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The Dawn of the Postliterate Society



BRITISH SPECTATORS RAISE THEIR EYES UP TO THE HEAVENS, CAPTIVATED BY AN AIR DISPLAY, CIRCA 1950. (RAYMOND KLEBOE/PICTURE POST/HULTON ARCHIVE VIA GETTY IMAGES)

The smartphone hasn't just distracted us. It's dismantled the habits of thought that built our civilization.

By James Marriott

It's no secret that young people today are desperate for meaning. A recent report found that 58 percent of young adults experienced little or no sense of purpose in their lives over the past month. Some attribute this to social media. Others, to a lack of religion.

In the following essay, James Marriott explains why the stakes couldn't be higher. Our liberal democracy, he writes, was built by widespread literacy—the same widespread literacy that is now being dismantled by

screens. Unless we start reading again, he says, our civilization may not survive. —The Editors



It was one of the most important revolutions in modern history—and yet no blood was spilled, no bombs were thrown, and no monarch was beheaded.

What happened was this: In the middle of the 18th century, huge numbers of ordinary people began to read.

For the first couple of centuries after the invention of the printing press, reading remained largely an elite pursuit. But by the beginning of the 1700s, the expansion of education and an explosion of cheap books began to diffuse reading rapidly down through the middle classes and even into the lower ranks of society. Suddenly it seemed that everyone was reading everywhere: men, women, children, the rich, the poor.

This transformation is sometimes known as the "reading revolution." It was an unprecedented democratization of information, the greatest transfer of knowledge into the hands of ordinary men and women in history.

In Britain, only 21,000 books were published in the first decade of the 18th century; in the last decade of the century, it was over 56,000. More than half a million new publications appeared in German over the course of the 1700s. The historian Simon Schama wrote that "literacy rates in 18th-century France were much higher than in the late 20th-century United States."

Where readers had once read "intensively," spending their lives reading and rereading two or three books, the reading revolution popularized a new kind of "extensive" reading. People read everything they could get their hands on. Books, pamphlets, and periodicals poured off the presses.

It was an age of monumental works of thought and knowledge: the *Encyclopédie*, Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language*, Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Radical new ideas about God, about history, about society, about politics, and even the whole purpose and meaning of life flooded through Europe.

Even more importantly, print changed how people thought.

In books, knowledge is classified, comprehended, connected, and put in its place. "To engage the written word," the media theorist Neil Postman wrote in 1985, "means to follow a line of thought, which requires considerable powers of classifying, inference-making, and reasoning."

As Postman pointed out, it is no accident that the growth of print culture in the 18th century was associated with the growing prestige of reason, hostility to superstition, the birth of capitalism, and the rapid development of science. Other historians have linked the 18th-century explosion of literacy to the Enlightenment, the birth of human rights, the arrival of democracy, and even the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution.

The world as we know it was forged in the reading revolution.



Now, we are living through the counterrevolution.

More than 300 years after the reading revolution ushered in a new era of human knowledge, books are dying.

In America, daily reading for pleasure has fallen by more than 40 percent in the last 20 years. In the UK, more than a third of adults say they have given up reading in their leisure time. The National Literacy Trust reports "shocking and dispiriting" falls in children's reading, which is now

at its lowest level on record. The publishing industry is in crisis: As the author Alexander Larman wrote recently, “Books that once would have sold in the tens, even hundreds, of thousands are now lucky to sell in the mid-four figures.”

In late 2024, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development published a report which found that literacy levels were “declining or stagnating” in most developed countries. Once upon a time, a social scientist confronted with statistics like these might have guessed the cause was a societal crisis like a war, or the collapse of the education system.

What happened instead was the smartphone, which was widely adopted in developed countries in the mid-2010s.

You do not have to believe print is a perfect and incorruptible system of communication to accept it is also almost certainly a necessary precondition of democracy.

Never before has there been a technology like the smartphone. Where previous entertainment technologies like cinema or television were intended to capture their audience’s attention for a period, the smartphone demands your entire life. Phones are designed to be hyper-addictive, hooking users on a diet of pointless notifications, inane short-form videos, and social media rage bait.

The average person now spends seven hours a day staring at a screen. For Gen Z the figure is nine hours. A recent article in *The Times* found that on average, modern students are destined to spend 25 years of their waking lives scrolling on screens.

If the reading revolution represented the greatest transfer of knowledge to ordinary men and women in history, the screen revolution represents the greatest theft of knowledge from ordinary people in history.

Our universities are at the front line of this crisis. They are now teaching their first truly "postliterate" cohorts of students, who have grown up almost entirely in the world of short-form video, computer games, and addictive algorithms (and, increasingly, artificial intelligence).

Because ubiquitous mobile internet has destroyed these students' attention spans and restricted the growth of their vocabularies, the rich and detailed knowledge stored in books is becoming inaccessible to many of them. A 2024 study of English literature students at two American universities found that most of them were unable to understand the first paragraph of Charles Dickens's novel *Bleak House*—a book that was once regularly read by children.

An article published last year in *The Atlantic* cites the characteristic experience of one professor:

Twenty years ago, Dames's classes had no problem engaging in sophisticated discussions of *Pride and Prejudice* one week and *Crime and Punishment* the next. Now his students tell him up front that the reading load feels impossible.

This chimes with everything I've heard in my own conversations with teachers and academics. One Oxbridge lecturer I spoke to described a "collapse in literacy" among his students.

The transmission of knowledge—the most ancient function of the university—is breaking down in front of our eyes. Writers like William Shakespeare, John Milton, and Jane Austen, whose works have been handed on for centuries, can no longer reach the next generation of readers. They are losing the ability to understand them.

The tradition of learning is like a precious golden thread of knowledge running through human history, linking reader to reader through time. It last snapped during the collapse of the Western Roman Empire as the barbarian tides beat against the frontier, cities shrank, and libraries burned or decayed.

That golden thread is breaking for the second time.



The collapse of reading is driving declines in various measures of cognitive ability. Reading is associated with a number of cognitive benefits including improved memory and attention span, better analytical thinking, improved verbal fluency, and lower rates of cognitive decline in later life.

After the introduction of smartphones in the mid-2010s, global Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores—the most famous international measure of student ability—began to decline.

As John Burn-Murdoch wrote in March in the *Financial Times*, starting in the mid-2010s, students increasingly tell surveys that they struggle to think, learn, and concentrate. These cognitive issues are not restricted to schools and universities. They affect everyone: "Adults show a similar pattern, with declines visible across all age groups."

Most intriguing—and alarming—is the case of IQ, which rose consistently throughout the 20th century but which now seems to have begun to fall. The result is not only the loss of information and intelligence but a tragic impoverishing of the human experience.

For centuries, almost all educated and intelligent people have believed that literature and learning are among the highest purposes and deepest consolations of human existence. The greatest novels and poems enrich our sense of the human experience by imaginatively putting us inside other

minds and taking us to other times and other places. By reading nonfiction—science, history, philosophy, travel writing—we become deeply acquainted with our place in the extraordinary and complicated world we are privileged to inhabit.

Smartphones are robbing of us of these consolations.



As Walter Ong writes in his book *Orality and Literacy*, certain kinds of complex and logical thinking simply cannot be achieved without reading and writing. Think of somebody trying to simply speak a famous work of philosophy—say, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* or Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* or Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. It would be impossible to do. And also impossible to listen to.

To produce his great work, Kant had to write down his ideas, think about them, refine them, and then rework them over many years so they added up into a persuasive and logical whole. Similarly, to properly understand a book, you have to have it in front of you so you can reread bits you don't understand, check logical connections, and meditate on important passages until you really take them in.

The classicist Eric Havelock argued that the arrival of literacy in ancient Greece was the catalyst for the birth of philosophy. Once people had a means of pinning ideas down on the page to interrogate them, refine them, and build on them, a whole new revolutionary way of analytic and abstract thinking was born. This was our species' cognitive liberation.

And it's not only philosophy. The entire intellectual infrastructure of modern civilization depends on the kinds of complex thinking inseparable

from reading and writing: from serious historical writing to scientific theorems to detailed policy proposals.

These forms of advanced thought provide the intellectual underpinnings of modernity. Ong emphasized that writing cools and rationalizes thought. If you want to make your case in person or in a TikTok video, you have innumerable means for bypassing logical argument. You can shout and weep and charm your audience into submission. Such appeals are not rational. But human beings are not perfectly rational animals and are inclined to be persuaded by them.

A book can't yell at you (thank God!) and it can't cry. Authors are much more reliant on reason alone, condemned to painfully piece their arguments together sentence by sentence (I feel that agony now). Books are much more closely bound to the imperatives of logical argument than any other means of human communication. This is why Ong observed that preliterate "oral" societies often strike visitors from literate countries as mystical, emotional, and antagonistic in their discourse and thinking.

As books die, we seem to be returning to these "oral" habits of thought. Our discourse is collapsing into panic, hatred, and tribal warfare. Anti-scientific thought thrives at the highest level of the American government. Promoters of irrationality and conspiracy theories such as Candace Owens and Russell Brand find vast and credulous audiences online.

Laid out on the page, their arguments would seem absurd. On the screen, they are persuasive to many people.

We may be about to find out that it is not possible to run the most advanced civilization in the history of the planet with the intellectual apparatus of a preliterate society.



Serious readers are overrepresented in almost every area of human achievement. Take great politicians: Teddy Roosevelt claimed to read a book a day; Winston Churchill set himself an ambitious program of reading in philosophy, economics, and history as a young man and continued to read voraciously throughout his life; Clement Attlee recalled that he read four books a week as a schoolboy.

Or even consider popular culture. David Bowie read, in his own words, "voraciously." "Every book I ever bought, I have. I can't throw it away," he once said. "It's physically impossible to leave my hand!" In a recent book about his songwriting career, Paul McCartney cited Dylan Thomas, Oscar Wilde, and Allen Ginsberg among the authors who had inspired him.

Thomas Edison read deeply throughout his life. So did Charles Darwin. So did Albert Einstein. Ironically, even Elon Musk claims that he was "raised by books."

Reading enriches creative work by giving men and women of genius access to the vast and priceless trove of knowledge preserved in books. As Elizabeth Eisenstein argues in *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, the invention of the printing press helped to catalyze a series of cultural revolutions which forged the modern world: the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Scientific Revolution. Other historians would add the Enlightenment, the birth of human rights, and the Industrial Revolution.

Eisenstein explains how the tendency of reading to foster innovation played out in Renaissance universities. With the invention of printing, students had increased access to books. Gifted students no longer needed to sit at the feet of a given master in order to learn a language or academic skill.

And so, "Young minds provided with updated editions, especially of mathematical texts, began to surpass not only their own elders but the wisdom of ancients as well." Modern students who are unable to read are

once more reliant on the authority of their teachers and are less capable of racing ahead, innovating and questioning orthodoxies.

These students are just one symptom of the stagnant culture of the screen age. Pop songs in every genre are becoming shorter, simpler, and more repetitive. Films are being reduced to endlessly repeated franchise formulas. Studies suggest that the number of "disruptive" and "transformative" inventions is declining. More money is spent on scientific research than ever in history, but the rate of progress isn't keeping up. Even books themselves are becoming less complex.

If the literate world was characterized by complexity and innovation, the postliterate world is characterized by simplicity, ignorance, and stagnation. It is probably not an accident that the decline of literacy has ushered in an obsession with cultural nostalgia; a desire to endlessly recycle the cultural forms of the past: the television shows and styles of the '90s, for instance, or the fashions of the early 2000s.

Deprived of the critical tools to question and develop the insights of those who went before us, we are condemned endlessly to repeat and pastiche ourselves, superhero film by superhero film, repetitive pop song by repetitive pop song.

Most of all, this increasingly trivial and mindless culture is a calamity for our politics.

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Amusingly, from the perspective of the present, the reading revolution of the 18th century was accompanied not only by excitement, but by a moral panic. "No lover of tobacco or coffee, no wine drinker or lover of games, can be as addicted to their pipe, bottle, games, or coffee-table as those many hungry readers are to their reading habit," thundered one German

clergyman. Writer and politician Richard Steele feared that “novels raise expectations which the ordinary course of life can never realize.” The British writer Isaac D’Israeli fretted that reading “excites the imagination too much, and fatigues the heart.”

It is easy to laugh at these anxieties. But in hindsight, these conservative moralists were right to worry. Ignorance was a foundation stone of feudal Europe. The vast inequalities of the aristocratic order were partly able to be sustained because the population had no way to find out about the scale of the corruption, abuses, and inefficiencies of their governments.

And the old feudal hierarchy was justified not so much by logical argument as by what Ong might have recognized as very preliterate appeals to mystical and emotional thinking: a highly visual system of monarchical propaganda that forced the fearsome and awe-inspiring image of the king onto his subjects. The regime displayed its power in parades, paintings, firework displays, statues, and grandiose buildings.

But as knowledge spread through society and the analytic, critical modes of thinking fostered by print took hold, the atmosphere that sustained the old order was burned away. People began to know too much. And think too much. They asked questions: Where does power come from? Why should some men have so much more than others? Why aren’t all men equal? As the historian Orlando Figes has noted, the English, French, and Russian revolutions all occurred in societies in which literacy was approaching 50 percent.

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It's worth noting that print alone cannot usher in peace and democracy, or abolish the innate human tendencies toward partisanship and violence. And it is certainly not immune to fake news and conspiracy theories. But you do not have to believe print is a perfect and incorruptible system of communication to accept it is also almost certainly a necessary precondition of democracy.

Democracy draws immeasurable strength from print, with its tendency to foster deep knowledge, logical argument, critical thought, objectivity, and dispassionate engagement. In this environment, ordinary people have the tools to understand their rulers, to criticize them and, perhaps, to change them.

By contrast, politics in the age of short-form video favors heightened emotion, ignorance, and un-evidenced assertions. Inevitably, parties and politicians hostile to democracy are flourishing in the postliterate world. TikTok usage correlates with increased vote share for populist parties and the far right. As the writer Ian Leslie put it in May, TikTok is "rocket fuel for populists," because "populists specialize in providing that rush of certainty you get when you know you're right. They don't want you to think. Thinking is where certainty goes to die."

This is by design. The tech oligarchs have just as much of a stake in the ignorance of the population as the most reactionary feudal autocrat. Dumb rage and partisan thinking keep us glued to our phones. And where the old European monarchies had to (often ineptly) try to censor dangerously critical material, the big tech companies ensure our ignorance much more effectively by flooding our culture with rage, distraction, and irrelevance.

These companies are actively working to destroy human enlightenment and usher in a new dark age. And it's working. Superstitions and antidemocratic thinking flourish. Scholarship in our universities is shaped by rigid partisanship, not by tolerance and curiosity. Our art and literature is cruder and more simplistic.

Just as the advent of print dealt the final death blow to the decaying world of feudalism, so the screen is destroying the world of liberal democracy. We are already seeing the world we once knew melt away. Nothing will ever be the same again.

Welcome to the postliterate society.

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