

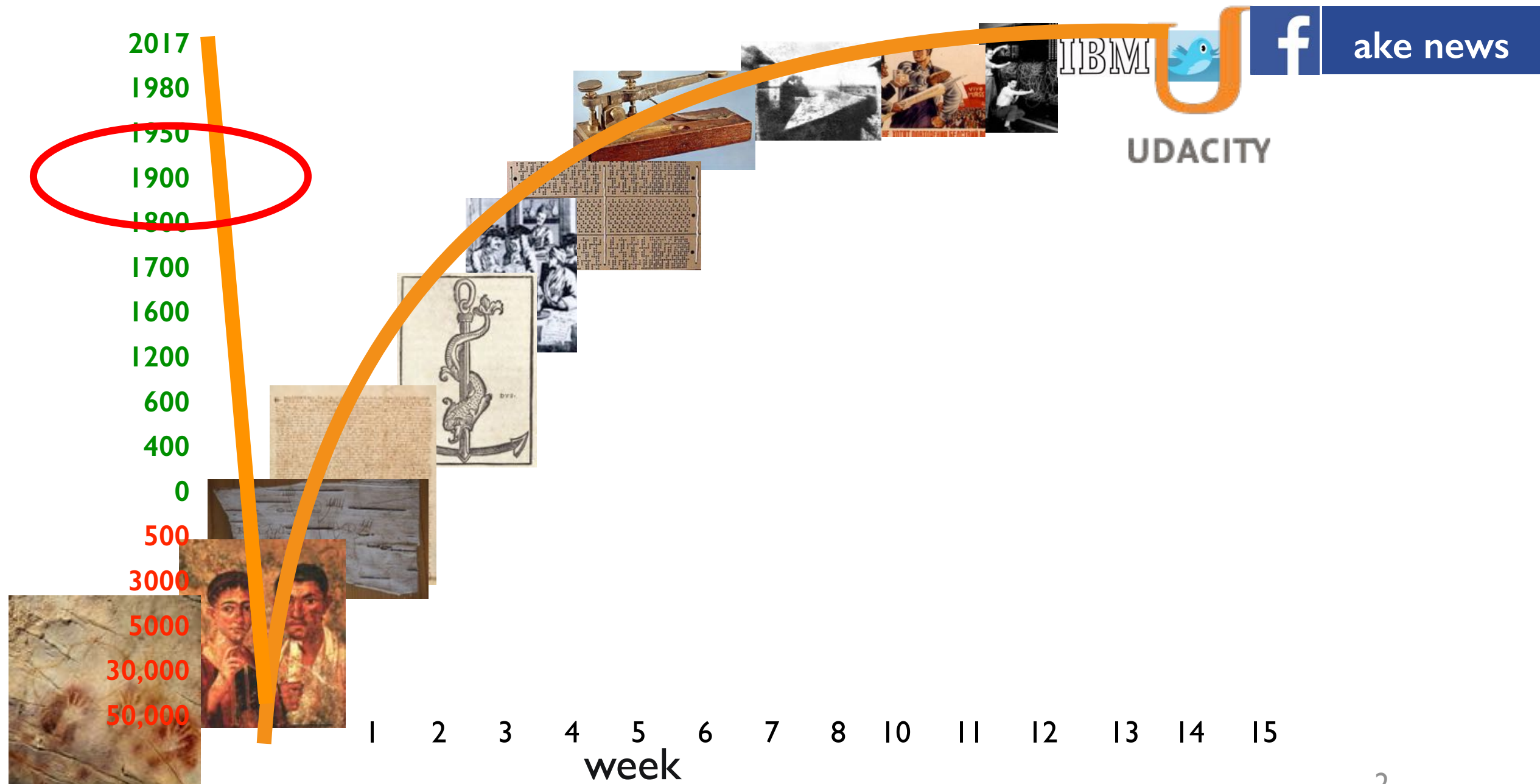


# The Rise of Mass Literacy

**Geoff Nunberg**  
History of Information  
i103 March 2, 2017

# History of Information

## The rise of mass literacy



# Itinerary: 3/2

---

What do we mean by "literacy"?

- Complicating "literacy rates"

- Functional literacy and group literacy

Literacy, power and social control

- Literacy as an instrument of improvement

- Literacy as a subversive force

Literacy and "other Americans"

Literacy as good-in-itself

- Modern extensions of literacy

# What do we mean by "literacy"?

---

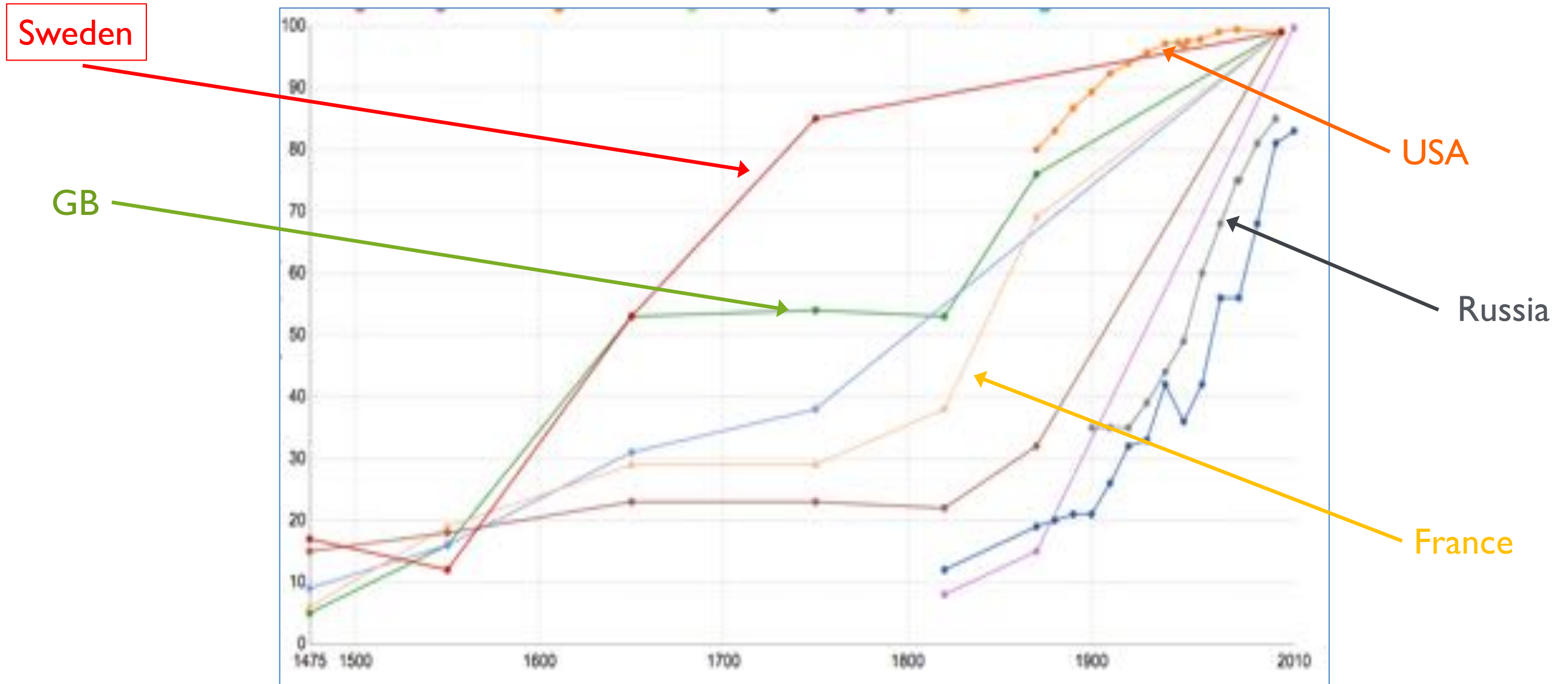
## **What do we mean by "literacy"?**

Literacy, power and social control

Literacy and “other Americans”

Literacy as good-in-itself

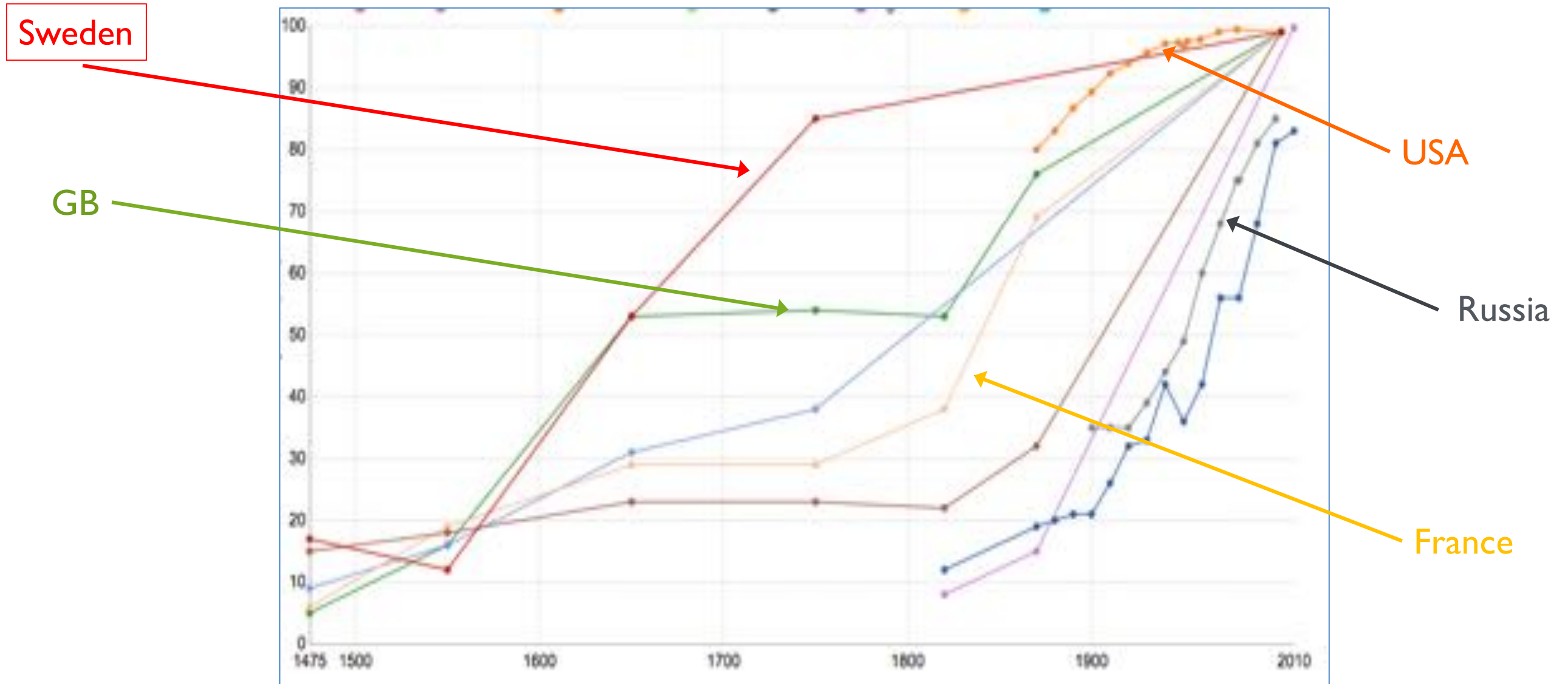
# A simple story...



Growth of literacy rates



# ... or is it?



Growth of literacy rates

# Complicating “literacy”

---

## **What do we mean by “literacy”?**

Literacy, power and social control

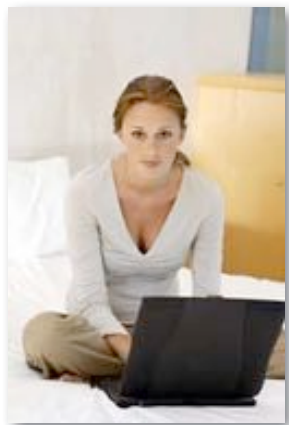
Literacy and “other Americans”

Literacy as good-in-itself



# "Functional Literacy"

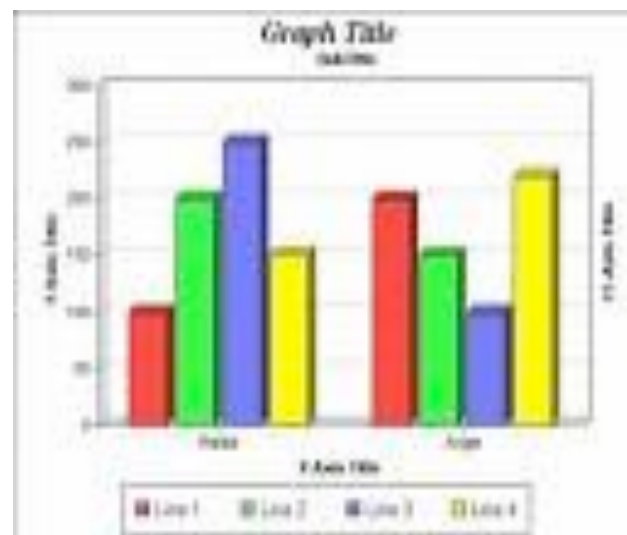
How did you use your literacy today?







# What does "functional literacy" entail in modern America?



<b>8283</b> (Rev. 10-18-2002)		<b>Noncash Charitable Contributions</b> a. Receipt for each item must be attached to this statement of noncash contributions. b. See instructions.		(OMB No. 1545-0047) Department of the Treasury Internal Revenue Service	
Taxpayer's name (if different from the name on the return) _____		EIN (if different from the EIN on the return) _____		Filing status _____	
Name of each charity or other qualified organization receiving the property:					
Section 501(c)(3) or other tax-exempt status of each organization for which you received a deduction of \$500 or more:					
Information on Recipient Organization (attach separate sheets, parts 1 and 2, if more than one):					
a. Name of charity or other qualified organization:		b. Check one or more boxes to describe:			
c. Deductible value (see instructions):		d. Attach a copy of each receipt for each item, listing the name of the charity or other qualified organization receiving the property.			
e.		f.			
g.		h.			
i.		j.			
k.		l.			
m.		n.			
o.		p.			
Note: If you received any deduction for a charitable contribution in 2002, attach a copy of the completed Schedule D, Part II, to this statement.					
q. Total value of all contributions:		r. Total value of all contributions:		s. Total value of all contributions:	
t.		u.		v.	
w.		x.		y.	
z.		aa.		ab.	
ac.		ad.		ae.	
af.		ag.		ah.	
ai.		aj.		ak.	
al.		am.		an.	
ao.		ap.		aq.	
ar.		as.		at.	
au.		av.		aw.	
ax.		ay.		az.	
ba.		bb.		bc.	
bd.		be.		bf.	
bg.		bh.		bi.	
bj.		bk.		bl.	
bm.		bn.		bo.	
bp.		bq.		br.	
bs.		bt.		bu.	
bv.		bw.		bx.	
by.		bz.		ca.	
cb.		cc.		cd.	
ce.		cf.		cg.	
ch.		ci.		cj.	
ck.		cl.		cm.	
cn.		co.		cp.	
cq.		cr.		cs.	
ct.		cu.		cv.	
cw.		cx.		cy.	
cz.		da.		db.	
dc.		dd.		de.	
df.		dg.		dh.	
di.		dj.		dk.	
dl.		dm.		dn.	
do.		dp.		dq.	
dr.		ds.		dt.	
du.		dv.		dw.	
dx.		dy.		dz.	
ea.		eb.		ec.	
ed.		ee.		ef.	
eg.		eh.		ei.	
ej.		ek.		el.	
em.		en.		eo.	
ep.		eq.		er.	
es.		et.		eu.	
ev.		ew.		ex.	
ey.		ez.		fa.	
fb.		fc.		fd.	
fe.		ff.		fg.	
fh.		fi.		fj.	
fk.		fl.		fm.	
fn.		fo.		fp.	
fr.		fs.		ft.	
fu.		fv.		fw.	
fx.		fy.		fz.	
ga.		gb.		gc.	
gd.		ge.		gf.	
gg.		gh.		gi.	
gj.		gk.		gl.	
gm.		gn.		go.	
gp.		gq.		gr.	
gs.		gt.		gu.	
gv.		gw.		gx.	
gy					



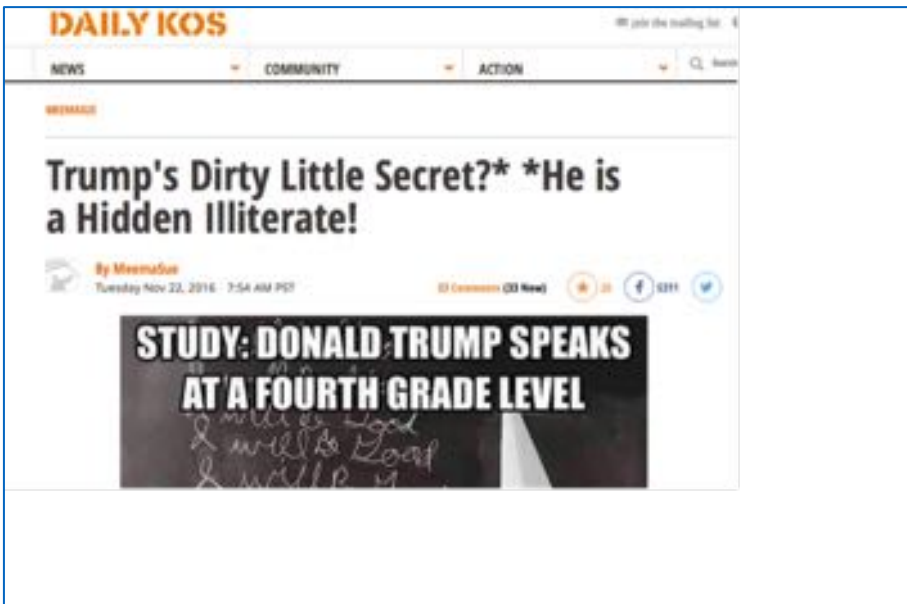
# Faking Literacy



What does it take to fake literacy in modern America?





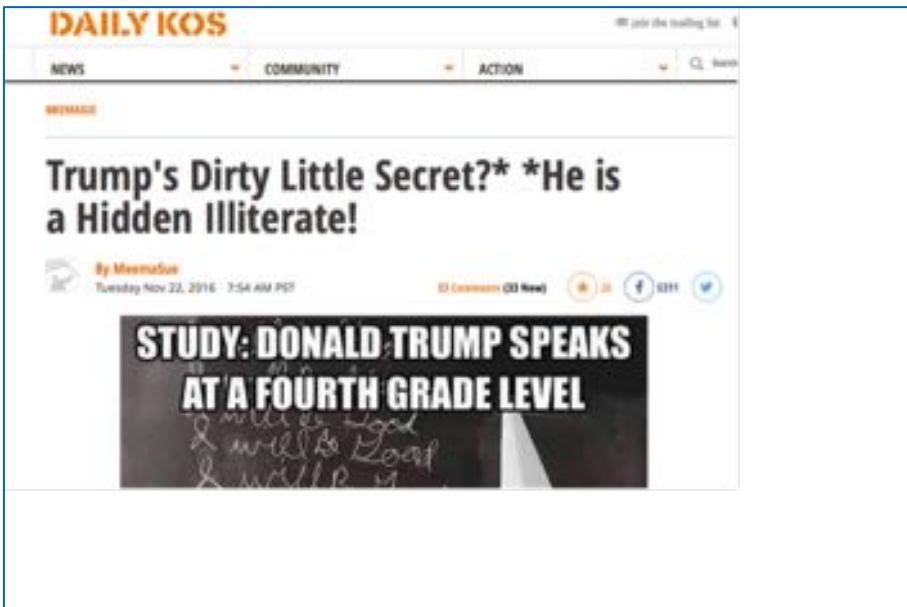


# Misinterpreting "Functional Literacy"

## Difficulties in measuring functional literacy

Purely illiterate persons cannot read or write in any capacity, for all practical purposes. In contrast, functionally illiterate persons can read and possibly write simple sentences with a limited vocabulary, but cannot read or write well enough to deal with the everyday requirements of life in their own society." Wikipedia





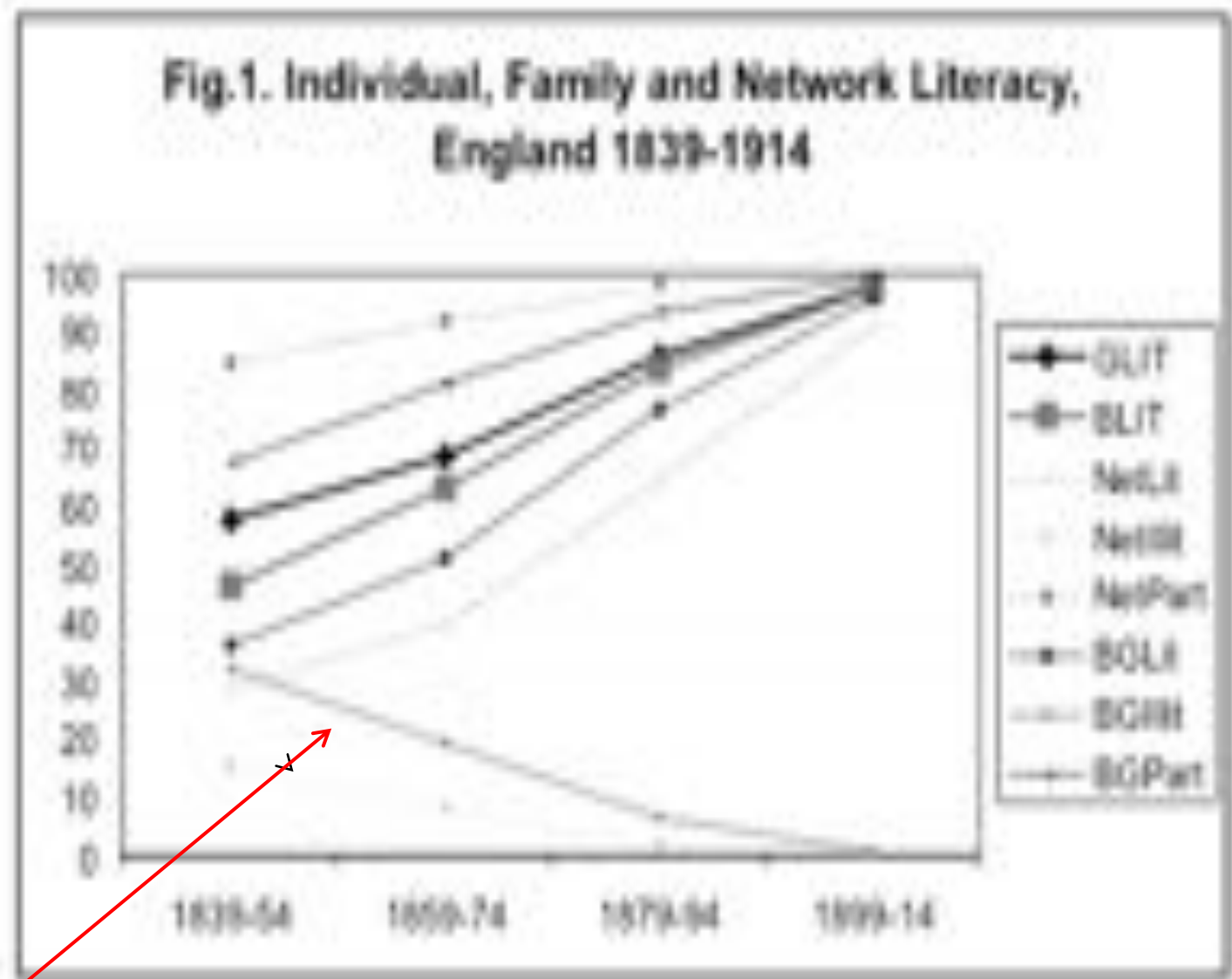
# Misinterpreting "Functional Literacy"

## Difficulties in measuring functional literacy

Purely illiterate persons cannot read or write in any capacity, for all practical purposes. In contrast, functionally illiterate persons ~~can read and possibly write simple sentences with a limited vocabulary,~~ but cannot read or write well enough to deal with the everyday requirements of life in their own society." Wikipedia



# “Network Literacy”



Both bride and groom  
illiterate





# Individual and Group Literacy

Complicating the notion of "literacy rates."

Is literacy an individual or group achievement?





# Group Literacy in the Modern World



**PRO PUBLICA** Journalism in the Public Interest

Home Our Investigations Data MuckReads Get Involved About Us

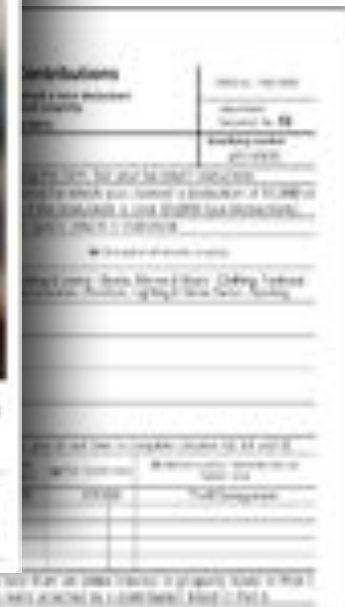
## How the Maker of TurboTax Fought Free, Simple Tax Filing

A photograph of a box of TurboTax software. The box is blue and red, with a large white checkmark on a red circle. The text on the box includes "TurboTax", "Federal & State Returns", "Home & Business", "Personal & Business", "Schedule C businesses", "Sole proprietors", "Consultants & contractors", "Single-member LLCs", "everything in Premier", and "Includes Federal E-File with Guaranteed Accurate Calculations".

Intuit, producer of the top-selling tax software TurboTax, has opposed letting the government do your taxes for free – even though it could save time and headaches for millions of filers. (Shannon Stapleton/Reuters)

by [Liz Day](#)  
ProPublica, March 26, 2013, 4 a.m.

93 Comments | Republish | Email | Print



# Literacy, power & social control

---

What do we mean by "literacy"?

**Literacy, power and social control**

Literacy and “other Americans”

Literacy as good-in-itself

# Literacy as an instrument of "moral improvement" and social control



"If a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be"

Why should] the estates of orphans, bachelors, and persons who have no children be taxed to pay for the support of schools from which they can derive no benefit?.... The bachelor will in time save his tax for this purpose by being able to sleep with fewer bolts and locks on his doors, the estates of orphans will in time be benefited by being protected from the vantages of unprincipled and idle boys, and the children of wealthy parents will be less tempted, by bad company, to extravagance.

Let our pupil be taught that he does not belong to himself, but that he is public property. Let him be taught to love his family, but let him be taught at the same time he must forsake... them when the welfare of his country requires it.

Benjamin Rush, 1786



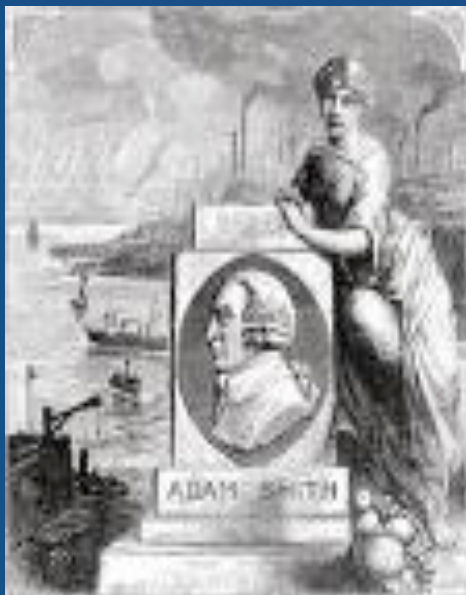
# Literacy makes the poor docile



"We must build more schools or more prisons." *Edinburgh Review*, 1839

"The more [the poor] are instructed, the less liable they are to the delusions of enthusiasm and superstition, which, among the ignorant nations, frequently occasion the most dreadful disorders." Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*

"The learning we are to communicate is only intended to enable you to read the scriptures and to see that it is the will of God that you should be contented with your station." Sunday School Tract, 1806





# The lone R

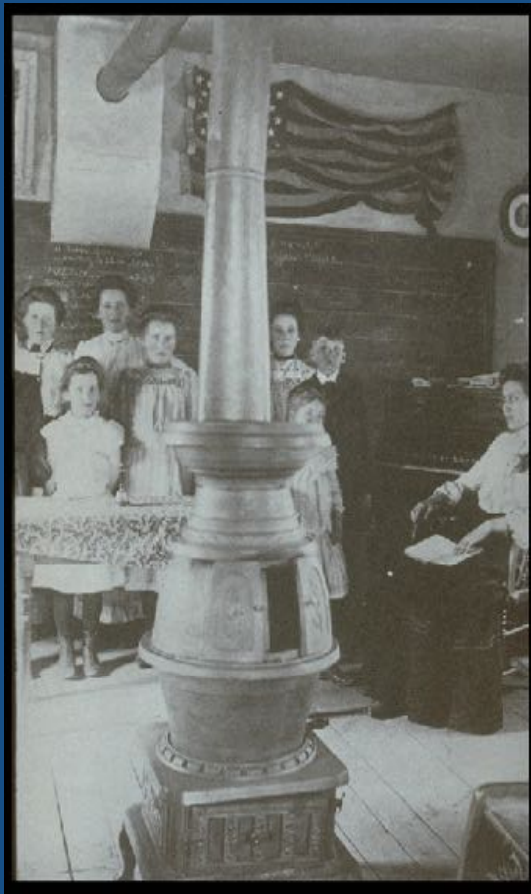
"Reading will help to mend people's morals, but writing is not necessary." Jonas Hanway, ca 1780

"It is not proposed that the children of the poor be taught to write and cipher." Anglican National Society for Fostering Education.

"Reading is a key to the treasures of the holy writ... but writing and arithmetic should be reserved for particular children." Rev Vaughan Thomas 1812



# The Spelling Bee: the oral culture of literacy



"Perhaps [the teaching of orthography] is best done by Pairing the Scholars, two of those nearest equal in their Spelling to be put together; let these strive for victory each propounding ten words each day for the other to be spelt. He that spells truly most of the other's Words; he that is Victor most Days in a Month, to obtain a prize, a pretty neat Book of some Kind useful in their future Studies."

B. Franklin, 1751

# The Spelling Bee: the oral culture of literacy



## Popularity of the spelling bee:

"Thar's a new game down in Frisco, that ez far ez I can see  
Beats euchre, poker, and van-toon, they calls the "Spellin' Bee."

...O little kids, my pretty kids, down on your knees and pray!

You've got your eddication in a peaceful sort of way;

And bear in mind thar may be sharps ez slings their spellin'  
square,

But likewise slings their bowie-knives without a thought or care>

You wants to know the rest, my dears? Thet's all! In me you see

The only gent that lived to tell about the Spellin' Bee!"

--Bret Harte, "The Spelling Bee at Angels"

# The Spelling Bee: the oral culture of literacy



*The spelling-bee mania has spread over all England, and attacked London with especial virulence" (Harper's New Monthly Magazine, June, 1876).*

Spelling is the finest of fine arts; good spelling is the rarest attainment of English humanity; bad spelling... is the last infirmity of noble minds. *Pittman's Journal*, 1875

# The Modern Spelling Bee: Spelling as an Extreme Sport

---



Winning words from Scripps National Spelling Bee in decade following 1925: promiscuous, intelligible, fracas, gladiolus, knack.

Winning words in recent Bees: xanthosis, opsimath, succedaneum, and prospicience, thamakau, Scherenschnitte



# Literacy as a subversive force

---

What do we mean by "literacy"?

**Literacy, power and social control**

Literacy and “other Americans”

Literacy as good-in-itself

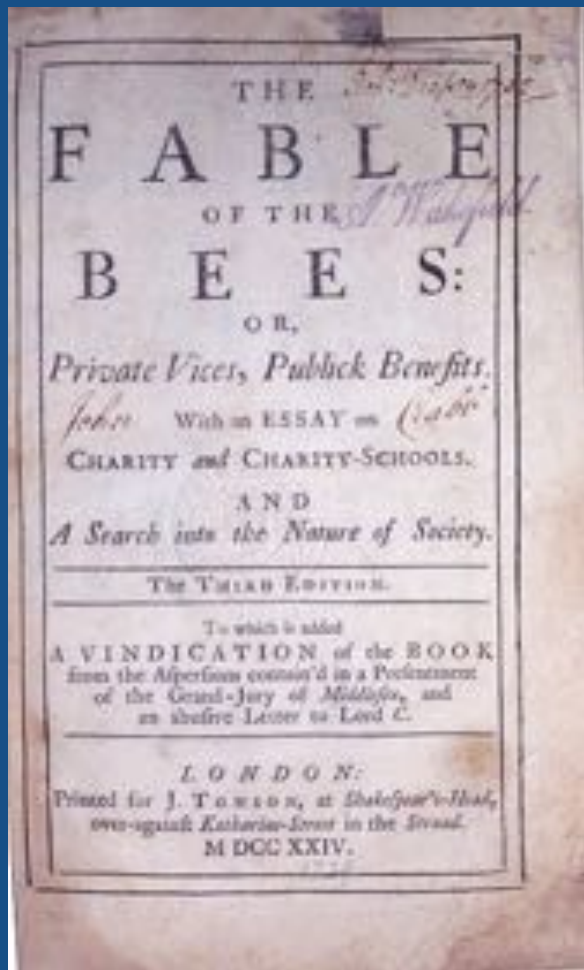
# Against Literacy

Literacy can instill "dangerous ideas"

"I thank God, there are no free schools nor printing, and I hope we shall not have these hundred years; for learning has brought disobedience and heresy into the world and and printing has divulged them," --Governor Berkeley, VA, 1671

Too much education "would make everyone unfit to follow the plough."  
Bishop Samuel Wilberforce, 1857

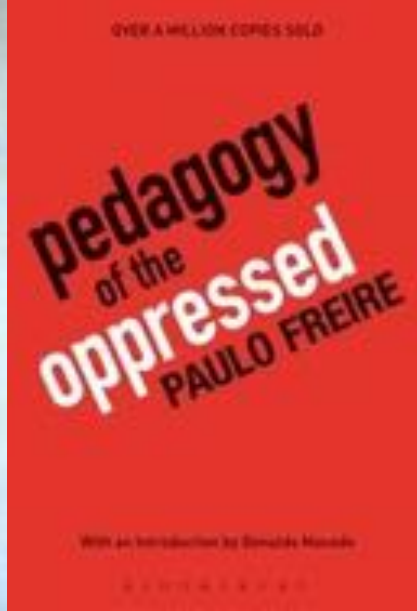
# Against Literacy



Literacy can instill "dangerous ideas"

[T]he surest wealth consists in a multitude of Laborious Poor. ... To make the Society Happy and People Easy under the meanest Circumstances, it is requisite that great numbers of them should be Ignorant as well as Poor. ....The more a Shepherd, a Plowman or any other Peasant knows of the World, and the things that are Foreign to his Labour or Employment, the less fit he'll be to go through the Fatigues and Hardships of it with Chearfulness and Content....

Reading and Writing are not attain'd to without some Labour of the Brain and Assiduity, and before People are tolerably vers'd in either, they esteem themselves infinitely above those who are wholly Ignorant of them, often with so little Justice and Moderation as if they were of another Species.



# Literacy creates class consciousness

"Educate first, agitate afterwards. Ignorance, superstition, and timidity [timorousness] are the weapons which our oppressors have used most effectively in the past.

-- *Palladium of Labor*, 1873

## Cf Paulo Freire on literacy a “process of knowing”

The cognitive dimensions of the literacy process must include the relationships of men with their world. Learning to read and write ought to be an opportunity for men to know what speaking the word really means.... As such it is a primordial human right and not the privilege of a few. Speaking the word is not a true act if it is not at the same time associated with the right of self-expression and world-expression, of creating and re-creating, of deciding and choosing and ultimately participating in society's historical process.

“The adult literacy process as cultural action for freedom” (1970)

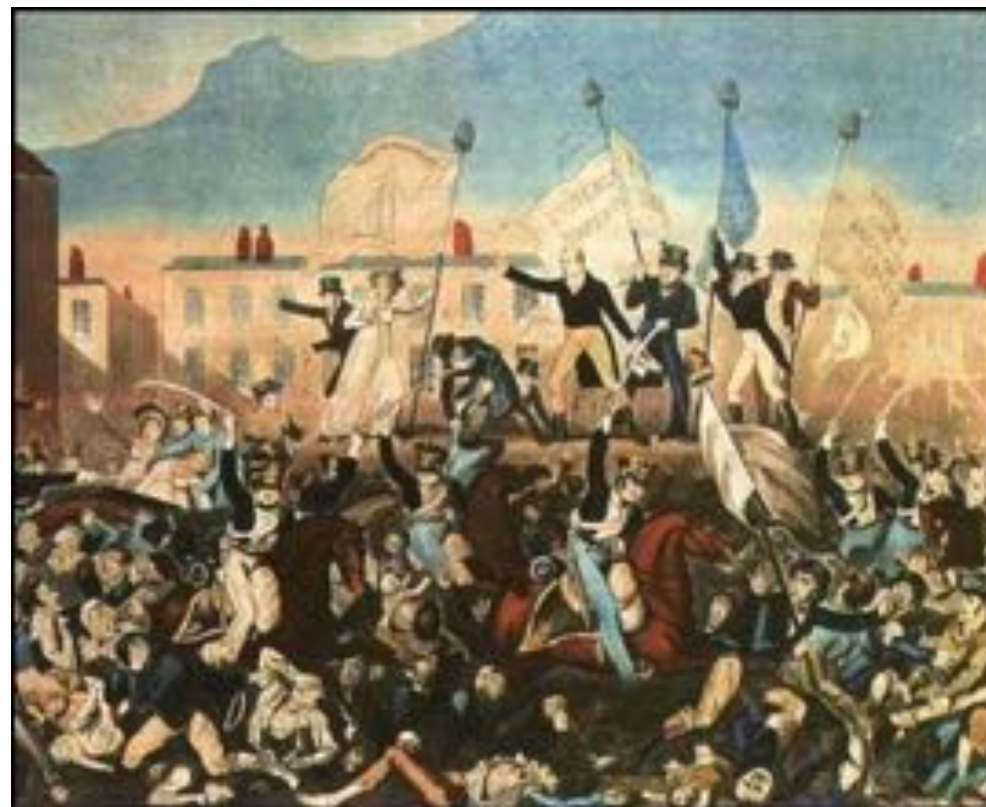




# Rise of the Radical Press

William Cobbett's *Political Register* in Britain achieves 44,000 weekly circulation in 1816 (as pamphlet, to avoid 4d. newspaper tax).

1819: Richard Carlile's *Republican* achieves greater circulation than the *Times* after Carlile is imprisoned for sedition.



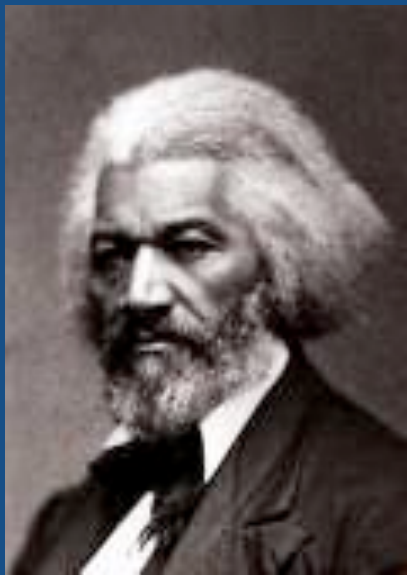
Print of Peterloo Massacre, 1819 pub. By Carlile





Wm. Lloyd Garrison

# The abolitionist press



Frederick Douglass

"Someone who's done an amazing job and is getting recognized more and more"

North Star (Douglass), 1847; The Liberator (Garrison), 1831

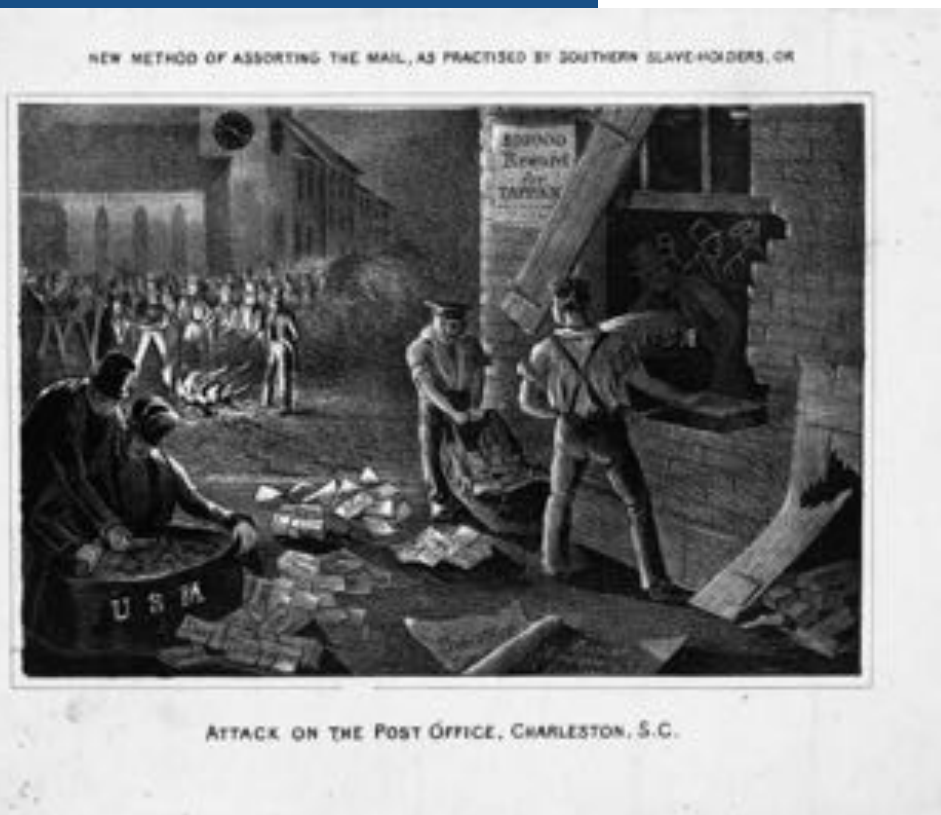


# The abolitionist mail “crisis”: 1835

A “monstrous abuse of the privilege of public mail... moral poison.” *The Charleston Southern Patriot*

The post office department was created to serve the people of each and all of the United States, and not to be used as the instrument of their destruction. ...The newspapers are inflammatory and incendiary and insurrectionary in the highest degree. By no act... could I be induced to aid in giving circulation to papers of this description, directly or indirectly.

Amos Kendall, Postmaster General





Lector in  
Key West, 1920's

# "Group" Literacy and Political Consciousness

Cf *lectores* in Cuban cigar factories:

Followed creation of cigar-makers' union in 1857; *lector* paid for by workers (85% illiteracy rate in Cuba at the time)

1866: Political Governor of Cuba issues edict making it illegal "to distract the workers of the tobacco shops.... with the reading of books and newspapers, or with discussions foreign to the work in which they are engaged."



# Literacy and “Other” Americans

---

What do we mean by "literacy"?  
Literacy, power and social control  
**Literacy and “other Americans”**  
Literacy as good-in-itself



# Literacy and Black Americans

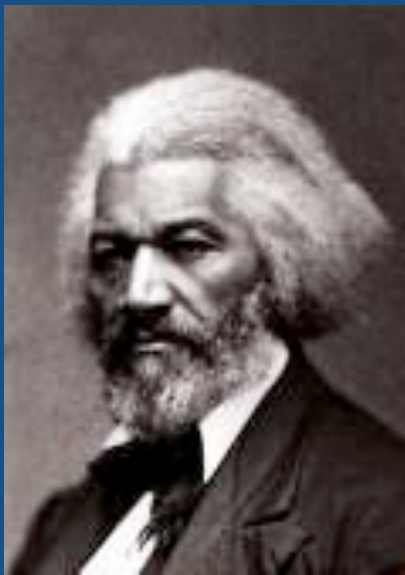


Following rebellions of Denmark Vesey (Charleston, S. Carolina, 1822) and Nat Turner (Virginia, 1831), many southern states make it illegal to teach blacks to read & write. Congress bans schooling for free people of color in DC.



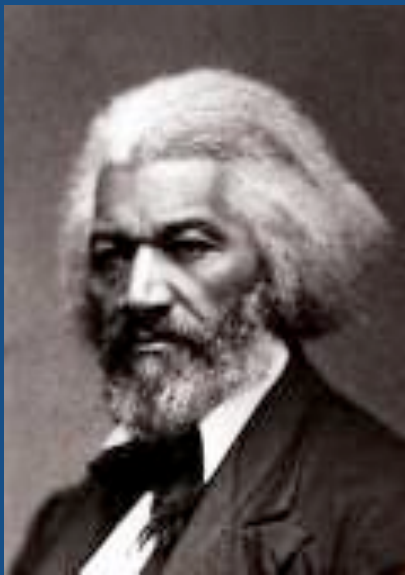


# The "dangers" of black literacy



Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld [ca. 1830], she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. ... Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read...*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, 1845*

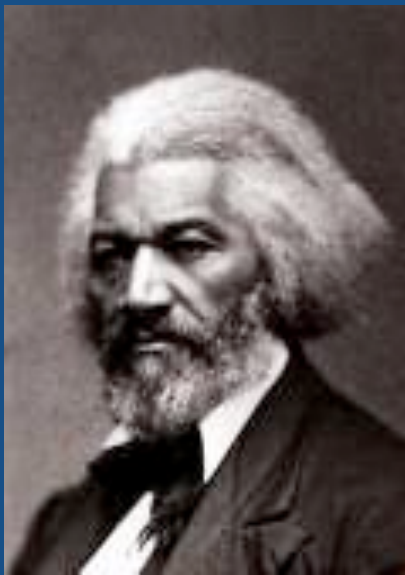
# The "dangers" of black literacy



"If you give a n\_\_\_\_ an inch, he will take an ell. A n\_\_\_\_ should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best n\_\_\_\_ in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that n\_\_\_\_ (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave."

*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, 1845*

# The "dangers" of black literacy



"These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. ...I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom."

*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, 1845*

# “The Uplifting of the American Negro”

The growth of new wants, presided over by intelligence and culture, is the best lever for raising the status of the idle, quarreling, sensual, ravishing Afro-American. Certainly the infecting of the backward portion of the race with a high estimate of cleanliness, neatness, family privacy, domestic comfort, and literacy is an agent quite as moralizing as the dread of future punishments or the love of an ethical God.

Edward Alsworth Ross in the *Am. Jrnl. Of Sociology*, 1898

Not a universal view...





# The achievement of black literacy



Mary Peake

Rise in black literacy after Civil War: from 5-10% to ca. 50% by 1900

Literacy as a "coveted possession"

With the children that are coming up no white men will not be needed They are learning to read and write. Some are learning lawyer, some are learning doctor and some learn minister, and reading books and newspapers they can understand the law.

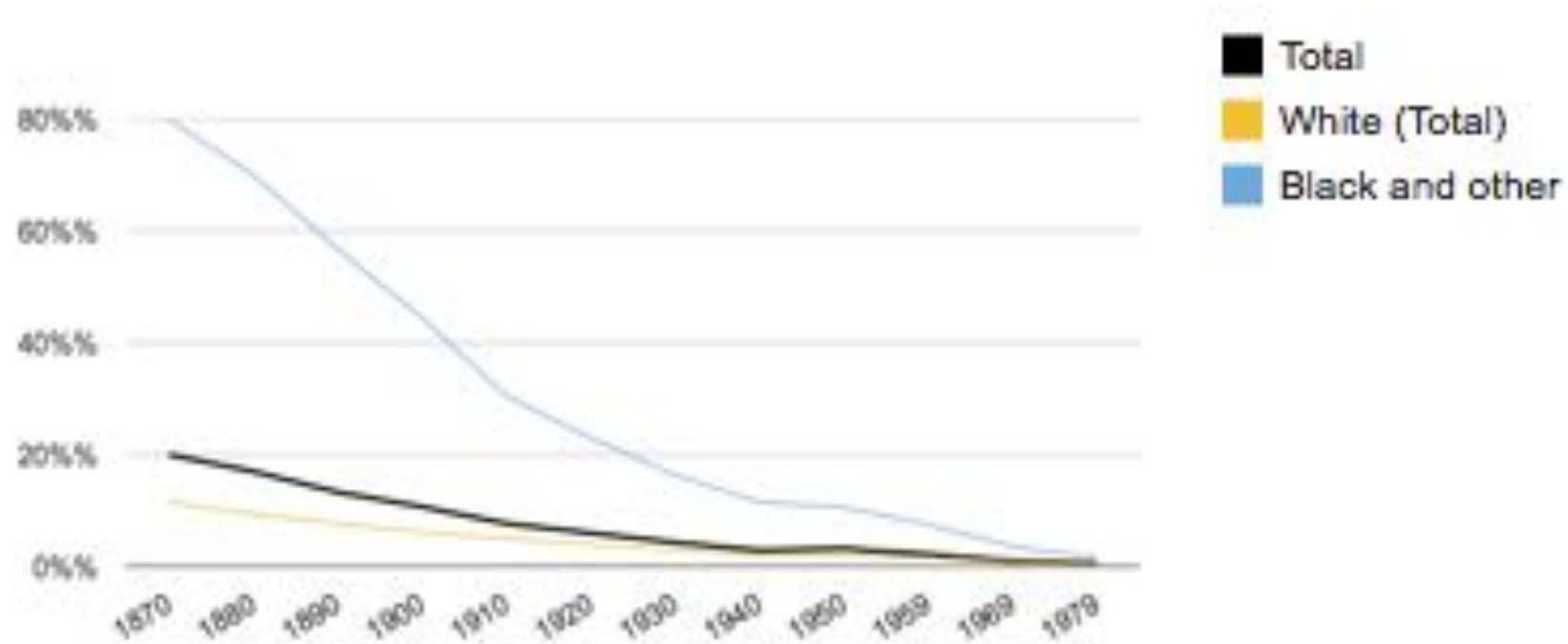
Beaufort. S.C.



# The (mixed) blessings of desegregation...



US Illiteracy by Race: 1870-1979





# “Americanizing” the Indian

“Kill the Indian: Save the Man”  
(Gen. Richard Henry Pratt)



Carlisle Indian School, 1900



"Spotted Tail, you are... the principal chief of these thousands of your people. But Spotted Tail, you cannot read or write. You claim that the government has tricked your people and placed the lines of your reservation a long way inside of where it was agreed that they should be. [...] You signed that paper, knowing only what the interpreter told you it said...if you had been educated and could read and write, you could have known about it and refused to put your name on it... Wm. Henry Pratt to Lakota chief

# Literacy as "a good in itself"

---

19th c. The invention of "literacy": Literacy rates become an indicator of modernity.

What do we mean by "literacy"?  
Literacy, power and social control  
Literacy and "other Americans"  
**Literacy as good-in-itself**



# Literacy as "a good in itself"



US:

1800-1825: proportion of children in US schools from 37 to 60%

1848-1852: In Massachusetts, Horace Mann introduces system of public education ("normal schools") based on Prussian system with age grading, compulsory attendance, nonsectarian (but Christian) curriculum

# Literacy as "a good in itself"

US:

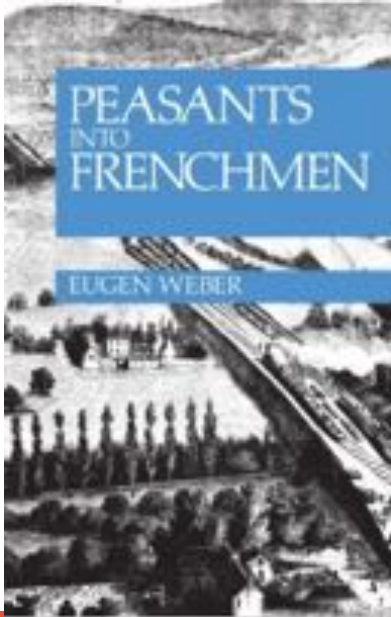
1800-1825: proportion of children in US schools from 37 to 60%

1848-1852: In Massachusetts, Horace Mann introduces system of public education ("normal schools") based on Prussian system with age grading, compulsory attendance, nonsectarian (but Christian) curriculum

UK:

1833: Parliament allocates money for schools for the poor.

1880: school attendance made compulsory from ages 5-10 (later 11, then 12). (But most schools remain sectarian or private)



# Literacy as "a good in itself"

Jules Ferry



US:

1800-1825: proportion of children in US schools from 37 to 60%

1848-1852: In Massachusetts, Horace Mann introduces system of public education ("normal schools") based on Prussian system with age grading, compulsory attendance, nonsectarian (but Christian) curriculum

UK:

1833: Parliament allocates money for schools for the poor.

1880: school attendance made compulsory from ages 5-10 (later 11, then 12). (But most schools remain sectarian or private)

France:

Minister of Public Instruction Jules Ferry creates first free education (1881) mandatory and laic (secular) education (1882)

But literacy rate is already high by mid-19<sup>th</sup> c.

# Socio-Economic Benefits of Literacy?

I have known many persons rise to wealth and respectability by their industry, virtues, and self-taught skill; but from their utter want of training in the proper mode of writing, or speaking, or reading their native tongue, they are unable to fill the situations to which their circumstances and talents and characteristics entitle them, and in which they might confer great benefits on society.

Eggerton Ryerson, Chief Superintendant of Education for Upper Canada, 1849



# “The Literacy Myth”



“...the acquisition of literacy is a necessary precursor to and invariably results in **economic development, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement, and upward social mobility**. Despite many unsuccessful attempts to measure it, literacy in this formulation has been invested with immeasurable and indeed almost ineffable qualities, purportedly conferring on practitioners a predilection toward social order, an elevated moral sense, and a metaphorical “state of grace.”

“The Literacy Myth,” *Encyclopedia of Language and Education*

*Does literacy lead to development or does development lead to literacy?*

*Yes.*

# The rise of female literacy



Women in bus. schools from 4% in 1871 to 77% in 1900

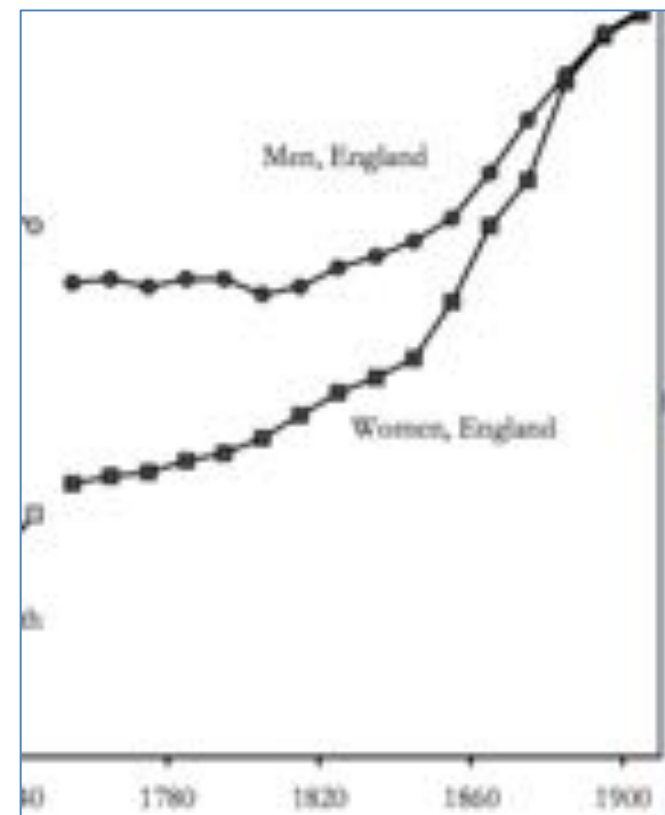


Fig. 1.1. Work in one of many filing areas at Metropolitan Life Insurance Company.

# Political Significance of Literacy

---

# Politics and the Post



Historical roots:

1792 postal legislation establishes low rates for newspapers, free exchange of papers bet publishers.

“cabalistic concealments”

Postal reforms of 1840 reduce rates for letters...



# The Growth of Public Libraries



Subscription libraries (Franklin founds Library Company of Philadelphia: 1731)



UK: Public Libraries Act of 1850 provides for "libraries freely open to the public... in towns in Great Britain and Ireland" passed w/ Conservative opposition

Carnegie libraries. 1700 public libraries in US between 1883 and 1929, 660 in UK



# Functions of the Library: Political Objectives



Libraries (and literacy in general) as bulwarks against demagoguery etc.

[To the free library] we may hopefully look for the gradual deliverance of the people from the wiles of the rhetorician and stump orator.... As the varied intelligence which books can supply shall be more and more widely assimilated, the essential elements of every political and social question may be confidently submitted to that instructed common sense upon which the founders of our government relied.

J. P. Quincy, 1876

# But what were they reading?

Concerns about popularity of "immoral fiction" and availability of seditious works

"Go to the nearest Carnegie Library and examine its catalog of books. The chances are five to one that you will find the place full of literary bilge and as bare of good books as a Boston bookshop." H. L. Mencken, 1928



# What does “Literacy” entail?

---

“Literacy” = a way of claiming status for a subject or body of material as a “basic” form of knowledge, for which the state should assume responsibility

"Literacy" in X is considered necessary to

- economic growth
- personal betterment,
- independent critical thinking,
- healthy public discourse.



# Extension of “Literacy” to Other Fields

[Bennington promotes] the development of literacy in all the important aspects of our cultural heritage. This does not mean merely verbal literacy. ... Bennington is attempting the uphill task of including the nonverbal disciplines of art and science. "The Bennington Idea," Lewis Webster Jones, *Jrnl. Ed. Soc.*, 1947

“Economic literacy” from 1950. Soon after: geographic, historical literacy, media literacy, cultural literacy, mathematical literacy (“numeracy”) etc.

# The birth of “Information Literacy”

"information literacy" is justified on the same grounds as earlier literacies:

Personal empowerment & health of public discourse

Information literacy... is a means of personal empowerment. It allows people to verify or refute expert opinion and to become independent seekers of truth.

To say that information literacy is crucial to effective citizenship is simply to say it is central to the practice of democracy

“The Importance of Information Literacy to Individuals, Business, and Citizenship” (ACRL Report)

## In Sum

---

“literacy” is a complex social phenomenon, not easily reduced to a “rate”

Literacy has historically been seen as:

An instrument of social control

The source of individual & collective development

A path to critical thinking or revolutionary consciousness

The ideology of literacy still shapes our views of education and basic knowledge

# Readings for March 2

---

Statute of Anne. *Source:* Copyrighthistory.com

U.S. Constitution, Article 1, Section 8. *Source:* U.S. Archives

U.S Copyright Act (1790). *Source:* Cambridge University

An Act to Amend the Several Acts for the Encouragement of Learning [54 Geo III 156] *Read:* Section IV *Source:* Cambridge University

An Act to Prevent the Counterfeiting, Changing or Destroying Trade Marks, Devices, and Brands. *Source:* bCourses

An Act to Revise, Consolidate, and Amend the Statutes Relating to Patents and Copyrights *Read:* Sections 77-84 *Source:* bCourses



# Assignment for March 2

---

A media critic has suggested that it is not possible to draw a line between “objective” reporting and opinion or propaganda :

[M]embers of the media [argue] that their opinions do not matter because as professional journalists, they report what they observe without letting their opinions affect their judgment. But being a journalist is not like being a surveillance camera at an ATM, faithfully recording every scene for future playback. Journalists make subjective decisions every minute of their professional lives. They choose what to cover and what not to cover, which sources are credible and which are not, which quotes to use in a story and which to toss out.

Of the two writers you have read, Schudson and Irwin, which would find this point of view more plausible? Reading both discussions, does it seem to you that reporting has grown more objective over the last half-century or so? Remember to cite the readings as necessary.