



# The Rise of Literacy

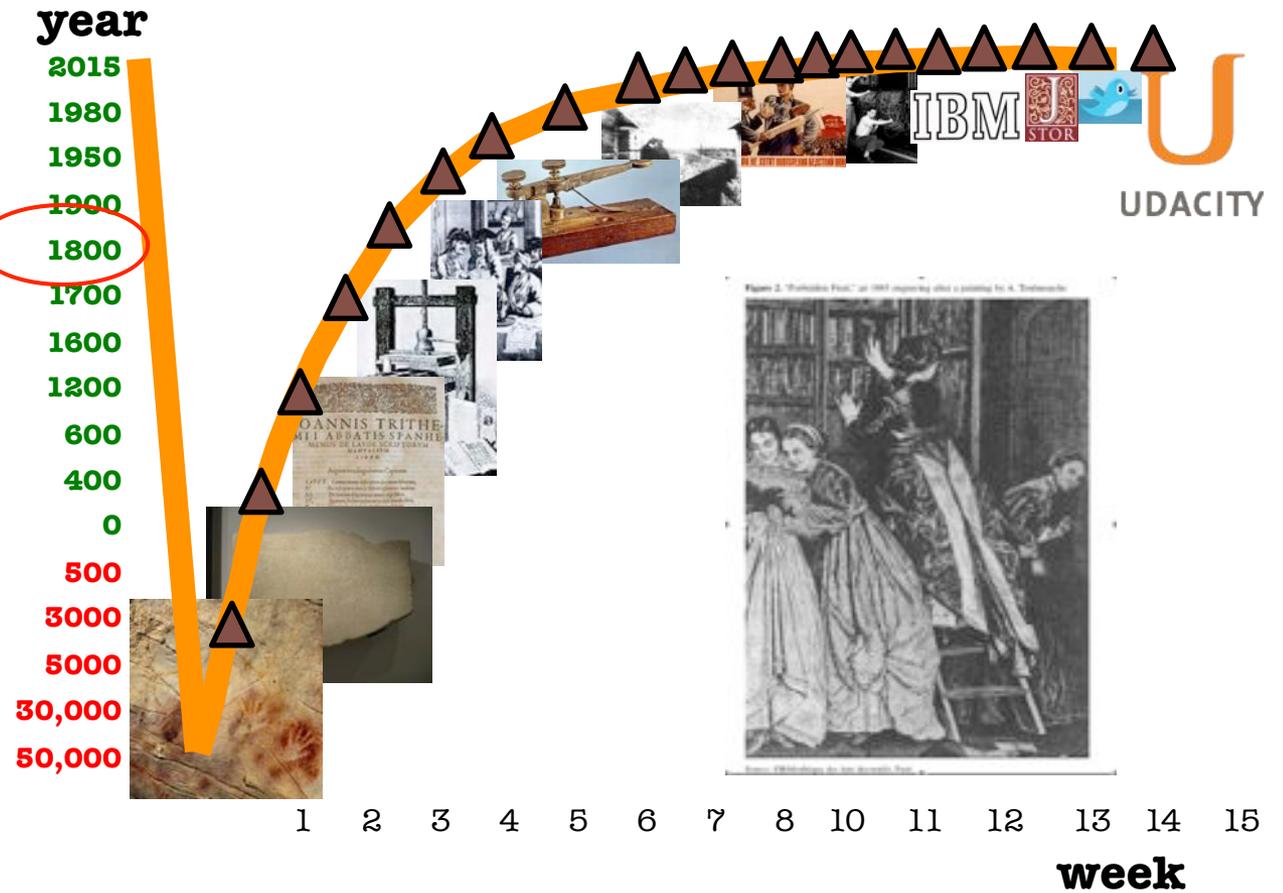
**Geoff Nunberg**

History of Information

IS 103 March 11, 2014



# Where we are





## Itinerary: 3/11

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Vincent  
Gabriel  
Haleigh  
Timothy  
Marlene

The demand side of information  
What do we mean by "literacy"?  
The growth of literacy  
Literacy, power and social control  
Literacy as a "good in itself"  
Modern extensions of literacy



# **What do we mean by "literacy"?**

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# Literacy: The Original "Technology Adoption"

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What do we mean by "literacy"?

Historians tend to measure literacy as simple "signature literacy" -- why?

Complicating the notion of "literacy rates."

Range of social functions requiring literacy:

What do people need literacy for?





# Literacy: The Original "Technology Adoption"

What do we mean by "literacy"?

Levels of individual skill.

Cf Stone's five levels of literacy in pre-industrial Britain

Ability to sign name

Some reading, writing, use of numbers

Account keeping & preparation for professions

Some education in classics

University education



JEAN-JACQUES DE BOISSIEU. *Le grand maître d'école*



# "Functional Literacy"

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"Functional literacy" defined in UNESCO report of 1956:  
"A person is functionally literate when he has acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his culture or group"

What does "functional literacy" entail in modern America?

How did you use your literacy today?



# "Functional Literacy"

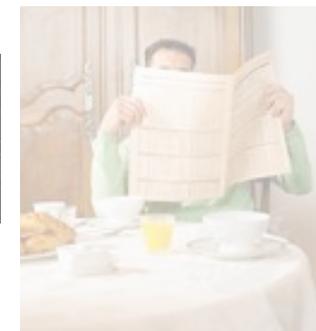
How did you use your literacy today?





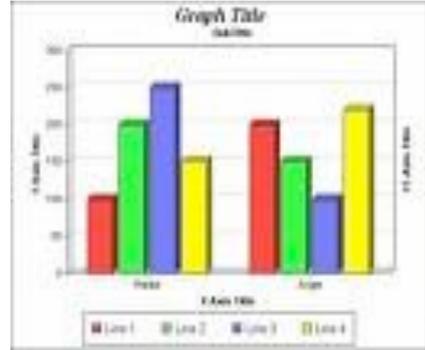
# "Functional Literacy"

How did you use your literacy today?



# "Functional Literacy"

What does "functional literacy" entail in modern America?





# "Functional Literacy"

What does it take to fake literacy in modern America?





# Misinterpreting "Functional Literacy"

Difficulties in measuring functional literacy

In US, “functionally illiterate” rapidly becomes a loose way of saying “virtually illiterate”

*47.5% of the nation - almost 1 of 2 Americans are functionally illiterate!– Web site of Literacy Now!, Inc.*

*Dorothy Allison's autobiographical novels and social commentary slices wide the underbelly of Southern female experience—growing up dirt poor and shamed, functionally illiterate in the language of love. Chicago Tribune*



# Individual and Group Literacy

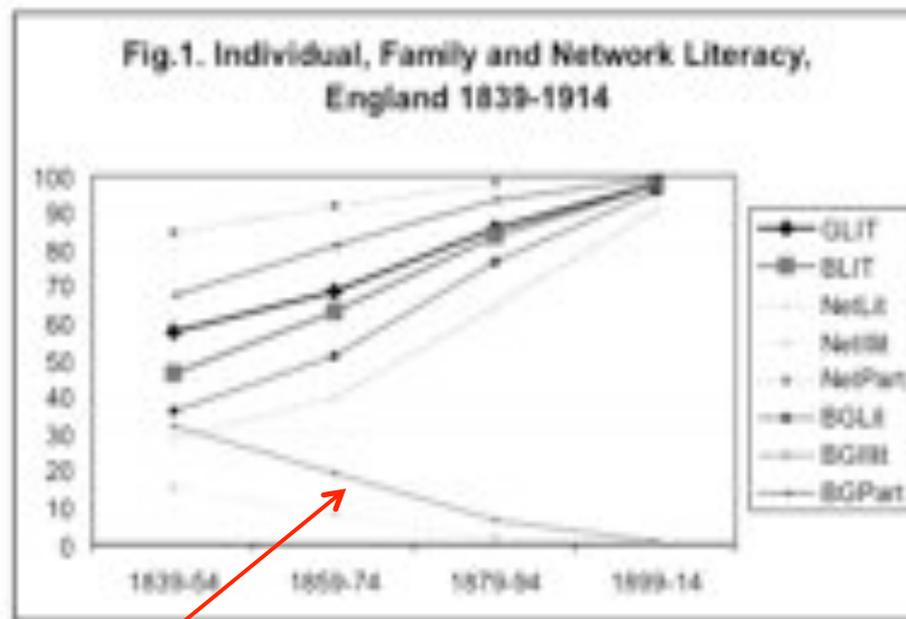
Complicating the notion of "literacy rates."  
Is literacy an individual or group achievement?  
Cf role of public readers, letter writers, etc.





# The Growth of Literacy

The importance of “network literacy”



Both bride and groom illiterate





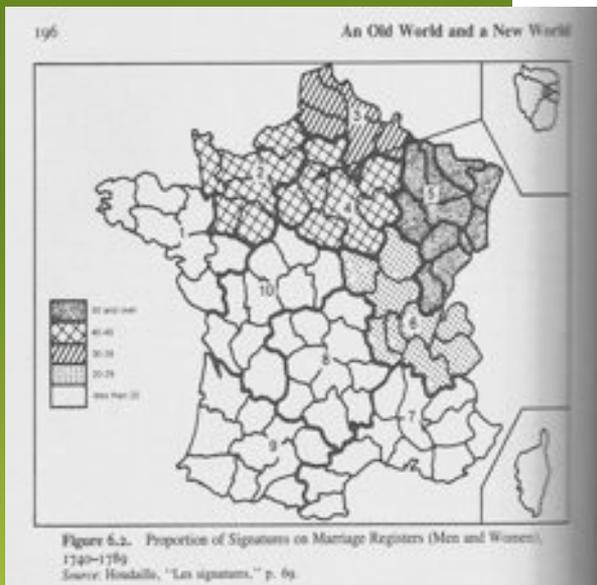
# Social and Religious Prerequisites for literacy

## Growth of literacy

Protestant > Catholic, North > South

Literacy rates highest in Scotland, Sweden, New England, Wales...

Literacy reaches around 80% among northern French males by 1800.



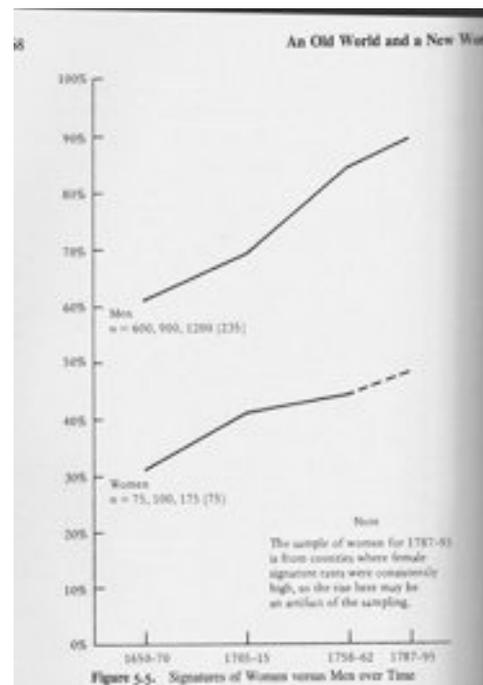
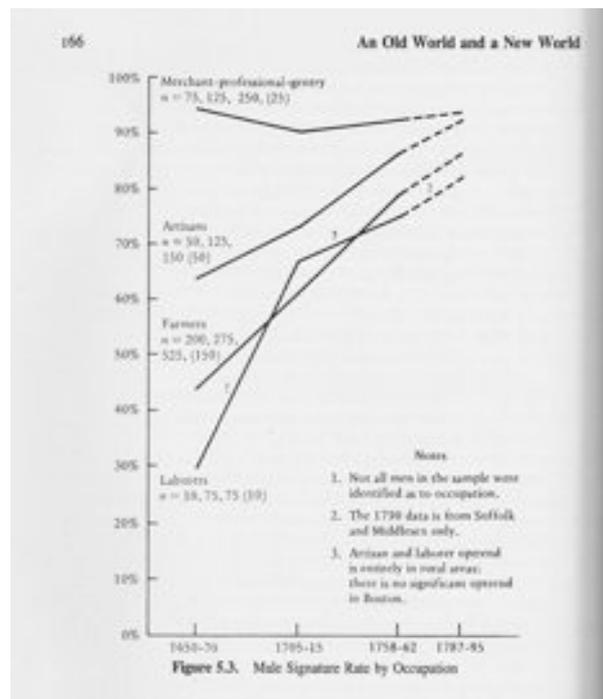
"une France double"



# Social Prerequisites for Literacy, 2

## Growth of literacy

Urban > rural  
Men > women





# Literacy and Education

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Education should be a vehicle for producing literate society per societal requirements...

But often fails to achieve these goals for historical, symbolic, class reasons



# Literacy as cause and effect

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Henkin writes (p. 15) of a "technological bias" in communication history, which assigns more importance to the introduction of the telegraph in the 1840s than to the emergence of the modern postal system at around the same time. Each of these developments were seen as uniting the country by eliminating time and distance and each of them imposed new requirements on the populations and institutions that relied on them. How were they different in both regards, and which would you reckon more important in communication technology?



The advent of the reformed post service definitely had a strong impact on how the nation communicated with each other. The invention of the telegraph increased the speed of communication, but not necessarily the connectedness between "physically separated parties within a shared temporal framework" (Henklin 16). Once the post moved to a model that encouraged letter writing via basic infrastructure change such as, "Primary category of mail would consist of letters... circulating without restriction within a postal network" (Henklin 22) communication between distant parties across the country increased. ...distance was no longer a determinant in the price for most letters in contrast to the telegraph which used distance and the amount of characters to determine the cost. .... The high cost of the telegram essentially limited it to commercial and government use, so while connecting the country with faster communication **it essentially only connected news. The post connected the people.**



# Gabriel

The major difference between the telegraph and the postal system is that the postal system was very much a product of the governmental process—slow, methodical, unassociated with any one name—and as such is much **more boring** to discuss in popular history than the telegraph. The telegraph can be presented with one big name—and often is—of Morse, even if it’s not an accurate depiction. It can be defined by a single moment in history, of genius. .... “In 1800, far fewer Americans would have wanted to maintain correspondence, even if they had access to the franking privileges of a postmaster or a Congressman. By mid-century a demographic foundation for popular participation in the postal system had been laid” (29, Henkin). That’s roughly 50 years of slow change, maybe less considering “... beginning in 1840, the country’s leading cities were swept up in the annual ritual of exchanging love tokens” (148, Henkin). But **the telegraph was flashy. Harnessing the power of lightning?** Being able to do regular correspondence cheaply just can’t compete.



# Timothy

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... The change introduced with the telegraph was much stronger. Rather than making the associated communication more available, as the changes to the postal system did, the telegraph was invented at this time. The near-instant communication it provided became mandatory for business people who could dramatically change their speculations based on information and get advantage over those who had less rapid communication. While the postal system may have been used more at the time, **the telegraph paved the way for many future information technologies.**



# Haleigh

...While at its inception sending letters was something reserved for the elite, after political/economic reforms, the postal system, came to embody a united system of communication in which mail became a part of everyday life. Unlike the telegraph which was very expensive to use (\$2.05 for the first 10 words in 1969), the postal system offered a cheap and relatively dependable mode a communication ..... Unlike the telegraph which would connect two people simultaneously, the postal system was capable of delivering all types of news and... objects at a low cost and in a short time span.

It is for this reason that I have to agree with the author and say the postal service had a larger and more important impact on the masses in American society during this time since it **democratized long distance communication,**



# Marlene

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Levi Woodbury outlined in the *Electro-Magnetic Telegraph* reading how the telegraph may transmit precise information, be used at any time without the fear of delays from weather conditions, and its advantage in taking up little space. However, it differs from the postal system in that it required the extension of wires that were very costly. The telegraph also didn't have as big of a cultural shift as the postal system. ...the postal system was more influential ...due to the cultural societal affects it had. The postal system imposed a larger shift in political and economic culture. When the Postal Act of 1851 was established and the system was expanded, it was a turning point for new innovations that coincided with that shift in communication



# The rise of literacy

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# The Spelling Bee: the oral culture of literacy



"Perhaps [the teaching of orthography] is best done by Pairing the Scholars, two of those nearest equal in their Spelling to be put together; let these strive for victory each propounding ten words each day for the other to be spelt. He that spells truly most of the other's Words; he that is Victor most Days in a Month, to btain a prize, a pretty neat Book of some Kind useful in their future Studies."

B. Franklin, 1751



# The Spelling Bee: the oral culture of literacy

Popularity of the spelling bee:

"Thar's a new game down in Frisco, that ez far ez I can see  
Beats euchre, poker, and van-toon, they calls the "Spellin' Bee."  
...O little kids, my pretty kids, down on your knees and pray!  
You've got your eddication in a peaceful sort of way;  
And bear in mind thar may be sharps ez slings their spellin' square,  
But likewise slings their bowie-knives without a thought or care.  
You wants to know the rest, my dears? Thet's all! In me you see  
The only gent that lived to tell about the Spellin' Bee!"

--Bret Harte, "The Spelling Bee at Angels"

1875: 4000 attend spelling bee at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia.





# The Spelling Bee: the oral culture of literacy



"Spelling was my forte, as is natural for a child of tenacious memory and no judgment." Horace Greeley, of his childhood around 1820

Winning words from Scripps National Spelling Bee in decade following 1925: *promiscuous*, *intelligible*, *fracas*, *gladiolus*, *knack*.

Winning words in recent Bees: *xanthosis*, *viviseulpture*, *euonym*, *opsimath*, *succedaneum*, and *prospicience*.





# **Literacy, power & social control**

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## Against Literacy

Literacy as an instrument of increased political consciousness, which can instill "dangerous ideas"  
[It is not easy ] to conceive or invent anything more destructive to the interests and very foundation principles of a nation entirely dependent on its trade and manufactures than this giving an education to children of lower class of her people that will make them contemn those drudgeries for which they were born. 1763.

Too much education "would make everyone unfit to follow the plough." Bishop Samuel Wilberforce, 1857

**BUT:**

"We must build more schools or more prisons." *Edinburgh Review*, 1839



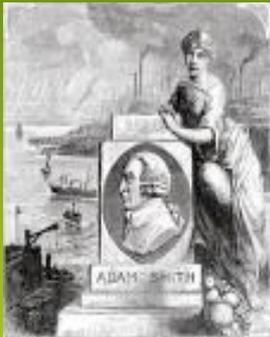
# Literacy as an instrument of "moral improvement" and social control



But literacy also regarded as instrument of social control, which guarantees political stability and workers' tractability.

"The more [the poor] are instructed, the less liable they are to the delusions of enthusiasm and superstition, which, among the ignorant nations, frequently occasion the most dreadful disorders." Adam Smith

"The learning we are to communicate is only intended to enable you to read the scriptures and to see that it is the will of God that you should be contented with your station." Sunday School Tract, 1806





# Literacy and Social Control, cont.

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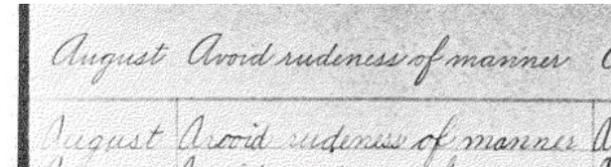
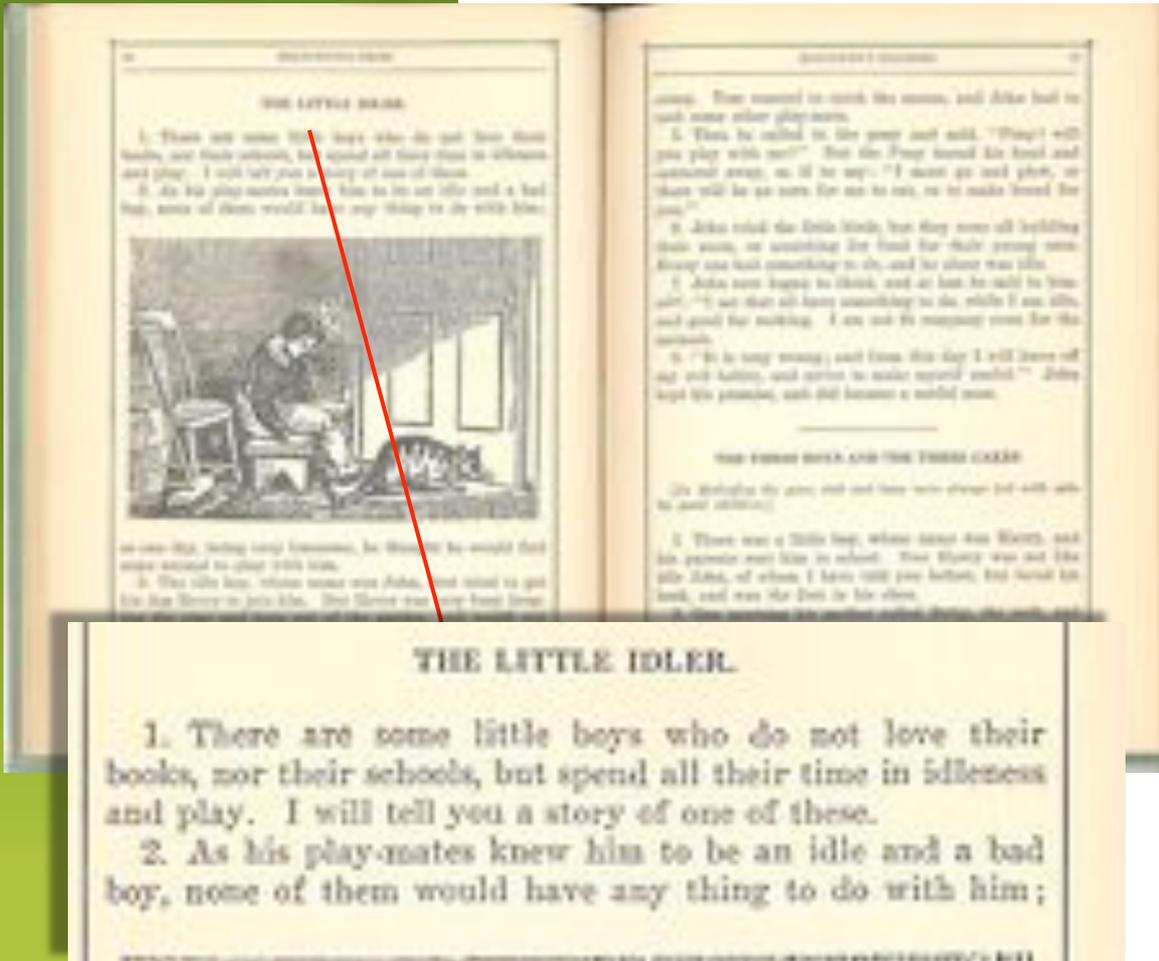


"Those who have been accustomed to exercise their minds by reading and studying... have greater docility and quickness in applying themselves to work [and] greater appetite, dexterity or ingenuity in comprehending ordinary processes." Horace Mann, 1849.





# Emphasis on Moral Advantages of Literacy Instruction





## The lone R

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"Reading will help to mend people's morals, but writing is not necessary." Jonas Hanway, ca 1780

"It is not proposed that the children of the poor be taught to write and cipher." Anglican National Society for Fostering Education.

“Reading is a key to the treasures of the holy writ... but writing and arithmetic should be reserved for particular children.” Rev Vaughan Thomas 1812



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# **Literacy as a subversive force**

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# Literacy as a subversive force

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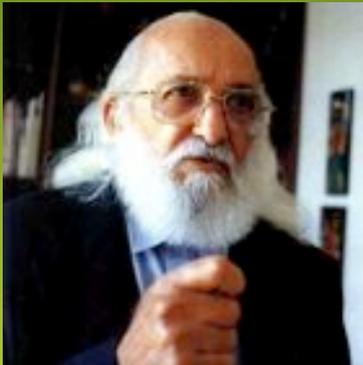
## Conflicting views of literacy:

Literacy as an instrument of increased political consciousness, which can instill "dangerous ideas"

"Educate first, agitate afterwards. Ignorance, superstition, and timidity [timorousness] are the weapons which our oppressors have used most effectively in the past.

-- *Palladium of Labor*, 1873

Cf Paulo Freire on literacy as the "pedagogy of the oppressed" and a means for disrupting the "culture of silence."





# Rise of the Radical Press

William Cobbett's *Political Register* in Britain achieves 44,000 weekly circulation in 1816 (as pamphlet, to avoid 4d. newspaper tax).

1819: Richard Carlile's *Republican* achieves greater circulation than the *Times* after Carlile is imprisoned for sedition.

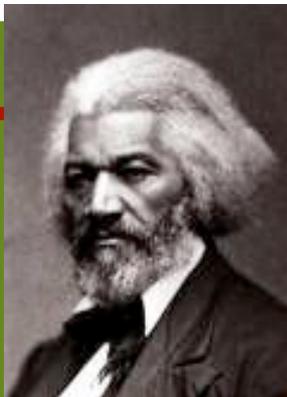


Print of Peterloo Massacre, 1819 pub. By Carlile

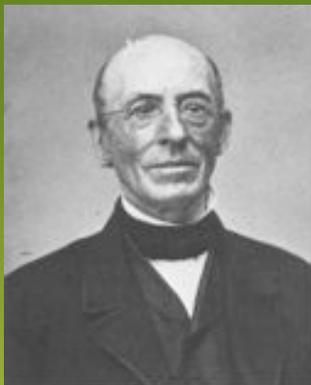




# The radical press



Frederick Douglass



Wm. Lloyd Garrison

North Star (Douglass), 1847; The Liberator (Garrison), 1831





# "Group" Literacy and Political Consciousness



Lector in  
Key West, 1920's

Cf *lectores* in Cuban cigar factories:

Followed creation of cigar-makers' union in 1857; *lector* paid for by workers (85% illiteracy rate in Cuba at the time)

1866: Political Governor of Cuba issues edict making it illegal "to distract the workers of the tobacco shows.... with the reading of books and newspapers, or with discussions foreign to the work in which they are engaged."





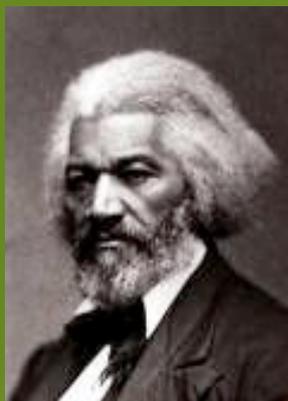
# Literacy and Black Americans

Following rebellions of Denmark Vesey (Charleston, S. Carolina, 1822) and Nat Turner (Virginia, 1831), many southern states make it illegal to teach blacks to read & write.





## The "dangers" of black literacy

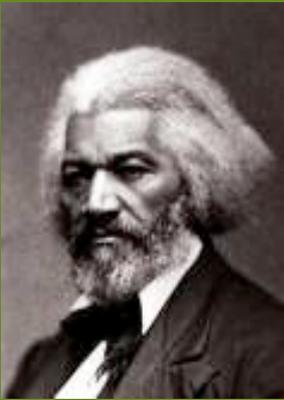


Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld [ca. 1830], she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read...*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, 1845*



## The "dangers" of black literacy

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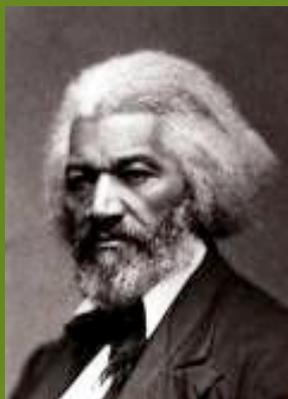
"If you give a n\_\_\_ an inch, he will take an ell. A n\_\_\_ should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best n\_\_\_ in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that n\_\_\_ (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave."

*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, 1845*



## The "dangers" of black literacy

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"These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. ...I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom."

*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, 1845*



# “The Uplifting of the American Negro”

The growth of new wants, presided over by intelligence and culture, is the best lever for raising the status of the idle, quarreling, sensual, ravishing Afro-American. Certainly the infecting of the backward portion of the race with a high estimate of cleanliness, neatness, family privacy, domestic comfort, and literacy is an agent quite as moralizing as the dread of future punishments or the love of an ethical God.

Edward Alsworth Ross in the *Am. Jnl. Of Sociology*, 1898

Not a universal view...



# The achievement of black literacy

Rise in black literacy after Civil War: from 5-10% to ca. 50% by 1900

Literacy as a "coveted possession"

With the children that are coming up no white men will not be needed They are learning to read and write. Some are learning lawyer, some are learning doctor and some learn minister, and reading books and newspapers they can understand the law. Beaufort. S.C.





# **Literacy as "a good in itself"**

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# Literacy as "a good in itself"

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## 2d half of 19<sup>th</sup> century

Introduction of compulsory universal schooling

Increase in immigration, urban in-migration

Introduction of women into the workforce

Women in bus. schools from 4% in 1871 to 77% in 1900

Rise of both radical politics and of political parties and "boss" system makes both conservatives and reformers eager to create literate public.

Literacy rates become an indicator of modernity.



# “The Literacy Myth”



“...the acquisition of literacy is a necessary precursor to and invariably results in **economic development, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement, and upward social mobility**. Despite many unsuccessful attempts to measure it, literacy in this formulation has been invested with immeasurable and indeed almost ineffable qualities, purportedly conferring on practitioners a predilection toward social order, an elevated moral sense, and a metaphorical “state of grace.”

“The Literacy Myth,” *Encyclopedia of Language and Education*



# Socio-Economic Benefits of Literacy

I have known many persons rise to wealth and respectability by their industry, virtues, and self-taught skill; but from their utter want of training in the proper mode of writing, or speaking, or reading their native tongue, they are unable to fill the situations to which their circumstances and talents and characteristics entitle them, and in which they might confer great benefits on society.

Egerton Ryerson, Chief Superintendent of Education for Upper Canada, 1849



# Socio-Economic Benefits of Literacy?



But assumptions about literacy and social advancement are not always justified.

"The literate English farm labourer of the late eighteenth century fared no better (and possibly even worse, due to the prejudices of his employer) than his illiterate companion." Laurence Stone

Cf also dubious benefits of literacy in 19<sup>th</sup> c. Canada

Literacy as indication of tractability rather than as a job skill...





# Literacy and Social Control, 21<sup>st</sup> Century versions

## New SAT test will eliminate 'obscure' vocabulary

Cliff Peale, CIN 11:09 p.m. EST March 8, 2014

Instead of obscure vocabulary words, the new SAT test starting in 2016 will concentrate on words that are relevant, such as 'synthesis' and 'empirical.' That's just one of the big changes.

You too can  
spring in



**Kathleen Parker**  
Opinion Writer

### The new SAT don't care 'bout no fancy words

By Kathleen Parker, Published: March 7 [E-mail the writer](#)

When the going gets tough, well, why not just make the going easier?

This seems to be the conclusion of the College Board, which administers the dreaded SAT college entrance exam. Recently announced "improvements" to the test are designed, say board officials, to better gauge what students study and learn in high school. Shouldn't take too long.





# **Political Importance of Literacy**

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# Political Importance of Literacy

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## Historical roots:

1792 postal legislation establishes low rates for newspapers, free exchange of papers bet publishers.

“cabalistic concealments”

Postal reforms of 1840 reduce rates for letters...



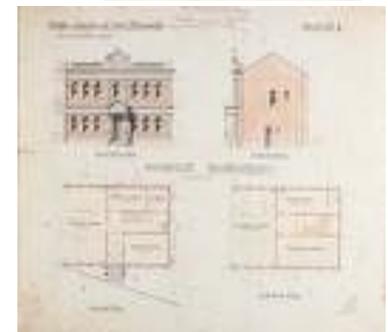
# The Growth of Public Libraries



Subscription libraries (Franklin founds Library Company of Philadelphia: 1731);  
Town libraries (Boston, 1848; NY, 1849)

UK: Public Libraries Act of 1850 provides for "libraries freely open to the public... in towns in Great Britain and Ireland" passed w/ Conservative opposition

Later: Carnegie libraries. 1700 public libraries in US between 1883 and 1929, 660 in UK





## Functions of the Library: Political Objectives

Libraries (and literacy in general) as bulwarks against demagoguery etc.



[To the free library] we may hopefully look for the gradual deliverance of the people from the wiles of the rhetorician and stump orator.... As the varied intelligence which books can supply shall be more and more widely assimilated, the essential elements of every political and social question may be confidently submitted to that instructed common sense upon which the founders of our government relied.

J. P. Quincy, 1876



# Reservations about Carnegie Libraries

Figure 2. "Forbidden Fruit" an 1885 engraving after a painting by A. Tschirnbeck



Concerns about popularity of "immoral fiction" and availability of seditious works

"Go to the nearest Carnegie Library and examine its catalog of books. The chances are five to one that you will find the place full of literary bilge and as bare of good books as a Boston bookshop." H. L. Mencken, 1928





## What does “Literacy” entail?

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“Literacy” becomes a way of claiming status for a subject or body of material as a “basic” form of knowledge, for which the state should assume responsibility

"Literacy" in X is considered necessary to

- economic growth
- personal betterment,
- independent critical thinking,
- healthy public discourse.



## Extension of "Literacy" to Other Fields

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[Bennington promotes] the development of literacy in all the important aspects of our cultural heritage. This does not mean merely verbal literacy. ... Bennington is attempting the uphill task of including the nonverbal disciplines of art and science. "The Bennington Idea," Lewis Webster Jones, *Jrnl. Ed. Soc.*, 1947

"Economic literacy" from 1950. Soon after: geographic, historical literacy, media literacy, etc.



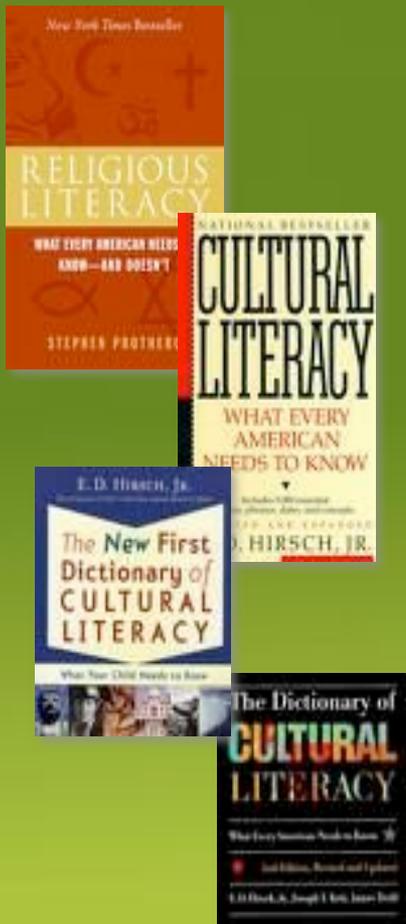
## Modern extensions of “literacy”

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Literacy has become too promiscuous. The word itself...is daily extending its application. We have more and more literacies. In both popular and learned discourse the term is attached to a proliferating body of conditions and activities. Since the 1980s the term has frequently been applied to competence in computers. Literacy has become not the forerunner of information technology but the gateway to it.... David Vincent, "Literacy Literacy," 2002



# Extension of “Literacy” to Other Fields



“Cultural literacy” from E. D. Hirsch: “What every American needs to know,” “the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world”

cultural literacy, [is] the network of information that all competent readers possess. It is the background information, stored in their minds, that enables them to take up a newspaper and read it with an adequate level of comprehension...

List includes: Juno, Sir Galahad, Blarney Stone, apple of discord, “Don't give up the ship,” “Close, but no cigar,” *éminence grise*, golden parachute, ergo, NIMBY, Eucharist, François Rabelais, yarmulke, personal pronoun, Count Basie, W.C. Fields, Walter Lippmann, Foggy Bottom...



# The birth of “Information Literacy”

"information literacy" is justified on the same grounds as earlier literacies:

## **Personal empowerment & health of public discourse**

Information literacy... is a means of personal empowerment. It allows people to verify or refute expert opinion and to become independent seekers of truth.

To say that information literacy is crucial to effective citizenship is simply to say it is central to the practice of democracy

“The Importance of Information Literacy to Individuals, Business, and Citizenship” (ACRL Report)



# The Birth of "Information Literacy"

## **Achieving social & economic equality**

...the very people who most need the empowerment inherent in being information literate are the least likely to have learning experiences which will promote these abilities. Minority and at-risk students, illiterate adults, people with English as a second language, and economically disadvantaged people are among those most likely to lack access to the information that can improve their situations.

“The Importance of Information Literacy to Individuals, Business, and Citizenship” (ACRL Report)



# The birth of “Information Literacy”

The New York Times  
nytimes.com

February 13, 2005

COURSE CORRECTION

## Teaching Students to Swim in the Online Sea

By GEOFFREY NUNBERG

INFORMATION literacy seems to be a phrase whose time has come. Last month, the Educational students' ability to evaluate online material. That suggested an official recognition that the millions know how to retrieve useful information from the oceans of sludge on the Web.

The New York Times

...Paul Duguid, an information researcher who will teach a class this fall at the University of California, Berkeley on judging the authenticity of information found on the Web.

## Individual betterment & strengthening of economy

...There is ample evidence that those who learn now to achieve access to the bath of knowledge that already envelops the world will be the future's aristocrats of achievement.

Every day lack of timely and accurate information is costly to American businesses.

“The Importance of Information Literacy to Individuals, Business, and Citizenship” (ACRL Report)



## Readings for Thurs 3/13

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Statute of Anne

US Constitution, Article 1, Section 8.

Copyright Act (1790)

“The Trademark Cases” 100 US 82 (1879).

Read: All laws

An Act Concerning Trade Marks and Names [CA 1863 155]

from An Act to Revise, Consolidate, and Amend the Statutes Relating to Patents and Copyrights (1870), sections 77-84. [16 Stat 198 1848-1871]

Of Trade and Stock Marks and Brands [Laws of Oregon, Chap 33, Oct 21, 1864] -