

+ Page 54 +

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"Those Who Don't, Won't"

By Walt Crawford

It's all well and good to blather on about refinements and extensions to online catalogs. More power to those providing full-text access and adding retrieval for visual materials and sound. Good access to non-textual material is a vital part of modern library catalogs.

What provokes me this time, however, has to do with the end-result of most library catalog searching: text. The provocation comes in the term "post-literate," particularly as used by those who say "text-impaired" in the sense of "hung up on text, that old-fashioned narrow channel of communication."

A Post-Literate Society Would be a Medieval Society

Need I say more? Perhaps--but that heading is the gist of this diatribe, and my optimistic viewpoint shows up in the word "would" rather than "will." I don't believe we're headed for a post-literate society (and desperately hope that we're not), and feel that librarians should make every effort to see to it that we're not.

Some of you will already know the prequel to this column's title: Dick Dougherty's ALA Presidential slogan, "Kids who read, succeed." As a rejoinder to those who urge us to move smoothly into a post-literate society, the follow-on is more important: "Those who don't, won't."

+ Page 55 +

In a society where most people were "visually literate" or "media literate" but lack solid, well-developed, constantly-used reading skills, the literate or "text-oriented" minority would be in control--perhaps not always overtly, but most assuredly where it counts. In that dystopian vision, we would revert to a medieval state where the knowledgeable few rule the ignorant masses. This time the ignorant masses would not think themselves ignorant, since they would be flooded with "information" through the vastly richer channels of sight and sound.

I've heard some of the visions of those who believe that text doesn't matter. Business people will solve problems by working through virtual-reality embodiments of the situation at hand, or use video game-like methods to arrive at the best course of action. Maybe I'm getting gullible in middle age, but (God help me) I believe that some of these people are serious!

## Narrowness Can be a Virtue

Yes, text represents a narrower communication channel than sight and sound. Another way of saying that is that text provides specificity. Text is also linear, which makes it ideal for logical operations, case-building and the other tools of argument. (For the purposes of this discussion, mathematics is a special case of text: even narrower, even more specific, and generally even more linear.)

Of course text isn't all there is. A description of the Sistine Chapel can't substitute for photographs of the ceiling and chapel itself, which in turn don't really substitute for being there. A description of Stravinsky's "Variations on 'Vom Himmel Hoch'" would be pretty pallid, while the music itself is an astonishing cross-century blend and a considerable pleasure. I watch network TV (and I don't mean PBS) and enjoy it; a description of "Evening Shade" or "Northern Exposure" could surely not replace the experience itself.

Turning to more "factual" matters, I would never approve a proposed extension to my house without seeing appropriate drawings--but I would also never approve the extension without detailed textual and mathematical support for those drawings, in the form of firm costs, structural details, and a proper contract.

+ Page 56 +

## Literacy Empowers

Without the ability to read carefully, thoroughly and thoughtfully, a person will always be at the mercy of others. That's true of mathematical literacy as well, to be sure: if you can't do approximate calculations in your head, you have no basis for challenging a dishonest tradesperson or a simple error in charging. Reading, thinking, understanding: these provide power, the power to participate fully in the modern world. In a post-literate society, only the reading minority would have that power. That is, I maintain, a future to be avoided rather than dealt with.

One final note. If you believe that this column is an attack on multimedia, or that I am arguing that only print is important or that entertainment is unimportant: go back and read it again, this time more carefully.

## About the Author

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