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Feel Free to Read This Later, on Your Phone

By DAMON DARLIN

OUR evolutionary roots are showing when we sit down at the computer.

With our hands constantly traversing the keyboard, we forage for information. We ceaselessly search for the next task. In that heightened state of awareness and anxiety, it is very hard to just sit back, relax and read.

When we do read for fun, it is in nuggets. We are attracted by articles that are short and quickly consumed. If the headlines mention Kim Kardashian or promise a list like “Six Creepy Ways to Mourn a Dead Pet,” online readers react like a Cro-Magnon finding a patch of ripe red raspberries after a day of digging for tubers.

The economics of the Web favor sites that aggregate those nuggets. That is why so many writers and publishers wring their hands and lament that long-form journalism, meaty articles that are at least two or three times as long as the trifle you are currently reading, is dying in the Internet age.

Digital technology has fractured the mass media by upending the distribution networks of publishers, who have been hoping that computer tablets like the iPad can replace the newsstands and paperboys. Just about all of the big media companies, including this one, are developing applications for mobile devices that deliver copies of their publications and some, like the News Corporation, are creating whole new publications just for the iPad.

But there are also other approaches, alternate distribution systems like the one that Marco Arment, a 28-year-old programmer, has created while working at home in Hastings on Hudson, N.Y.

He built Instapaper, a clever way to create personalized publications. It is clever because it plays to human psychology by helping us gather articles we want to read, but have no time to read while we are foraging.

Instapaper is an answer for anyone who stumbles upon a long article on the Web but does not want to read it immediately. You set it up by dragging a “Read Later” icon from the Instapaper site to your browser’s toolbar. Save an article by clicking on the icon, and the link or article is stored on one of Mr. Arment’s servers.

If you have downloaded the Instapaper app for the iPhone, iPod Touch, iPad or Kindle, the article shows up there. You can save painfully long e-mails or newsletters as well.

Then when you have the time, open Instapaper, lean back and read those long articles on a mobile device or on your PC. “My goal was to time-shift and place-shift reading on the Web to a comfortable place,” says Mr. Arment.

Machines can compile reading lists, of course. That is what Google News or RSS readers do, generating Web pages full of articles that can put a reader into an anxiety-producing alert state not unlike what we feel looking at the long list of unread e-mail. There is always one more link to click or one more e-mail to open, because the Internet never ends.

With Instapaper, on the other hand, you have a complete, self-aggregated personalized publication. “One human editing a list can be more effective than any algorithm,” says Mr. Arment. “Machines are very bad at evaluating what is interesting.”

Instapaper works because the personalized magazine is built from a wide range of publications. “Media companies have outsourced it to me,” says Mr. Arment.

The app is free, and the \$5 version is one of the best values in the Apple App Store. It is how Mr. Arment makes most of his money. (He says he is not going to build an app for Android devices because it creates too much complexity for a one-man operation. Other apps, like EverPaper and BenPaper, allow Android users to read their Instapaper feeds.)

The paid app lets a reader organize articles into folders that can be shared with others. It can automatically switch to a black background at night so you can read without a bright screen that bothers a bedmate or burns your retinas. (Mr. Arment uses the device’s knowledge of its location and ties that into a database of sunsets.)

But how does a personalized magazine compiled from a variety of publications help the original publishers — the people paying to create the articles? People do have to visit a publication’s Web site to find the articles. Mr. Arment notes that if readers like what they find, they will be back to that site for more.

“I’m not addressing the supply,” says Mr. Arment. “But I am increasing the demand.”

Another free app for the iPad, Flipboard, uses streams of short items to create yet another new way of distributing a publication’s content. Flipboard pulls in a person’s Facebook and Twitter feeds, which are increasingly packed with suggestions of things to read, and compiles them to look like a magazine.

“Twitter is becoming a social RSS reader,” says Mike McCue, the chief executive of Flipboard. “You follow certain people who provide a kind of social curation above the level that is likely on a blog.”

He thinks this will not annoy publishers. “A lot of publishers will tell you people are coming in the side door,” Mr. McCue says.

Kristin M. Mason, a spokeswoman for The New York Times Company, says: “We are working very closely with the developers of both apps, and they have been responsive to

any concerns we have had. We are continuing to monitor the many apps in the news space.”

A number of print or Web publications, including The Washington Post magazine, AllThingsD and Bon Appetit, are testing special feeds that pump their content directly into Flipboard. No one publisher could create Flipboard’s personal magazines or Instapaper’s curated feeds, because they are not based on a single content source. “What consumers want is a combination of all things in one place,” Mr. McCue says.

He sees ads as the next step. People ignore them on a Web site, he says, but on Flipboard’s magazinelike layout they may seem more appropriate. He thinks people not only will look at them, but also will click on and even share the ads: “It’s just another piece of social content.”