Introduction

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About two hundred and fifty years ago, writers and journalists across Europe began to notice an astonishing – and, many thought, disturbing – change in human behaviour. To some observers it looked like a 'fever' or an 'epidemic', or even a 'madness'.[1] Pessimists warned that terrible moral corruption would surely follow in its wake. Although if it was an epidemic, it was not one that a lot of people nowadays would find especially worrying. What was happening was this: in the middle of the eighteenth century it suddenly seemed that everyone, everywhere had started to read.

These new readers, one onlooker thought, seemed as 'addicted' to their reading habit as any gambler, smoker or drunkard. Respectable ladies neglected their household duties because they were transfixed by 'poems and periodicals'. It was said that people would fall asleep reading and then wake up the next morning and immediately start reading again. Men would read while they were eating dinner. Women would go out in the evening and, perplexingly, 'wander alone with a novel in their hands'.

What was striking about this strange new vice was that it appeared to afflict nearly everyone. For most of history reading had been restricted to a tiny elite section of society. No longer. Suddenly readers could be found in 'every class'. The English bookseller James Lackington (who ran what he claimed was 'the cheapest bookshop in the world') observed that 'all ranks and degrees now READ'. Even visiting the homes of country folk, he thought, you could see popular novels 'stuck up on their bacon-racks'. 'Conservatives were appalled, and progressives were delighted, that it was a habit that knew no social boundaries,' writes the historian Tim Blanning.[2] Suddenly you could see 'common soldiers' hanging around lending libraries. A gentleman might visit his kitchen to make the astounding discovery that his cleaning maid was engrossed in a newspaper. Fashionable aristocrats, eager to get with the spirit of the times, were pulling down their ancient tapestries and lining their rooms with books instead, 'so as not to appear uncultivated'. There was, it sometimes seemed, simply no escape from the reading craze. If you went to a tavern for a drink you would just find yet more readers: peasants huddled up 'reading their almanacs to each other'.[3]

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[1] Tim Blanning, *The Pursuit of Glory: Europe, 1648–1815* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), p. 477

[2] Ibid., p. 478

[3] Tim Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture: Old Regime Europe, 1660–1789* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 133–4

What these writers had noticed was the cultural transformation some historians now call the 'reading revolution', the explosion of books and reading that took place in the second half of the eighteenth century. This revolution may not have been quite as sudden and unexpected as some of the more breathless observers at the time believed. And this was not yet the age of mass literacy: a world in which virtually every adult could read would not arrive until the end of the nineteenth century. But the reading revolution was an important chapter in the spread of literacy. And that is undoubtedly
p. 3 one of the most important stories in human history.

The rise of reading mattered because it heralded a major change in how people understood their world. Books and newspapers spread access to new ideas and new information down through society, transforming what ordinary citizens could know about their history and their governments. And reading also changed how people thought. The intellectual world of print is orderly, logical and rational. In books, knowledge is organised, comprehended and contextualised. Books make arguments, propose theses and develop ideas. 'To engage [with] the written word,' the media theorist Neil Postman wrote, 'means to follow a line of thought, which requires considerable powers of classifying, inference-making and reasoning.'[4]

The development of print culture in the eighteenth century was associated with the growing prestige of reason, hostility to superstition and the development of science. Literate men and women began to interrogate received ideas about politics, about the natural world and even about the entire meaning of life. Where does power come from? How should we classify whales? How do we know the Bible is true?

Historians have linked the spread of literacy to the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, the birth of human rights, the rise of capitalism and the advent of modern democracy. The ascent of reading changed the world. Our vast, interconnected, tolerant and technologically advanced civilisation is founded on the complex, rational kinds of thinking fostered by literacy.
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But there is evidence that this remarkable story may be coming to an end.

The first rumours that something important was happening reached me via friends working in universities. I came close to going into academia myself (though I don't think the world is a poorer place for the loss of my proposed PhD on landscape imagery in post-war British poetry). And having a vague sense of a parallel unlived life, I am always keen to know about what is going on in universities. A few years ago I began to hear that students were struggling to read the books their professors assigned to them. The idea was so persistent it seemed that this was more than the professional pessimism normally associated with lecturers in English literature.

I got in touch with some senior academics teaching in English departments to follow up the issue for an article in *The Times*. A conversation I had with one of them still stands out. 'I used to expect students to easily read a novel in a week,' she told me. But recently she had begun to realise that 'I just can't expect that any more.' The university undergraduates she taught were having trouble concentrating on long texts to the point that it was becoming impossible to assign some of the classic books she had been teaching for her entire career. She had already given up trying to teach George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which were regarded not long ago as two of the obligatory masterpieces on any English literature course. This professor was soldiering on as best she could, teaching Ralph Ellison's classic of African-American literature *Invisible Man*. But,
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[4] Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (London: Penguin, 2006 [1985]), p. 51

she said, 'I can guarantee not one of my students will have finished it.'[5]

I didn't realise it when I wrote my article but I was contributing to an emerging genre. Warning beacons were being lit across the media and academia. Essays about the decline of reading were appearing everywhere. In high-minded American magazines, long reads on the end of literacy would attain virtually the status of a well-loved monthly feature. Across the world, journalists were discovering the same thing I had: universities were beginning to teach their first truly 'post-literate' cohorts of students. And the education system, founded as it still is on the study of complex texts, was not prepared for them. Some professors reported that it was not that the young men and women in their classes were unwilling to read but that they seemed almost unable to. One reported that they were 'intimidated by anything over 10 pages'. Rather than sophisticated literary analysis of the kind once associated with an English literature degree, 'considerable class time is taken up simply establishing what happened in a story or the basic steps of an argument'.[6] Another believed that many of his students struggled to 'attend to small details while keeping track of the overall plot'.[7]

The decline of reading has been accompanied by the advent of generative artificial intelligence which is capable of producing reams of text on demand. According to a series of reports, the use of AI to write essays is virtually ubiquitous in universities. It is not absurd to imagine that you could graduate from university having scarcely read or written a word – perhaps someone has already done this. The death of writing compounds the death of reading, further unmooring our culture from its foundations in the written word. p. 6

The ability to read long and complex texts was once a widespread skill. It now risks becoming a rare, even esoteric accomplishment. It is true, of course, that there have always been university professors who have found their students lazier, shallower and less intellectually scintillating than they might have hoped. But these new anxieties about reading are more than just reactionary griping. People really used to read more. In 1940, when George Orwell reviewed a newly published study of children's reading habits, he found that, alongside the inevitable comic books and detective stories, children were voluntarily reading works by Charles Dickens, Daniel Defoe, Robert Louis Stevenson, G. K. Chesterton and Shakespeare. These children, Orwell noted, were 'aged 12–15 and belong to the poorest class in the community'.[8] By contrast, a recent study of English literature students at American universities found that many struggled to understand the first paragraphs of Charles Dickens's novel *Bleak House*.[9] We face the serious possibility that writers like Shakespeare, John Milton and Jane Austen, whose works have been handed on for centuries, are not going to reach the next generation of readers. The transmission of knowledge – the most ancient function of the university – is breaking down in front of our eyes.

The decline of student reading is only the most visible symptom of a wider crisis. In America, reading for pleasure declined by 40 per cent in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. And in the UK, more than a third of adults say they have given up the habit. The National Literacy Trust reports 'shocking and dispiriting' falls in children's reading and reading enjoyment, which is now p. 7

[5] James Marriott, 'By degree, we're losing touch with humanity', *The Times*, 12 May 2023, thetimes.com/culture/books/article/by-degree-were-losing-touch-with-humanity-kdzgh9dvf

[6] Adam Kotsko, 'The loss of things I took for granted', *Slate*, 11 February 2024, slate.com/human-interest/2024/02/literacy-crisis-reading-comprehension-college.html

[7] Rose Horowitch, 'The elite college students who can't read books', *Atlantic*, 1 October 2024, theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/11/the-elite-college-students-who-cant-read-books/679945/

[8] George Orwell, 'Review: A. J. Jenkinson, *What Do Boys and Girls Read?*', *Life and Letters*, July 1940, republished in *Seeing Things as They Are: Selected Journalism and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 2014), pp. 106–7

[9] Susan Carlson, Ananda Jayawardhana and Diane Miniel, 'They Don't Read Very Well: A Study of the Reading Comprehension Skills of English Majors at Two Midwestern Universities', *The CEA Critic* 86(1), 2024, 1–17, doi.org/10.1353/cea.2024.a922346

at its lowest level on record.[10] A report published by the OECD found adult literacy skills 'have largely declined or stagnated over the past decade in most [developed] countries'.[11]

What is going on? Though some still argue over the significance of factors like inequality or changes to the education system, it seems increasingly obvious that the major culprit is the smartphone, which became widespread among the populations of developed countries in the early 2010s. I don't think any other factor can explain declines in reading which hold across countries with different education systems and different economic trajectories. These years will be remembered as a watershed in human culture.

There has simply never been a technology like the smartphone. Where previous entertainment technologies like radio or cinema or television were intended to capture their audience's attention for a period of time, the smartphone demands your entire life, using a sophisticated array of content-recommendation algorithms, notifications and endlessly scrolling feeds of distracting content to keep your attention fixed almost permanently to the screen. Screen addiction is the logical end point of Silicon Valley's ad-based business model. The longer you spend looking at your phone, the more advertisements you see and the more effectively technology companies are able to track your behaviour in order to serve you better advertisements. In the battle between you and your smartphone, you are not supposed to win. As the Google whistle-blower Tristan Harris has eerily remarked, 'You can try having self-control, but there are a thousand engineers on the other side of the screen working against you.'[12]

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Screens are changing human behaviour far more rapidly than the printed book ever did. More than 90 per cent of American adults own a smartphone and among young adults the figure is close to 100 per cent. Nearly 50 per cent of teenagers report using the internet 'almost constantly'. 'I spend so much time on TikTok,' one university student told *New York* magazine. 'Hours and hours, until my eyes start hurting, which makes it hard to plan and do my schoolwork.'[13] It is not an unusual predicament. As an executive at TikTok admitted, 'I think we need to be cognizant of what [the TikTok algorithm] might mean for other opportunities. And when I say other opportunities, I literally mean sleep, and eating, and moving around the room, and looking at someone in the eyes.'[14]

To me, the decline of reading is a personal as well as a cultural tragedy. My dad was an English teacher possessed of more than ordinary zeal for his subject. I was brought up to view literature as a (possibly *the*) central feature of life in a way that was not exactly common in the North of England in the early 2000s. Literature was our religion, the way we explained and interpreted our lives. As a child I quickly learned that every possible event, from a major bereavement to a minor playground controversy, could be cross-referenced against a poem by Thomas Hardy or a short story by Katherine Mansfield. We worshipped writers fairly indiscriminately. But Shakespeare was

[10] Ella Creamer, 'Report finds "shocking and dispiriting" fall in children reading for pleasure', *Guardian*, 5 November 2024, theguardian.com/books/2024/nov/05/report-fall-in-children-reading-for-pleasure-national-literacy-trust

[11] 'Adult skills in literacy and numeracy declining or stagnating in most OECD countries', OECD, 10 December 2024, oecd.org/en/about/news/press-releases/2024/12/adult-skills-in-literacy-and-numeracy-declining-or-stagnating-in-most-oecd-countries.html

[12] Tristan Harris, testimony to US Congress, 25 June 2019, commerce.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/media/doc/06_25_19Harris_Testimony.pdf

[13] James D. Walsh, 'Everyone is cheating their way through college', *New York*, 7 May 2025, nymag.com/intelligencer/article/openai-chatgpt-ai-cheating-education-college-students-school.html

[14] Bobby Allyn, Sylvia Goodman and Dara Kerr, 'TikTok executives know about app's effect on teens, lawsuit documents allege', NPR, 11 October 2024, npr.org/2024/10/11/g-s1-27676/tiktok-redacted-documents-in-teen-safety-lawsuit-revealed

our Jesus or, more probably, our God. I was dragged off to Shakespeare plays at what now strikes me as an ambitiously young age ('If you're not enjoying it,' I remember my dad telling me, 'you can just read your book instead'). My dad celebrated Shakespeare's birthday with a homemade cake, and like superstitious peasants our house was strewn with devotional items: Shakespeare mugs, Shakespeare socks, Shakespeare tea towels. I was once presented with a Shakespeare bear, wearing a T-shirt featuring a quotation from *Hamlet*.[15] p. 9

A more independent-minded child would have probably rebelled against all this and gone to work in the tech industry. But I never lost the faith. Books have been the major theme of my life. In my unhappy teenage years I spent great tracts of my free time sheltering from the world in Newcastle's beautiful Regency library, the Lit & Phil. Even had I not been set on a bookish path already, the Lit & Phil would have converted me, with its high glass cupolas, wrought-iron galleries and tall shelves. In my ideal memories, its grand reading room is always sleeping in the drifting afternoon light of late summer: school impossibly distant, only the long days of reading ahead…My enthusiasm for books was not an act of impressive originality or – as it was for some of my friends – glamorous rebellion against a philistine upbringing. I just soaked it all up the way other kids soaked up the Disney Channel or Cartoon Network.

If my perspective has anything to recommend it, it is perhaps that I grew up between two worlds. For all the literary eccentricity of my childhood, I am also a full participant in the digital age. I can't really remember a time before the internet. I spent hours online in my teens, holding endless inane conversations with my school friends on a primitive messaging service (the 'what you doing'…'not much…you?' school of adolescent repartee). I played video games. I had a Facebook account and felt an unmatchable glow of social success when people uploaded pictures of me at parties. Today my work as a journalist requires me to live closer to the front line of the digital bombardment than most people. I am if anything over-familiar with the internet and its endless, hectic, dazzling rush of the new, the remarkable and the mad. I am by no means automatically opposed to technology. But I have seen both sides and it seems to me that the print world – in all its richness and complexity – is not one that we want to lose. p. 10

If the decline of reading was just a matter of personal sadness, this would be a different book. I would have quite enjoyed writing an elegant lament for the fading world of libraries and novels. But I think the situation is more urgent than that. The decline of reading represents more than the loss of a pleasant hobby or an old-fashioned and inefficient means of absorbing information. Literacy is one of the substructures of modernity. Its erosion threatens to usher in a world very different to the one we have known. When the historians of a distant future look back on our time they will remark that we bore witness to a cultural revolution just as significant as the one that took place in the middle of the eighteenth century.

In understanding what the decline of reading means for us we are lucky to be able to draw on the work of a number of brilliant thinkers, mostly from the mid to late twentieth century, who were inspired by the rise of radio, cinema and television to reflect on the ways new communications technologies reshape societies. They include the philosopher Marshall McLuhan, the historian Elizabeth Eisenstein, the classicist Eric Havelock and the literary scholar Walter Ong. The theme that unites their work is the idea that writing is not merely a technology that helps us to communicate more effectively but one which has shaped our minds and our entire civilisation. p. 11

The most famous and pessimistic version of this argument was made by Neil Postman in his great

[15] James Marriott, 'English literature's last stand', *New Statesman*, 11 June 2025, newstatesman.com/culture/books/book-of-the-day/2025/06/stefan-collini-review-english-literatures-last-stand

1985 polemic against television, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Postman believed that the rise of TV – with its bias towards triviality and charismatic personalities – was beginning to undermine the kinds of reasoned and productive public discourse on which a civilised democracy depends. He was dismissed by some of his critics as a crank and a Luddite. The passing of time has revealed that he was a prophet.

This book is deeply indebted to Postman's analysis. But a great deal has changed in the last forty years. Where Postman saw a culture making its 'descent into a vast triviality', the situation today looks even more disturbing. It is not just that twenty-first-century society lacks seriousness; it also seems to be growing dangerously chaotic and irrational. The experiences of recent decades have only sharpened our appreciation of what we owe to print. Its decline threatens not only reasoned discourse but the whole edifice of enlightened modernity. As reading fades, I believe that we may find ourselves facing a post-literate future that resembles the pre-literate past: mystical, tribal and autocratic.

At this point it is probably worth introducing a few caveats. I am very far from being unlimitedly optimistic about reading. I do not think that all books are perfect. I do not believe that reading
p. 12 necessarily makes you a good person: history, after all, is packed with well-read monsters (Stalin was a keen reader who wrote sensitive nature poetry as a young man). And although this book focuses on the profound historical consequences that resulted from the spread of reading, I do not think that literacy is by any means the most important force in human affairs. Books and newspapers tend to make a society more reasoned, more critical and more democratic, but they are not in themselves a recipe for a better world. A profitable newspaper industry and flourishing bookshops will not preserve reason and democracy in a society shaken by a war or economic collapse (as happened in Nazi Germany). Indeed, it is undeniably true that books have on occasion been used to spread some of the worst ideas our species has ever conceived.

The argument of this book is not even that every historical consequence of literacy has been benign. The printed book is not a universal panacea, or an elixir of peace and rationality – one gulp and all social ills are cured! Rather, it is a flawed but useful technology, one that is crucial to the way our society functions now and one that I strongly believe we would very much prefer not to lose.

I want to persuade you that literacy matters profoundly to our civilisation. I believe much of the disorder and unreason of the twenty-first century is a direct consequence of the fading of the written word and the colonisation of our culture by addictive screens. As reading declines, the result,
p. 13 evident all around us, is the intellectual hollowing out of our society. Without reading, the world is going to become less rational and more disordered.

In the fragmented, trivialised and angry new world that is being shaped by the smartphone, conspiracy theories and mad ideas spread with terrifying fertility. Political discourse which was once conducted in print – with its remarkable capacity for sustaining logical thought and extended argument – now takes place amid the moronic inferno of social media. If our politicians seem lightweights, our public discourse trivial to the point of dysfunction, and our culture stale and repetitive, it is in large part because books and newspapers have been replaced by ubiquitous screens. I believe that we haven't yet fully grasped the consequences of this transformation. As the age of print gives way to the age of the screen, the world we once knew is vanishing.