



1988

Literacy

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opinion is a chimera and that the machinery of knowledge is not organized in a way that provides responsible decision makers with the information they need.

The Phantom Public drives home Lippmann's conclusion that the average person cannot be expected to form intelligent opinions on major political questions. Lippmann was not opposed to the ideal of an informed citizenry, characterizing it as "bad only in the sense that it is bad for a fat man to try to be a ballet dancer," but he emphasized that most people are unable to take the time and trouble to become informed.

Several of Lippmann's briefer works also treated aspects of communication. *Liberty and the News* (1920) anticipated ideas on media sociology included in *Public Opinion*. A forty-two-page supplement to the August 1920 *New Republic* (with Charles Merz) reported on a CONTENT ANALYSIS of news about the Bolshevik Revolution carried in the *New York Times*. The authors concluded that reporters tended to see what they wanted or expected to see rather than what actually happened.

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W. PHILLIPS DAVISON

LITERACY

The set of organized, culturally specific practices that make it possible to understand, use, and create written texts. The term is sometimes loosely used as a synonym for competence in a variety of cultural skills, but a strict definition limits its meaning to practices associated with written LANGUAGE. Minimum and normative standards of literate achievement vary among *textual communities*, a term historian Brian Stock has coined to describe groups that consider texts or types of texts—and their designated interpreters—authoritative. A textual community that embraces a characteristic set of practices specifying skillful PERFORMANCE in READING, WRITING, composition, and even speaking, along with an interpretive framework that gives meaning to these performances, constitutes a *literate community*. A literate community may be a school system that subscribes to standards and practices codified in explicit testing procedures, a nation-state whose leaders promulgate literacy training in the service of patriotic goals, a cult devoted to a sacred text, an AVANT-

GARDE literary circle, or a group of graffiti artists. Literates may belong to more than one literate community, and literate communities may overlap.

The proficiencies demanded for membership in particular literate communities depend on the kinds of literate tasks those communities practice. Some of these proficiencies may be formally schooled, but their usual range is much wider. Oral skills, for example, are an important but often unrecognized dimension of literate performance. Literacy-related oral skills may include reading aloud or recalling the words of a text, speaking about texts, or speaking with implicit reference to them, as when "grammatical" speech identifies the speaker with a textual community that contends that correct speech imitates certain features of written discourse. See GRAMMAR; ORAL CULTURE.

Contemporary popular notions of literacy often define it as reading and writing skills with general applicability, able to be specified independently of any social group or setting, and unrestricted to any particular canon of texts. That notion has its roots in the extension of literate skills through popular education to persons of modest or low social rank in industrializing nations during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This expansion marked a significant departure from centuries of an elite, restricted literate tradition embodied in both East and West in a narrow textual canon and a highly structured initiation procedure. What are counted as the most advanced literary skills in particular societies are traditionally the possession of privileged groups, usually males of a specific hereditary or socioeconomic status. In ancient Egypt literacy was an esoteric "mystery" presided over by an elect priesthood. Literacy in medieval Europe was a collection of craft skills reserved almost exclusively to the clergy as the guardians of all written knowledge. Literacy was apparently universal among the two highest classes of Gupta India (fourth century B.C.E.): the Brahmins (priests, lawgivers, and scholars) and the Kshatriyas (rulers and soldiers). Comparable literacy levels may also have characterized periods of high culture in traditional China. A majority of the 25,000 to 30,000 adult male citizens in classical Athens are thought to have been literate in a total Attican population of 250,000 to 350,000, including women, slaves, and the foreign-born (see HELLENIC WORLD).

The term *literacy* has not always had an exact synonym in other languages and cultures. A man who could read was described as *grammatikos* in classical Greece, but this connoted no positive sense of education or cultivation. During the ROMAN EMPIRE, the word *litteratus* signified a person familiar with literary culture. The same word described persons with training in Latin grammar and syntax during the MIDDLE AGES. It was used interchangeably

with the term *clericus*, since churchmen had a virtual monopoly on literate skills and training. Both the fragmentation of clerical authority after the Middle Ages and efforts by printers to expand their secular markets accelerated the written codification of oral vernaculars in Europe and contributed to the gradual dissociation of literacy from clerical control.

The growth of popular literacy in the West was supported by a religious IDEOLOGY, which viewed reading as a form of receptivity to the word of God, and by a democratizing ideology, which cast literate skills as more utilitarian than intellectual and deprecated the cultivation of elite literacy and classical cultures with which literacy had long been identified. Contemporary notions of functional literacy as the minimal level of literate skill necessary to cope with the ordinary demands of daily life reflect this perception of democratized literacy as broad but shallow. Literates in the everyday, urban industrialized world of the twentieth century, for example, are more likely to use their skills for writing checks and interpreting tax forms, traffic signs, and ballots than for reading and debating works of great literature.

Medieval literacy, by contrast, was focused around the monastery and the scriptorium and oriented to the authority of the Bible (*see* BOOK). Some literate artisans were scribes, others were readers, and still others were skilled in the art of composition. Highly educated individuals might be adept at all three skills, but specialization was (and remains) a characteristic pattern of restricted literacies around the world, especially in traditional preindustrial literacies. A contemporary example may be found in computer literacy, defined as skill with computer texts, since users who are able to execute or read computer programs (texts) at a given level of proficiency may not be able, and may not be expected, to write such programs themselves (*see* COMPUTER: IMPACT—IMPACT ON EDUCATION; EDUCATION).

Despite the cultural and historical variability of literate goals and practices, most efforts to promulgate literacy standards on behalf of a particular literate community have presented those standards as natural and universal. Most are nevertheless ethnocentric, prescriptive, and associated with membership in ideal cultural groups. That fact prompts some scholars to speak of a variety of literacies or socially situated textual practices, instead of a single literacy or set of literacy standards. As definitions of literacy have moved away from attempts to specify universal cognitive achievement criteria, they have moved toward what are taken to be broadly consensual social achievement criteria. A good example is the definition of literacy put forward in 1951 by the newly formed United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which declared that “a person is literate who can with under-

standing both read and write a short, simple statement on his everyday life.” While leaving specific cognitive criteria to be identified in local situations and circumstances, contemporary programmatic definitions of literacy frequently emphasize its social purposes and may link its practice to the exercise of personal pride and dignity, to the ability to realize goals for oneself and one’s family, or to creative participation in community and nation building.

Cognitive effects. If efforts to arrive at universal standards of literacy have largely been abandoned in descriptive definitions of it, the notion that literacy has universal effects remains widespread. In individuals, literacy has been said to have an enabling effect on higher intellectual and logical processes, often defined as the capacity for abstract thought, decontextualization, propositional logic, or psychic mobility. Such claims are difficult to demonstrate, however. This is because every empirical measure of literate achievement appeals to some criterion of success in interpreting messages, where success in interpreting messages is a socially constructed rather than an objective category, subject to complex variation across literate communities. Literacy is always learned, practiced, and evaluated as interpretive strategies in which every “correct” interpretation reflects the cultural framework within which it occurs and which gives it meaning. Research on the cognitive effects of literacy, therefore, has the special challenge of identifying cultural influences that affect the cognitive performances of literates. One team of researchers working on this problem compared the cognitive behaviors of persons from different literate communities within the same Nigerian tribal culture with one another and with the cognitive behaviors of nonliterate in that culture. Although the evidence is not entirely clear, the studies by U.S. scholars Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole in Nigeria suggest that strong literacy effects are not general and that different literacies cultivate specific skills in the exercise of tasks that vary significantly from literacy to literacy. In sum, literacy cannot be assessed independently of its socially embedded practice because it has no existence apart from a social situation.

Literacy as a mechanism of social control. Since cultural knowledge is manifest in symbolic representations for which literate modes may be especially efficient, literacy is closely associated with social control. Historically literacy has been an instrument to exert control and to challenge it alike. To achieve a wide level of cultural currency and stability, literate practices require the support of powerful institutions, such as the church or the state, which sponsor and promote literacy by providing occasions for its exercise and even by coercing participation in its practice. The development of bureaucratically complex, populous, and far-flung social and political units

unsuited to traditional oral mechanisms of control propelled literate training and practice forward throughout the modern period. At the same time, a variety of nonschooled or informally schooled literacies existed in societies in which literate training was (or still is) a craft apprenticeship distinct from standardized, hierarchically stricter forms of state-sponsored literacy training.

The relationship between literacy and the distribution of power in society has been vigorously debated. A central question is whether literacy is primarily an instrument for diffusing and sharing power or a device for its exercise over the many by the few. In the modern West literacy is regarded as essential to the well-being of individuals in civil society. In the tradition of liberalism descended from the Enlightenment (including Marxism, which favors enlightened class consciousness) universal literacy is held in high esteem. Literacy is thought to be an implicit condition for open expression, which is necessary to discover truth, which in turn is necessary for a just and stable civil society. Literacy is thus a prerequisite for shared political power, a means of ensuring informed participation by democratic electorates, and an instrument of upward social mobility, particularly at the lowest levels of society. The extension of literacy through public schools to nonelites in Europe and the United States in the nineteenth century was justified by an appeal to its presumed capacity to increase its practitioners' political knowledge and maturity, to prevent civil disturbances by including literates within the circle of state power (insofar as that power was manifest in written form), to elevate political discourse above uninformed oral rumor, and thus to increase political stability.

Belief in the positive value of literacy precedes the Enlightenment, however. The labor of copying manuscripts was believed by medieval monks to be in the service of their own and the world's spiritual redemption. By the sixteenth century, Reformation clerics were enthusiastically promoting reading literacy as the key to spiritual salvation. Since the Enlightenment, competing political states have sponsored mass literacy campaigns in the hope that literates would prefer the political programs and ideals of the sponsors to those of rival states and ideologies. So deep is the commitment of modern states to mass literacy that any apparent decline in its level is a source of public concern. Great outcry was raised in the United States when levels of high school literacy measured by academic achievement tests dipped dramatically during the 1960s and 1970s. It is unclear whether this "crisis" was due to lax standards, as some critics charged, or whether it reflected a temporary adjustment to the absorption of large new student constituencies that had previously been excluded from the educational system.

A different version of the Enlightenment tradition grants the efficacy of literacy but sees it as a means for elites to restrict and control nonelites in order to maintain and extend their own power. Many scholars such as David Cressy, Harvey Graff, Lee Soltow, and François Furet have demonstrated that historical opportunities for acquiring and practicing literacy are related to a variety of social factors, including class, gender, occupation, ethnicity, birth order, and whether one's residence is urban or rural. According to this account literacy is an instrument of social power selectively granted or withheld by elites who wish to preserve the gap between themselves and outsiders in order to enjoy the rewards of their own literate status, or because they fear its extension to those lacking in or resistant to elite values. Centuries of reluctance to offer women full educational opportunities available to males and prohibitions on teaching literacy to slaves in the American South are good examples.

Still other elites have forcibly imposed literate practices on subject populations in order to transmit systems of ideology and authority implicit in those practices. During the nineteenth century the American Indian Bureau instituted compulsory education for Indian children in English-language literacy in order to demonstrate the superiority of white culture. A common conquistadorial practice during the sixteenth-century conquest of Peru was to burn the written artifacts of the Incas and establish mission schools to teach Spanish-language literacy. European settlers in North America frequently refused to recognize Indian claims to traditional tribal lands because these claims were not codified in writing. Historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have argued that literacy training is also a mechanism of social control by which the labor forces of modern industrial states learn obedience and efficiency, practice taking orders, and become accustomed to routinized work. Other scholars have challenged the assumption that the acquisition of literacy automatically leads to social mobility, at least within the first generation.

Historically there appears to be no necessary relation between popular literacy and political structure. Political cultures with high participation have existed in the absence of popular literacy, and authoritarian regimes have flourished in its presence. The sense of urgency many modern states feel to achieve mass literacy among their populations may have less to do with the participatory character of their political structures than with perceived threats from rival states, or with the rationalization of economic production on a world scale and the growth of science and technology, all of which are facilitated by literate modes.

Literacy as a molder of world views. Still another body of theory assigns the effects of literacy not at

the level of individual cognition or political power but to cultural perception and organization. Walter Ong, Jack Goody, and others have argued that the physical form of the dominant mode of communication in each historical period shapes the character of political and social order, the quality and texture of individual experience, and even the moral spirit of the culture it presides over. In this view differences among literate practices are trivial since the essential effects of literacy flow from certain universal features of script as an exteriorization of language in discrete signs and from the physical and technological requirements of recording, storing, and retrieving written or printed texts.

A variety of historical consequences have been derived from these assumptions. U.S. historian Elizabeth Eisenstein has argued that the accuracy of textual reproduction that printing made possible offered unprecedented opportunities for access to texts and scholarly cross-comparison (*see* PRINTING). This led in turn to a flowering of intellectual activity in the fifteenth century that could never again be halted or lost by the diversion of cultural energies to emergencies like war and famine. Other scholars have argued that the historical appearance of the rational, impersonal procedures of modern science required a level of symbolic abstraction that is said to be more characteristic of literate than oral communication. It has been claimed that literacy promotes cultural homogenization by giving many people access to the same ideas; individualism by making possible personal access to sources of authority, standards, and ideas foreign to one's immediate community; and psychological alienation by substituting literate solitude for face-to-face exchange. Goody has argued that religions of conversion are religions of the book because their fixed point of reference, the sacred text, is less flexible than that of more syncretistic, orally based religions. Writers such as HAROLD INNIS have claimed that literacy fosters a modern secular concern with territorial expansion, since the ease with which written materials may be transported relative to other symbols of authority facilitates political and administrative control of distant territory.

These claims confront the same obstacles to empirical demonstration as those discussed earlier, but with two added difficulties. It is not clear whether written forms of communication are more pervasive or influential than the oral ones they are assumed to displace and with which they are contrasted. It may be truer to say that written and oral practices continually collide with and transform each other. Additionally, the attempt to demonstrate that literacy causes large and often vaguely defined social effects that would be absent without it requires adopting a strong, monocausal explanation for complex differences among cultures and historical epochs.

For example, anthropologist Kathleen Gough has challenged the hypothesis that literacy promotes concepts of linear time, interest in historical precision, and the development of skeptical thought across cultures, as well as the related hypothesis that these results are fostered more by alphabetic traditions than by literacy alone. Gough argues that whether or not such hypotheses describe historical experience in the West, they do not account for important contrasts between the literate premodern high cultures of India and China. These two nonalphabetic written traditions show marked distinctions that suggest that the experience of literacy is not culturally uniform. The nature of these differences also argues against large claims of uniform difference between literate and nonliterate discourse and between alphabetic and nonalphabetic discourse, since (written) Indian traditions contain important features associated exclusively with orality, and (nonalphabetic) Chinese traditions contain features associated exclusively with alphabetic writing. Whereas the Chinese produced reliable chronologies of societal events as early as the ninth century B.C.E., for example, traditional Indian literature had nothing comparable before the Muslim period (1000 C.E.). Elaborate theories of cyclical time also characterized Indian astronomy. Similarly, Buddhist, Hindu, and Jainist thought in India cast the material world as unreal, while secular monarchs and literate bureaucracies in China fostered a fascination with correct, this-worldly social relations.

If the enthusiasm with which contradictory effects have been attributed to literacy does not resolve the question of what these effects are, it does suggest the close association between literacy and acculturation. In this view literacy is less important as a cause of particular cognitive or social effects than as a sign of its practitioners' participation in a social system of written messages. Beyond the socioeconomic factors that may control admission to training in a given array of literate skills lies a coded discourse of literate practice that continually marks and regulates social relations around written language, whether these skills are carefully restricted or widely diffused.

Measures of literacy. Contemporary emphasis on the importance of literacy may obscure the fact that even with the arrival of paper, printing, bureaucracy, and schools, reading and writing were not practiced by large numbers of persons until perhaps the eighteenth century. Although it has been argued that literates may exercise control over certain features of the lives of the less literate, many literate practices may also be irrelevant to large domains of experience for those with expertise in other communicative codes. While mass literacy may be counted as a twentieth-century achievement for many industrialized and industrializing countries, universal literacy is still an

elusive attainment. Less developed countries that lack formal institutional mechanisms for teaching popular literacy have perhaps the highest rates of illiteracy in the world. Like the term *literacy*, however, the term *illiteracy* is relative. If signatures are used as a criterion for literacy (as in most studies of pre-nineteenth-century literacy, for example), literacy may be considered a widespread phenomenon in the twentieth century. If the chosen standard is a critical ease and reflective familiarity with a canonical tradition for which intensive, specialized training is required, the number of literates will be small even in societies in which rudimentary reading and writing skills are widely diffused. Nor are quantitative measures of popular literacy completely informative. The depth of a literate tradition may be indicated by the existence of literate institutions such as libraries, universities, public inscriptions, village schools, and literatures.

Daniel and Lauren Resnick have shown how dramatically literacy standards have changed throughout history. The purposes of literacy tests have been equally various. Before the late nineteenth century, most direct tests of literacy were oral tests of recitation and memorization of familiar texts. Much Qur'anic (Koranic) literacy is still taught and examined this way today. Michael Clanchy has described how persons who could read aloud a prescribed scriptural passage (the "neck verse") in late medieval England were exempt from secular prosecution and punishment by virtue of the clerical status imputed to all literates. This practical literacy test discriminated those with benefit of clergy, or immunity from prosecution, from those without. Literacy levels have also been inferred by measuring signatures from early marriage registers, parish catechetical examination records, conscript records, nineteenth-century school attendance records, and public censuses. Precise estimates of literacy are not possible before the modern evolution of state recordkeeping and written involvement in citizens' lives, which provide data for direct or indirect measures of the literate skills of large numbers of citizens. Twentieth-century literacy tests have been devised by educators, military authorities, social scientists, and international agencies like UNESCO. These tests have had a variety of purposes, including understanding the nature and distribution of literacy skills, classifying some persons as qualified for particular tasks and opportunities, and evaluating literacy training.

Contemporary issues. Widespread popular literacy cannot be said to have existed anywhere in the world before the eighteenth century. Even after a century of public education in the United States more than 20 percent of the adult population is estimated to be less than functionally literate. While some critics argue that literacy is overvalued and that excessive emphasis on literacy may obscure the importance of

nontextual modes of communication, many citizens, educators, politicians, intellectuals, and others who articulate and enforce standards of literate practice are concerned about limitations on the life opportunities of nonliterates because of their exclusion from a significant part of the communications mainstream. In a world in which science, technology, and the world economy are largely organized by literate modes, literate skills provide individuals with occupational entry, security, and mobility. They also provide tools for self-defense against literate centers of power, as well as the opportunity to take advantage of the vast range of human knowledge and experience in textual form.

See also ALPHABET; CODE; EAST ASIA, ANCIENT; ISLAM, CLASSICAL AND MEDIEVAL ERAS; LIBRARY; MUSIC THEORIES—NOTATIONS AND LITERACY; NEWSPAPER: HISTORY; PAMPHLET; PUBLISHING; READING THEORY.

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CAROLYN MARVIN

LITERARY CANON

Those literary works that at any given moment in a CULTURE'S history are regarded by educated people as the best their culture has to offer. Though one often speaks of the canon of Western literature or of the Asian classics, literary traditions are usually associated with the character and ideals of ethnic and national groups. The close relationship between these groups and their literary traditions both requires and guarantees a certain stability in the makeup of literary canons. Thus the works of William Shakespeare,