and Readers Presses that self-consciously
make reading, understood as a non-commercial meditative time of interpretive
community, the focus of knowledge creation. In other words, the first task is to
clearly distinguish the non-commercial time of emancipative reading from the time
of Internet search and download as they are now being exploited for profit.

In my version of this thought experiment I am assuming that many of us are,
without quite realizing it, already in positions to construct Authors and Readers
Presses organized out of own networks of intellectual commitment and
engagement. We are already poised, again without perhaps quite knowing it, to act
to organize and create institutions among ourselves built on the distinction between
knowledge and information that both the literate principle of narrative and the
neurology of the reading brain encourage. The technical material threshold of book
publishing is now much lower than it has ever been in history. Good books create
good readerships and from those readerships come better books. Many of us know
or are close to the authors--or potential authors--of important works whose readers
we will welcome becoming.

In my thought experiment we enroll ourselves as subscribers to publishing
projects proposed by people with whom we have formed ourselves into interpretive
communities dedicated to matters of pressing importance. We undertake the
creation and publication of written texts whose communicative success is assessed by the quality of the original thought they contain and generate no matter what the size of the readership. That readership may be twenty people. It may be a hundred thousand.

The business model in my experiment is based on the aristocratic subscriber model of old but without the aristocrats. It’s strength is that within it truth value and commercial value are held—even if only momentarily—separate. In my version of the thought experiment, at the center of authors and readers’ presses is not the figure of the printer as entrepreneur but alliances of authors, readers, intellectuals, scholars, students and teachers. In my experiment these alliances are dedicated to the view of language and reading articulated by Toni Morrison in her 1993 Nobel lecture. There she said that as a writer she “thinks of language partly as a system, partly as a living thing over which one has control, but mostly as agency—as an act with consequences.” She sees language “as susceptible to death, erasure; certainly imperiled and salvageable only by an effort of the will.” She speaks of the real existence of dead language in our midst “that actively thwarts the intellect, stalls conscience, suppresses human potential.” Such language, she says, is “dumb, predatory, sentimental.”

In lieu of the dream of an undifferentiated “general public” of consumers paying for continual access to commercialized “content” within a commercialized time of distracted attention, Authors and Readers’ presses, in my thought experiment, are interpretive reading communities dedicated to specific knowledge created and applied to realize explicit purposes within explicit occasions.
Here is how such a press would actually work in my experiment. I know of an unpublished manuscript on the impossibility of a subjectivity of freedom and the realization of the values of individualism within the present structure of global capitalism. I'm convinced this manuscript would attract, and deserves to attract, a wide and intense readership but that existing U.S. publishers will be reluctant to publish it. I can imagine an Authors and Readers’ Press dedicated to creating a sustained interpretive community to explore the question of “the future of capitalism” from the vantage point the author of this manuscript offers through a careful reading and public discussion of its pages. Undertaking to publish this work and provide at the same time a forum for critical engagement with the text would be the task of such a press in my version. The sale of copies would be ancillary however lucrative. An electronic version of the text of the work would be made available online for free. The press would be supported by voluntary subscriptions paid by its participants and readers.

In may experiment, every book would continue to be made available for sale in hardcopy paper and ink form as well as electronically. This would maintain the vital democratic link to the Enlightenment understanding of the book as a form of permanent, incorruptible knowledge transmitted in the form of a perishable human speaking voice in real time. Books, Proust said, were machines for turning space into time.

I believe that out of such non-commercial interpretive spaces dedicated to emancipative reading will come the most financially successful books of the future. If I am right about this, another principle of my version of the thought experiment is
that any windfall profits from bestsellers would be divided equally between the author and the press and not according to the present royalty-rate structure of book publishing.

This essay is not an argument against the Internet. It is an argument against the exploitation of the ever-increasing staggering coordinating power of cybernetic algorithms for the maximization of profit at the expense of communicative, deliberative democracy and real welfare of large percentage of the world’s population. The Internet will continue to be at the center of all our lives as writers, authors, readers, intellectuals, teachers, students, citizens, parents, and subjects of modernity. But we must do everything we can to create emancipative spaces of literate reading in which to experience and act upon the difference between knowledge and information management. Nothing prohibits us from creating and sustaining interpretive communities of emancipative reading within digital culture with which the knowledge to go beyond the constraints of things as they are is created from the time reading gives us to think for ourselves.