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Can't We All Get Along? Content, Technology and the Battle for Literacy

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Abstract

The rise of the internet and various forms of online communication has given rise to concerns about what online writing and reading might mean for the future of traditional literacy. This essay examines the concept of literacy and understanding, and the arguments and research surrounding traditional and online literacy with the goal of harmonizing the major arguments in the field. Ultimately it appears attempts to define online literacy by the habits of traditional literacy are unhelpful. Online literacy is a hybrid that combines traditional literacy with the speed and feedback of oral literacy.

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In war, it is said, the first casualty is truth. The United States—and, in fact, the world—is not quite involved in a war on literacy and understanding, though there is a battle underway. This battle is one of competing ideas and visions for the future of reading, comprehension and what passes as knowledge. The rise of digital media has resulted in an unsettled landscape that is creating uncertainty about how our literacy-based culture and its longstanding philosophical underpinnings can survive. Some believe the future may be grim (Bauerlein, 2009), others see the future as bright (Chandler-Olcott, 2009), and still others believe the future will be an admixture of traditional literacy and some new habits and modes of thought (Agger, 2010).

The history of communication transformation has often been accompanied by great hopes and equally great skepticism. One of the early mass media breakthroughs—the telegraph—promised "a revolution in moral grandeur" (Czitrom, 1982). Communication scholar Daniel Czitrom notes this same technology led some to conclude that rapidly disseminated, short messages would result in "a debauch of the intellect…this perpetual dissipation of the mind" (Czitrom, 1982, p. 19) among those who gave themselves over to the new technology. Centuries earlier, vicar and academic fellow Robert Burton looked over the cultural landscape as the printing press poured forth book after book. Burton's assessment: "We are oppressed with (books), our eyes with reading, our fingers with turning" (Agger, 2010).

As technology expands and makes new applications to communication, researchers and thinkers are in agreement on one general point: the use of online information as a primary source for news and information will impact literacy and understanding among those who use this media regularly. The question to be addressed in this study is if it is the *content* presented

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in an online context or if it is *the nature of the online media* itself that provides the greater impact on understanding and literacy skills.

Before beginning, it is worth a moment to provide definitions for two terms used in this section that will be used throughout the paper—literacy and understanding. If someone wishing to analyze defines literacy as simple reading and writing it will be hard to come to any meaningful distinction between the use of the so-called traditional media (like books) and electronic media. The reason for this is that each media requires the ability to read and this is supported by the ability to write, so that media users can recognize and take into account grammatical conventions as they read (Malloy, 2006).

"Literacy," then is defined as the ability to read and write, and using that ability to collect general knowledge. "Understanding" is the mental processing and synthesizing of information.

Understanding is important because it reflects the outcome of literacy (Bortins, 2010). The purpose of literacy is to achieve some outcome; perhaps it is to develop engaged citizens, perhaps it is to obtain some practical knowledge that permits one to achieve a specific task, or it may be to provide hints about how one is to act in certain cultural contexts. Both of these things together—literacy and understanding—work to create socially functional individuals (Bortins, 2010).

CONTENT

One of the primary struggles in the battle over literacy centers on content. More specifically, is the act of reading online a literary endeavor? The reason this question gets

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asked is due to the opinion that creating articles and information on the web is substantively different from creating articles and information on paper (Chaouli, 2005).

The rise of social networks—Facebook is now at the top of the list of the world's most visited sites on the web (Doubleclick, 2010)—has been advanced as evidence that the quick, informal style of messaging and posting is a 180-degree departure from the slower, more deliberative type of writing on paper. Ken Pugh, a cognitive scientist, says writing and reading these "fractured messages" has an impact on how well online users develop literacy skills and understanding (Rich, 2008).

> Taking the time to ruminate and make inferences and engage the imaginational processing is more cognitively enriching, without a doubt, than the short little bits you might get if you're in the 30-second digital mode. (Rich, 2008)

Critics of the digital realm as the future of literacy also point to two related ideas—the first is that research shows that "internet reading" is a bit of a misnomer; and the second is that good thinking and good writing are connected. Research by web usability guru Jakob Nielsen shows there appears to be little true reading on the internet. Instead, readers are better called content scanners who zip through page after page of text. The result, critics say, is that those who read online do not encode information so that it eventually becomes embedded as understanding (Nielsen, 2006; Kelleher, 2010). Without this information, the content generated by these individuals is shallow because they cannot or do not think deeply (Kelleher, 2010). The result is a concern that the online environment is not conducive to building or extending literacy.

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One of the difficulties of discussing literacy in an online environment is the many different types of "writing" or "reading" that take place. Critics tend to point to texting and the breezy, informal tone of social networks as one of the major forces undermining literacy (Kelleher, 2010). The research in this area is developing, but at this time it seems as if texting, messaging, social networking and so forth is a supplemental manner of communication instead of a primary one (Ito, 2010). In one of the more extensive studies available, Danah Boyd finds that youth mostly use online media "…as another method to connect with friends and peers in a way that is seamless with their everyday lives" (Ito, 2010, p.84). We will not spend a great deal of time in this area because texting and "writing" or "reading" on social networks seems akin to placing a quick call to a friend. Its purpose is short, utilitarian information exchange, not creative, expressive, or deeper information exchange. We wish to focus on the latter type of content in this essay.

One of the top content-based concerns about the digital environment is that users of the media are no longer getting vetted, quality writing of the type that often comes through print (Wallis, 2008). Instead people seem to value the ease of obtaining information over the quality of the information (Baildon, 2009). An article in the New York Times describes online reading as an "…enemy of reading—diminishing literacy, wrecking attention spans and destroying a precious…culture that exists only through the reading of books" (Rich, 2008) and in traditional print.

However, the same article describes people who regularly read online stories—some as long as 45 pages—for leisure (Rich, 2008). The problem, for those involved in traditional literary education, is that the content is elliptical and the stories may contain spelling and grammatical errors. As award-winning writer David McCullough said, "Learning is not to be

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found on a printout. It's not found at the touch of a finger. Learning is acquired mainly from books, and most readily from great books" (Rich, 2008).

One question that is not often examined in the back-and-forth about digital content is how much it varies from its print-based counterpart. There are two approaches to this question—a side-by-side comparison of content (at least as much as is possible in a short study such as this) and a look at actual writing practices between print and online.

The research on side-by-side content seems to indicate that a good deal of online content parallels that of the print world. Individuals seeking an old book that no longer has copyright protection may be able to find a complete copy online (Project Gutenberg, 2010; Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d.). Those seeking news will often find the content they access online is the same as the content in the print version.

A large, multi-nation examination of content shows that online news content in the United States, United Kingdom, Russia, France and Germany tends to mirror the content in the traditional media (Quandt, 2008). Where there are differences, the media tend to add occasional links or perhaps a little extra print content, though overall the package is deemed "underwhelming" and a sign that there is a strong status quo in the news and information business (Quandt, 2008). Added to this, Quandt found, is that the topical content also holds close to cultural expectations for the rest of the media. For example, German websites (as with similar websites and print media within the country) tend to cover more economic news, sports and culture. The French are heavy on domestic and international political news. The United States and Russia are crime heavy (Quandt, 2008). The bottom line to these findings is that the so-called digital revolution did not happen, at least as it involves content. Indeed, Quandt writes that online information is basically what is found in offline sources; major

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information outlets are not "making use of the World Wide Web's potential for new types of writing, producing, linking and interacting. It seems highly likely they just want their usual news—fast and reliably" (Quandt, 2008, p. 735).

A quick examination of the 100 most-visited websites reveals that about a third of them are communication-based news, blogging or sites that permit or require some sort of active literacy-based skill, such as writing, reading for enrichment or communicating with others (Doubleclick, 2010). This gives support to the claim of educator Judy Gregory, who argues that all the talk about the fundamental differences between literacy-based content generation in print and online is overdone (Gregory, 2004).

The reason they are overdone, she claims, is due to an unfounded focus on the media (print versus digital) instead of on genre (Gregory, 2004). For example, she points out that online writing tips like writing 50 percent shorter for online than for print; writing for scannability; writing for restless readers; and chunking writing all have well-accepted antecedents within print writing. Gregory claims a good many of the issues between print and online literacy can be harmonized if we understand the goal of the genre for which we are writing. For example, she sets forth the idea that print writing and television writing—which once were at odds—now coexist peacefully once writing for broadcast was understood as its own genre.

If Quandt's and Gregory's analysis is sound, then some of the concern about online readers losing a sense of connection to a common culture found through print may be unnecessary (Grohol "Internet Use," 2004; Baum & Groeling, 2008). If there is a reasonable consistency of content between print and online, it seems logical to argue that there is a larger common store of ideas that would expose consumers of information to similar ideas,

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interpretations and explanations. This tendency is further amplified upon examining research about how readers select online content.

Online readers tend to approach the digital product in much the same way as they do the print product, looking for cues as to what information is important to know. It appears as if very few online users surf widely (Tewksbury "What do Americans Know?" 2003). In print products, people are directed to important information by headline use or where it sits on the page (Thorson, 2008). Important online content is highlighted by the use of various "news recommendation engines" that provide readers with lists of stories that are tagged as "most popular," "most e-mailed," or "most viewed" (Thorson, 2008). This public endorsement effect tends to have the result of granting a story greater credibility—these recommendation engines tend to be seen by readers as independent (which is to say free from an obvious vested interest) and are perceived as being agenda free (Thorson, 2008).

One added benefit of online information is that news has a longer shelf life than it does in print. Thorson found that about half of the articles in her research remained on the "most popular" list for more than one day. This means information remains public longer, permitting more people to access common ideas while adding a different twist from traditional print media—a public endorsement. And online readers who regularly comment on news stories say they use endorsement engines (specifically the recommendations function) to learn what individuals in their specific digital environment are reading and thinking (Swidey, 2010).

The question that arises in this discussion, then, is *what* those who tend to get their information from online sources read. In this, it appears as if people use online media differently than print media. However, this is one of the points in current research that is not

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entirely clear. Some research says sports is the most popular online content within the news realm. Others claim it appears to be opinion and news.

Tewksbury ("What do Americans Know?" 2003) found that online readers self report that they have an interest in public affairs and are also more likely to report reading a newspaper or watching CNN or listening to radio. They are less likely to watch network and local television news. However, actual observation found that users of online news do not access public affairs news to the level of their self report. The observation found that about 25 percent of all page views were for sports, about twice as much as for any other single area.

Thorson's findings in her referral engines study indicate news and opinion are the most popular fare, while sports stories rarely showed up on the lists (Thorson, 2008). Her findings indicate "life-issue stories," stories that touch on personal or health matters, were among the most popular on the referral engines; and that stories that tended to take a counterintuitive look at issues tended to land on the list.

These findings are not the contradiction they may seem. The motivations of each of the groups studied are different. Tewksbury ("What do Americans Know?," 2003) finds that people tend to go online with a purpose. Rather than hunting for information, they gather it—and they know where they want to go to gather it. As a result, the individuals online regularly seek out the news they want, be it last night's score or some timely piece of information. These are rarely stories having the "wow" factor, and so they are not commonly recommended or e-mailed to people. Thorson's research has to do with how people are directed to content. The people in her study were more inclined to be led to interesting stories—and to learn what the community of online users thought important; they look to see

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what others have to say. This is nothing more than basic social proof theory at work (Cialdini, 2009).

This is a point that critics of online literacy should note. Tewksbury's finding provides support for the oft-cited view that online reading tends to make people narrower instead of wider (Bauerlein, 2009). In fact, research consulted for this study (Nie, 2010; Tewksbury "Audience Fragmentation", 2005) provided strong evidence that online media users tend to ingest those sources that fit their preconceived interest in a topic. However, Thorson's work indicates that the breadth of online content provides ample opportunity for users to come in contact with new sources or ideas deemed useful or important by the community. This is similar to flipping through a magazine and being drawn into an article we would not have otherwise read. There seems to be reasonable evidence that people are drawn into content they would have ignored in print because it is recommended by a friend or by a search engine. Online, though, they may be exposed to it due to the free-flowing nature of content (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2008; Grohol "The Internet," 2006).

A study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project says that more than 60 percent of all Americans now get some of their news from the Internet, though 92 percent of respondents said they get their news from more than one type of media outlet (Gross, 2010). The same study also points out that for more and more people the act of getting news is now an interactive and social activity. Almost 40 percent of people who get news online reported that they have commented on a story they read, reported news or spread news using social networks (Gross, 2010). And to pick up on our earlier line of discussion, Pew found that eight of 10 online news users seek weather information, and 73 percent followed national news. A little more than half said they look for sports news, and 47 percent say they look for

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entertainment or celebrity news (Gross, 2010). Most of this news comes from established news and information entities.

As stated earlier, the theory that online media tends to isolate people may not be fully correct. It is true that media use in the digital realm is often solo, but the fact that the Pew survey found that nearly four of 10 people have communicated news, spread it or commented about it challenges the notion that digital media tends toward a narrow experience when compared with mainstream media (Nie, 2010). Shelley Boulianne, in a study examining how or if internet use affects social connection and engagement, found the very things reported by Pew increase "…the likelihood of finding a positive and larger effect of internet use on engagement. In other words, internet use may reduce the costs of participation (time and effort) by increasing the availability of information" (Boulianne, 2009, p. 205). Lowering barriers to entry makes it simpler for people to access, generate and respond to news.

This "placing of the cookies on the lower shelves" connects to a study done by William Eveland, Jr. that investigates if the medium through which an individual obtains their news content impacts understanding. It was expected that those who were a part of the study would be able to achieve greater recall of facts in the traditional media than in web media due to the fact that the more linear structure and greater content coherence fit better with mental processes (Eveland, 2002). Michel Chaouli goes a bit further in his argument about how understanding is derived in online stories. He writes "…some of the difficulties with reading hypertexts derive from the curtailment of interpretive freedom we experience when the text burdens us with cognitive demands, when, for example, it places the onus of determining the semantics of a link squarely on us" (Chaouli, 2005, p. 610).

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Eveland's research results showed that overall print newspapers and television produced more accurate recall of facts. But they also found something they were not fully looking for—that the web was superior to print newspaper and television in helping users structure information for retention in memory. Apparently the linear structure of print and broadcast allowed for greater immediate recall, but the fact that online news consumers were able to group several stories about the same general topic—and in a way that was under the control of the news user—aided recall.

This study does not cleanly fit with Nielsen's well-known work about how people read on the web. Nielsen reports that just 16 percent of people tended to read web pages word for word, but almost 80 percent of people scanned the pages (Nielsen "How Users Read on the Web," 1997). In his seminal work about how web pages are scanned, he provided samples of readable text—keywords, subheads, and bullet points. All are ways to increase readability on the web. These findings fit well with Eveland's first finding that recall of facts is greater in print and television than online due to the fact that broadcast is short and can be attended to for a time. Print requires some sustained attention and the relatively short column widths and short paragraphing allow for quick reading that rises above the type of scanning that exists on the web. In fact, it appears the addition of paragraphing and punctuation to the written word is one of the key elements in historical literacy (Agger, 2010).

However, the finding about structured knowledge seems not to fit with Nielsen. The reason is that Nielsen's studies, though sound and accepted, do not take into account information that is presented across different media types or that allows the reader to take the initiative to access certain information at certain points in the cognitive process. Baildon refers to this type of mental process as lateral thinking (Baildon, 2009).

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The ability to think about and to think through content laterally allows the individual to make mental connections that link information together. In the case of Eveland, this linked information would allow for greater recall due to the fact that the mental connections made bring greater attention to the task of reading, gathering information and applying the understanding that comes from that information (Eveland, 2002).

There is a great deal of content online written in a traditional way, that is, with standard use of grammar and punctuation and the conventions of literacy. The area we have focused on in this section of the paper falls into this category. Research does not provide any clear answer about how—or if—reading content online undercuts literacy and understanding. Some experts believe the two types of reading—in traditional print and online—require different skills and mental abilities, though the research is clear that some change to literacy and understanding is taking place. It is at this point where we begin to leave the discussion about content and consider if the nature of digital media might not provide a clearer answer about why a change to literacy and understanding is underway.

THE NATURE OF THE MEDIUM

Moving through online content—select just about any site at random—one can easily find writing done in a conventional format. It is true that there are media (phones and social networks, for example) where the writing is choppy, minimal and full of fairly indecipherable abbreviation. In the main, though, the writing is standard on the internet. It may not qualify as literary or academic, but this is also true of magazines and newspapers. There are many different forms of writing, but these forms tend to fall into the @ the introduction of details and other media into the text increased, instead of decreased, interaction with the information. When many images are given, though, there was lower recall.

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> It appears that the mental processes engaged when an individual invests more effort into encoding the text of a selected online news story are similar to mental processes engaged by encoding high-imagery radio ads. Both tasks appear to result in cardiac acceleration, which in theory, is due to more resources being allocated to retrieving information from long-term memory to aid encoding of the message. (Wise "Choosing and Reading," 2008, p. 82)

Wise draws the conclusion that the medium moves people to invest more effort into processing the information in the story they select. This is not in accord with the commonly held belief that links and multimedia might lead to information overload (Eveland, 2002; Chaouli, 2005). If we go back to Nielsen for a moment, one of his later studies shows that online readers scan pages in an F-shaped pattern (Nielsen "F-Shaped Pattern", 2006). Critics of internet-based education and knowledge gathering often cite this as evidence that online literacy encourages bad habits, thus resulting in bad outcomes (Bauerlein, 2009). What is overlooked in Nielsen's work is that the pages used to acquire this finding were a page of search-engine results, a product page on an e-commerce site, and a page that told about a corporate entity (Nielsen "F-Shaped Pattern," 2006). Despite what Nielsen claims, all his study shows is that people scan pages in which they may not have much interest. He does not demonstrate that all, or even most, pages are routinely scanned.

Wilson Lowrey and Kyun Soo Kim found that motivation plays a critical role in how accessing and retaining information takes place (Lowrey & Kim, 2009). If it is correct that a good deal of the information on the internet is similar to information in print, then it also stands to reason that reading outcomes and knowledge gathering would be somewhat similar

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as well. It is well known that readers scan print text, especially if they are searching for information or are assessing the interest or import of that information (Gregory, 2004).

> The idea that readers skip and skim and that we should, therefore, write for scannability isn't new. It appears in discussions about technical writing…in comments about Plain Language writing…and in discussions about professional writing. It also appears in discussions about motivated readers who ask questions of texts. (Gregory, 2004, p. 278)

The issue of motivation is important in considering the nature of literacy and understanding in the digital medium. As mentioned above, there are youth who are not greatly interested in reading books, but who will wade through 45-page stories or who will "…stay awake until 2 or 3 a.m. reading articles about technology or politics—his current passions—on up to 100 web sites" (Rich, 2008). Author Paul Wallis is a bit more pointed:

> The Net, ironically, involves a lot more physical reading, if not necessarily quality content reading. What's at issues are the values, and the arguments have now become more vague than ever…Why is it that teenagers, being hit by puberty, peer groups, youth culture, adolescent growth, the weird world of education, and the oncoming threat of higher education, are expected to become avid readers? People being driven into a state of terminal time management crisis are hardly likely to become enthusiastic readers. If they're not interested, why not? (Wallis, 2008)

The nature of the online reading environment allows for individuals to seek their interest(s). This creates a problem for those who highly regard traditional literacy because the freedom dilutes the pool of common literary knowledge. Wallis is correct, however, that there appears

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to be a great deal of reading and writing on the internet. Blogs and news sites dot the top 100 sites in terms of unique visitors (Doubleclick, 2010).

Another study by Wise found that online text augmented with a video tended to increase the retention of knowledge when it was attached to a story written in a narrative style (Wise "When Words Collide," 2009). This is a little counterintuitive when one considers the finding that knowledge retention was *not* aided by the simpler, more stripped down inverted pyramid form. What accounts for this? The author says interest, increased heart rate (which was present in those with higher retention), and experience with the subject matter were decisive factors. Kelly Chandler-Olcott finds the ability of individuals to follow personal interests, read, and take part in the digital community meets the definition of meaningful literacy (Chandler-Olcott, 2009). In a comment about the culture of Wikipedia, she writes:

> What I know is that s/he has assumed a writerly identity, learned the community's conventions and engaged in civil but direct conversations with others about improving online text for a particular purpose. What could be more consistent with the goals of literacy instruction? (Chandler-Olcott, 2009, p. 73)

There are some who believe interest and motivation is a critical element in literacy (Wallis, 2008) and in understanding (Agger, 2010). While there is good reason to applaud this, there is a concern that the a la carte nature of the online world may create disconnection that undermines the social capital of the digital environment. This is the concern that provides the impetus for the belief that the web will take away necessary social touchstones that flow from reading common texts (Rich, 2008). One study shows that online readers of public affairs/political news tend toward more extreme views, creating a strong small-group identity that can fragment culture (Tewksbury "Audience Fragmentation," 2005). These

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microcultures are possible because the economics of the digital world allow content to be disseminated cheaply, something traditional media cannot do (Nie, 2010). In fact, the Pew Internet and American Life Project finds that those who e-mail their friends or relatives at least once a week are 25 percent more likely to talk with them weekly by phone than those who are not connected digitally. Further, regular internet users tend to have a larger network of significant relationships—37 individuals compared to 30 for those who rarely or never use the internet (Grohol "The Internet," 2006). Harmonizing these studies, there is a strong suggestion that reading and communicating online tends toward the development of active community and interpersonal relationships.

THE WAY FORWARD

> What we are losing in this country and presumably around the world is the sustained, focused, linear attention developed by reading. I would believe people who tell me internet develops reading if I did not see such a universal decline in reading ability and reading comprehension on virtually all tests. (Dana Gioia, qtd. in Rich, 2008)

The concern about literacy in the digital age, to some extent, overlooks a larger trend. In 1983, well before the online world appeared, there was concern about decreasing reading and literacy. A national report, *A Nation at Risk*, found that 13 percent of all 17-year-olds in the United States were functionally illiterate; that average verbal scores on the SAT fell over 50 points between 1963 and 1980; achievement tests showed consistent declines in English; and many 17-year-olds did not have higher order intellectual skills, such as drawing correct inferences from written material (The National Commission, 1983). Traditional literacy has been a standard in crisis for some time (Bortins, 2010).

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In reading dozens of articles, briefs, columns, and research about digital and traditional literacy there was one great truth that was occasionally approached—and that truth is that traditional literacy and understanding and online literacy and understanding should not be examined in light of which is better and which is worse. Doing so frames the issue incorrectly. Online literacy is not better or worse, it is simply different (Agger, 2010). Throughout this work we caught glimpses of how content between the two areas varies—ranging from close vetting (Crook, 2006) to self-generated, self-published stories (Rich, 2008)—and how the content is similar (Gregory, 2004). We also considered the nature of the media, and in this we essentially see many differences in detail (Kelleher, 2010) between the two—such as print's tendency to draw people together in a large community and digital's tendency to allow people to self select their community (Barone & Wright, 2008).

So to answer the question posed at the beginning of this essay—is it digital content or the nature of the online environment that has a greater impact on literacy? Given the fact that a good deal of digital content is similar to—or the same as—print content, it does not seem as if the greatest impact comes from the content online. It is the nature of the technology—the instant dissemination, the ability to easily seek content of interest, the ability to create—that is providing the challenge to traditional literacy.

We are in the midst of a paradigm change. Arguments, such as those in the quote that opened this section and by Mark Bauerlein in the book *The Dumbest Generation* are worth hearing, but they miss a fundamental point—trying to analyze digital literacy and understanding by applying the standards of traditional literacy will misrepresent the things that make each worthwhile. The works consulted for this study take it for granted that many people today are not reading books, and fewer are reading the Great Books (Rich, 2008). This

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does not mean people are not reading at all. Individuals are picking up books and reading them—total United States print book sales in 2009 were 724 million, down a bit from 2008 in a tough economic year (Flamm, 2009). It appears as if more people are reading online, as we have illustrated earlier (Project for Excellence in Journalism "Online," 2010). What we cannot say at this time is how much or for how long people read online. The research is not out there. However, we can tease from the data we have that blogs, social networks and news sites are popular—taken together, the top 10 get about 1.2 billion unique visitors each month (Doubleclick, 2010). This is a good deal of reading and, perhaps, writing taking place.

The concern is that this reading, which is not as long or as involved as traditional print will create what author and blogger Nicholas Carr describes as "the shallows," the sense that instead of being able to focus deeply and at length we are becoming shallower (Agger, 2010). To counter this, a point made by several thinkers is worth throwing into the mix—and that is that we tend to switch seamlessly between literacies (Barone & Wright, 2008). In their commentary about a hybrid digital/traditional reading class, Barone and Wright illustrate how book reading can be combined with online chat with other classmates; this expands to students being given writing prompts based on the book, which they complete quickly and send out for comment so that they can get feedback and, perhaps, rewrite.

Though some like to point to web content as substandard content in comparison to traditional literature, there appears to be quite a bit of good content online—content that if the web statistics are to be believed is being accessed and, presumably, read (Agger, 2010). What appears to be happening is a partial return to ancient ideals. By this we mean that prior to the coming of literacy, the oral word was the way knowledge was rooted and spread. This was a very public and social method of spreading knowledge. Literacy, as it supplanted orality and

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spread through cultures, erased a good deal of the widespread, real-time feedback and enrichment that existed in oral culture (Ong, 1982). Literate cultures never did away with the social component of knowledge, though it did essentially relegate them to places of learning (Agger, 2010). However, digital culture allows for the widespread dissemination of ideas, immediate feedback and enrichment of these ideas in a way that is more in line with oral culture (Leu, 1999). In short, the pendulum seems to be swinging back to some sort of middle ground.

There is a new literacy and a new way of understanding that is rising. No matter where we are going, it is hoped "…that we will reserve a place for attentive thinking…the literary, attention-capable mind may not quite go the way of the chanting Greek poets…but if it does, our culture will lose something ineffable. And we're likely to have forgotten was it is or was" (Agger, 2010).

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