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The literacy we teach today

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ДИСКУССИЯ • DISCUSSION



Essay

A. van der Weel

The Literacy We Teach Today

Abstract. The article discusses the issues of text culture transformation, literacy and reading. The purpose of the article is to explore the modern interpretation of the concept of "literacy" and determine its place in creating the shape of tomorrow's world. The author analyzes the changes in the culture of reading and literacy education that resulted from the introduction of massive educational reforms in Western Europe. The author reminds us that literacy and our reading culture are not givens but that they constantly evolve under the influence of new text technologies. The author tries to comprehend the consequences of the current digital media revolution for intellectual development and the future structure of society; to identify new features that reading and literacy have acquired in modern culture. Besides, considerable attention is paid to the place of text in the digital age. The author concludes that the parallel presence of all mediums on the same screen suddenly showed the real place of text in people's affections. Being cognitively more demanding, text clearly takes second position to auditory and visual media for entertainment and as a vehicle of cultural experience. Meanwhile the social use of text in the meantime is a different matter: text is still very important in social media – although in an ever more rudimentary form. Author concludes that none of the new mediums were ever regarded as a serious threat to books and other text forms. Reading and writing had as it were simply "got their first". Books could pride themselves on a centuries-old tradition, and when film, radio and television came along, all subjects had already been properly described in (text-) books. The author highlights that the "screen effect" leading to the demotion of such more demanding forms of reading clearly shows once again the contingent nature of literacy. What follows is a plea to give back to literacy its original aura as a major intellectual achievement: a means to shape future minds, and thus the society in which our children will live. Based on previous research, the author draws our attention to the fact that digital media revolution is already having the effect of devaluing reading as a cultural technique. It has been generally accepted that schools should include "digital literacy" in the curriculum – even though there is little agreement what position it should take (purely practically and philosophically). In conclusion, the author emphasizes that the future of the literacy project still comes down to overcoming the social and digital divide.

Keywords: literacy, reading, media, society, digital literacy, teaching

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А. ван дер Вил

Грамотность, которой мы обучаем сегодня

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Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются вопросы трансформации текстовой культуры, грамотности и чтения. Цель статьи: исследовать современную интерпретацию понятия «грамотность» и определить ее место в создании облика завтрашнего мира. Автор проводит анализ изменений в области культуры чтения и обучения грамотности, которые произошли в результате проведения масштабных образовательных реформ в Западной Европе. Автор напоминает нам, что грамотность и наша культура чтения не данность, так как они постоянно развиваются под влиянием новых текстовых технологий. Автор пытается осмыслить, какие последствия будет иметь революция цифровых медиа для интеллектуального развития и будущего устройства общества; определить новые черты, которые приобрело чтение и грамотность в современной культуре. Значительное внимание уделяется месту текста в цифровую эпоху. Параллельное присутствие всех медиаформ на одном экране внезапно показало реальное место текста в сердцах людей. Будучи более требовательным к когнитивным способностям, текст явно занимает второе место после аудио- и визуальных средств массовой информации для развлечения и как средство передачи культурного опыта. Между тем социальное использование текста – это совсем другое дело: текст по-прежнему очень важен в социальных сетях, хотя и во все более рудиментарной форме. Автор делает вывод, что ни один из новых медиаформатов никогда не рассматривался как серьезная угроза книгам и другим текстовым формам. Чтение и письмо как бы просто «получили свое первое место», так как когда появились кино, радио и телевидение, все окружающие нас предметы уже были должным образом описаны в (текстовых) книгах. Автор подчеркивает, что «эффект экрана» привел к отказу от более требовательных форм чтения, что еще раз ясно доказывает случайный характер грамотности. Он призывает вернуть грамотности ее первоначальную ауру важнейшего интеллектуального достижения: средства формирования будущего сознания и, следовательно, общества, в котором будут жить наши дети. Опираясь на ранее проведенные исследования, автор обращает внимание на то, что эта революция цифровых медиа ведет к обесцениванию чтения как культурной практики. Им сделаны выводы о необходимости включения «цифровой грамотности» в учебную программу школ, несмотря на отсутствие единого мнения о позиции (чисто практической и философской), которую она должна занимать. В заключении автор подчеркивает, что будущее проекта грамотности по-прежнему сводится к преодолению социального и цифрового разрыва.

Ключевые слова: грамотность, чтение, медиа, общество, цифровая грамотность, обучение

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It is a truism to say that literacy is a fundamental prerequisite for participating fully in today's society. However, more than that, the literacy we teach today will determine the shape of tomorrow's world. This too would appear at first blush to be no more than a statement of obvious fact. Yet it is cause for worry that awareness of the fact doesn't appear to be widespread. There is little sign, for example, of it influencing educational policy. We don't seem to realise that literacy and our reading culture are not givens but that they constantly evolve under the influence of new text technologies, the current digital media revolution

being the most recent case in point. Like all revolutions, this one too has major consequences for the future shape of society. As research shows, it is already having the effect of devaluing reading as a cultural technique and a technique to care for the self. It certainly stimulates reading as an information practice, but it fails to recognise – let alone promote – reading as an intellectual achievement. If we set any store by that for the shape of tomorrow's society, we will have to work a bit harder at it. The role of literacy has been crucial since the education revolution of the nineteenth century. Without that revolution modern democracies would

be unthinkable. Yet that the literacy we teach today will determine the shape of tomorrow's world is at least as true now as it was then. It may even be more true today, principally because literacy as a suite of necessary skills appears to be expanding greatly. To take one simple but telling example, it is now generally accepted that schools should include "digital literacy" in the curriculum – even though there is little agreement what position it should take between the purely practical and the philosophical. The unbridled access to online information and communication has been shown to come with unintended consequences of a rather dubious kind. These range from a more superficial engagement with text down to a massive incidence of manipulation, deception and privacy infringement. It is clearly unrealistic to expect the media to solve the resulting crisis of mistrust and to stem the tide of misinformation and fake news. Rather, our only hope lies, I think, in creating greater awareness among consumers of the dark side of the new "democratised" information environment. Such an extension of literacy is new, not just because the digital element is new; it is new also in the sense that it was never felt necessary to teach what by analogy we might dub "book literacy".

Another, probably less immediately visible way in which schools' responsibility for teaching literacy is – or should be – actually growing is in countering the fast disappearance of what was once the ultimate (if implicit) goal of all attempts at teaching literacy: the practice of long-form deep reading. Deep reading has the potential to foster mental focus, patience and discipline, to offer emotional and esthetic experiences, to increase linguistic knowledge and to enhance economic and personal well-being. It is associated in particular with more than averagely demanding long-form texts, such as, say, poetry, serious non-fiction, or literary fiction. In the course of the last twenty or so years the inclination to read book-length texts – and probably in particular those of a more demanding kind – has experienced a remarkable downturn. Simply put, if young people have less experience of engaging in demanding long-form texts this is likely also to affect their ability to do so. This means that, if we still believe that this ability is an important literacy skill, there is no room for complacency. It should now more than ever be consciously trained, and thus explicitly be made part of the formal curriculum. As it happens, in the Netherlands stimulating such serious reading (thereby hopefully enhancing the ability and inclination) is subject of a policy-making exercise at the time of writing. The government has commissioned a report by the national Education Council to determine ways in which young people of a school-going age can be induced to read more long-form texts. One of the particular challenges will be how to get Dutch teachers, who are themselves often notoriously poor readers, to motivate their charges to become more enthusiastic about reading.

The assumption that reading is fundamentally beneficial is a relatively recent one. When only an elite was reading the literacy question (the issue of who should be allowed and enabled to read what) hardly existed. It certainly wasn't a pressing one. It became so with the education revolution in the nineteenth century. From today's vantage point of virtually universal literacy it is only too easy to overlook the magnitude of the changes that resulted from the introduction of massive educational reforms in Western Europe. Perhaps for someone of my generation an analogy may be found in the introduction of the networked computer. Now that being online is a permanent condition, it is hardly thinkable what an offline existence looked like. From a technological development that merely added an exciting new dimension to one's private and social life, it has become one of the basic necessities of life. Observing the ensuing social transformations, the painful but inescapable conclusion must be that only very few people even thought very hard about the potential consequences of a 24/7 connectedness. Certainly no one predicted the extent of the ensuing societal transformation.

By contrast, scholars, politicians and clergymen alike sensed already in the seventeenth century that "unbridled reading" needed regulation. To us this might seem an unnecessarily alarmist position, sprouting from a quaintly unenlightened temperament: we now regard newspaper consumption as an essential means to create an informed public. In the seventeenth century it was recognised that newspapers also had the potential to derail social order if readers were not sufficiently equipped to make sense of what they read. This fear certainly proved less misguided and alarmist than we might think. In fact it prefigured quite accurately what is happening today. We now see that even people who we would in an earlier era have called literate can easily fall prey to fake news. The seventeenth-century "moralists" somehow intimated how powerful literacy is as an instrument of social change.

The distrust of literacy never completely disappeared. Even Enlightenment thinkers remained highly ambivalent about popular access to books. It was only in the course of the nineteenth century that what appeared as a drastic change in attitude occurred. Slowly but surely pessimism gave way to a new optimism about the potential of literacy to elevate the masses. This indicated an initially hesitant but nevertheless decisive new willingness by a hereditary elite class to share its power. The elite carried responsibility for those lower on the social ladder, but also for the future of society. While modern democracy was at best only an incipient idea at the time, it was felt that, on balance, literacy would be beneficial to society.

It wasn't till the turn of the twentieth century that literacy gained its current unassailable position as a *sine qua non* of life in a representative democracy. The optimism that had made this about-face possible was not to last

very long. The voices warning of the Pandorean nature of the power of reading and writing had never been totally silenced. Many had always kept their doubts about the effects of unbridled access to books and knowledge. As the new readers began to indulge their taste for what was regarded as inferior reading matter, especially intellectuals saw their worst fears become reality. Romance novelettes and crime fiction were among the many new “trashy” genres that fed their sense of disillusionment. The atrocities of WWI only served to confirm the sense of the literacy-for-the-masses project as a painful fiasco.

The disillusionment was profound and widespread, and not only social and political, but also philosophical. The ostensible failure of the optimistic social and political programme of nineteenth century positivism also raised – or confirmed – doubts about the suitability of the means chosen: universal literacy. The very efficacy and power of textual communication and even human language itself came under increasing scrutiny. Under the influence of this new problematic view of language, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw the birth of the new disciplines of linguistics and the philosophy of language. Almost without exception the linguists and philosophers of language, too, expressed a new pessimism: a fundamental skepticism about the power of linguistic expression.

However, even such broad disillusionment came too late to stop the march of literacy. The position that reading and writing had managed to acquire for themselves in a relatively short period had already become impregnable. In retrospect, there had been only a brief window of opportunity for this to happen, but it had been seized – not by anyone on purpose, but by an almost accidental confluence of forces. Text had de facto gained a virtual monopoly as a vehicle for knowledge and culture. When from the end of the nineteenth century one potentially competing new medium after another made its appearance, it was already too late. Each could – in retrospect – have been used for the purpose of communicating human knowledge and culture. However, none managed to overthrow the by now sanctified place of text in education, scholarship and science. In other words, whatever the popularity of film, radio or television, they could not oust books from their hard-won position – at least not for the time being.

Given the new position of text as a self-evident necessity, it did not really have to be defended any longer, or even explained or rationalised as such: reading and writing had become securely ensconced in the curriculum. In fact, the entire education system in the West – not to mention modern democracy – has come to rely on it. This had the interesting effect that before we were even aware of it, the status of literacy, which had only so recently found its way into compulsory education, had become relegated from that of an intellectual achievement – a miraculous means to change people’s minds and ways

of thinking – to that of a mere practical skill, prerequisite for learning – and teaching – other knowledge.

If this analysis is correct it is in retrospect perhaps understandable that none of the new mediums were ever regarded as a serious threat to books and other text forms. Reading and writing had as it were simply “got their first”. Books could pride themselves on a centuries-old tradition, and when film, radio and television came along, all subjects had already been properly described in (text-)books. Books were venerable, if not revered objects that maintained a natural place in everyone’s esteem.

It was only some time after the middle of the twentieth century that the tables finally turned and the position of books started slowly to decline. Though in the absence of relevant research there is no easy access to precise statistics, TV was the first medium to show itself a massive competitor for reading as leisure-time home entertainment. But it was the advent of the networked computer at the tail end of the twentieth century that made the decisive difference. The parallel presence of all mediums on the same screen suddenly showed the real place of text in people’s affections. Being cognitively more demanding, text clearly takes second position to auditory and visual media for entertainment and as a vehicle of cultural experience. The social use of text in the meantime is a different matter: text is still very important in social media – although in an ever more rudimentary form.

Inherent properties of screens are shifting the dominant reading mode away from deep long-form reading. Though by no means the exclusive or even necessarily primary focus of paper reading habits, deep long-form reading was at least one of its ready affordances and an implicit ideal. This “screen effect” leading to the demotion of such more demanding forms of reading clearly shows once again the contingent nature of literacy. What follows is a plea to give back to literacy its original aura as a major intellectual achievement: a means to shape future minds, and thus the society in which our children will live.

Narrowly, literacy is simply the ability to code and decode textual expressions that use the writing system that is dominant in one’s society. In other words, to be able to read and write. Now that such a large proportion of all communication (personal, in education, in society at large) is in a textual form, a more extensive definition would encompass an understanding and mastering of the way text functions in society, minimally one’s own, but given the ineluctable advance of globalisation, also globally. It is questionable if this is what the curriculum currently achieves, given that teachers – at least in the Netherlands – tend to be rather reluctant readers themselves, and given the growing role of screens in education. Attempts to substitute the long-form paper experience with screens – a medium that seems inherently antithetical to it – can only be regarded as inexpedient if not doomed. Some individuals will probably always be determined enough

to manage to rise above the level that they are offered by the education they receive. But for most people the upper literacy level that their curriculum is aimed to achieve will determine the level of thinking that they – and hence in the aggregate society – will be able to reach. The sad reality is that there is no evidence of any concerted efforts to raise the aims of literacy education above the minimum level required to code and decode text: to simply read and write.

The question that faces us now is ostensibly primarily one of ambition: how deeply does society wish its individuals to be able to think? However, before we can get to the matter of ambition we need to deal first with an unspoken and almost unspeakable, yet persistent fear: that such deep thinking may harbour unsuspected dangers. So the real question is whether we may prevail over our persisting distrust of the power that literacy may bestow on the next generation. How deeply do we who have the power to cogitate and decide about such things think that those who do not have that power should be allowed to think? Just how critical do we think the next generation should be allowed to be?

Perhaps the most serious problem here is that it is the new orthodoxy that an elite like the one that worried about literacy in the seventeenth century no longer exists. The elite's excuse was always that the world is too complex for some people to understand, and that it was necessary for that reason to set limits to literacy. Today's Western-style democracy is founded on equal participation in – compulsory – education. Yet if we look properly, we can see a political establishment again – or still – behaving like an elite and again – or still – distrusting the electorate. This distrust is – incidentally – mutual and growing. The difference with the seventeenth century is that in the Web (2.0) the masses have gained a powerful channel to express their feelings and sentiments. It is easy to mock the inarticulate nature of such expressions (think of the yellow vests or other “populist” protesters), but that will of course merely reinforce their mistrust of elites and authorities.

It is clearly not an option to attempt to put the spirit of literacy back in its bottle, going back to a social divide between literates and illiterates. The only way open to us now is fearlessly forward. The populist movements of Europe all seem to exhibit the same phenomenon: that unfocused and often preverbal disgruntlement is hijacked by more literate demagogues and rabble rousers for their own political ends. It is only the demagogues who appear interested and willing to take the shouters seriously. However, they do so for their own ulterior motive of political power; not to improve the lot of the disenfranchised. Instead of shaking our heads disapprovingly while observing the disturbance from a distance, we have to realise that however prevocal they may sometimes be, these expressions of disgruntlement are by and large justified. Perhaps hardest to accept is that the distrust is mutual. The electorate feels – rightly – that

its legitimate concerns have not been taken seriously: about globalisation, about mass immigration, about the European project.

If we feel that it is beneath us to listen to mere inchoate and inarticulate noise, surely the only way out of the mire is to enable the masses to articulate their concerns and protests properly. Even if the elite is supposed no longer to exist, the reality is that it does exist, and that it needs to take action. It alone is in a position to decide on a fairer distribution of literacy. Ultimately the future of the literacy project still comes down to the willingness to share power: the power that literacy bestows.

From the Editorial Team. We publish an essay from the collection *THE ART OF READING: Contemporary Perspectives on the Countless Ways We Encounter the Written Word* published by Leiden Academic Press in 2019 (Ed. Jaka Gercar (2019). *The Art of Reading: Contemporary Perspectives on the Endless Ways We Encounter the Written Word*. Leiden: Leiden Academic press: TXT). The book includes the works of ten foreign researchers devoted to topical issues of the place and role of reading and literacy in modern society; reading methods, modern reading teaching technologies and the issues related to the future of books and book culture. This issue has one aim, it is to put varied scholarly perspectives on reading side-by-side with the hopes of elucidating the complex space that exists between texts and that which is or, what is far more telling, which is not attained from them.

We express our gratitude to our colleagues for the opportunity to publish this material. We look forward to the continued cooperation.

От редакции. Публикуемое эссе из сборника «Искусство читать. Современные взгляды на бесчисленные способы, с которыми мы сталкиваемся, работая с письменным словом», выпущенного издательством «Лейден Академик Пресс» в 2019 г. (Ed. Jaka Gercar (2019) *The art of reading: contemporary perspectives on the countless ways we encounter the written word*. Leiden: Leiden Academic press: TXT). В сборнике собраны работы десяти зарубежных исследователей, посвященные актуальным вопросам места и роли чтения и грамотности в современном обществе; способам чтения, современным технологиям обучения чтения и проблематике будущего книги и книжной культуры. Цель сборника – сопоставить различные научные точки зрения на чтение в надежде прояснить сложное пространство, существующее между текстами, и то, что есть или, что гораздо более показательно, чего в них нет.

Редакция выражает благодарность уважаемым коллегам за возможность опубликовать этот материал и надеется на продолжение сотрудничества.