

Zach Boyle

Theory of Writing Paper

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I've always taken being literate for granted. I assumed that it was something that through good parenting and schooling I gained in my early years and would never have to concern myself with again. But I've come to learn that literacy has a far more broad definition than I first thought. Literacy can cover competence within any specified area of knowledge. Some are highly specialized, and can't reasonably be expected of any given person. But some are highly important in that they are essential in order to be an engaged and capable person in society, while also not being skills that are taught in school. As the digital and media landscape has evolved so much in the past couple decades, can we reasonably expect everyone to keep up and remain literate in these different areas? Digital literacy is deeply complex and layered. So much of the discussion and education on the topic focuses on basic cognition and practical skills—and while this obviously presupposes all other digital literacy, it barely scratches the surface, especially upon consideration of the broader societal repercussions. A form of digital literacy that is more societally consequential would be the ability to source information online and be able to evaluate its veracity. The importance of this skill can't be understated, and as I'll discuss further, we have yet to find a good method of teaching this.

One of the main issues facing those attempting to garner digital literacy, especially older generations, is that there are no required formal teaching processes in place to

help them become literate. They are forced to get up to speed primarily through acquisition, not actually learning, a distinction made by James Paul Gee (Gee, 20). Gee points out that acquisition is the process of acquiring something purely through exposure and a process of trial and error. Whereas learning is a process involving conscious knowledge gained through teaching. Baby Boomers and Generation X grew up in a world that relied far less heavily on technology. Any formal education that they received that pertained to technology would largely be rendered useless today, simply because of the rate at which technology has advanced. The fortunate few may have been working in a field that adopted computer and digital technology early, or they saw the writing on the wall early and realized the importance of staying up to date with technology. However, those who resisted the massive boom in computers and technology during the late 1990's and early 2000's would now find themselves living in a world where more advanced, more complex versions of the technology they initially resisted is now ubiquitous, and impossible to ignore. If they're lucky, these people will have the resources to learn the practical skills required to navigate this technology. Often these resources are children, or technologically savvy friends, or simply programs or classes that offer guidance and support. None of these resources can be taken for granted, however. It's entirely possible that someone may find themselves without access to these means of learning. This exposes the lack of educational infrastructure to support people in becoming digitally literate. What are the consequences of this? Those that lack practical ability to use computers or smartphones will find themselves at a severe disadvantage if attempting to gain employment, I couldn't imagine attempting to seek a job without utilizing the Internet as a major tool in not only finding opportunities, but promoting myself as a viable candidate. A *Pew Research Center* study from 2016 placed 14 percent of U.S. adults

in this category, labeling them as “The Unprepared” (Horrigan). The demographics of this group were primarily women aged 50 and older, they generally came from lower income households, and had lower levels of formal education. This is an exceptionally difficult spot to find oneself in, and often it only propels already tough circumstances in one's life. Up to this point we have failed to provide adequate support to those that lack this sort of literacy, and many people's response may be an unforgiving one, arguing that it's not the role of government or other institutions to promote digital literacy. However the societal implications of these individual shortcomings can loom large.

The election of Donald Trump was confounding to many Americans. The resulting head scratching and attempts to diagnose the cause have dominated much of the media discourse over the past two years. One of the most popular narratives that has caught wind is that many voters were misguided by false news stories that were propagated online. Much of the blame for this has been directed at those that are actively promoting the false news stories for gain, or abstract villains like Vladimir Putin, but our inability to discern truth from lies online deserves far more attention. On the Internet it's so easy to be caught in your own bubble and consume enough content littered with falsehoods that you begin to believe that everything else is incorrect. Baby Boomers and Generation X never received a great deal of media and information education, likely because it was seen as unnecessary as the media they were exposed to was so much more limited. But in our contemporary world these people are faced with a litany of news sources on the Internet whose veracity is increasingly difficult to verify. When dealing with highly divisive issues and people are more inclined to want to read pieces that reinforce their existing world view, the ingredients

for people falling victim to “fake news” all begin to fall into place. This issue now being intertwined with politics is especially dangerous upon consideration of the fact that there may be a party which has a vested interest in people being misled by the media, and untrusting of traditional media sources. This is where the “politics of literacy” that was discussed by Deborah Brandt in her piece titled *Literacy in American Lives* become far more relevant (Brandt, 147). It’s essential that this issue be addressed through public education as quickly as possible, that measures are implemented to help those who lack digital literacy immediately.

The United States faces additional barriers in dealing with the problem, as freedom of speech and freedom of information are placed on such a high pedestal in American culture. France, for example, passed a law that prevents “fake news” from being published if the courts determine it necessary (Young). It’s extremely difficult to foresee this happening in America, so the issue must be tackled from the other side—by providing citizens with the skills to determine the veracity of news reports.

So what can be done to increase digital literacy? How can older generations be reached and educated? Enforced formal education programs for those beyond high-school age simply don’t exist, and likely never will. Consequently, the issue must be addressed from two different directions. Firstly, those currently going through the education system need to receive a focused digital education that ensures that they’re not only ready to combat technology today—but also any future advancements in technology. This begins with encouraging students to develop a “postcritical” stance toward technology. Meaning that they become significantly more questioning of the role that computers play in their lives—not simply accepting them as a norm—but instead asking how we wish to employ these tools for good, rejecting the idea that

their default setting is one of benevolence (Selber). The earlier that students are encouraged to be skeptical of anything related to digital culture and computers, the more enabled they are to take this technology and turn it into a legitimate force of good. This directly translates into the best method of addressing the lack of digital literacy for older generations—that being regulation. The same critical approach being taught to students must be applied to the Internet. As a result of the 1st amendment, this can't be done legally; it must involve Internet companies taking responsibility for the content shared on their platforms and implementing processes that prevent misinformation being spread. I believe this can only be done in conjunction with the revamp of the education system previously mentioned. It is not until we take a uniformly postcritical stance on technology that this becomes realistic. Promote a questioning attitude toward technology, and allow it to filter through to the major companies older generations rely on for information.

The importance of digital literacy can't be understated. Technology continues to play a greater role in our lives and if we fail to remain literate we will not only face severe personal consequences, but societally the downfall could be catastrophic as well. It's well accepted at this point that in order to be a functioning member of modern society, literacy is required. In order for our relationship with technology to be positive and not ultimately harmful, this must become the case with digital literacy also. It should be prioritized by all, promoted beginning with the education system, ensuring that all children feel capable of not only using digital technology, but feeling confident that they're not falling victim to those looking to deceive and hurt them through technology.

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