

Post-Literacy **by University of Guelph UNIV1200 Section 7**

Are reading and writing doomed? On July 31, 1997 the *Globe and Mail* published an article by Geoffrey Rowan entitled “Good Riddance to Literacy,” in which literacy was condemned as archaic and unnecessary. A massive outcry in the Letters-to-the-Editor section followed, and the article was later revealed to be a joke.

Perhaps we need to revisit this: the last laugh may be on us.

As part of a small-group-learning experience at the University of Guelph, we have been speculating on the possibility of “post-literacy.” It isn’t imminent, it won’t happen in your lifetime, but we have concluded that reading and writing as we know them are toast; they are over. Be assured that we are talking about more than what scholars call “visible language.” By delving into the possibilities of post-literacy, we are questioning how symbolism works in the human brain and what, if anything, might evolve to replace today’s preferred tools for communication.

Post-literacy refers to capabilities, capacities or tools that are profoundly more powerful and valuable than our current tools of choice: reading and writing. Post-literacy is not a decline into a dark age but a tremendous advance into a strange, new world in which literacy has been displaced by something far better.

Post-literacy is fraught with controversy and speculation: controversy because we hold up reading and writing as an unassailable good; speculation because we have little or no evidence upon which to base our observations. The concepts presented here are thought experiments that have helped us to explore critically the issues and ideas that shape our world.

So, what would post-literacy look like? How would we experience it? How would it change us? For the most part, it seems likely that even if literacy is doomed, language will still be very important. However, language will be enabled and enriched in new and very different ways.

One example might be some sort of neural prosthetic: a means to extend our current brain functions by directly wiring or attaching a device to our brains. These synthetic implants might be some nanotechnology allowing us to store, access and transmit information, memories, and ideas directly to and from our brains. Brain-computer interface (BCI) experiments are in their infancy but some early successes in both animals and humans are promising.

Perhaps the same affect could be achieved by mimicking the biochemical basis of our memories and concepts, that is, replicating (or inducing) through pharmacology the way the brain creates, stores and accesses ideas. Post-

literacy would be a chemical consciousness. Why would we bother struggling with sentence structure and the imprecision of the written word if, through the dilation of certain blood vessels and the activation of specific synapses, we were granted instantaneous access to all required information and understanding? Want to learn French? Take a pill - voila! Literacy replacement therapy in a bottle.

Another direction might be to search within ourselves and uncover some existing but undeveloped, or even repressed, capacity. This won't require augmentation, just practice. Telepathy is a capacity long studied by science and, apparently, practiced actively by psychics and mediums. Freud speculated that human telepathy was once widespread and only sublimated by the development of language. Widespread telepathic capacity would be an extraordinarily powerful and intimate connection. Think "MSN in your head."

In a similar manner, what if memories and ideas - all physiologically represented in the brain - are part of the DNA of an individual and are passed on to their offspring? This genetic memory is found in the fictional Goa'uld of Stargate SG-1 and could be lying among the undetermined functions of junk DNA. This genetic memory might be the physiological basis for instinct or the recollection of past lives.

It may be that technological add-ons and rediscovered natural capacities are not the way to achieve post-literacy. Perhaps a more dramatic transition will be required if we are to achieve the profound capabilities necessary to displace reading and writing. Fans of Star Trek will be familiar with the Borg, a "hive mind" that is the manifestation of Jung's collective unconscious. In essence, this is a new entity or organism (a post-human?) that exists as one being consisting of many interconnected parts. A human society in such a state would know all that each part knows; the knowledge of one would be the knowledge of the whole.

Rarely do changes come without a price. In this example the price of extraordinary knowledge and communication is that of individuality, where the collective is the end of the self. A Faustian bargain or accelerated evolution?

Of course, post-literacy will not appear instantly or be readily accepted. As with literacy, which in the past was viewed with some suspicion, and even outright opposition (see Plato on this), we can expect a difficult transition into post-literacy. Early adopters will be treated as outcasts, literate people will feel threatened, and society will be disrupted. The prospect of "neuro-hackers" and the possibility of "memory rejection" are mind-boggling.

So, while the irony of having to explain post-literacy in print is not lost on us, we remain convinced that literacy is simply a tool, and that tools evolve or are replaced. Whether or not this is good or bad remains to be seen. Clearly, things will be different - as different as when we developed the alphabet, learned how to

codify speech, and gradually developed a literate culture that has been profoundly powerful.

Stay tuned, lots of laughs to follow.

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