"Now You See It: How the Science of Attention Will Transform the Way We Live, Work, and Learn”

In April 2012, former MSU Department of English faculty member Professor Cathy N. Davidson returned to campus to address the subject of her latest book, “Now You See It: How the Brain Science of Attention Will Transform the Way We Live, Work, and Learn” (Viking Press), which “Publishers Weekly” named “one of the top ten science books” of the Fall 2011 season.

As Davidson wrote in its introduction, “This book is designed as a field guide and a survival manual for the digital age. I have focused on the science of attention because it offers us clear principles that, once we see them, can be useful in thinking about why we do things the way we do them and in figuring out what we can do differently and better.

Continued Davidson, “The age we live in presents us with unique challenges to our attention. It requires a new form of attention and a different style of focus that necessitates both a new approach to learning and a redesign of the classroom and the workplace.”

As the eminent historian Robert Darnton argues, noted Davidson, there have been only four times in human history when the “very terms of human interaction and communications have been switched so fundamentally that there was no going back.” These are:

- Mesopotamia, 4,000 B.C.—the invention of writing
- China, 10th century and Europe, 15th century—movable type
- The Enlightenment, end of 18th century—the invention of mass printing and mass-produced paper and ink, making newspapers and books available to the middle and lower classes
- The Information Age/The Internet—the fastest and most global of the four great epochs

Professor Davidson pointed out that while all of this change is happening around us, our most important institutions of school and work haven’t changed much at all. Many look as if there has been no digital revolution at all.
“The age we live in presents us with unique challenges to our attention. It requires a new form of attention and a different style of focus that necessitates both a new approach to learning and a redesign of the classroom and the workplace.”

—Cathy Davidson
Professor, Duke University

This, Davidson says, is due to our whole society having attention blindness. “It’s not that we haven’t noticed the change,” she said. “We’re pretty obsessed with it. What we haven’t done yet is rethink how we need to be organizing our institutions that should be preparing us for more changes ahead.”

She went on to add that if attention suddenly has our attention, it’s because everything is changing so radically and quickly that our mental software is in constant need of updating. We’ve heard many times that contemporary-era distractions are bad for us, but are they? All we really know is our digital age demands a different form of attention than we’ve needed before.

“If a certain kind of attention made sense in a world where all of our news came through one of three television channels,” Davidson said, “then what form of attention do you need when your primary information source is Google, where a search for information about ‘attention’ turns up 371 million entries, and there’s no librarian in sight?”

ON CATHY DAVIDSON

Cathy Davidson was born in Chicago, received a B.A. from Elmhurst College, an M.A. and Ph.D. from Binghamton University, and did postdoctoral studies at the University of Chicago. She has received honorary doctorates from Elmhurst College and Northwestern University. Davidson was a professor of English at Michigan State University prior to joining the faculty of Duke University.

Of her time at MSU, Davidson noted, “I taught at MSU for a dozen years, and…there was something truly incredible, and powerful, and urgent about teaching…at MSU.”

At Duke, Davidson served as vice provost for Interdisciplinary Studies from 1998 until 2006, and helped create the Program in Information Science + Information Studies, the Center for Cognitive Neuroscience, the John Hope Franklin Humanities Institute, and many other programs.

In 2002, she founded HASTAC (Humanities, Arts, Science and Technology Advanced Collaboratory, or ‘haystack’), a virtual network of innovators with more than 6,500 members.

She is the Ruth F. DeVarney Professor of English and the John Hope Franklin Humanities Institute Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at Duke University, and has published more than 20 books, including “Revolution of the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America,” “Closing: The Life and Death of an American Factory” (with photographer Bill Bamberger), and “The Future of Thinking” (with HASTAC co-founder David Theo Goldberg).

In 2010, President Obama nominated Professor Davidson to a six-year term on the National Council on the Humanities, a position confirmed by the Senate in July 2011.

For more about Professor Davidson, go to:
http://www.cathydavidson.com/
http://www.cathydavidson.com/blog/