



# The Rise of Literacy and the Mass-Circulation Press

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**History of Information i103**

**Geoff Nunberg**

**March 1, 2011**



## Itinerary: 3/4

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The emergence of mass communications:  
creating supply and demand

The historical rise of literacy

- The two sides of literacy: empowerment and social control

- The emergence of "literacy" as a social good

- Creating the institutions of literacy: schools and libraries

- The future of literacy

The creation of the popular press:

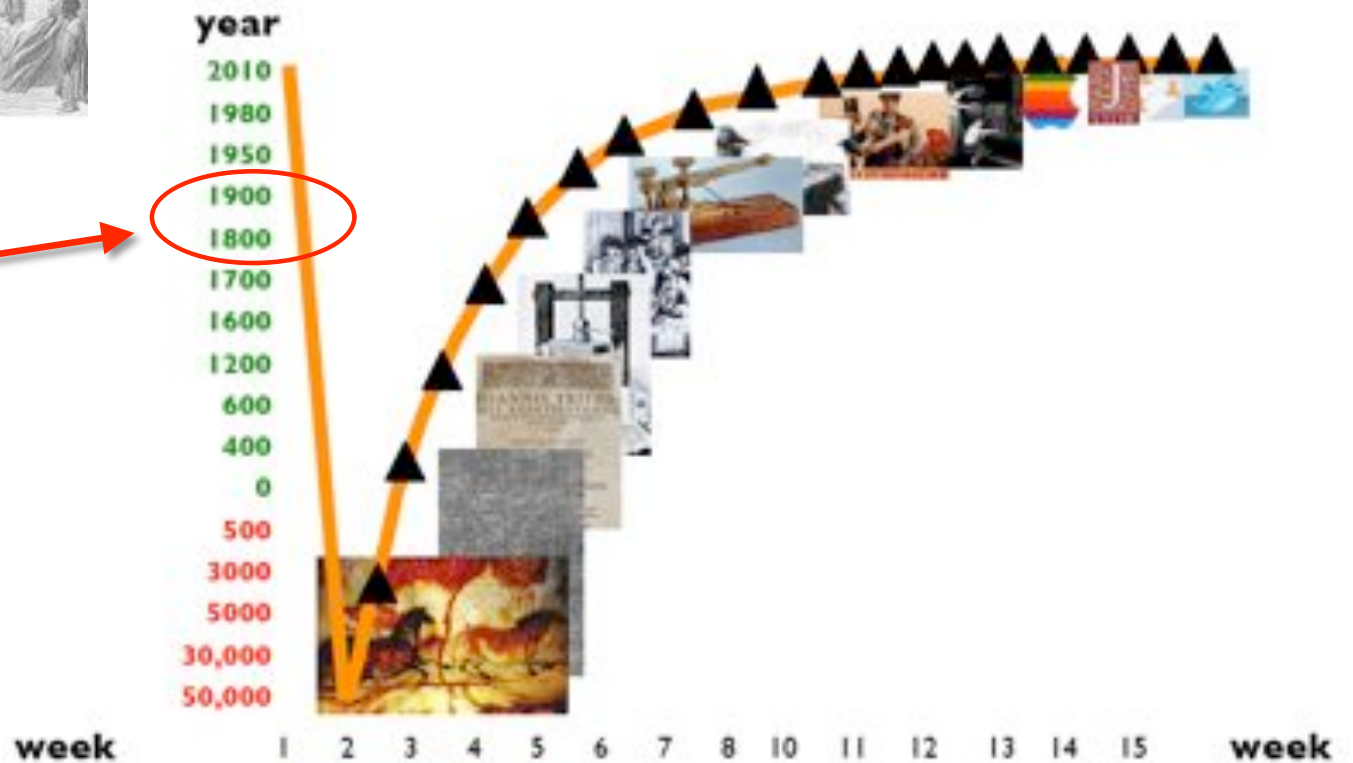
- sensationalism, muckracking, and "news"



# Where We Are



Figure 2. "Forbidden Fruit" an 1851 engraving after a painting by A. Toulmouche





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

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# Literacy: The Original "Technology Adoption"

What do we mean by "literacy"?

I. 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

*But historians tend to measure literacy as simple "alphabetism" – why?*



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

# Literacy: The Original "Technology Adoption"

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What do we mean by "literacy"?

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





# Literacy: The Original "Technology Adoption"

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Complicating the notion of "literacy rates."

Range of social functions requiring literacy:

What do people need literacy for?

"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"



# "Functional Literacy"

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What does "functional literacy" entail in modern America?

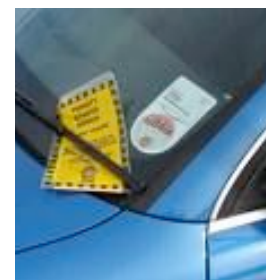
How did you use your literacy today?





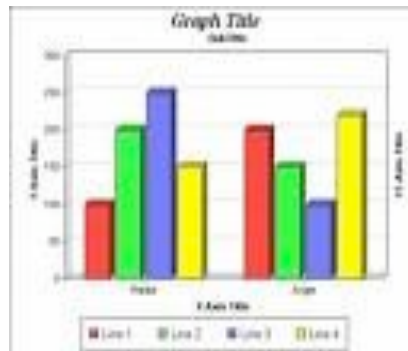
# "Functional Literacy"

How did you use your literacy today?



# "Functional Literacy"

What does "functional literacy" entail in modern America?



Form 990

Noncash Charitable Contributions

Form 990 (2008)

OMB No. 1545-0047

Department of the Treasury

Internal Revenue Service

11/08

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# "Functional Literacy"

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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.





# Group Literacy in the Modern World

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Section	Description
Part I	Summary of Information
Part II	Information on Qualified Property
Part III	Information on Qualified Property
Part IV	Information on Qualified Property
Part V	Information on Qualified Property
Part VI	Information on Qualified Property
Part VII	Information on Qualified Property
Part VIII	Information on Qualified Property
Part IX	Information on Qualified Property
Part X	Information on Qualified Property
Part XI	Information on Qualified Property
Part XII	Information on Qualified Property
Part XIII	Information on Qualified Property
Part XIV	Information on Qualified Property
Part XV	Information on Qualified Property
Part XVI	Information on Qualified Property
Part XVII	Information on Qualified Property
Part XVIII	Information on Qualified Property
Part XIX	Information on Qualified Property
Part XX	Information on Qualified Property
Part XXI	Information on Qualified Property
Part XXII	Information on Qualified Property
Part XXIII	Information on Qualified Property
Part XXIV	Information on Qualified Property
Part XXV	Information on Qualified Property
Part XXVI	Information on Qualified Property
Part XXVII	Information on Qualified Property
Part XXVIII	Information on Qualified Property
Part XXIX	Information on Qualified Property
Part XXX	Information on Qualified Property



# The Growth of Literacy

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# Factors influencing the growth of literacy (Stone)

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Social stratification

Job opportunity

Religion

Social control

Demographic patterns

Economic organization

Political institutions





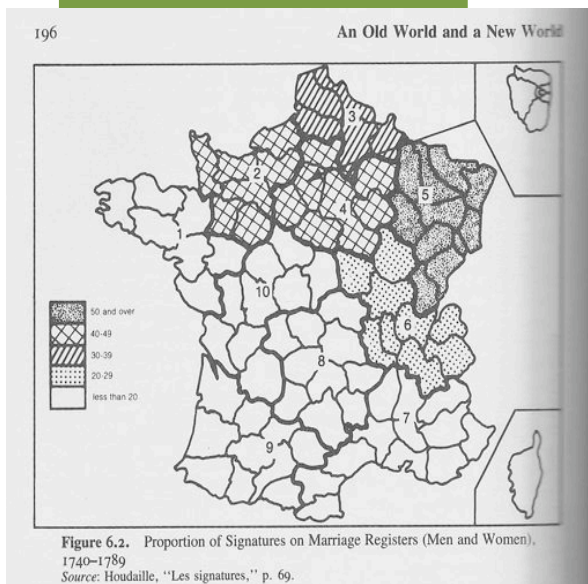
# Social and Religious Prerequisites for literacy

## Growth of literacy

Protestant > Catholic, North > South

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

But there is also a relatively high literacy rate in Catholic areas of Northern Europe (Bavaria, Rhineland), which tended to be wealthier with more commercial development and more towns.



"une France double"

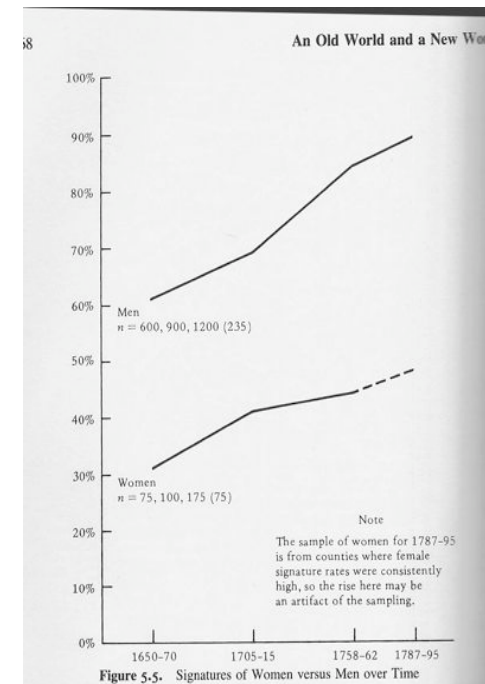
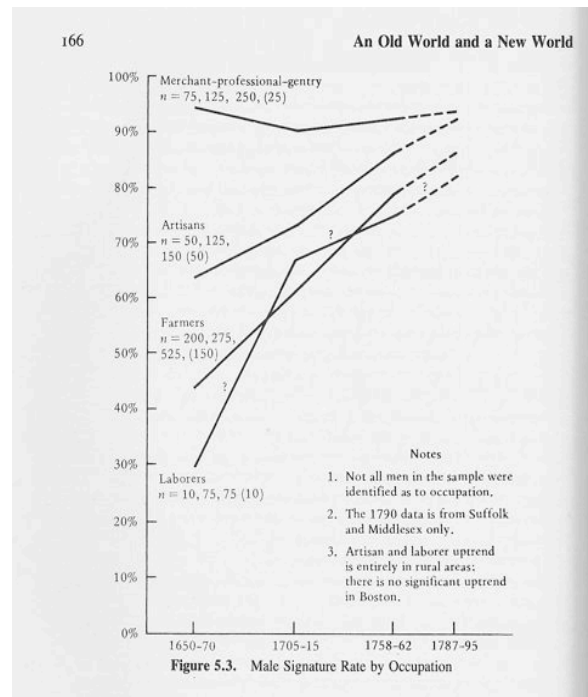


# Social Prerequisites for Literacy, 2

## 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 and Social Control

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Conflicting views of literacy:

Instrument of increased political consciousness,  
which can instill "dangerous ideas"

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

"Education without religion is... a pure evil. Secular education makes communists and Red Republicans."  
Founder of Woodard schools, 1871



# Literacy and Social Control

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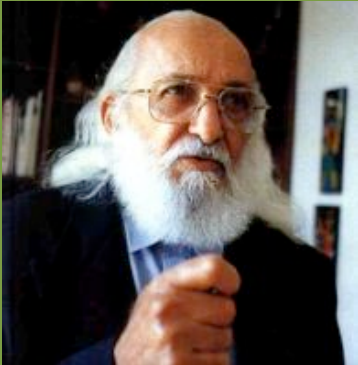
## Conflicting views of literacy:

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.





# Seditious Uses of Literacy in the Renaissance... and now



The "talking statue" in the Piazza del Pasquino, Rome, with posted *pasquilli* ("pasquinades")



# Rise of the Radical Press



Cobbett

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.

## The Republican.

No. 2. Vol. 1.] LONDON, FRIDAY, SEPT. 3, 1819. [PRICE 2D.







# "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



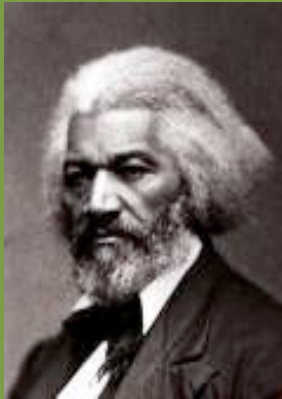
Following rebellions of Denmark Vesey (Charleston, S. Carolina, 1822) and Nat Turner (Virginia, 1831), many southern states make it illegal to teach blacks to read & write.





## The "dangers" of black literacy

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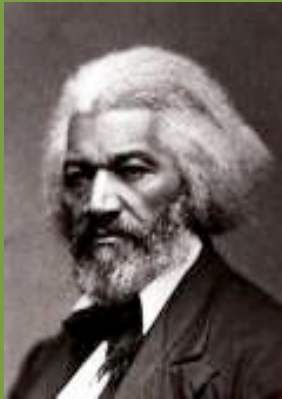


Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld [ca. 1830], she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade 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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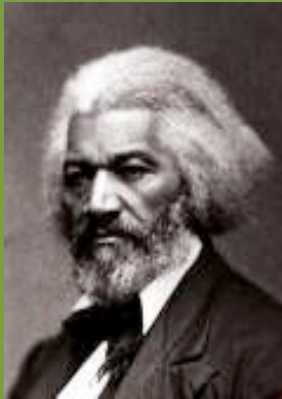


"If you give a n\_\_\_\_ an inch, he will take an ell. A n\_\_\_\_ should know nothing but to obey his master--to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best n\_\_\_\_ in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that n\_\_\_\_ (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. 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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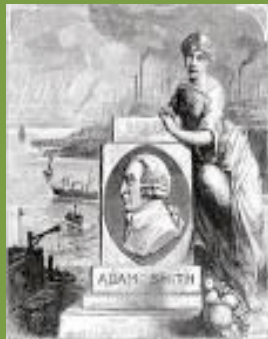
"These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. ...I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, 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*



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

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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.



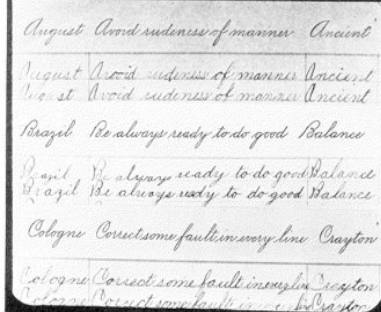
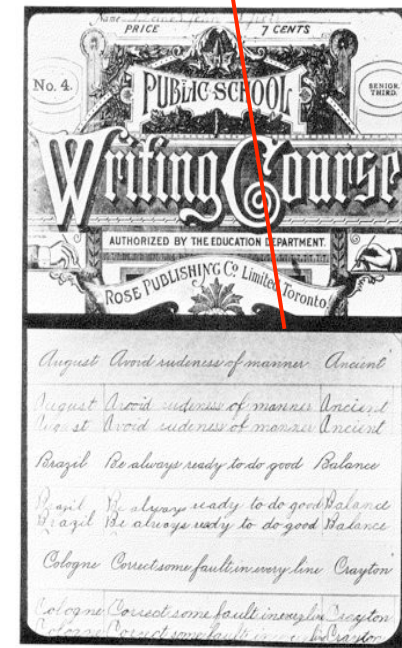
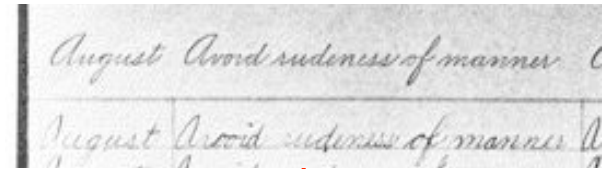
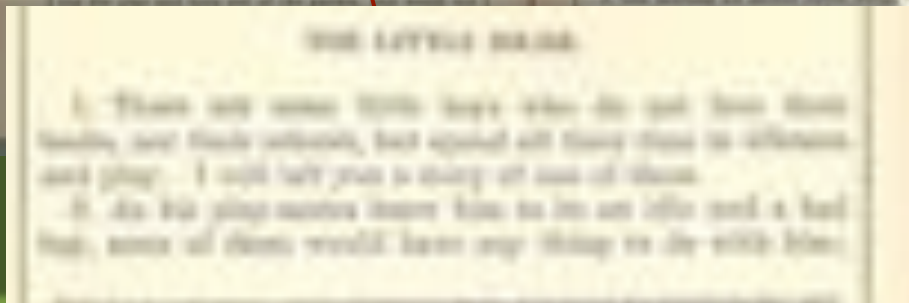
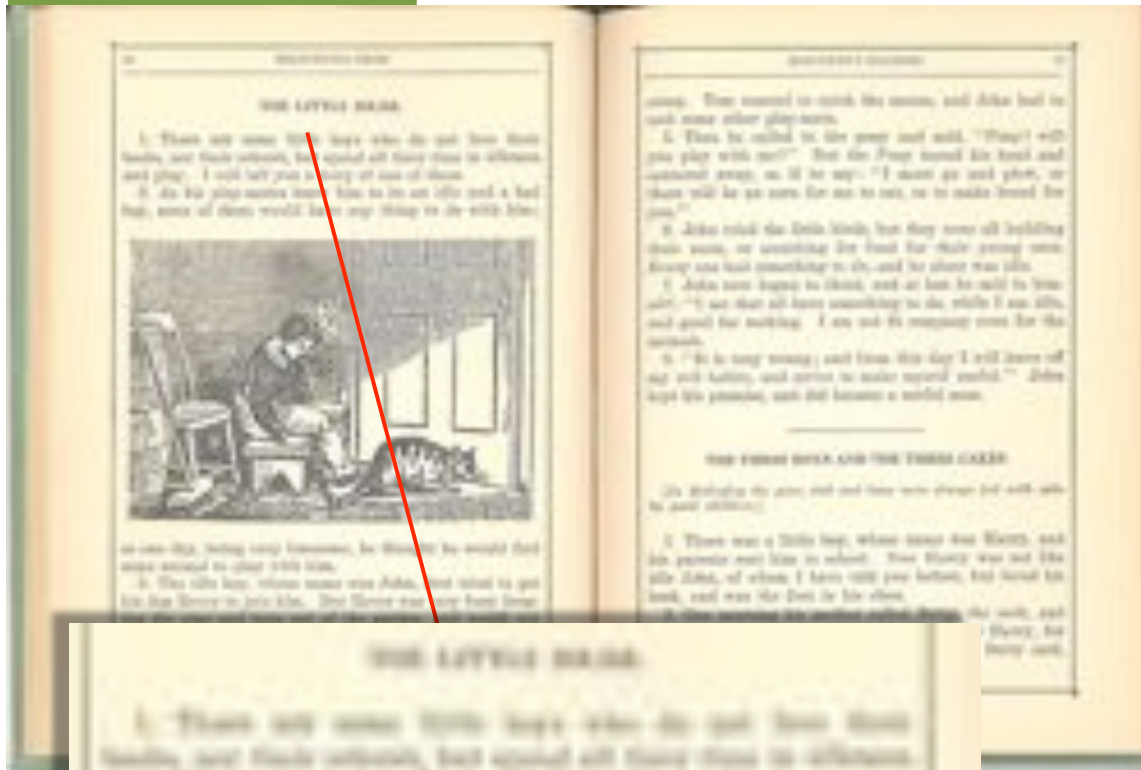
"Those who have been accustomed to exercise their minds by reading and studying... have greater docility and quickness in applying themselves to work [and] greater appetite, dexterity or ingenuity in comprehending ordinary processes." Horace Mann, 1849.







# Emphasis on Moral Advantages of Literacy Instruction



Learning the moral base of literacy by practicing cursive.



# “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





# The achievement of black literacy

Rise in black literacy after Civil War: from 5-10% to ca. 50%  
60% by 1900 +1870

Literacy as a "coveted possession"





## Literacy as "a good in itself"

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

Invention of the word *literacy*

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.



# 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.

Eggerton Ryerson, Chief Superintendant of Education for Upper Canada, 1849



# Socio-Economic Benefits of Literacy?

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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





# The Spelling Bee: the oral culture of literacy

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

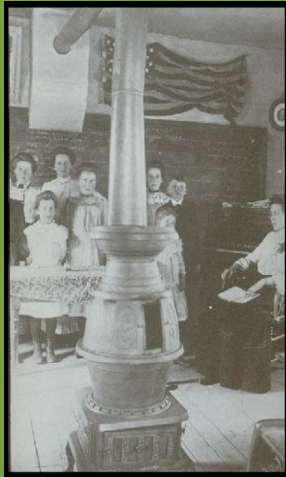
Winning words from Scripps National Spelling Bee in decade following 1925: *promiscuous*, *intelligible*, *fracas*, *gladiolus*, *knack*.

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





# 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

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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

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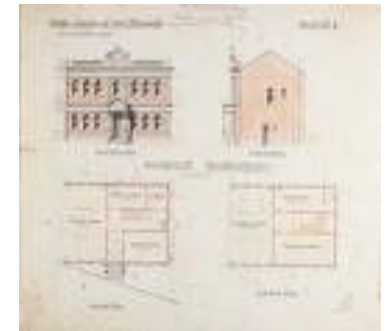
# The Growth of Public Libraries



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

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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. Toulmouche



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

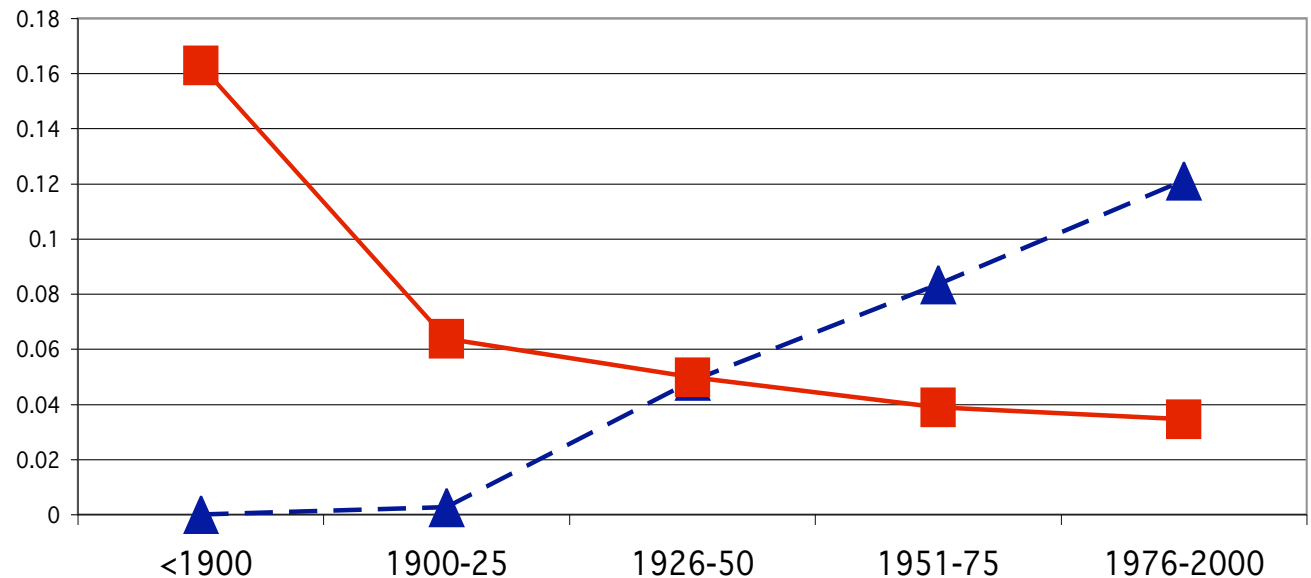
"Go to the nearest Carnegie Library and examine its catalog of books. The chances are five to one that you will find the place full of literary bilge and as bare of good books as a Boston bookshop." H. L. Mencken, 1928





# The Triumph of "Literacy": 1900-2000

Frequencies of *literate* and *cultured* in JSTOR  
Journals in Education and Language and Literature  
( normalized for corpus size)





# 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, and this involves a great deal of teaching of elementary literacy, neglected at present in the lower schools except in the verbal subjects. "The Bennington Idea," Lewis Webster Jones, *Jrnl. Ed. Soc.*, 1947

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

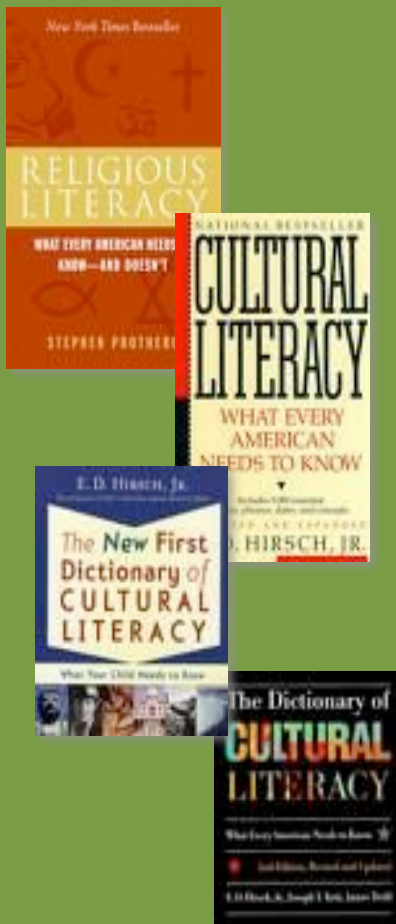


# Extension of “Literacy” to Other Fields

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

What [Jeanne S. Chall] calls world knowledge I call cultural literacy, namely, 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, getting the point, grasping the implications, relating what they read to the unstated context which alone gives meaning to what they read.

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





## 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, necessary to economic growth, personal betterment, critical thinking, and the health of public discourse.

"Literacy" makes the state responsible for teaching basic skills.



# 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. Any society committed to individual freedom and democratic government must ensure the free flow of information to all its citizens in order to protect personal liberties and to guard its future.

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





# The Birth of “Information Literacy”

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## **Achieving social & economic equality**

It is unfortunate that 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”

## **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)