

The Consequences and Value of Literacy: A Critical Reappraisal

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In many First World countries, the value of literacy is seldom questioned. Literacy, it is often believed, has certain consequences (e.g., economic growth, social mobility, and logical thought) which are highly desirable. This article problematizes commonplace assumptions about the nature of literacy. Rejecting the technological view of literacy (represented by theorists such as Goody and Ong), the author, drawing on the work of Lankshear and Lawler, argues that reading and writing need to be seen as complex social forms, dynamically interwoven with (and inseparable from) other dimensions of human activity. *Literacies* are seen as heterogeneous, nonneutral constructs and practices, with consequences which vary across different contexts and ethical positions.

Dans nombre de pays industrialisés, la valeur de la littéracie n'est guère questionnée. La littéracie, croit-on souvent, a des conséquences inévitables (e.g., croissance économique, mobilité sociale et pensée logique) qui sont hautement désirables. Cet article problématise les présupposés courants quant à la nature de la littéracie. Rejetant une vue technologique de la littéracie (représentée par des théoriciens tels que Goody et Ong), l'auteur, en s'appuyant sur les travaux de Lankshear et Lawler, avance que la lecture et l'écriture doivent être perçues en tant que formes sociales complexes, dynamiquement reliées (et inséparables) à d'autres dimensions de l'activité humaine. *Les littéracies* sont appréhendées comme des modèles et des pratiques hétérogènes non neutres, dont les conséquences varieront selon les contextes et les positionnements éthiques.

Introduction

In many societies, the value of literacy is frequently taken for granted. The ability to read and write is often regarded as an indispensable prerequisite for active participation in the contemporary world. It is sometimes helpful to remember, however, that human beings survived without literacy for hundreds of thousands of years. Harvey Graff notes that while the species *homo sapiens* is roughly 1,000,000 years old, writing did not emerge until

approximately 5,000 years ago. Western literacy (based upon the Greek alphabet) has been with us about 2,600 years, and printing is just 430 years old (Graff, 1987, p. 26). Literacy, then, as it has typically been defined, has been a feature of everyday life for but a fraction of the total period of human existence. All basic human needs (including food, clothing, shelter, and social contact) can be met without literacy. In addition, humans can communicate with one another without reading and writing (through the spoken word, through pictures and other forms of visual representation, via gestures and sign language, and so on). Why, then, do we invariably take it for granted that people ought to become literate?

On the face of it this is an odd question, with at least one obvious answer: literacy must, in some significant sense, improve the quality of our lives as human beings. To be literate, it might be argued, is to enjoy certain benefits which are unavailable to those who are illiterate or nonliterate. This *value thesis* clearly enjoys considerable popular support. Politicians regularly refer to the role of literacy in social and economic development (e.g., Goff, 1990, p. 3); newspaper editors assert that "everyone benefits from living in a literate, civilised society" (Editorial, 1990); major educational organizations such as UNESCO invariably assume that literacy campaigns are worthwhile. Literacy has been associated with progress, civilization, social mobility, abstract reasoning, and critical thought (Street, 1984, p. 2). Attitudes purported to accrue from literacy include innovativeness, information and media awareness, national identification, technological acceptance, commitment to democracy and to opportunism, flexibility, adaptability, and a willingness to accept and initiate change (Graff, 1987, p. 19; Oxenham, 1980, p. 15). Reading and writing have been related to the achievement of expanded horizons of personal enlightenment and enjoyment, and to the maintenance of stable societies (Szwed, 1981, p. 13). For many commentators, literacy is "the most important technology in the history of education and human culture" (Goldman, 1989, p. 394).

In recent years, however, cherished assumptions about the nature of literacy have come under increasingly critical academic scrutiny. In this article I problematize commonplace ideas about the consequences and value of literacy, concentrating in the first instance on the alleged differences between written and oral modes of communication. While there is a burgeoning literature pertinent to this theme (see Roberts, 1995a), I shall, given space constraints, limit my initial focus to two theorists who have been especially influential: Jack Goody and Walter Ong. Following a brief overview of key ideas in these theorists' work, I consider the alternative position advanced by Lankshear and Lawler against what I shall call the

technological view of literacy. I argue that reading and writing need to be seen as complex *social forms*: that is, as discursive constructs inextricably intertwined with other elements of human activity. Five points underpin my analysis:

- (1) Literacy has no absolute or final essence. There are, however, certain characteristics which many constructs of literacy and practices of reading and writing have in common.
- (2) There are always consequences in becoming and being literate, but these are not mechanical, cause-and-effect outcomes.
- (3) Conceptions, policies, and practices of reading and writing are necessarily partial in the sense that they always favor particular worldviews, interests, systems of social organization, and so on.
- (4) The consequences of literacy vary according to the character of given practices of reading and writing. How we view the consequences of literacies (as regards their value) – that is, as either desirable or undesirable – depends on the ethical assumptions we begin with. On several ethical positions there are good grounds for describing some forms of literacy as harmful; hence, the popular conception of literacy as necessarily valuable is problematic.
- (5) The notion that people ought to become literate in societies where reading and writing are fundamental to everyday life is compelling, but it is vital that consideration be given to the *ways* in which people learn and practice reading and writing.

Goody and Ong on Literacy and Orality

In his classic essay, “The Consequences of Literacy” (co-authored with Ian Watt) Goody argues that the distinctive features of Western thought can be traced back to the radical innovations of the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers of the sixth century BC (Goody & Watt, 1968, p. 43). This period coincided with the diffusion of writing throughout Greece, and with the (more permanent) recording of what was previously an oral cultural tradition. With these developments, the Greeks began to question many of the traditional beliefs that had been handed down through the spoken word. In identifying inconsistencies in these beliefs, the (literate) Greeks were “impelled to a much more conscious, comparative and critical attitude to the accepted world picture, and notably to the notions of God, the universe and the past” (p. 48).

In nonliterate societies, Goody and Watt note, cultural beliefs, values and norms are transmitted primarily through person-to-person communication.

While there is an appearance of consistency between the past and the present, practices change with shifting circumstances over time. As soon as ideas and events become inscribed in writing, it becomes possible to revisit them and pinpoint faults and contradictions. This leads to a more critical orientation toward the world. Literacy thus promotes a form of scepticism which in nonliterate societies, if it is present at all, is personal and noncumulative in form. In inculcating an awareness of inconsistency, literacy fosters a distinction between those aspects of tradition and belief which are based on fiction, error, and superstition, and those which are founded in truth (1968, p. 49). Literate individuals begin to seek alternative explanations on questions about the nature of reality. Formal logic, impossible without writing, emerges.

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato suggests that writing engenders forgetfulness and cannot "defend itself." Of written words, he remarks, "you might suppose that they understand what they are saying, but if you ask them what they mean by anything they simply return the same answer over and over again" (Plato, 1983, p. 97). Goody and Watt claim, however, that to construe Plato as a whole-hearted supporter of the oral tradition and an arch rival of the written word would be inaccurate. In fact, they argue,

Plato was torn between his interest and understanding of the prosaic, analytic and critical procedures of the new literate thoughtways on the one hand, and his occasional nostalgia for the 'unwritten customs and laws of our ancestors,' along with the poetic myths in which they were enshrined. (Goody & Watt, 1968, p. 52)

Some of the critical epistemological distinctions made by Plato – for example, the contrast drawn between truth (*episteme*) and current opinion (*doxa*) – coincided with the widespread adoption of writing. This was probably because "the written word suggests an ideal of definable truths which have an inherent autonomy and permanence quite different from the phenomena of the temporal flux and of contradictory verbal usages" (p. 53). The logical system followed by Socrates (as exemplified in Plato's dialogues) is essentially a literate procedure. The complexity of the arguments in Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Analytics* could not have been sustained in oral form (p. 53).

Elsewhere Goody (1977a) argues that alphabetic literacy enhances the potential for criticism by laying out a discourse in written form (where it is visible and open to scrutiny). In overcoming the constraints of space and time imposed by oral communication, writing increases cumulative knowledge. Written communication encourages schematic treatment of categories of understanding through mechanisms such as lists and tables (see Goody,

1977b). The organization of ideas in rows and columns (with each item standing in a definite permanent relationship to all other items, as in a table), is only possible through writing. One of the consequences of literacy before the Renaissance, for example, was the development of the type of systematized classification seen in the signs of the zodiac. In giving language a visual, spatial location, writing promotes a form of discontinuity in our perception of the world. It enables us to break our ideas about reality down into parts; through the written word we can create lists (of ideas or terms) which are generally too complex to be formulated orally. Writing is a tool which allows us to reclassify, organize, and reflect upon, information. The changes brought about through writing, Goody maintains, "could be described as differences in modes of thought, or reflective capacities, or even cognitive growth" (1977a, p. 111); becoming literate thus alters "not only the world out there but the psyche in here" (p. 108).

Another prominent scholar who has arrived at similar conclusions to those reached by Goody is Walter Ong. Ong (1986) argues that writing is a technology that restructures thought:

Functionally literate human beings ... are ... beings whose thought processes do not grow out of simply natural powers but out of these powers as structured, directly or indirectly, by the technology of writing. Without writing, the literate mind would not and could not think as it does, not only when engaged in writing but even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form. (p. 24)

According to Ong, we have "interiorized" the technology of writing so deeply that, without a great deal of effort, we cannot separate it from ourselves or recognize its presence or influence (p. 24). Like Goody and Watt, Ong views Plato's condemnation of writing in the *Phaedrus* with some suspicion. The fact that Plato was able to critique the written word, Ong suggests, was a reflection of the influence of writing on Plato's thought processes. Plato's entire epistemology, with its emphasis on cool, analytic thought, was more consistent with the written tradition than with the oral (p. 29).

Writing, Ong notes, is similar to many other technologies: it requires the use of tools (e.g., styli or pens) and special equipment (e.g., paper, animal skins, inks, paints, and so on). While spoken language is natural to all human beings, written language is not; in this sense, writing is an artificial technology. However,

to say that writing is artificial is not to condemn it but to praise it. Like other artificial creations and indeed more than any other, writing is utterly invaluable and indeed essential for the realization of fuller, interior, human potentials By distancing thought, alienating it from its

original habitat in sounded words, writing raises consciousness To live and to understand fully, we need not only proximity but also distance. Ong, 1986, p. 32)

One of the most important consequences of writing, Ong maintains, is its separating effect: writing divides and distances. In separating the known from the knower, writing promotes objectivity. We can acquire knowledge through reading a text without having to meet its author. Writing also distances the word from sound (although we may recreate sound when reading the written word). There is a tendency towards greater verbal precision in the written word than in the spoken word, inasmuch as writing usually allows for a longer period of reflection between words, sentences, paragraphs, and so on. Writing separates the past from the present – we can *freeze* what is with us now and revisit the past (theoretically) as often as we wish to, at any future point, via the written word. All elaborate, linear, logical explanations depend on writing. In Ong's opinion, we could not have philosophy without the written word: philosophical analysis relies on elaborate, intricate, exacting, cause-and-effect sequences which are impossible to duplicate orally. In doing all of these things, Ong concludes, writing is a “consciousness-raising and humanizing technology” (1986, p.48); it can “enrich the human psyche, enlarge human spirit, set it free, [and] intensify its interior life” (p. 33).

Three assumptions in the work of Goody and Ong are of particular significance for this article:

- (1) Goody and Ong advance what I shall call a technological view of literacy: to be literate, from their standpoint, is to possess, and be able to use, the technology of (alphabetic) writing. As a technology, writing is neutral. It can be applied in various ways in different settings, but it is still the same basic technology in all cases. Writing has certain *properties* and *potentialities* which mark it as a distinctive technology; literate folk, by implication, possess particular qualities which distinguish them from illiterates or nonliterate. The technology of writing is separate from the contexts in which it is used. Writing provides a tool which can be put to different ends by those who are literate. Without the technology of writing, certain forms of logic, listing, tabulation, and so on would not be possible. Given that the underlying technology is the same no matter what the (social, cultural, historical, political) situation, becoming literate is essentially the same process for all who learn to read and write.
- (2) On the view of literacy presented by Goody and Ong, reading and writing have definite and distinct consequences. Ong is the more explicit in his identification of an apparently *causal* relationship between writing and particular modes of thought. Goody and Watt, on the other hand, speak

of a wider range of consequences when discussing the impact of literacy. In both cases, literacy becomes an independent variable in (bringing about) cognitive and social change. This, as Street (1984) points out, is a form of technological determinism. The technology of writing determines, in important ways, what we become as human beings: how we think, how we relate to and communicate with others, how we make sense of the world, and even how we structure our societies. It is not a matter of us determining or shaping what writing is or becomes; rather, it is a case of the parameters for thought and action being defined by the technology. Our very perception of the options available to us as human beings is a product of the technology working through us.

- (3) Goody and Ong assume that the consequences of literacy are worthwhile. Again, Ong is the more overt of the two in declaring writing a consciousness raising and humanizing technology. Writing enriches the psyche, enlarges and frees the human spirit, and is essential in realizing “fuller, interior, human potentials” (Ong, 1986, p. 32). These advances are *specifically* and *directly* attributable to writing. There are also strong positive connotations in Goody's account of literacy. Goody argues that literacy enhances “cognitive growth,” which suggests progressive, perhaps even developmental, change. Moreover, he grants at least tacit approval to a whole range of critical, logical and analytical capacities allegedly made possible, fostered and extended by writing. Certainly Goody does not seriously call into question the value of these qualities; indeed, given the way he builds his theory, they could not be seen as anything but worthwhile. For Goody and Ong, there are fundamental differences between written and spoken forms of communication, and between literate and oral cultures. Writing opens up a whole range of communicative possibilities which are either impractical or impossible through the spoken word. Goody and Ong tend to develop points about literacy and writing through contrasts – through a series of oppositions – with spoken language, or with patterns of thought and behavior in oral (nonliterate) societies. In contrasting oral communication with literate communication, the former is almost always superseded or improved in some way by the latter. Where oral societies sustain myths and superstition, literacy enables these to be identified and broken down; communication through the spoken word allows inconsistencies to occur over the passage of time, while literacy highlights errors and contradictions; where oral language places limits on the development of complicated logical arguments, the opportunities for analysis through

writing are almost limitless. The technology of writing allows us to do more and *be* more as human beings than oral communication permits.

An Alternative Position

An influential alternative to Goody and Ong's position on the consequences and value of literacy is provided by Lankshear and Lawler (1987). Drawing on ideas advanced by Brian Street (1984) and Harvey Graff (1979), Lankshear and Lawler argue against the popular conception of literacy as a unitary, neutral, necessarily beneficial technology. While conventional 20th century accounts typically define literacy as the ability to read and write, Lankshear and Lawler maintain that we do better to focus on *literacies* as social practices and conceptions of reading and writing. Employing a range of historical and contemporary examples, Lankshear and Lawler demonstrate that literacies assume a multiplicity of distinct forms, some of which are liberating, others of which are profoundly oppressive. Different literacies are forged through human practice: through myriad activities, struggles, movements, campaigns, and so on involving reading and/or writing, within settings which may either enhance or impede possibilities for worthwhile change. No literacy, for Lankshear and Lawler, is ever neutral: conceptions and practices of writing are always shaped and conditioned by political policies, social structures, and (sometimes competing or contradictory) ideologies. To this extent, and in so far as reading and writing always take place within structured relations of power, literacies can be seen as necessarily *political* phenomena.

For Lankshear and Lawler, politics pertains to "the operation, exercise, and distribution of structural power, and the way in which this shapes human life within society" (1987, p. 27). To understand the politics of *literacy* is to inquire into the forms reading and writing take within the process of "humans pursuing interests, goals, and aspirations under conditions of unequal power" (p. 28). There are, accordingly, at least two senses in which the political nature of literacies might be revealed. First, attention can be paid to the efforts of subordinate groups who have resisted – through critical modes of reading and writing – oppressive social structures and relations. (The critical approach to both 'word' and 'world' fostered in Paulo Freire's adult literacy work in Brazil and Chile during the 1950s and 1960s provides an obvious example here.) Second, scholars can investigate the extent to which, and ways in which, literacies contribute to the reinforcement of existing inequalities (across class, gender, ethnic, and other lines) and established patterns of structural power. This process, as Lankshear and Lawler note (p.

29), is complex. The reading and writing activities of oppressed groups may be rendered less effective than those of dominant groups, given the kinds of literate activity officially recognized, valued and rewarded, and the absence of institutional mechanisms for taking the concerns of subordinated groups seriously (cf. p. 29). Subordinate groups may, through the very forms of literacy they practice in everyday life, contribute to their own domination. Alternatively, acts of resistance involving the written word may be reduced to apparently worthwhile, but often (politically) ineffective, exercises such as letters to newspaper editors, petitions, submissions to ruling bodies, and so on (cf. pp.29-30).

In extending this link between literacy and politics, Lankshear and Lawler distinguish *proper* forms of literacy from *improper* forms. Modifying a distinction first drawn by O'Neil (1970), they suggest:

Proper literacy enhances people's control over their lives and their capacity for dealing rationally with decisions by enabling them to identify, understand, and to act to transform, social relations and practices in which power is structured unequally Improper literacy either fails to promote, or else actively impedes, such understanding and action. (Lankshear with Lawler, 1987, p. 74)

These categories provide a framework for analyzing literacy practices past and present. The following examples are discussed as representative of proper literacy: the activities of the London Corresponding Society in England in the 19th century; the pedagogy of Ira Shor at the City University of New York; the teaching practices of Chris Searle in working-class schools in London's East End in the early 1970s; the work of Paulo Freire; and the Nicaraguan literacy crusade. By contrast, the practices observed by Alison Jones (1986) in her study of two New Zealand secondary school classrooms are critically investigated as examples of improper literacy. As described by Lankshear and Lawler, the improper dimensions of reading and writing observed in Jones' study included the copying of notes without understanding, the separation of classroom information from existing knowledge and everyday experience, the reinforcement of a demonstrably false ideology of meritocracy and equal opportunity, and the lack of any form of structural analysis of social reality (see p. 164). With Postman (1970), Lankshear and Lawler argue that most people who become literate practice reading and writing in predominantly trivial ways – for example, in writing shopping lists, reminder notes, cheques, letters, or in reading newspapers, Mills and Boon novels, and the like for information and leisure. Few, despite the high hopes customarily held for literacy, are likely to seek enlightenment in great works

of literature or use reading and writing to critically analyze the world they live in (Lankshear with Lawler, 1987, pp. 48-50).

The identification of opposing *generic* forms (proper literacy and improper literacy), allows a host of more specific, localized modes of literate practice to be categorized, analyzed, and evaluated. As the level of specificity increases, one form, in effect, becomes “nested” within another. Hence, if we take proper literacy as the generic form, the Nicaraguan literacy campaign as a whole – as a *moment* in Nicaraguan and world history – can be taken as an exemplification of proper literacy. Within the crusade a host of more specific forms of proper literacy emerged. One could focus, for instance, on the efforts of women confronting issues of patriarchy through organizations such as AMNLAE (the Association of Nicaraguan Women, named for Luisa Amanda Espinosa: see Lankshear with Lawler, 1987, pp. 202-216). At a more specific level still, attention could be paid to the work of particular women in different communities. The distinction between proper literacy and improper literacy thus furnishes a useful theoretical framework for distinguishing between different literacies – while explicitly recognizing the ethical and political dimensions of reading and writing – without denying the heterogeneity of particular forms within specific contexts.

Lankshear and Lawler's work suggests that it is nonsensical to talk of literacy *on its own* or *in itself*. There is no transcendental, ahistorical, contextless essence to writing, reading, or literacy, though there may be similarities in certain conceptions and constructions of these terms over time and in different contexts. Lankshear and Lawler do not see writing as a neutral technology waiting to be used in disparate ways; rather, for them, what writing *is*, or becomes, is dependent upon the forms *particular* writings take in various contexts. If there is no such thing as literacy in itself, then literacy cannot cause *anything*. This does not mean that literacies do not have *consequences* of a kind. The different ways in which we read and write *do* have consequences, but these are not mechanical cause-and-effect outcomes. Literacy does not independently bring about logical, analytical, critical thought (or economic growth, or social mobility, or anything else), though particular forms of literacy may *be* critical, or passive, or oppressive, and so on.

Technologies, Consequences, and Ethics

For Goody and Ong, writing, reading, and literacy are *unitary* phenomena: the assumption is that there is one basic technology (alphabetic writing) which all literate people use, whatever the circumstances in which

they read and write. In rejecting this view, Lankshear and Lawler maintain that the search for unitary essences diverts attention from “the actual forms ... [literacy takes] within and among particular groups and individuals, in particular times and places ... and the many issues – social, political, ethical, cultural, etc. – that turn on them” (1987, pp. 47-48). They contend that if we focus on literacies as actual social practices and conceptions of reading and writing, we are “freed to ask a whole range of questions that we are effectively discouraged from asking if we assume that literacy is neutral” (p. 50). If literacy is seen as neutral, “teachers and other purveyors of literacy are absolved from having to consider what the end consequences are of their activities” (p.50). Lankshear and Lawler claim: “Only if we face up to ways in which, and extent to which, reading and writing *are actually patterned* are we enabled to consider the wider scene in which we, as teachers of reading and writing, are key characters” (pp. 50-51).

At stake here is the question of how our understanding of literacy might limit or extend possibilities for addressing the ethical and political dimensions of reading and writing. While Lankshear and Lawler’s position will be supported here, I want first to consider what might be involved in trying to argue *against* their view. For it might be maintained that *if* literacy is neutral, consideration of wider questions relating to its uses and consequences becomes all the more important. Perhaps taking moral responsibility for one’s actions is *more* likely to follow from the neutral technology view than from Lankshear and Lawler’s position. Technologies, it could be suggested, can be employed to oppressive or liberating ends. In almost any form of technology there exists the potential for both benefit and harm; it is vital, therefore, that utmost importance be placed upon the way a given technology is *used*. From this perspective, it is not the technology itself which is nonneutral; rather, it is the processes, values, beliefs, and social practices involved in making a decision about what to do with this technology which are never neutral. The more powerful the technology, it might be argued, the greater the care required in using it wisely.

With regard to literacy, then, we might (if this pattern of reasoning were to be adopted) proceed from the assumption that written symbols on their own are harmless; they have no inclination one way or the other with respect to questions of harm and benefit. When written symbols are put to use, however, manifold possibilities arise: people might enjoy the wonders of literature, or write racist hate letters; teachers might encourage or stifle creativity in written expression among children; the highest truths can be pursued through the philosophical analysis writing allows, or written evidence may be

falsified; stirring tributes might be paid to great performers or athletes, or ungrounded rumors might be spread to millions via tabloid newspapers. Given the potential for both harm and benefit, it becomes vital that ethical questions pertaining to literacy be addressed *before* the technology is put to use. Literacy can be applied in many different ways: we must, and *ought*, to decide which applications to favor and which to reject. Literacy *itself*, like other technologies, is neutral, but what we *do with* the ability to read and write is never neutral. The “search for unitary essences” (Lankshear with Lawler, 1987, p. 48) does not *have* to direct our attention away from ethical, social, and cultural issues; indeed, it should necessitate their examination. If we see literacy as neutral, then we are not absolved from the responsibility of considering the consequences of our actions; in fact, we are almost forced to consider actual and possible consequences. If we limit our focus to the actual forms literacy takes, we confine investigation to that which *does* happen, and exclude inquiry into what *might* or *ought* to happen.

This line of argument is riddled with problems, some of which will be identified here to highlight the merits of Lankshear and Lawler's position. On the view tested above, it is as if technologies develop in a desocialized, depoliticized, ahistorical void: once in place, they can then be used as people see fit. I would argue, however, that it is not a question of how a technology is used, but rather one of what form it takes *as it develops*. Indeed, strictly speaking there is no such thing as a unitary, utterly distinct, self-contained technology; rather, it might be more accurate to talk of multiple *technologies* – as social forms which encapsulate practices, attitudes, conceptions, beliefs, values, and so on. It is peculiarly unsociological to conceive of human forms (like technologies) outside of the structures and relations that make them what they are. Attention needs to be paid to the specific circumstances under which various technologies – including those associated with the written word – develop. Each situation in which a technology, or any other human form, develops must be studied – as far as this is possible – as a social whole. The technology itself cannot be neatly separated from the wider context within which it evolves. The context *is* the technology in the sense that we cannot understand writing (or computers, or nuclear fission, or various chemical and medicinal technologies, and so on) in the absence of some contextual setting. Technologies are always *embedded* in, and in this sense defined by, structures, practices, conceptions, social relations, rules, policies, theoretical frameworks, and political systems (cf. Habermas, 1971, chapter 6; Marcuse, 1986, especially pp. 154-160).

As to whether assuming the neutrality of literacy impels us to ask ethical questions pertaining to, and take greater responsibility for, the use and application of technologies, I have my doubts. At a purely analytic level, it does not follow that if literacy is seen as neutral people will *necessarily* consider the consequences of their actions in using the technology of writing. As it stands, the argument is as follows: (a) literacy is a facility with the neutral technology of writing; (b) neutral technologies can be used in harmful or beneficial ways; *therefore* (c) those who use the technology of writing (i.e., literate folk) will consider whether their application of the technology in any given situation is likely to have harmful or beneficial effects. There is at least one premise missing in this equation, namely, the presupposition that people tend (always, or often, or of necessity) to weigh up the consequences of their actions before using technologies they regard as neutral. This proposition can be questioned on empirical grounds, and certainly requires clarification if it is to be effective as the pivot on which the whole argument turns.

It is difficult to imagine many people pausing to reflect on questions of ethics (whether conceived in terms of harm and benefit' or oppression and liberation, or humanization and dehumanization, or in any other way) pertaining to *any* technology in daily use. It is, in part, precisely because many technologies (including writing) appear innocent and neutral – as simply part of the ebb and flow of everyday life – that they are seldom subjected to critical interrogation. Whether it is a toaster used for breakfast, a car driven to work, a computer employed in keeping records, or written symbols on a blackboard in a school classroom, there is a proclivity among many of us to regard these as simply conveniences or tools which make working or home life easier. This hypothesis obviously cannot be proven without empirical data; nevertheless, it seems more plausible than the notion that people always, or even frequently, contemplate the consequences of their actions in employing contemporary technologies.

Another element in the explanation is to be found in the very forms of literacy children and adults are typically initiated into. For, if it is true, as Lankshear and Lawler argue, that the majority of people who become literate practice reading and writing in predominantly trivial ways, assumptions about neutrality become embedded in these practices. The banality of everyday literate activity reinforces the view that writing is a benign, innocuous, or harmless technology, while simultaneously rendering its problematization – in ethical or any other terms – less likely than ever. Given its routinized character in many lives, literacy becomes not only innocent but effectively *invisible*: an unseen layer or strand in the tapestry of everyday life.

I believe, then, that even if (for the sake of argument) the neutrality of literacy is granted, there are problems in assuming that this will lead to, or even allow for the likelihood of, ethical and political questions being pursued. These matters, I suggest, are less likely to be addressed when this conception of literacy is advanced (or embodied in practice) than they would be if Lankshear and Lawler's view was in place. While it might be argued that people *ought* to ponder ethical questions and contemplate (possible) consequences in using technologies such as writing, irrespective of whether many people actually do this, this idea presupposes a prior commitment to certain values (and a particular view of literacy) which not all people have or are likely to develop.

Teachers and other purveyors of literacy are not literally absolved (Lankshear with Lawler, 1987, p. 50) from responsibility for their actions in a society which takes the neutrality of reading and writing for granted, at least not in the sense of being exonerated *by* officials, politicians, parents of children under their care, or anyone else; nor do teachers exculpate themselves from a consideration of consequences. Rather, their absolution is a *logical* outcome, albeit one which is often manifested empirically, of a particular way of thinking about, and practicing, reading and writing. *If* literacy is just a skill, or a tool, or facility with a neutral technology, consideration of social, political, and ethical questions will always be a separate issue. These matters may even be regarded as important areas for inquiry, but, on the neutral technology view, they have nothing to do with literacy itself. Teachers of reading and writing simply provide children or adults with the means for acquiring the technology: what learners do with this technology is up to them.

I have argued, however, that literacies are never neutral. The myriad forms reading and writing take always rest on certain ideas about human beings and the world, and always favor particular beliefs, values, ideologies, interests, patterns of (social) advantage or disadvantage, and so on. Conceptions and practices of reading and writing are thus always *partial*, and in *this* sense always have consequences for those who construct or participate in them. A person who engages in a practice which comes to be called reading (e.g., a child deciphering written symbols from a story book) cannot but be affected in some way by this process. The ability to practice this kind of activity does not, however, constitute an independent variable, causing (say) enhancement of the child's reflective or abstract reasoning capacities; rather, this ability itself represents the combination of a whole web of social factors which interact in complex ways to shape the child's future development. We can never isolate one element in a specific example of reading which causes

this or that; instead, we must examine each situation as a social whole, where an intricate, ever shifting range of intersecting factors combine to distinguish one (form of) reading from another. There can never be a finite list of consequences or outcomes which accrue from literacy; we can only talk of this person, or these people, being shaped in this or that way through practices A, B, C, which are socially constructed as examples of reading or writing.

Revisiting Value Claims

How we view the consequences of different literacies (as regards their value) – that is, as either beneficial or harmful – depends on the ethical assumptions we begin with. This is seldom noted in statements about the benefits of literacy. *Prima facie*, there appears to be considerable agreement about what constitutes a valuable or worthwhile outcome or goal. We ought to be wary, however, of taking this apparent agreement at face value. For example, politicians frequently stress the importance of literacy for economic growth, taking for granted not only a causal relationship (where arguably none exists: see Lankshear with Lawler, 1987, chapter 2) but also the value of the goal itself. In New Zealand the ruling National Party has, for several years, proclaimed its (real or imagined) achievements in promoting an economic recovery. The concept of economic growth which underpins this boasting, however, seems excessively reliant upon indicators such as low inflation; problems such as continuing unemployment and a growing gap between the rich and the poor appear to be less important in gauging progress. For the thousands of people who have been made redundant or forced to endure an impoverished existence (as a direct or indirect result of government economic and social policies), the desirability of economic growth – as defined by the State and corporate elites – may be less than self-evident.

Social mobility, likewise, is frequently mentioned as a valued consequence of literacy. Let us suppose that this concept refers to, among other things, the movement of a person from a lower to a higher income. Now, on *some* ethical positions this would be regarded as unquestionably valuable; from other perspectives, however, social mobility is not *necessarily* worthwhile. Those who espouse an ethic of market liberalism (e.g., former New Zealand finance ministers Ruth Richardson and Roger Douglas) – where it is taken for granted that individuals seek, and *ought* to seek, to maximize their own economic advantage in free competition with others – would be in the former category. Those who adopt a Marxist perspective, however, would

argue that the circumstances under which a person's income is raised must be examined. If elevating one's income means accumulating great wealth by exploiting others who do not own the means of production, then social mobility is not always a desirable goal.

Of course, if it is accepted that conceptions and practices of reading and writing are diverse and many, then there can be no inevitable, uniform consequences of (or outcomes from) literacy. This allows us to rule out one proposition immediately, namely, the view that *literacy* (in the singular) is valuable or worthwhile. But another possibility is left open: it might be claimed that while literacies vary, all are valuable. This proposition too, I believe, must be repudiated. I submit that on *several* ethical positions, there are good grounds for assessing certain literacies (which either have existed in the past, do currently exist, or could occur in the future) as harmful or oppressive. To give one example, the compulsory reading of texts, religious documents, or political slogans in a rote-learning manner – under conditions where criticism of the material being read is discouraged and punished – offends against various conservative, liberal, and radical ethical stances. Plato would condemn this practice on the grounds that it inhibits the pursuit of knowledge through Socratic dialectical processes; R.S. Peters would object to the lack of wittingness and voluntariness on the part of learners; Freire would find the banking nature of the situation intolerable; and so on.

Literacy is both socially constitutive and socially constituted. We *construct* conceptions of what counts as reading and writing – and hence literacy – and forge distinctive practices and discourses based upon these formations (see Roberts, 1995b). In this sense, the *nature* of literacy is determined by us. If we assume, though, as I have for the purposes of this article, that a given form of literacy implies engagement in a specific set of practices within concrete social settings, then clearly literacy also shapes us. In being literate – that is, in engaging in myriad reading and writing activities – we both work within and *create* social structures. The social forms we construct through our actions as literate people act back on us, conditioning us and our view of literacy.

Extending a point made by McHoul (1991, p. 192) in relation to reading, it can be argued that the distinction between literacy and the social context is ultimately an artificial one. The social context of a particular form of reading or writing is what makes a specific literacy what it is. Each context (or discursive setting) conditions us in different ways. Just as we might expect a child raised in a poor family to emerge with a different view of the world (different values, tastes, perceptions, beliefs, feelings about others, and

so on) to that developed by a child brought up in a wealthy environment, so too should we expect, for instance, that the reading and writing practices associated with studying for a university degree will shape people in different ways to those required for shopping in a supermarket. Within these examples, further divisions could (and must) be made: no one child from a poor background exists in exactly the same context as any other poor child; different university degrees require different literacies; and so on. This suggests that while it may be possible to identify general patterns or trends across a number of localized practices of reading and writing, no one literacy is precisely the same as any other.

Possibilities for Further Research

I want to conclude by noting two areas for further scholarly investigation, both of which are pertinent to the preceding discussion but neither of which (given space constraints) can be given the consideration they deserve in the present paper. First, it must be acknowledged that only a limited account of key ideas in the work of Goody and Ong has been provided. Goody and Ong, and others (notably, Marshall McLuhan, 1962; 1978), also raise the possibility of a much more radical thesis on the question of how literacy shapes us. In more recent publications, Goody has (again) raised the question of “whether and how writing transforms the mind” (Goody, 1987, p. 247). While expressing some hesitation in confronting this subject (“it seems more a problem for the analytic philosopher than the social scientist,” p. 247), Goody nevertheless hypothesizes that “if the development of language changed the physiological structure of the brain (or if they developed in interaction), then it is conceivable that in the long term parallel developments in hand-eye coordination might occur through writing” (p. 250).

This moves contemplation about the consequences of literacy to a new territory: the physiology of the brain. Goody postulates that given the late arrival of writing (by comparison with spoken language) in the evolutionary development of human beings, it is likely that any influence on the physical structure of the brain will at this point in our history be negligible (1987, p. 249). Others are less reticent. Marshall McLuhan boldly declares that alterations to brain function have already occurred as a consequence of reading and writing. Phonetic literacy, he claims, creates an “abstract rationalism,” altering the ratio among our senses (McLuhan, 1978, p. 56; Olson, 1981, p. 140). Under the influence of the alphabet we have shifted from the “hot hyperaesthetic world” of the ear to the “cool, neutral world” of the eye (McLuhan, 1962, p. 19). The transition from an auditory mode of

being to a predominantly visual environment contributed to the dominance of the left hemisphere of the brain in literate human beings. The characteristic features of left-hemisphere activity are linearity and sequentiality. The left hemisphere is logical, mathematical, detailed, controlled, active, and analytic. The right hemisphere, by contrast, is responsible for artistic, symbolic, emotional, intuitive, creative, spiritual, receptive, synthetic activity. The rise of logic and individualism in Greece, McLuhan argues, was a direct outcome of the working of alphabetic literacy on the brain (see McLuhan, 1978, pp. 54-56; Levinson, 1981, pp. 184-185). Ong adopts a similar perspective: "the mind does not enter into the alphabet or the printed book or the computer so much as the alphabet or print or the computer enters the mind, producing new states of awareness there" (Ong, 1977, p. 47).

These hypotheses are obviously difficult to prove or disprove. In arguing against them we may simultaneously support them, for, Ong might say, it may only be through the influence of writing on our minds that the articulation of inconsistencies, logical flaws, and so on comes to seem necessary or important. There is an unavoidably speculative character to the propositions being considered here. While the notion of literacy having a gradual influence over the way our minds function seems plausible, this paper has taken the position that reading and writing are social practices which cannot be neatly separated from other aspects of the social world. If the ideas advanced in earlier sections are accepted, isolating direct links between writing or reading and subsequent physical and mental changes becomes not simply difficult, but impossible. It *is* possible to demarcate some of the distinguishing features of a particular literacy (X), and to examine the significance of X as one *part* (i.e., one element, or aspect, or dimension) of wider social change. This does not mean there is little point in examining physiological processes in attempting to more deeply understand the impact reading and writing have on human life. The stance adopted in this paper merely implies that while research of this kind is likely to be invaluable in enhancing ideas about the relationship between literacy, thought, and action, if it aims to definitively establish *causal* connections over time it will be based on misguided assumptions.

There is an additional area of inquiry to which scholars interested in questions about the consequences and value of literacy might turn: namely, the emergence of the new information technologies, and their potential impact on conceptions and practices of reading and writing. A number of authors (e.g., Bolter, 1991; Landow, 1992; Lanham, 1993) have demonstrated that traditional modes of literate activity are undergoing a metamorphosis as the dominance of print increasingly gives way to the floating signifier of the

image in a digitalized world. In the age of computerization patterns of communication in commercial, educational, and personal life are changing in significant ways. Academics can contact colleagues on the other side of the world almost instantly through E-Mail; fax machines enable not only words but pictures to be transmitted from one destination to another thousands of miles away; multimedia computer systems integrate sound, graphics, and text, furnishing new opportunities for teaching and learning; through the Internet, information on a vast array of different subjects can be gained, and connections to others with like interests can easily be made. With the shift toward global networks of information, it will not only be structures and practices that change, but also, perhaps, our ideas of what it means to read, write and be literate. New ways of organizing information, and of conveying knowledge (e.g., "hypertext" as opposed to the conventional printed text) demand new approaches to reading and writing. Ultimately, our entire conception of reality, and of ourselves, may require revision. The development of "virtual reality" technologies provides an especially thought-provoking challenge to traditional notions of knowledge and experience.

If the dangers associated with technological determinism are to be avoided, any exploration of the changing face of literacy in cyberspatial times must situate computer-based innovations in their wider social context(s). For it is clear that information technologies, like all others, have been shaped in important ways by a variety of material, ideological, and political forces. It is impossible, for example, to adequately understand contemporary computing practices without examining the pervasive influence of corporate giants in the digital marketplace. Telecommunications companies play a significant role in determining costs, and opening or closing opportunities, associated with the information superhighway. Microsoft and other key players in the software industry shape fashions, trends, and ideas in the application of digital technologies. Without the appropriate software (and hardware), new forms of literate activity in word processing composition, hypertextual reading, and E-Mail communication are simply not possible. The radically uneven distribution of computing facilities (and supporting software and networking resources) across the planet also seriously undermines the notion of a truly global cyberspatial community. Indeed, inequities of access to computer-based technologies are glaringly apparent *within* supposedly information rich societies (see Spender, 1995).

In addition to the ongoing work required in contextualizing digital technologies, literacy studies scholars might also make a worthwhile contribution in drawing attention to the "darker side" of computing and cyberspatial practices. The emergence of an increasing number of

surveillance mechanisms in the digital age is one area of special concern for social theorists. Reading and writing are, in some senses, becoming more closely *monitored* (and thus potentially regulated and controlled) as computer keyboards and terminals take the place of pen and paper. There has even been talk by some employers of recording every key stroke employees in data-entry and other keyboard-related jobs make (now that this is technically possible), ostensibly with the aim of promoting greater efficiency, less dishonesty, and higher rewards for productive workers. It is not difficult, however, to argue against such practices, from a number of angles. Monitoring of this kind can be seen as a gross invasion of privacy and personal space, as a blatant infringement of workers' rights, as a form of symbolic violence, as a hegemonic and dehumanizing mechanism for manipulating minds and producing docile bodies, and so on. If the principles developed earlier in the paper are heeded, addressing this area would require an ethical theory from which judgements about the desirability or undesirability of given modes of surveillance might be made. Similarly, if we are to get to grips with matters of surveillance, we cannot assume that computer-based technologies are simply there, waiting to be used for good or for ill; rather, we need to recognize that surveillance systems constitute particular *forms* such technologies may take.

Concluding Comments

The argument that people ought to become literate in countries heavily dependent on the written word is compelling. On the face of it, there seems to be an odd, if not cruel, irony in the fact that those who appear to be downplaying the importance of literacy are already (highly) literate. A comparison might be drawn here with the rich person who declares that money is not necessary for happiness (cf. Chall's comments in Chall, Harman, Isaac, Jones, Laubach, Laubach, & O'Neil, 1970, p. 266). Those who problematize the value of literacy seem, at first glance, to be faced with a contradiction in that they affirm the value they are rendering problematic through conveying their ideas in writing. Presumably an author believes he or she has something worthwhile to say in constructing a critique of literacy. Typically, in arguing his or her case, a scholar consults books, articles, and the like, and employs the written word in either producing a formal paper or notes for a spoken presentation. The whole procedure of criticizing commonly held assumptions about literacy, then, is (often) literate through and through! Of course, without denying that certain ironies exist here, appearances can be deceiving. The point is that literacy can be both beneficial *and* harmful.

Hence, while the claim that people need to be literate in order to meaningfully participate in contemporary First World societies seems reasonable, we need to go beyond this to look at the *forms* of literacy being promoted. It is not sufficient, surely, to say that citizens need to learn just enough to *survive* in their society; rather, we need to investigate (theoretically and empirically) forms of reading and writing which allow people to *thrive* in the social world (cf. Lankshear, 1985). Indeed, going beyond mere functional survival implies, to me, an attempt to analyze exactly what kind of society one is being ushered (more fully) into through literacy. This is one aspect of what I would call *critical literacy*, a subject which cannot be investigated here (see further: Lankshear & McLaren, 1983; Giroux, 1988; Kretovics, 1985; McLeod, 1986; Roberts, 1996).

My aim in this article has been to demonstrate that the value of literacy, contrary to popular opinion, cannot be taken for granted. Literacy has no fixed, inevitable, uniform, causal outcomes. Different *literacies* have distinct consequences, varying according to the disparate social contexts within which reading and writing take place. The harm or benefit conferred by given practices of reading and writing can only be determined through reference to an explicit or implied set of ethical principles. Promoting literacy in a world which continues to demand an increasing range of reading and writing competencies is vital, but in supporting this goal we must always consider what *kind* of literacy we aim to foster, and, ultimately, what form of social ideal we wish to work toward.

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