

My Bookshelf of Broken Links

BY JESSICA FURSETH

For fifteen years, I've been curating reading lists of online articles and blogs I've enjoyed. But, one by one, the links eventually stop working. So, what is this digital bookshelf really for?



ONE DAY BACK IN 2011 I sat down and wrote a post on my Tumblr called “Reading List”—a list of things I’d been reading lately, collected from across the internet. It was a reclamation of myself as a reader, as I’d been feeling bad about not really reading books anymore. I used to be a bookish kid, always escaping into some imaginary world as I waited for my life to start. Then I grew up and the world became more intriguing, and I stopped reading books. But I was spending hours a week reading online articles—didn’t that count?

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Now, it’s fifteen years later, and I’m reading books again, but I still feel that reading online “counts”—all reading counts! And I’m still collecting articles and other online writing into these Reading Lists—I usually post a new one monthly, maybe more, maybe less. As I recently looked back over my decade and a half of links, I expected to find a record of my own preferences, but I’m really struck by how the list is also a reflection of the changing internet. The web of the 2010s was full of so much great, fun stuff to read. We were still in the golden age of blogs and quirky websites; there was always something to read that felt fresh, insightful and delightfully weird. Case in point: search for an article called “My Flu” by Sarah Miller, published on The Awl in 2015—this is the kind of writing that the internet used to do better than any other medium.

My first Reading List from August 2011 contained nine links, and today, four of them are dead. They used to warn us to be careful what you put on the internet as it would remain there forever, but oh boy were they wrong. Some parts of the internet are a graveyard of broken links, proving that this cultural record can be just as vulnerable as zines in a box stored in a damp basement. But even when the links lead nowhere, my Reading Lists are a record of the title, writer

and source, and sometimes I also added a quote. And, perhaps best of all, these dead links can be used to look up the article on an archival service like the Wayback Machine, an initiative run by the nonprofit Internet Archive for the purposes of preserving our digital cultural heritage. The Wayback Machine may have trawled the site when it was still live and kept a copy; this service is a gift to us all, holding the early internet together with spit and wire.

Not everything saved to my Reading Lists is “good” writing—some of it is just fun and silly, but that was also part of the point. The internet used to be a lot more experimental and casual than it is now, back when we used to blog for fun and share entire albums of a single night out on Facebook. There are a lot of clips from shuttered favorites like The Hairpin and The Toast, which now click through to nowhere. There are plenty of links to personal blogs and Tumblrs from the likes of Roxane Gay and Stoya, most of which are still live, but the format feels alien—who writes short snippets on personal blogs anymore? (Actually, we still do, except now there’s a photo on top and it’s called Instagram.)

I used to keep track of all of these disparate publications with Google Reader, the popular RSS feed aggregator, which I would open every morning while drinking my first coffee. Google Reader shut down in 2013 and I was pretty steamed about it, even though by then we were using Twitter to recommend articles to one another. I soon learned who had the best recommendations, and that acted as an informal aggregator for a while. Now that’s out the window too, and nothing has really replaced it.

Maybe that’s why my newest Reading Lists don’t have nearly as much variety as the older ones—they feature lots of links from places like Vox, The Guardian, and The New Yorker. The articles are a lot less casual, with more “proper” journalism—maybe this is because that’s the direction the internet has taken, or maybe this is because I’m older now and my preferences have changed. But I still link to a lot of the same people as I used to, as several of the writers I used to follow on the smaller sites now work for big-name sites. I first started linking to Emily Gould

back when she had a Tumblr called “Things I Ate That I Love,” and now I link to her writing on The Cut; while matured, her voice still has a flavor forged in the blogosphere. Every now and again she includes a flourish that feels straight out of Tumblr, and I love it.

Sometimes I go into my Tumblr and click on the “reading list” hashtag that brings me to the full archive. Then I spin the wheel by scrolling down and stop at a random place. Here’s one from March 2018: “Reading List, Everything Edition.” The header image, from The Museum of Neon Art, features some scribbled turquoise script that reads, “The right amount of everything.” It has ten links. One of them is an article in Racked (since absorbed by Vox) about the top-rated sweatpants on Amazon (I wrote, “My favorite kind of journalism is where a random thing is taken very very seriously, and this is perfect”). Another is a link to a *MEL Magazine* (RIP, though you can still read their stories online) article about how selfies relate to gender and learned objectification. I spin the wheel again and find a Reading List from July 2014—this one is called “Oh, Wow Edition”—linking to a whole supplement on Lana Del Rey published in *The New Inquiry*. It quotes Sarah Nicole Prickett: “And if all she wants is dope and diamonds, so what? What if the most radical—fuck it, feminist—thing you can do is believe everything a girl says about her life, whether or not you like it?”

Sometimes I click on these links to read the articles again—an evergreen favorite to search for is “You Cannot Escape Jet Lag, Only Embrace It,” by Vincent Bevins, published by The Outline (RIP, but the archive is still online) in 2018. But it’s also fun to just look at them as a time capsule—what I chose to include, what I wrote about the articles, the quotes I pulled, and how it reflects my own state of mind at the time. One of the lists quotes Oscar Wilde, and it seems apt: “... one regrets the loss even of one’s worst habits. Perhaps one regrets them the most. They are such an essential part of one’s personality.” I enjoy every bit of my age and my experience, but sometimes I look at these archives of the preferences of my younger self and remember how nice it was, sometimes, not to know yet.

My Reading Lists have always been online, and I know that people read them, but my casual curation habit was never really for other people. It’s mostly a record of hours and hours spent reading things that I couldn’t put on a bookshelf, but still felt a need to save somewhere. In some ways, it’s not been very successful; the links are breaking and Tumblr has terrible searchability. But in other ways, it’s been perfect, or at least as good as it gets—like how a set list from an old gig is still proof of what happened, even if you can never hear the music played live again.

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These Reading Lists will continue to fulfill their function as a personal archive of what the internet was like for me—at least until Tumblr decides to stop paying for the servers that support this endeavor for zero money and pull the plug on the whole thing. Until then, the Reading Lists will remain as a small digital bookshelf of what the internet was like during a moment in time, or maybe just what I was like, as seen through what I chose to read and keep. Like so much on the internet, it’s there for anyone to see, but all along I was doing it for myself. ■

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