

New York Times TV critic talks digital media

By [Jia You](#)

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Some may call the digital age of media a cultural catastrophe, but for those who love to read and write, it may be the perfect era, said Virginia Heffernan, a columnist for The New York Times Magazine, in a lecture in Fisk Hall, 1845 Sheridan Road, on Monday.

"The regime of analog culture has already ended," Heffernan said to an audience of about 50.

The former TV critic for The New York Times delivered her speech based on her new book, "The Pleasures of the Internet," as part of the Literature of Fact lecture series sponsored by NU Center for the Writing Arts, the Medill School of Journalism and the Alumnae of Northwestern. Heffernan discussed the current dominance of digital culture and its implications for journalism.

"Her public lecture today did a wonderful job laying out many of the issues raised by the advent of digital culture that face journalism in the years ahead," said Prof. David Abrahamson, who introduced Heffernan.

The physical aspects long associated with journalism — the page, the broadsheet, the television images — are all inevitably gone in the new age of digital culture, she said.

Yet people are "hoarding" the material forms and unwilling to let go, she said.

"Your body has the culture written in it," she said of people's attachment to objects. "They define at the deepest level how we apprehend and understand



Digital: Virginia Heffernan, a New York Times Magazine columnist, spoke to students Monday about the digital age of media. Courtesy Photo.

the world."

But media consumers need to put the physical forms behind them, Heffernan argued.

The digital age returns us to the appreciation of ideas rather than images, she said. Digitization enhances the intellectual experience of media consumption. She gave the example of bloggers who don't have to worry about physical appearance as broadcasters on television do.

She also added how eReaders are helping people to pick up reading again.

"There's certainly a place and culture for a love of objects, like antique books and rare books and collecting books, but that's separate from a love of reading," she said.

People will react to developing digital culture in one of three ways, Heffernan said.

The first is continuing development of the free web, she said, which can be compared to New York City in the 1970s: full of exciting events as well as the "squalor" of junk sites that disguise advertisements as content.

"This is not a fair exchange between me and the web any more," she said about these websites. "I am fully taken advantage of."

In the second, she said people will use the world of applications — the suburb with "neat cute homes" — as a getaway from disruptive advertising.

Finally, she said people could hold onto and continue developing material culture as a rejection to an increasingly digital culture.

Medill junior Alexandra Sifferlin said Heffernan's speech gave her a lot of hope about the future of the media industry.

jiayou2014@u.northwestern.edu