

The Power of Reading Comprehension In Post-Literate Society

Emmet Spaeth
University of Connecticut
emmet.spaeth@uconn.edu

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze the effects of lower reading comprehension in a post-literate society. This paper analyzes how reading impacts society and how society's relationship with literacy has changed. Finally, this paper will provide an argument for the need to raise reading comprehension.

Contents

1. Pre-literate society	2
2. Literate society	2
3. Post-literate society	3
4. Conclusion	3

1. Pre-literate society

For this analysis, we use a Marxian view of society splitting it into the elite bourgeoisie and the common proletariat. We start at pre-literate society because most of human history was in pre-literate society and it came first. Notably, this is not before the invention of reading, but before it was a wide spread technology. During this time, only the elite ruling class had the ability to read. The Greek and Roman philosophers, Egyptian pharaohs, and The Catholic Church are examples of the elite ruling class who had the ability to read.

The power to read allowed the ruling class to organize in ways never before seen. It was possible to transfer knowledge from person to person without meeting them or talking to them. Being able to share ideas and knowledge so easily led to an increase in scientific discovery. As a result, new technology was usually found by those that can read and write.

It also allowed for better communication across long distances, which was especially important for large empires. Writing solved the impossible logistical problems of large conquering empires. You don't need to remember how much all your citizens owe in tax, it is all written down. Organizing large armies, conquering land, and international trade (think the British East India Tea Company) all became significantly easier. The layman was barred from creating these highly profitable trade empires because without the ability to read and write, managing such an empire would have been impossible.

2. Literate society

Literate society was the next step for humanity. It starts somewhere around the invention of the printing press, newspapers, and public schools teaching how to read and write. Now, the layman is able to read and write. They may not have studied Greek or Latin philosophical writings, but is at least able to read and write their language at a conversational level.

The layman has the ability to read. Ideas and knowledge spread all over the world, proliferated by the use of the printing press, and the thirst for knowledge grows among the layman grows. One of the best examples of the spread of ideas is socialism. When socialist ideas came to America, it presented itself, not as a Bolshevik revolution, but as labor unions.

The Jungle by Upton Sinclair, a book about the poor food safety practices in the meat packing industry exemplifies the literate society. After the publication of his book, it garnered enough concern among the public to lead the creation of the FDA. This event is a strong example that in literate society, writing and people reading your writing can change society. Politics is now accessible for anyone who can read and write.

During literate society, writing and therefore reading became increasingly complex. There is an argument that this increase in complexity was bound to happen both because humanity began studying more complex topics, but also because our society is more complex. Either way, being on the forefront of scientific discovery required ever increasing reading and writing skills. Especially, for a layman to move to the scientific frontier required incredible reading comprehension. Lawyers, doctors, and engineers are touted as very complex, highly regarded professions and all

require strong reading ability to learn. However, I propose the idea that for the elite to remain separate from the layman and perpetuate class divide, academic literature had to elevate its complexity.

3. Post-literate society

Post-literate Society starts around the advent of social media (Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, Twitter), the twenty four hour TV news feed, smart phones, and the internet. It should be noted that I was born into post-literate society and lack experience of life before. It's not uncommon to see children given screens instead of their parents attention, usually referred to as 'iPad kids' as iPads are the device of choice.

Reading scores in America are down overall. Whether this is a result of increased screen time in youth has yet to be proven, but I personally believe it is. The level of academic writing has not decreased with the decrease in overall reading levels. In fact, the level of academic writing has only risen. Possibly due to the factors mentioned in the previous section (increases in complexity of science and society). Even Harvard has had trouble with their students complaining about the difficulty of reading assignments (see Harvard's grading report).

Essentially, there has been a lowering out of the bottom, making those who can read at a high level even more elite than in Literate society. High reading comprehension is the single most important skill for any student in higher education. Society's main technology for the transfer of knowledge remains reading and writing, but in post-literate society most students don't spend time trying to build those skills. When a student wants to achieve greatness in academia, study techniques and work ethic are what the students optimizes. This is especially true for problem set disciplines as it is put in Harvard's grading report. Reading intensive disciplines build reading comprehension through the standard process of school (homework, exams, essays), but problem set disciplines still require reading comprehension to learn just without the additional practice to build those skills.

4. Conclusion

When people lose their ability to think, it makes them easier to take advantage of them. Even if they maintain their same propensity for knowledge, a widened gap will have the same effect. It doesn't matter if it's a raising of the top (in pre-literate and literate society) or lowering of the bottom (in post-literate society).

Beware of the pitfalls of AI. Large language models can easily be used as a crutch to suppress the effects of poor reading skills. LLM's use does not lie in reading for you. Do not let it replace your ability to comprehend a text.

For those who can recognize this knowledge disparity, it allows them to gain an advantage on their peers. In quantitative trading, you are always looking for an "edge". Some statistical edge that allows you to predict the market better than other groups. Similarly, strong reading comprehension allows for an "edge" on your peers. When you build strong reading comprehension, you

are optimizing for your learning in a way that appears to be forgotten by most students. New technology can blind us of what has worked for centuries. Just because video is a new way to transfer knowledge, it doesn't degrade the usefulness of reading.

To be clear, I'm not disregarding video as a form of knowledge transfer nor am I saying society is worse off post-literate. Video has its uses, but in this current moment society is still deciding what it is best for and its current trajectory is not for academia.