

Facebook founder declares 'year of the books'

Mark Zuckerberg has invited the world to follow his resolution of reading a new book every fortnight. But does our fast-paced modern lifestyle leave us time to settle down with a good book?



He changed the world and distracted over one seventh of its population with his social media creation Facebook. Now, Mark Zuckerberg wants the public to pay attention to a much older form of media: the humble book.

The 30-year-old entrepreneur is a huge believer in new year's resolutions. In 2010 he vowed to learn Mandarin; four years later, he confidently used the language to address a packed hall of Beijing university students. This year he has invited the public to emulate his resolution of reading one book every fortnight for all of 2015.

'Books allow you to fully explore a topic and immerse yourself in a deeper way than most media today', he explained. 'I'm looking forward to shifting more of my media diet towards reading books'.

Over 140,000 have already joined his Facebook page, 'A year of books', which is described as the world's biggest book club. When the first book on Zucker-

berg's reading list, *The End of Power*, was posted online, Amazon almost immediately sold out of paperback copies.

Leaders have been extolling the value of reading for millennia – ever since the ancient Mesopotamians developed a system of writing 5,000 years ago, for charting astronomical events and trade deals or writing literature. The Roman statesman Cicero recognised the power of the written word, claiming that 'the task of the educated mind is simply put: read to lead'.

Modern science supports Cicero's belief. Studies show that reading changes the way our brains function. Tackling poetry or difficult prose sets off high levels of electrical activity in the brain as it strives to make sense of difficult language. When a person reads that a character is doing an activity like running, the brain responds as if the reader were also running. All of these make reading an ideal mental workout.

While Zuckerberg is far from being the first person to celebrate reading, many educators are delighted that this giant of modern media is backing the book. They hope it will inspire a generation of tech-savvy young people.

TO FACE A BOOK OR TO FACEBOOK?

But do books really deserve the reverence we give them? Some think not. Technological developments have blessed us with an abundance of ways to share and absorb information, from films and television to online news digests. Where once they were our primary source of thought and learning, books are now just one format among many.

But Zuckerberg believes that this ancient form allows us to delve more deeply into a subject than faster and flashier modern alternatives. Books demand our prolonged and undivided attention in a way that television, radio and the internet cannot. That makes them uniquely enriching and ultimately rewarding.

Q & A

Q But playing video games or watching TV uses our brains just as much as reading!

A Of course we use our brains when using other media. Some studies have found that responding to challenges in video games makes us better at multitasking and improves our reactions. But there is a trade off: experts say that the more ac-

customed we grow to constant distractions, the shorter our attention spans become. Reading forces us to concentrate and develop the skills we might otherwise lose.

Q So will reading any old book do?

A All reading is good, but books that challenge us are best. Reading Milton's *Paradise Lost*, for example, forces you to dwell more on the meaning than you would in an easy page-turner. But it is also important

that reading is enjoyable: if it becomes a chore you simply won't want to do it!

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Show me a family of readers, and I will show you the people who move the world.'

Napoleon Bonaparte

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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WORD WATCH

The end of power – In this book, the revered political thinker Moises Naim looks at how social media has taken power away from our leaders and placed it in the hands of the wider public.

Mesopotamians – Mesopotamia was a kingdom that existed in what is now Iraq from around 3100 BC to 539 BC. At the time it was among the most highly sophisticated civilisations in the world.

Cicero – Widely considered one of Rome’s greatest writers and public speakers, Cicero (106 BC-43 BC) had a huge influence on the development of the Latin language.

Function – A study by Emory University found that a reader would have heightened mental activity up to five days after reading a book.

Language – The Liverpool Uni-

versity study found that unfamiliar words and unusual sentence patterns engaged the brain the most, particularly the original works of Shakespeare.

Running – The University of Buffalo study discovered that readers also start to feel a social connection with the protagonists in the books they read. In this case, readers of the Harry Potter and Twilight series started to feel empathy with wizards and vampires.

YOU DECIDE

1. Is reading a good book more worthwhile than watching a good TV programme?
2. ‘In 500 years, books will be a relic of history.’ Do you agree?

ACTIVITIES

1. Make a list of five books you would like to read this year and make a plan about when you will find the time to read them. Books that you have to read for school don’t count!

2. Write a review of your favourite book, thinking about what lessons you can learn from it and how it can make you a better person.

 **BECOME AN EXPERT** Check our website for a selection of useful links to videos and further reading.

 **NOTES**

