

The Power of Reading Comprehension In Post-Literate Society

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze the effects of lower reading comprehension in a post-literate society. The paper will provide commentary through the Marxist lens of class conflict. It will analyze pre-literate, literate, and post-literate societal standards in chronological order. The paper will end with a conclusion discussing the impact of lower reading comprehension as society matures in its post-literate state.

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1. Pre-literate society

Humanity began as a pre-literate society. In most of human history, pre-literate society was the only option; This is not before the invention of writing systems, but before reading was widespread. 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 who could read and write, the bourgeoisie.

Writing information down 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. For example, taxing citizens by trying to *remember* how much each person owed would be nearly impossible. Organizing armies, conquering land, and international trade (e.g. the British East India Tea Company) became trivial with writing systems to record information.

Without the ability to read and write, the layman was limited to local markets whose business he could logistically manage. The institutions that taught reading and writing only served the elite. By withholding the knowledge of writing systems, the bourgeoisie reinforced the existing class structure.

2. Literate society

Literate society was the next step for humanity. It starts around the invention of the printing press, newspapers, and free public schools. Now, the layman knows how to read and write and has the technology to do so. He may not have studied Greek or Latin philosophical writings, but he is at least able to read and write his spoken language.

The proletariat recognize the power of writing systems just as the elite did before them. Ideas and knowledge spread all over the world, proliferated by the use of the printing press. One of the best examples of the spread of ideas is socialism. Socialist ideas came to America from Europe through the written word. In America, it presented itself, not as a Bolshevik revolution, but as labor unions. America was only able to achieve the eight hour work day (among other worker rights) through the proletariat's ability to read and write.

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

During literate society, writing and therefore reading became increasingly complex. This increase in complexity may have been due to humanity studying more complex topics, but also could have been because our societal structure grew more complex so the way people talked evolved. Again, the bourgeoisie separated themselves from the proletariat. In pre-literate society, the difference was having a writing system, but in literate society, it was the strength of the system and skill of the people using it that mattered. Being on the forefront of scientific discovery required ever increasing reading and writing skills. To be a proletariat working on the scientific frontier required incredibly strong reading comprehension to achieve. Lawyers, doctors, and engineers are touted as very complex, highly regarded professions and all require strong literacy skills to be successful.

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. Post-literate society is the most recent of the three and the current society in the America.

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 report on grading).

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 report on grading. Reading-intensive disciplines build reading comprehension through the standard process of school (homework, exams, essays), but problem set disciplines still require reading comprehension for learning just without the additional practice to build those skills.

4. Conclusion

When people accept weak reading comprehension, it makes them easier to take advantage of them. Even if they maintain their same propensity for knowledge, a widened gap in literacy skills will have the same effect. It doesn't matter if it's the bourgeoisie increasing their literacy skills (in pre-literate and literate society) or proletariat weakening theirs (in post-literate society).

Beware of the pitfalls of AI. Large language models can be a substitute to reading an original text by asking for an easy-to-digest summary. This removes the need to strengthen a person's

reading comprehension because the difficulty of the text has been decreased. Do not let LLMs replace your ability to comprehend a text.

Those who recognize this knowledge disparity, gain an advantage on their peers. Strong reading comprehension provides an “edge” to optimize. When someone strengthens their reading comprehension, they optimize for learning in a way that seems 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 its best use is and its current trajectory is not academia.

Reading and writing remain society’s best tools for the transfer of ideas and knowledge. The bourgeoisie remain the best at using these tools and the proletariat are still lagging behind. Changing your social class is one of the most difficult things to do in any society and this paper points to reading comprehension as the best tool for the job.

5. Limitations

It should be noted that I was born into post-literate society and lack experience in any other form of society. The reader should take this into consideration as it may have influenced my views on the topic.

Additionally, post-literate society is still ongoing. Unlike pre-literate and literate society, post-literate society may significantly change making the analysis in this paper irrelevant or factually incorrect. Only time will tell.