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## **Towards an Exploration and Understanding of Post Literacy**

“Language is a virus from outer space.”  
William Burroughs

**Abstract:** Fundamental to the development and extension of human ideas has been the ability to successfully communicate them over time (year to year; generation to generation; millennium to millennium). The rise of literacy was transformational not only for how we communicate and preserve ideas but also for how we think. The basis of information science, as with the contemporary information society as a whole, is literacy. As has been demonstrated by Ong (*Orality and Literacy*, 1982) and Havelock (*Preface to Plato*, 1963), much of modern thought and cognitive activity is only possible because of the written and printed word - it has wired our brains differently and powerfully. As literate people, however, we have difficulty imagining both the oral cultures that preceded us (and still exist in other cultures) as well as the possibility of a “post literate” culture that might evolve from advances in computing, biotechnology or other, as yet unimagined, developments.

There has been considerable discussion about the notion of post literacy but much of this has focused on the supposed decline of literacy (and the parallel ascendancy of other media, notably television, computers and video). From this perspective post literacy is a negative concept - a condition of great concern. However, just as oral societies saw literacy as a threat and feared its impact it seems likely that literate societies would also fear a development that would undermine (or even replace) one of its most fundamental capabilities and values. Literacy has displaced primary orality in every culture into which it has been introduced. What would be the characteristics of post literacy which would allow it to displace literacy (in the same fashion that literacy has displaced orality)?

This paper will review the inherent strengths of both orality and literacy and propose a series of models for a post literacy society. Post literacy is imagined in terms of the development of new tools as well as the evolution of humans and human capability. While some of this is highly speculative much of the paper follows an historical line of reasoning that suggests that post literacy is not merely possible but inevitable. Finally, the paper will reflect on the nature of information science and libraries in a post literate world.