

GUEST ESSAY

Thinking Is Becoming a Luxury Good

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When I was a kid in the 1980s, my parents sent me to a Waldorf school in England. At the time, the school discouraged parents from allowing their kids to watch too much TV, instead telling them to emphasize reading, hands-on learning and outdoor play.

I chafed at the stricture then. But perhaps they were on to something: Today I don't watch much TV and I still read a lot. Since my school days, however, a far more insidious and enticing form of tech has taken hold: the internet, especially via smartphones. These days I know I have to put my phone in a drawer or in another room if I need to concentrate for more than a few minutes.

Since so-called intelligence tests were invented around a century ago, until recently, international I.Q. scores climbed steadily in a phenomenon known as the Flynn effect. But there is evidence that our ability to apply that brain power is decreasing. According to a recent report, adult literacy scores leveled off and

began to decline across a majority of O.E.C.D. countries in the past decade, with some of the sharpest declines visible among the poorest. Kids also show declining literacy.

Writing in The Financial Times, John Burn-Murdoch links this to the rise of a post-literate culture in which we consume most of our media through smartphones, eschewing dense text in favor of images and short-form video. Other research has associated smartphone use with A.D.H.D. symptoms in adolescents, and a quarter of surveyed American adults now suspect they may have the condition. School and college teachers assign fewer full books to their students, in part because they are unable to complete them. Nearly half of Americans read zero books in 2023.

The idea that technology is altering our capacity not just to concentrate but also to read and to reason is catching on. The conversation no one is ready for, though, is how this may be creating yet another form of inequality.

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Think of this by comparison with patterns of junk food consumption: As ultraprocessed snacks have grown more available and inventively addictive, developed societies have seen a gulf emerge between those with the social and economic resources to sustain a healthy lifestyle and those more vulnerable to the obesogenic food culture. This bifurcation is strongly class-inflected: Across the developed West, obesity has become strongly correlated with poverty. I fear that so, too, will be the tide of post-literacy.

Long-form literacy is not innate but learned, sometimes laboriously. As Maryanne Wolf, a literacy scholar, has illustrated, acquiring and perfecting a capacity for long-form “expert reading” is literally mind-altering. It rewires our brains, increasing vocabulary, shifting brain activity toward the analytic left hemisphere

and honing our capacity for concentration, linear reasoning and deep thought. The presence of these traits at scale contributed to the emergence of free speech, modern science and liberal democracy, among other things.

The habits of thought formed by digital reading are very different. As Cal Newport, a productivity expert, shows in his 2016 book, “Deep Work,” the digital environment is optimized for distraction, as various systems compete for our attention with notifications and other demands. Social media platforms are designed to be addictive, and the sheer volume of material incentivizes intense cognitive “bites” of discourse calibrated for maximum compulsiveness over nuance or thoughtful reasoning. The resulting patterns of content consumption form us neurologically for skimming, pattern recognition and distracted hopping from text to text — if we use our phones to read at all.

Increasingly, the very act of reading scarcely seems necessary. Platforms such as TikTok and YouTube Shorts offer a bottomless supply of enthralling, short-form videos. These combine with visual memes, fake news, real news, clickbait, sometimes hostile misinformation and, increasingly, a torrent of A.I.-generated slop content. The result is a media environment that seems like the cognitive equivalent of the junk food aisle and is every bit as difficult to resist as those colorful, unhealthy packages.

A classical liberal might retort: Sure, but just as with junk food, it’s up to the individual to make healthy choices. What this fails to take into account, though, is that just like the negative health impacts of junk food overconsumption, the cognitive harms of digital media will be more pronounced at the bottom of the socioeconomic scale.

We see hints of this already. As Dr. Wolf points out, literacy and poverty have long been correlated. Now poor kids spend more time on screens each day than rich ones — in one 2019 study, about two hours more per day for U.S. tweens and teenagers whose families made less than \$35,000 per year, compared with peers whose household incomes exceeded \$100,000. Research indicates that kids who are

exposed to more than two hours a day of recreational screen time have worse working memory, processing speed, attention levels, language skills and executive function than kids who are not.

Bluntly: Making healthy cognitive choices is hard. In a culture saturated with more accessible and engrossing forms of entertainment, long-form literacy may soon become the domain of elite subcultures.

Already, elites, religious groups and conservatives are embracing self-imposed limits on tech use. Between 2019 and 2023, over 250 new classical schools, many of them Christian, opened in America, with an ethos centered on long-form “great books” literacy. New guides and initiatives from this crowd abound, such as the recent book “The Tech Exit: A Practical Guide to Freeing Kids and Teens From Smartphones,” by Clare Morell, a fellow at a conservative think tank.

It’s not just conservatives. Tech notables such as Bill Gates and Evan Spiegel have spoken publicly about curbing their kids’ use of screens. Others hire nannies who are required to sign “no phone” contracts, or send their kids to Waldorf schools, where such devices are banned or heavily restricted. The class scissor here is razor-sharp: A majority of classical schools are fee-paying institutions. Shielding your kids from device overuse at the Waldorf School of the Peninsula will set you back \$34,000 a year at the elementary grades.

Many U.S. states, including California, are restricting student smartphone use, which in theory ought to level the playing field. But it is optimistic to assume such rules will be enforced with the same determination in small-class private schools as in massive public schools, let alone in these students’ homes.

Even beyond Silicon Valley, some people are limiting digital stimulation (like social media or video games) for set periods of time as part of the self-improvement practice of dopamine fasting.

The ascetic approach to cognitive fitness is still niche and concentrated among the wealthy. But as new generations reach adulthood having never lived in a world without smartphones, we can expect the culture to stratify ever more starkly. On

the one hand, a relatively small group of people will retain, and intentionally develop, the capacity for concentration and long-form reasoning. On the other, a larger general population will be effectively post-literate — with all the consequences this implies for cognitive clarity.

What will happen if this becomes fully realized? An electorate that has lost the capacity for long-form thought will be more tribal, less rational, largely uninterested in facts or even matters of historical record, moved more by vibes than cogent argument and open to fantastical ideas and bizarre conspiracy theories. If that sounds familiar, it may be a sign of how far down this path the West has already traveled.

For canny operators, such a public affords new opportunities for corruption. Oligarchs attempting to shape policy to their advantage will benefit from the fact that few will have the attention span to track or challenge policies in dull, technical fields; what a majority now wants is not forensic investigation but a new video short “owning” the other tribe. We can expect the governing class to adapt pragmatically to the electorate’s collective decline in rational capacity, for example, by retaining the rituals associated with mass democracy while quietly shifting key policy areas beyond the reach of a capricious and easily manipulated citizenry. I do not celebrate this, but our net-native youth seem unfazed: International polls show waning support for democracy among Gen Z.

Lest you mistake me, there is no reason the opportunity to sideline the electorate or to arbitrage the gap between vibes and policy should especially favor either the red team or the blue team. This post-literate world favors demagogues skilled at code-switching between the elite language of policy and the populist one of meme-slop. It favors oligarchs with good social media game and those with more self-assurance than integrity. It does not favor those with little money, little political power and no one to speak up for them.

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