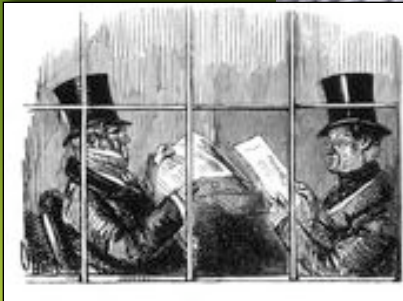




# The Rise of Literacy

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**Geoff Nunberg**  
History of Information  
IS 103 March 1, 2012



## Essay in lieu of midterm

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Students can ask to submit a paper instead of a midterm exam. This paper will be a 2000 word essay in response to one of a list of essay questions. We will provide a list of topics on March 1 and, if you wish to write an essay, you must let us know in writing which one you propose to write by March 8. We will let you know if you may proceed by March 10. The paper is due at 9 a.m. on the morning of the midterm (March 22). If you do not submit by that time, you should take the midterm exam, which starts at 9:30.



# Essay in lieu of midterm

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Choose one topic from a, b, or c and write a 2,000 word essay in response:

(a) "Many, if not most, of the cultural phenomena of the modern world derive from [the 18th century] — the periodical, the newspaper, the novel, the journalist, the critic, the public library, the concert, the public museum. Perhaps most important of all, it was then that 'public opinion' came to be recognized as the ultimate arbiter in matters of taste and politics."—Tim Blanning, *The Culture of Power*.

Choose ONE example, either from Blanning's list or from other seventeenth- or eighteenth-century developments mentioned in the class, and argue how the cultural phenomena came about. Consider key technologies, people, places and social institutions that might have been critical to the cultural phenomena. Finally, argue about the significance of the cultural phenomena you have chosen to the history of information: Does the story that you have outlined support a technologically deterministic history of information?



## Essay in lieu of midterm

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Choose one topic from a, b, or c and write a 2,000 word essay in response:

(b) Pick any of the information technologies that we have made the topic of a class up to this point in the semester, and use it to support either Heilbroner's or Williams's arguments. For whichever one you chose, be sure to include the arguments about that technology that were included in the reading for that day.

OR

(c) Assume that Phaedrus came to Socrates not with a scroll but a printed book. Write the ensuing dialog as Socrates contemplates the effect of the printing press on society.



## Itinerary: 3/1

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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

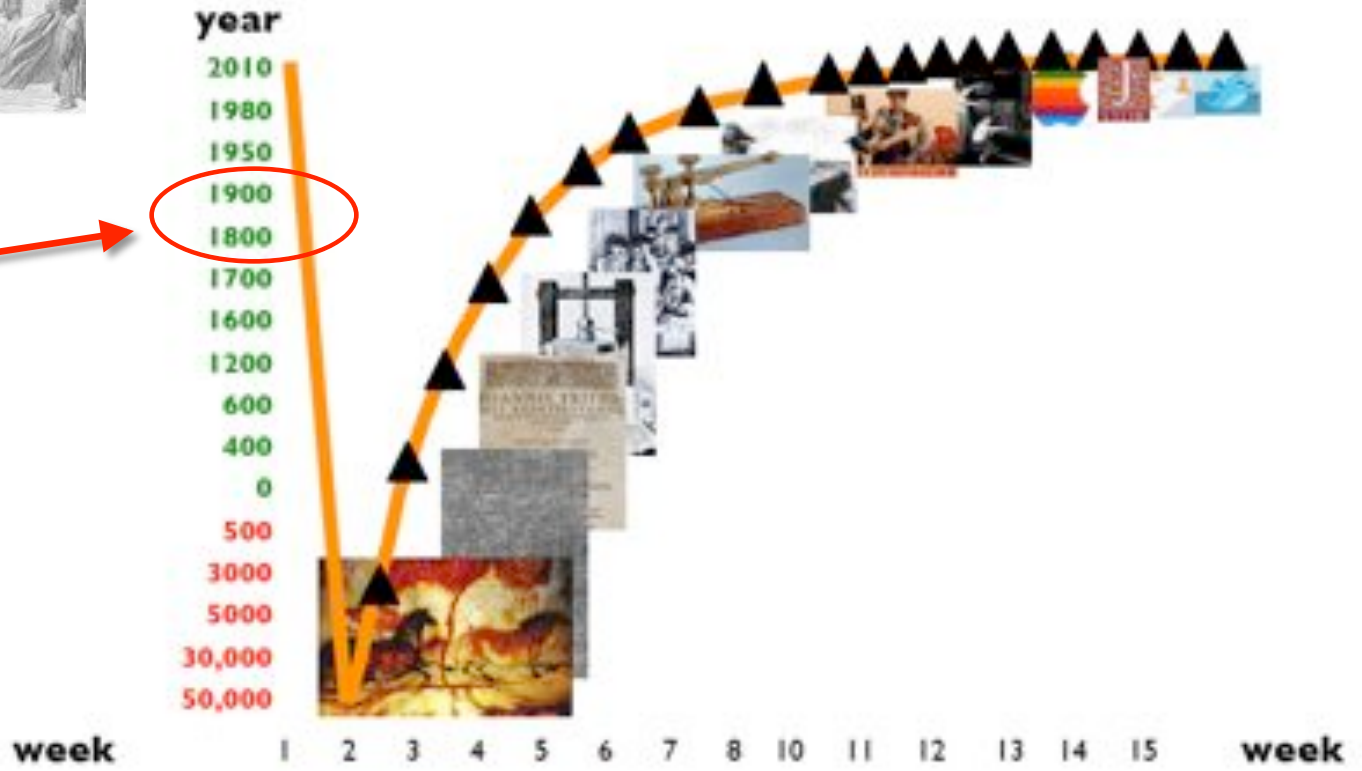
The future of literacy



# Where We Are



Figure 2. "Forbidden Fruit," an 1865 engraving after a painting by A. Tadmor.





# 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

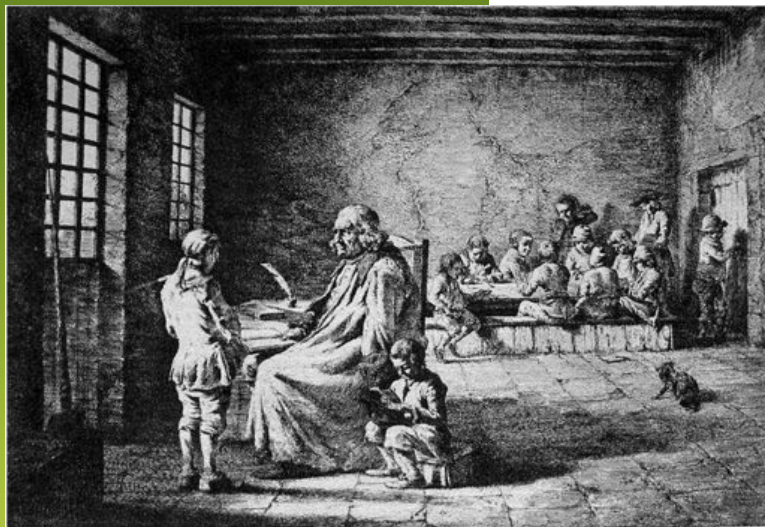
Some reading, writing, use of numbers

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 "signature literacy" -- why?

Complicating the notion of "literacy rates."

Range of social functions requiring literacy:

What do people need literacy for?





# "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"

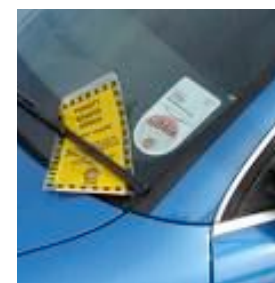
What does "functional literacy" entail in modern America?

How did you use your literacy today?



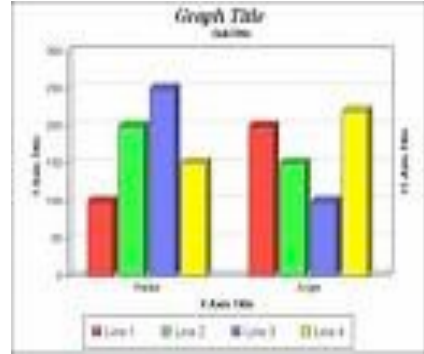
# "Functional Literacy"

How did you use your literacy today?



# "Functional Literacy"

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.





# Group Literacy in the Modern World



Form 8283		Noncash Charitable Contributions		OMB No. 1545-0047	
Department of the Treasury		Internal Revenue Service		Form 8283-09	
Use this form to report noncash charitable contributions made during the year for which you are filing this return.		If you are filing a joint return, both spouses must sign the form.		Do not check this box unless you are filing a joint return.	
This form is required if you contributed property other than cash to any qualified organization during the year for which you are filing this return.		Section 170(e) of the Internal Revenue Code may limit the amount of noncash contributions you can deduct in a tax year.		See the instructions for more information.	
Part I Information on Recipient Organization		Part II Information on Contribution		Part III Other Information	
1. Name of the organization (Print or type name of the organization.)		2. Description of the property contributed (Print or type description of the property.)		3. Date of the contribution	
4. EIN of the organization		5. Fair market value of the property as of the date of the contribution		6. Method of valuation (See instructions.)	
7. Acquisition date of the property		8. Date of the contribution		9. Date of the valuation	
10. Fair market value of the property as of the date of the contribution		11. Method of valuation (See instructions.)		12. Date of the valuation	
13. Date of the contribution		14. Date of the valuation		15. Date of the valuation	
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118. Date of the valuation		119. Date of the valuation		120. Date of the valuation	





# The Growth of Literacy

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# Factors influencing the growth of literacy

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Social stratification

Job opportunity

Religion

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...

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

196

An Old World and a New World

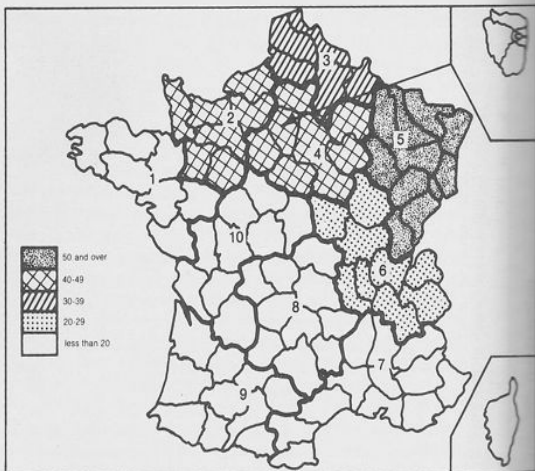


Figure 6.2. Proportion of Signatures on Marriage Registers (Men and Women), 1740-1789  
Source: Houdaille, "Les signatures," p. 69.

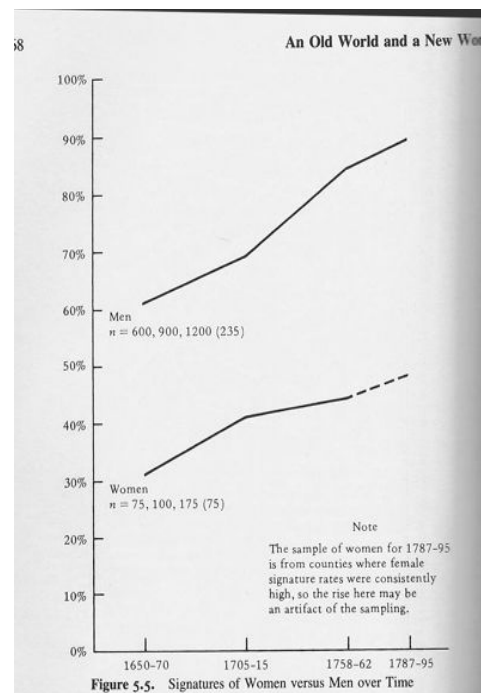
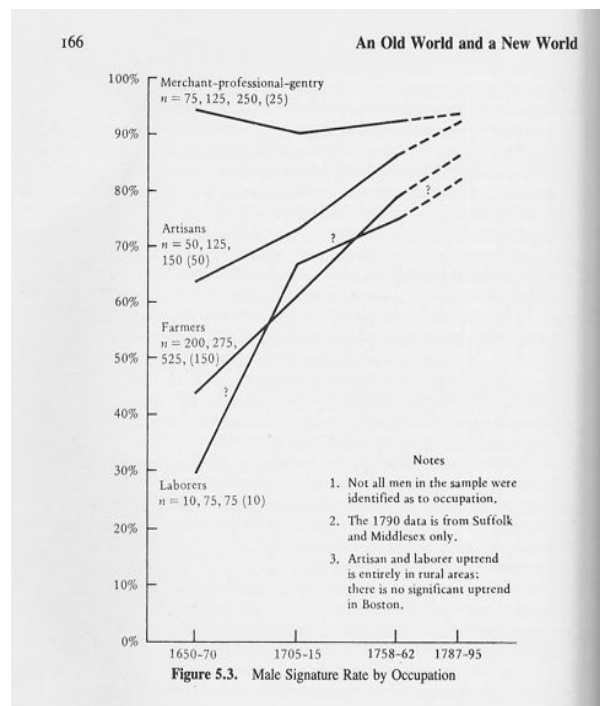
"une France double"



# 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

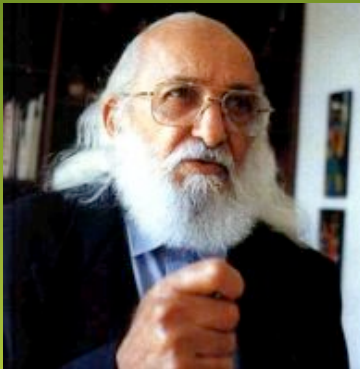
## Conflicting views of literacy:

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 *pasquili* ("pasquinades")





# Rise of the Radical Press

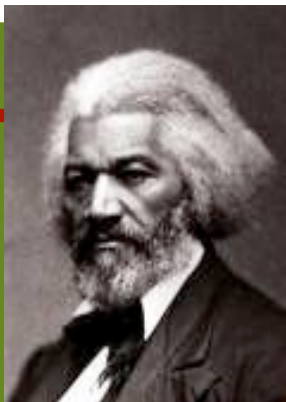
William Cobbett's *Political Register* in Britain achieves 44,000 weekly circulation in 1816 (as pamphlet, to avoid 4d. newspaper tax).

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

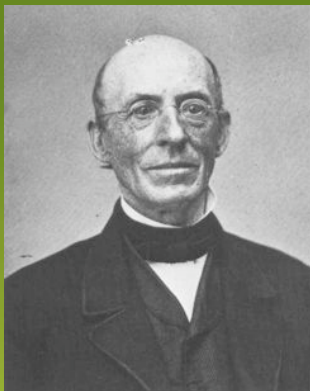


Print of Peterloo Massacre, 1819 pub. By Carlile





Frederick Douglass



Wm. Lloyd Garrison

## The radical press

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.



HORRID MASSACRE IN VIRGINIA.

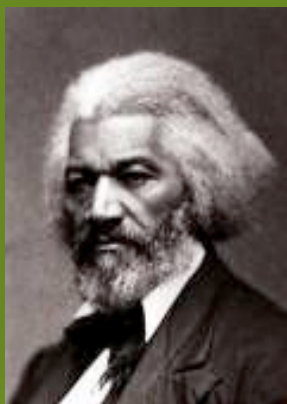


The scenes which the above Plate is designed to represent are—1. A White intruding into the house of his children—2. Mr. Turner, a white man, being killed by the blacks—3. Mr. Turner, who bravely defended himself, but with unequal success—4. A group of several Negroes in possession of the blacks.



## 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

---



"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*



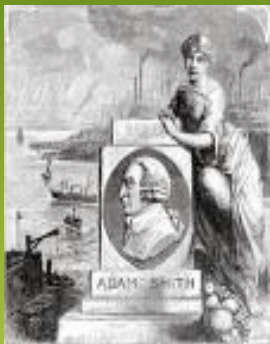
# Literacy as an instrument of "moral improvement" and social control



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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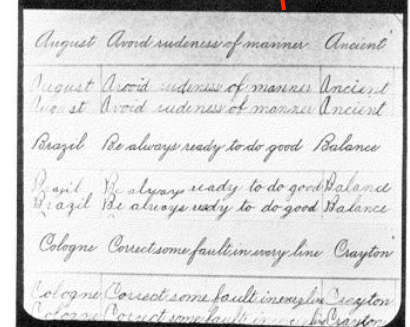
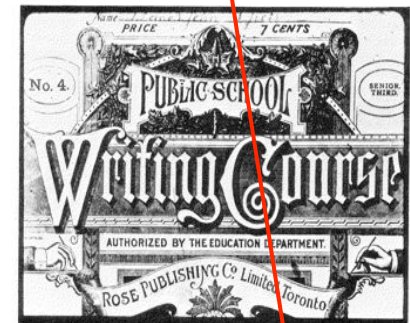
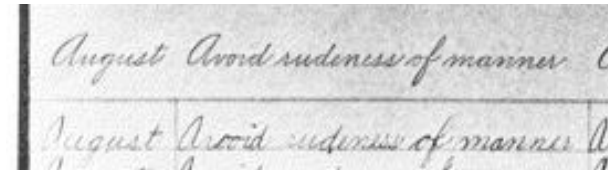
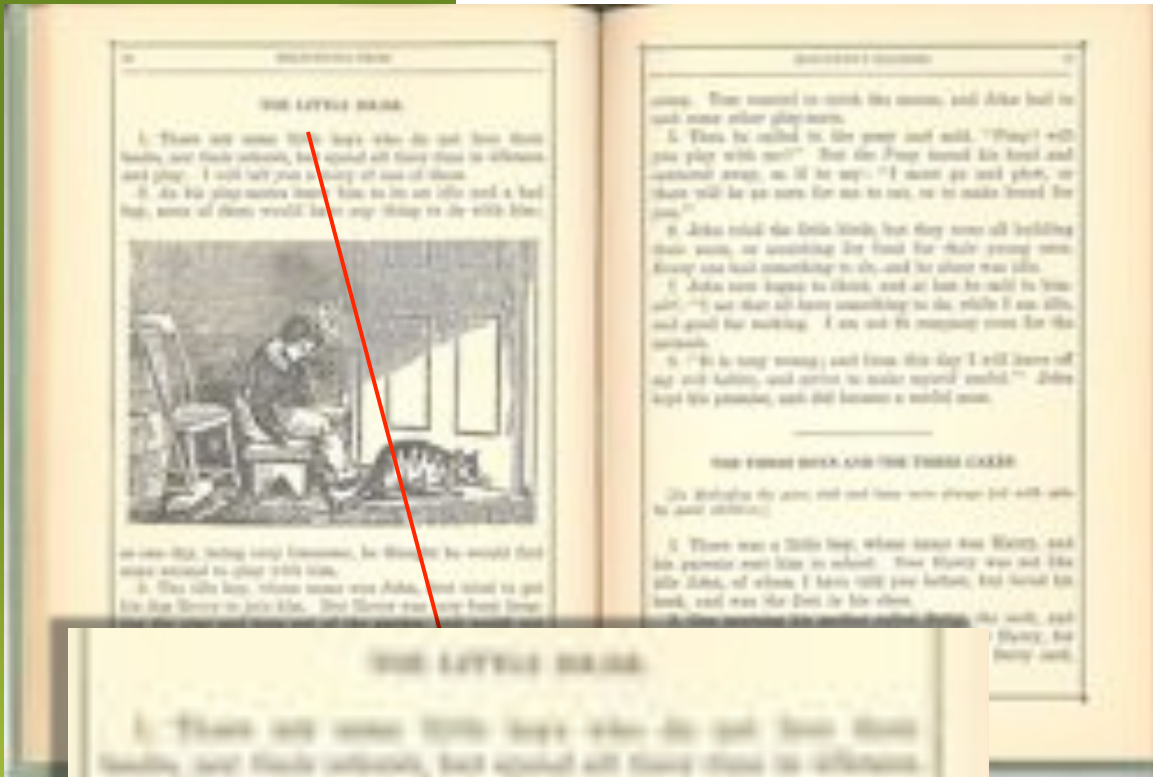


"Those who have been accustomed to exercise their minds by reading and studying... have greater docility and quickness in applying themselves to work [and] greater appetite, dexterity or ingenuity in comprehending ordinary processes." Horace Mann, 1849.





# Emphasis on Moral Advantages of Literacy Instruction



Learning the moral basis of literacy by practicing cursive handwriting.



# “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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## 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.

Egerton Ryerson, Chief Superintendent 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.

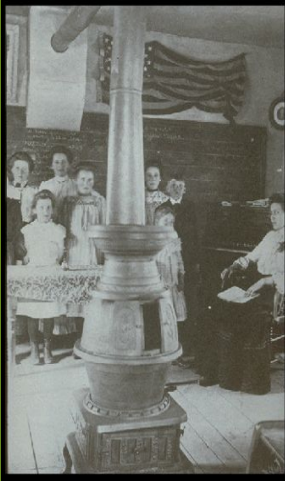
"The literate English farm labourer of the late eighteenth century fared no better (and possibly even worse, due to the prejudices of his employer) than his illiterate companion." Laurence Stone

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





# The Spelling Bee: the oral culture of literacy



"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



"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*.





# 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



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





# Extension of “Literacy” to Other Fields

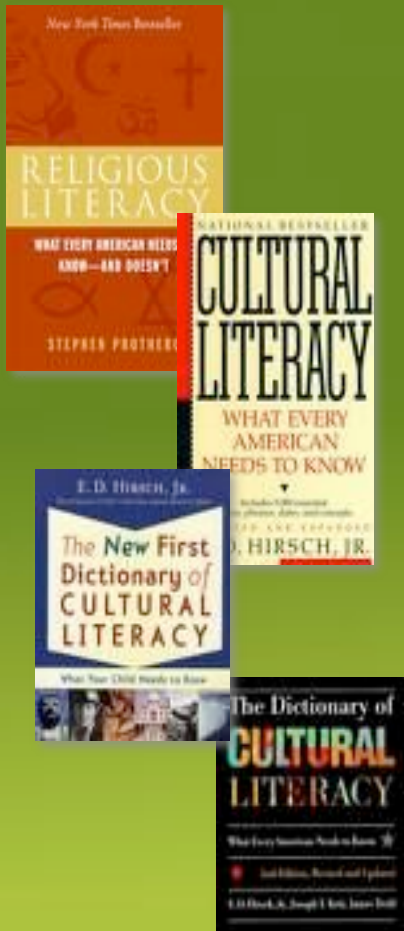
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[Bennington promotes] the development of literacy in all the important aspects of our cultural heritage. This does not mean merely verbal literacy. ... Bennington is attempting the uphill task of including the nonverbal disciplines of art and science.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

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



# 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, 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, for which the state should assume responsibility

Literacy is necessary to

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





# 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”

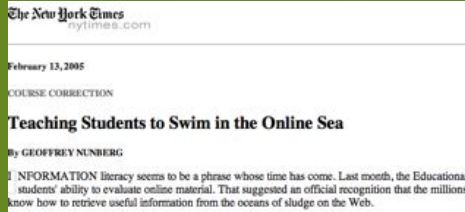
## **Achieving social & economic equality**

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”



## 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)



## Assignment for 3/6

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The two newspaper articles present cases for and against the recognition of international copyright in the United States. Which argument is the most convincing? Which most in keeping with the spirit of copyright as set out in the Statute of Anne, the US constitution, and the first US Federal copyright law of 1790? [Note, in 1842 US copyright was actually controlled by a law of 1831, but I'm not going to ask you to read that as well. If you want to, you may use that instead of 1790. You can find it at [copyrighthistory.org](http://copyrighthistory.org)]