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How should School Libraries Operate in a Post-Literate, AI-led Society?

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Abstract

This paper highlights the ongoing demise in longform reading as a leisure or scholarly activity, coupled with the decline in standards of reading. It aims to show that we are entering a post-literate society in which the lack of longform reading is leading to a change in culture, language usage, and also in cognition. It maps the move away from longform print media to digital, oral, and visual short-form media and explores the limitations of oral societies as opposed to literate societies. The ability to write heralds change in thought and extended reasoning, while writing also changes language itself, allowing for more complex ideas to be expressed and analysed. The essay explores the potential of a post-literate society to rewire brains preventing reasoning and leading to more emotive, tribal thinking, potentially paving the way to a catastrophic destruction of shared language, cultural norms and value systems in the age of the oral individual. Moreover, it seeks to explore the concept of post-literate society being similar to pre-literate societies and yet fundamentally different because of the technological advance of digital memory storage. Whereas written language gives a shared value system, history or inherent truth, digital storage represents a fragmentation of memory, a fragmentation of truth. Far from protecting inherent truths, digital storage capabilities, and the AIs of the future, may lead to further fragmentation. The paper aims to show that libraries need to be restored as essential institutions at the centre of schools and societies, being bastions of a shared value system and protectors of inherent truths, shared histories and reasoning in written format. Finally, the paper recommends positive and focussed utilisation of the advent of AI to increase reach and reading abilities in a constantly changing world.

When students and staff think about the library in the school, what goes through their minds? The place where the printer lives? Imaginative displays; a large collection of books; sometimes overwhelming with its huge selection and yet somehow lacking the one book they need? Perhaps for older students, it looms only as a digital entity with

an unachievable list of books to get through; for younger students a place for silent reading in library lessons that are anything but engines for learning, but rather a chance to sneak a whispered chat, a glanced look at a phone? Does that conjure a negative view of school libraries? Do they need a rethink?

School libraries will not be viewed in the negative aspect outlined above and can be fundamentally excellent if they are acknowledged as being integral to a school. Well-funded school libraries tend to be organised, maintained and curated by knowledgeable, expertly qualified and friendly librarians. Their collections are presented with relevant, inspiring displays, and can be a source of wonder and imagination, of scholarly love, and provide access to selected resources.

And yet, in this National Year of Reading, are we at a cusp of a new dawn? The National Year of Reading was conceived as a governmental sticking plaster because statistics show a decline in reading activity and aptitude, not just amongst children, but amongst adults too. (See Occasional Paper Number 79). In fact, despite the NYR being a national venture, the demise in reading is global. A 2024 YouGov poll showed that 40% of Britons hadn't read or listened to any books in the last year.[1] While in the US, the figure stands at 50% of half the population,[2] and statistics show that reading is in freefall: on an average day in 2003, 28 per cent of Americans read daily; yet by 2023 it was down to 16 per cent[3]. If adults don't read, our children have a lack of role models to show that reading is a viable leisure activity. In the UK, National Literacy Trust research shows that just 1 in 5 boys aged 14 to 16 years enjoy reading, while in girls it is 2 in 5. In 2025, only 19% of children and young people reported reading daily compared with 38% in 2005.[4] That's a fall by a half in 20 years.

So, what is the role of the school library if staff and students alike aren't reading? How should and can libraries develop to embrace students and staff and welcome them back to reading, or conversely, how do libraries prove their relevance or adapt in an era in which reading is in decline to the extent that experts around the world are labelling it the dawn of the post-literate society.

What do we mean by a post-literate society? Reading isn't innate, and it isn't something that perpetuates without practice. Reading must be taught – no child or adult just 'picks it up', and to get better at it, more fluent, better at comprehension, a

[1] YouGov. (2024). *40% of Britons haven't read a single book in the last 12 months*. https://yougov.co.uk/entertainment/articles/51730-40-of-britons-havent-read-a-single-book-in-the-last-12-months

[2] National Endowment for the Arts. (2024). *Federal data on reading for pleasure: All signs show a slump*. https://www.arts.gov/stories/blog/2024/federal-data-reading-pleasure-all-signs-show-slump

[3] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (n.d.). *American Time Use Survey (ATUS) data*. https://www.bls.gov/tus/data.htm, Jessica K. Bone., Bu, F., Sonke, J. K., & Fancourt, D. (2025). The decline in reading for pleasure over 20 years of the American Time Use Survey. *iScience, 28*(9). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.isci.2025.113288

[4] Clark, C., Picton, I., Cole, A., & Puri, V. (2026, February). *Teenage reading: Reframing the challenge*. National Literacy Trust.

person must practise it. The more one reads, the more automaticity one achieves in reading fluency, and the more one reads, the more knowledge is gained, which leads to fuller understanding, and critical thinking. As The Times writer James Marriott and the neuroscientist and reading specialist Maryanne Wolf describe it[1], reading isn't the passive absorption of information, it is in itself a creative act. It activates parts of the brain and develops cognition. The Harvard professor Joseph Henrich explores in 'Martin Luther Rewired Your Brain', that learning to read, particularly for children under eight, increases their verbal memory, and thickens the corpus callosum, which connects the left and right sides of the brain.[2]

The link between not reading and reading aptitude is becoming apparent. According to the OECD, 30 per cent of American adults read at a level that one might expect from a ten-year-old child.[3] In fact, the OECD's 2024 report showed that reading levels were declining or stagnating in most developed countries.[4] And books that once might have sold in the tens of thousands are now selling in mid four-figures[5]. University professors, who once may have set tomes such as *Middlemarch* by George Eliot (spanning between 800-900 pages in modern editions) as a key part of the curriculum, are turning to shorter texts as they realise that their students just can't manage what was once the literary canon. In essence, we aren't reading long texts, and we are getting worse at doing so.

Our world is becoming less about written communication, (certainly long-form written communication such as an essay, novella or novel), and becoming more oral …and more visual.

Digital and social media is commonly consumed through short-form video material or, if written, uses emojis, abbreviations and more orally styled language. As of 2025, industry has banded around the figure of approximately 82% of all consumer internet traffic being video.[6] AI is also predominantly led by oral-style language, despite for this short moment in time, being typed – about 70% written prompts to 30% oral, although

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[1] Marriott, James, How Reading Made Us 1. How Reading Made Our Brains, with Professor Maryanne Wolf, Director of the Centre of Dyslexia, Diverse Learners and Social Justice at UCLA

[2] Henrich, Joseph, Martin Luther Rewired Your Brain, Feb 2021, ProSocial World

[3] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2024). *Survey of adult skills 2023: Country notes—United States*. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/survey-of-adults-skills-2023-country-notes_ab4f6b8c-en/united-states_427d6aac-en.html

[4] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2023). *Do adults have the skills they need to thrive in a changing world?* https://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/

[5] Nielsen BookScan. (2025). *Print book sales decline in early 2025 market report*. Declining Volume: Print book sales for the first three quarters of 2025 dropped 0.9% in the U.S. compared to 2024. The UK experienced a 2.3% decrease in total consumer market volume, with total sales falling to 93.1 million units. Regional Declines (Jan-Aug 2025): 8 out of 19 territories saw revenue decreases, including Switzerland (-4.4%), Italy (-2.6%), and Poland (-1.3%).

[6] Cisco. (2025). *Cisco visual networking index 2025.* Linearity., & Lambda Films. (2025).

this is hard to quantify as it changes so rapidly. There is a rise in consumption of podcast over non-fiction written text, as well as a focus on storytelling as a primary way of consuming information – personal storytelling is trumping absorption of rational logical written objective text. In this era of the individual, first person is very much winning over distanced third person in narrative, solo music stars over groups, identity politics and individual causes over a social whole.

In the pre-literate world, very approximately 3 million years ago to 3200 BCE, before the Ancient Greek alphabet, before the printing press, life was distinctly oral. Communication was synchronous – in the moment, and communal – face-to-face and consisted of storytelling as a way to explain the world, life and everything in it. Oral societies before the existence of writing (and before the wave of mass literacy from technological advances of the printing press) dictated that knowledge had to be remembered. Knowledge was most commonly delivered in story narrative, with a rhythm to the language, and often with repetition, because stories are cognitively privileged (more likely to be absorbed by long-term memory), as is repetition and language with rhythm. If something needed explaining – how the world began or other aspects of the physical world, then stories were told to explain it – stories that weren't necessarily scientifically true. Community-agreed, tribal values were transmitted through story or poetry, usually in emotive form with the emotive language that goes alongside an oral storytelling. Characters were given an epithet for easier recognition of their constructed personality, such as in *The Odyssey*, and listeners could understand the emotion better because they had in front of them the storyteller and could see their facial expressions and body language – just like today's short-form videos.

When societies changed to written language, it opened a realm of new possibilities, if anything changing the very way that human beings thought. It meant that communication could be asynchronous – you could and still can read something written by someone who lived in a different time and space. You can store a complex idea without repetition or storytelling – it doesn't have to be memorised. So, ideas can become more complex, more nuanced, more linear, with clear cause and effect and argument building upon argument in a rational way. And so, with the technology of writing came quantum mechanics, Immanual Kant's reasoning, Wittgenstein's philosophical investigations. These complex reasoned ideas are hard to build on if you have to memorise each step of the thought process. And so, by writing them down, humans could add more complications, more nuance, more depth of thought. Emotion can be stripped away if the writer experiences detachment from the reader and isn't writing with audience in mind, and the reader experiences detachment from the author: the thinking becomes more objective. The evidence can be examined, the precise words can be revisited, formal logic can be analysed. Time can be taken over a written document in a way it can't in live performance. Language can be more precise as it can be edited and doesn't need to repeat or fit a rhythm for purposes of memory.

Readers can backtrack – research shows that all readers backtrack words in a sentence as they read for comprehension[1]. In oral form, our working memories simply cannot hold all the information in one go, so exact words of narrative can't be retained and re-examined, pulled apart and analysed. There are immediate limitations to the thoughts you conceive about the narrative because your working memory is remembering it, not analysing it.

Writers are reasoning through their argument, as opposed to a performance poet who is trying to impress the person in front of them with their wit, or emotion or facial expression. And the reader isn't assessing the human author in front of them; they are assessing the words with a cool reasoned and even sceptical detachment. The text is the text and nothing more.

The classicist Eric Havelock, in his *Preface to Plato and The Muse Learns to Write*, explored the idea that a huge cognitive shift stemmed from the development of phonetic writing and specifically the Greek alphabet. Text was separated from author, situational thought was replaced with theoretical ideas, and prose developed over and above poetry, all of which allowed for some of the fundamental things that shape our world today – democracy, theatre and jury trials.[2] The codification of laws and statutes, meant that people knew their rights, power was distributed rather than subject to the whim of the leader, leaders were accountable, written evidence could shape outcomes, and the theatre was used as a place of complex ideas and civic engagement. Ideas of justice, power and ethics were carefully analysed and constructed.

Walter Ong, the priest, English literature scholar and teacher, who was seminal in the exploration of the transition from oral to written communication and how it shaped the human brain, explained that in oral cultures, humans didn't study, they learned by doing, by apprenticeship.[3] There wasn't a guide or written manual to anything, you needed someone showing you, preferably with repetition. So you trusted the person in front of you delivering you the teaching, and you were persuaded partly by emotion – in the same way now that we follow a particular video influencer, a particular orator on screen – Tucker Carlson, President Trump, Charli D'Amelio. They speak their rhetoric, do their dance, speak their truth and you're part of their crowd, part of their tribe, in a community of like-minded followers. You like their jokes or face or power. Or you don't. In the same way that if an expert in a subject is telling you wise words about

[1] Folk JR, Eskenazi MA. Eye-tracking to Distinguish Comprehension-based and Oculomotor-based Regressive Eye Movements During Reading. J Vis Exp. 2018 Oct 18;(140):58442. doi: 10.3791/58442. PMID: 30394390; PMCID: PMC6235565. "Regressive eye movements comprise approximately 10-25% of eye movements during reading."
[2] Havelock, Eric A, The Alphabetic Mind: A Gift of Greece to the Modern World, Oral Tradition, 1/1 1986
[3] Walter J. Ong. (1982). *Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the word*. Routledge.

it, but at the same time picking their nose, you might feel a sense of disgust or mistrust in them as a person and consequently take a disregard to their wisdom.

Other writers took the idea one step further, as they recognised how media had started changing the world. Marshall McLuhon, the philosopher who coined much of our vernacular around media, explained in his book *Understanding Media* that the medium shapes the message. If long-form writing shows that the world is complicated, that ideas are nuanced and need time to disseminate and analyse, then short form is indicative of emotive, non-rational thought. Of ideas and a world that can be consumed and understood easily, as the writer Johann Hari acknowledges today in his concern at the distracted attention of the smartphone world:

> …the medium of the book tells us several things. Firstly, life is complex, and if you want to understand it, you have to set aside a fair bit of time to think deeply about it. You need to slow down. Secondly, there is a value in leaving behind your other concerns and narrowing down your attention to one thing, sentence after sentence, page after page. Thirdly, it is worth thinking deeply about how other people live and how their minds work. They have complex inner lives just like you.[1]

As well as the medium, there is language itself. Oral language differs from written language in its syntactical arrangement, in its vocabulary and use of descriptors. “To engage the written word means to follow a line of thought, which requires considerable powers of classifying, inference-making, and reasoning.”[2] What we lose when we lose writing is the ability to think in a re-examining analytical way, but also in a linguistic way – we lose a sense of the complexity of expression, and how that itself can lead to deeper thought. In essence, you think differently when you speak as to when you write. Findings have shown that writing and speaking are controlled by different aspects of the brain, and it’s not just motor skills that are involved, but actual aspects of word construction[3] and greater cognitive effort to find meaning.[4]

American linguist John McWhorter explained that writing on the Internet has maybe moved to ‘fingered speech’, meaning that our language typed on social media has more of the feel of orality than written language. Ironically, he made this declamation in a TED Talk rather than a piece of writing.[5] Fellow linguist Gretchen McCulloch goes further in her book (perhaps she can go further in a book than a TED Talk), *Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language*, explaining that online emojis are

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[1] Johann Hari. (2022). *Stolen focus: Why you can't pay attention—and how to think deeply again*. Crown Publishing Group.
[2] Neil Postman. (1985). *Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business*. Viking Penguin.
[3] Brenda Rapp. (2015, May). *The reading brain: A cognitive neuroscience perspective*. *Psychological Science*. Johns Hopkins University.
[4] Rebecca S. Ullrich., & Susan K. Lutgendorf. (2002). *[Study on expressive writing and health outcomes]*.
[5] McWhorter, J. (2013, April). *Txtng is killing language. JK!!!* TED Conferences. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VrQLDT_1Q_k

a replacement for body language for example, but also sees the positive side in that language is adaptive, and so by using punctuation as imbuing more meaning than just signposting (for example, passive aggressive full stops on text messages or ellipses indicating thinking), humans are making language more flexible. It is clear though, that there has been a shift towards shorter sentences, less complex clauses, fewer pronouns and conjunctions. This simplicity and shift to the informal or shortened sentence phenomena is now shifting beyond social media. Publishing is seeing retailers sell shorter books (with the exception of Romantasy maybe), more graphic novels, less convoluted prose. One only has to look at the recent Booker prize winner *Flesh* by David Szalay to see how this bears out in practice.

In fact, evidence indicates that bestsellers shrunk by about 11% in word count between 2011 and 2021, which is 50 pages on average per book.[1] And graphic novels sales are rising, doubling since 2019 in the US, and in the UK the children's and young adult graphic novel market reached an all-time peak in 2024, hitting £20.2 million in sales.[2]

However, there are worries that short-form consumption of media will eventually re-wire brains, which will then struggle with the sustained focussed attention and syntactical grappling that multi-phrasal sentences, ideas expressed in complicated and specialised terminology, long-drawn out reasoned text or convoluted narrative demands. And in fact, as we move from handwriting to typing, this re-wiring of the brain continues – handwriting has been shown to activate a broader network of brain regions, including motor, sensory, cognitive process and deeper learning and memory retention.[3]

So, to recap: research shows that longform handwriting and reading in print over digital is better for cognitive processing and understanding. However, there is an issue of critical importance that gets lost in a world of orality, even if that orality comes with visuals. Written text has for hundreds of years granted civilisation the idea of a shared value system, a shared history, a shared acknowledgement of logical truths. Perhaps an idea recognised in the Ptolemaic dynasty by Demetrius of Phaleron when he built the Great Library of Alexandria to gather all human knowledge under one roof.

As social anthropologist Jack Goody and literary historian Ian Watt argued much later about the literate society in their seminal essay collection about literacy and orality, only when writing was developed was: “the sense of human past as an objective reality formally developed, a process in which the distinction between ‘myth’ and ‘history’ took on decisive importance.”[4] If the past isn’t fixed, then the current storyteller can adapt

[1] WordsRated. (n.d.). *Bestselling books have never been shorter: Study of 3,444 NYT bestselling titles.* WordsRated. https://wordsrated.com
[2] BBC News. (2025). *Why are kids getting into comics and is their timing spot on?* BBC News. https://www.bbc.com/news
[3] Marano, H. (2025). *The neuroscience behind writing.*
[4] Goody, J., & Watt, I. (1963). The consequences of literacy. *Comparative Studies in Society and History, 5*(3), 304–345. Cambridge University Press.

it to suit themselves or their audience. It's also as much about what is shed as opposed to remembered. If a past fact is inconvenient, the oral storyteller (or TikTok influencer) can omit it from future stories, hence rendering it forgotten over time, thus changing history. When histories are written down, the past can't be obliterated just because the current society would like it to be. And instead of creating myths around what happened as a way of explaining the past, there is written documentation of what happened, preserved for the future so that recall can be verified by primary sources. Likewise, a shared justice system written down means that whoever is in power in a hierarchy can't just change the rules for themselves; there is a written collective agreement. Of course, this is simplifying both oral and literate societies, but it is relevant if we look at where we're going now.

In our new post-literate society, we're not, in fact going back to pre-literacy. Because although our world may be more oral and more visual, there is a memory of everything – it's just not written and collected in the same way. Everything you communicate – tweet, TikTok video, Instagram reel, podcast, WhatsApp, Ocado order etc is stored in memory. Conversations with Gemini, or Claude, or ChatGPT, whether typed or spoken, can be remembered. (As Ian McEwan neatly noted in his novel *What We Can Know*, historians of the future will be deluged with material when writing biographies).

But this is a different type of memory from those which oral storytellers had before. And a different type of memory from those memories collected and curated in published books. These are individualised memories in their millions, each person having their own record transmitted and stored. It is not written down as one book, one memory to be revisited by many, an agreed single story. This is many versions of the same story, all personalised. There is no collective truth. There is a fragmentation of truth.

If inherent truths disappear, then truth becomes something that is 'my' truth, a convenient truth. A truth disputed. One only has to look at the recent videos of ICE fatal shootings coming out of Minneapolis, USA, to see that even visual evidence of an incident can be debated with both sides claiming they hold the truth. This immediate form of personal communication has consequences. If you only read personal accounts of an incident, there is a lack of objectivity, and crucially, distance. We can sometimes lose sight of the actual truth. An investigation by non-partisan parties may give a more nuanced take on the situation, taking all 'versions' of the truth into account, looking at it rationally, without emotion, with nuance. Take Wikipedia: knowledge and history that can be changed dependent on the person editing and the time of day they did so. If our archive of knowledge itself is informal, flexible, simplified and shapeshifting – editable as we go depending on our current climate, then how can we trust the digital memory? Are we reshaping the past to fit the values of our current mentality?

There are some who will argue that the Internet has meant the great democratisation of knowledge. Why have it all housed in a Great Library with access granted only to those who have the time and money and education to consume it, when you could access it from every digital home or space. However, what has happened is that a huge amount of oral and written material became available over an incredibly short period of time (about 40 years), and yet with so much of it, posted by anyone with any agenda, unedited, unchecked, unverified, the knowledge can be incredibly hard to curate and trust.

While we are still living in an age of consensus on history and protected knowledge, tools such as Elon Musk's community notes on X pick up on falsehoods, and the majority voice quashes them. Science is (in the main) held to be true, as is the rule of law, an agreed history. However, one can already see the creep of disinformation from the anti-vaccine lobby to the Holocaust deniers. And as we move into an information stream of individual truths and tribalized beliefs rather than adherence to written facts and a canon of agreed factual history, it seems that the loudest voices, the most orally persuasive, will end up being believed. We are witnessing the erosion of a shared reality.

This is partly to do with the constructs of time. In a written world, time is linear. This happened then, and then, and because … In a post-literate world, everything is now. Videos from events far away and at a different time are regurgitated as if they are happening here and now – with the ability to remove timestamps and AI generate. Verification is difficult, and often comes long after the fabricated narrative has been consumed and accepted as truth. And immediacy is key as people absorb and scroll. Attention spans are limited. Information comes quickly and disappears quickly. The next is always more engaging. And so myth is perpetuated over agreed history.

AI works on a probability model, a predictive insight. It has been fed all the 'oral' and 'written' data available to it and then works on a predictive probability based on that text. That is why initially we saw that it had a bias skew – asked for a picture of a doctor, it presented a white male. AI wasn't 'prejudiced' itself; it was working from all the information it was given – it turns out human information on the Internet skews biased! As of today, AI will feed back the answer that the Holocaust happened (correctly). But there is only one Anne Frank's Diary, and there is only one Primo Levi, and so if we get to the point at which critical mass of denial trumps truth, and first-hand witnesses are all deceased, and history books are no longer read, our probability models will skew towards critical mass of information even if it's false data.

"In books, knowledge is classified, comprehended, connected, and put in its place."[1] As writer James Marriott explains, we can't consume everything and we can't trust everything. Knowledge has to be curated, (by whom is for a whole different essay),

[1] Marriott, J. (2025, October 23). *The dawn of the post-literate society.* The Free Press.

which is why libraries have collections, catalogues. And why a functioning society has a collective acknowledgement of what we know to be true. An understanding, just like the faith in the concept of 'invisible' money that whizzes between credit cards, retailers and banks, or an adherence to the laws of the land. And curated, reasoned text is a good place to hold that rational, thought-out objective truth and acknowledgement of shared history.

In the same way that our world fractures somewhat if we don't have the language of cultural capital, if our knowledge base and references are all so individualised that we have no shared language in common.

In his biographical novel *A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League,* published in 1998, Ron Suskind's protagonist, Cedric Jennings, cannot connect with his peers because of his lack of privilege; his upbringing and access to cultural specifics in his home environment means that he holds no cultural capital and struggles to form relationships. In essence, he has nothing in common with his peers, both racially and because of social stratification. Although the modern world is addressing inequalities and social mobility, so that those without a privileged background do have access to culture, opportunity and social infrastructure, the novel makes the point that without shared language, social cohesion, and cultural allusion, people remain isolated.

If you take this premise a step further into a dystopian future in which there are no cultural allusions, no shared history, a lack of shared language, no acknowledged universal values, then how will any humans connect or form relationships? Stories, truths, histories, values become individualised, disparate, fractured. They become…tribal.

With shared universal knowledge, the network effect is that if someone refers to Big Brother, or the Pollyanna effect, there is an acknowledgement through language of big ideas of politics or philosophy; there is a social fabric of shared allusions that maintains a culture. We can connect words and language to larger ideas. We can begin to reason.

And so, we are at a point in our post-literate, AI-led society that libraries have once again become critical. As in the European Middle Ages in which monastic centres of knowledge were key for preserving knowledge during its period of low literacy. Libraries must no longer be institutions to be shelved, handed over to community volunteers, or defunded.

Libraries need to be curators of knowledge. To be bastions of selectivity, distinguishing between oral lived experience, individual truth, and spinoffs from that, and holding onto written logical and objective truths that humans need to acknowledge and recognise in order to uphold civilisation. It is imperative that libraries take centre stage in our societies, and of course in our schools – where the next generation is being educated.

What do school libraries, in particular, need to do?

Libraries should not be a separate resource like a squash court, tucked away in the back of the building. They shouldn't be the reserve of the privileged either. Libraries, as author Adam Gidwitz said, should be the beating heart of the school, and not because it's an emotional thing, as perhaps he intended the quote to be taken, but because quite simply, without a beating heart, knowledge goes into cardiac arrest.

Libraries are not a thing of the past. They are not replaceable because Google or Claude or Copilot can give all the answers. And they should not be modernised into digital hubs, going against the grain of optimised research in objective facts. It is through the ability of writing that ideas exploded, became complicated and needed to be written to be digested. And so these texts need to be read for ideas to become learned, absorbed, understood, and further worked upon and developed. Libraries, as centres of curated text, are our ideas, our humanity, our centrality of being. They need to reassert themselves as essential centralities in schools. They need to remain centres of excellence in promoting the printed book, objective truths, long-form text that can be re-read, grappled with and fully comprehended.

And as a place of essential curated knowledge, the library is curriculum. It isn't some adjunct, some 'nice' to have addition or show-off facility in the school. Learning is from text, and writing is thinking. Text is everything. And libraries house text, so a library is curriculum. Schools need to think about how often staff from all faculties visit the library, use the library, promote the library to their students. When curriculum is planned, the first place that should be under consideration is the library. Not only should the library be housing the key curriculum texts as its roots, but also providing the trunk, branches and leaves that stem from that root. Librarians should be in curriculum meetings, and libraries should hold the canon of the curriculum. New books should provoke opportunity for stretch and challenge beyond the curriculum and also stemming from it. Students gain knowledge by building upon prior knowledge, and the library should represent that same growth. The disciplinary literacy in the library should be the foundation subject area but also provide ambition and stretch for curious minds and passionate thinkers. It should be representative of the shape of the curriculum and all that it leads towards. And yes, of course, it should provide all that goes with reading for pleasure – the novels, the graphic novels, the magazines, the encouraging displays. But one feeds off the other – and neither should be shelved to the corners.

And alongside this stretch and growth from the roots to the leaves, there should also be an acknowledgement of the end point. "Print encourages a sense of closure, a sense that what is found in text has been finalised, has reached a state of completion."[1] Of course, knowledge can be revised and can be built upon, but it can't be scrolled past in the hope of finding new, better truths. A text is a text and needs to

[1] Ong, W. J. (1982). *Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the word.* Methuen.

be re-examined as a finite thing. Which is why all libraries weed out-dated texts, once new theories have been properly considered and republished. A curated selection, but one that has had time taken over its curation. Patience with text is everything.

Furthermore, libraries and schools need to see reading as a social act. As books are the roots of our democratic and liberal (small l) society, so we need to remain steadfast in acknowledgement of the values, laws, logical truths and histories they hold against the growing tide of harmful disinformation that, like a leaf-blower, tries to sweep away our long-held foundation of truth. We need to incentivise the student body to bond over books as a positive force for good – as a weapon against untruths. To teach them to understand that books contain verified facts and worthy opinions, curated by expert gatekeepers for this very purpose. To understand that books and libraries are ammunition with which to fight the growing tide of loud distortions of history. Books as tools against short-form videos in which everyone sees something different. And to understand that reading is an active and social activity, not a passive silent solitary endeavour (yet recognising that solitary exploration and pursuit of curiosity also has its place in creating deep thinkers). As previously stated, a community with no cultural allusions and norms breaks down. So, reading must be promoted and modelled. Older students reading with younger students, high-school student volunteers in primary school libraries acting as role models to younger students, showing them the importance and pleasure of reading, books, libraries. School leaders embedding a culture of reading across the school, and all year groups, a social network of readers. Paired reading as a common activity, mixed reading circles, older student role models, library lessons guided by sixth formers, reading groups throughout. Discussion around the written text and writing that stems from this discussion.

We also need to embrace libraries as protectors of attention. It is now a rare but important thing to be able to sit with the sustained focus needed for a long-form text without removing our gaze to check the phone, to see who is messaging, what updated unverified news is coming in. When we read something that contains complex syntax, or complex ideas, the brain needs to work its way through the text to come to understanding. It takes focus and slow deliberation – it is a challenge and requires uninterrupted focus. In a fast paced, ever-scrolling world, libraries can become chambers of this necessary, fading skill of attention, sheltering those who recognise that deep understanding of a topic cannot be accomplished simply by reading a summary that another person or machine has created – deep understanding and critical thinking about a topic can only be done with attention and with slower thought, allowing any doubts to be recast as one re-reads, to follow an argument through many pages, to develop theory of mind, to monitor for comprehension, to join the complicated new knowledge to the pieces that are already in long-term memory, creating new insight and awareness. The time must be given to appreciate that which is outside our own lives and own experiences. In fact, even though I have argued for libraries as being bastions of curated knowledge, in which science and facts are

protected, I'd also argue for libraries to be homes of what Keats called 'negative capability'. The ability to sit with the ambiguity posed by the world and its texts, and to be able to accept that there are things that cannot be understood at first, or even after deliberation, but that doubts remain and from this can come further thought and creativity.

But following a logical argument to its end or sitting with ambiguity, cannot happen without sustained attention. And libraries are the perfect place to protect this – to be like forests of quietude, aesthetically beautiful with stacks of knowledge, bound and categorised, a place in which one comes to seek knowledge, be absorbed in the knowledge, and to remain in a state of attention to that knowledge, to the branches of text that have come before, and the new ideas seeding into life.

And lastly of course, libraries need to be those seeds of innovation. Not digital hubs, skeletal chambers of screens and printers, no google emporium. But quietly harbouring the power of AI as a force for good in our libraries, making sure that AI curates our trees of knowledge effectively, nourishes them for easier harvesting.

AI can be siloed to work off just an agreed canon or the library's own catalogue and therefore assess the catalogue and find curriculum gaps and forage for missing items. It can provide deep-tagging on the catalogue system for easy user finding, it can create a digital shelf-guide for users' visual navigation around the library. In a truth-gated version, AI could be grounded in high-quality, peer-reviewed or agreed texts only, making sure students are learning from established facts.

AI can do predictive maintenance for reading for pleasure – foreseeing trends and searching for new titles in popular series, by popular authors. It can facilitate students into picking the right texts to match their reading identities. AI chat could introduce serious literary questions into book groups, maybe bringing long-deceased thinkers of literary criticism into the mix. We must use AI for cognitive offloading, removing the mundane tasks from librarians, and yet not use it for cognitive outsourcing. We must remain thinkers.

Innovation centres and libraries should be inherently connected, talking daily, sitting in the same space. They are both information systems and should be symbiotic, entangled, roots growing around each other.

But crucially, the human has an edge over AI. A person understands that they cannot know everything – they have epistemological humility, and so a librarian can teach that a logical argument isn't just the one thrown back by AI that looks right, but it is the one that is backed with textual evidence. And I imagine, AI will be able to do so much more, but whatever that is, it will still need the seeds of human doubt to be applied, the critical thinking that can only be accrued by a human who has read lots of curated material.

The problem that remains of course, is that if we are living in a post-literate society – if globally reading rates and ability is falling, then we risk a return to a society in which only the elite can create written content, or curate written content, or read that written content. And so responsibility falls hard. Whilst the vast majority will be producing and consuming video media and the language of orality, the elite will be the ones holding the torch for the written word, for logical truths. And a divisive society prevails.

Therefore, it is finally and most importantly, the role of school libraries to reinvigorate the passion for reading, for text, for true knowledge, and the skill of reading – all things that go hand-in-hand.

In this post-literate world, libraries must not only hold the roots of the canon, the trunk of knowledge, the branches of disciplinary literacy and the leaves of pleasure that go with it but must also promote the fruit of its library for societal sustenance. We must make sure that libraries become our source of nourishment, and that reading is promoted above all else in our schools and our communities, so that we combat educational and civilisational decline.