

INSIGHT

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TELLER



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Scripturient: Rewriting Literacies

Understanding the future – a new literacy

“Futures literacy draws on current information to create better visions of the future: richer, more nuanced, more challenging, more useful.”

Are you on social media? Do you scroll as much as I do? Do you retweet, share... overshare? Are you scripturient?

Good word, isn't it? It means “possessed of a violent desire to write.” I learned it last year, from Richard Seymour's book *The Twittering Machine*, and I'm taking it with me into 2020.

Seymour's book is a polemic against social media as it currently stands. He argues that privately owned social networks do us little or no good. They bait our attention and use it unhealthily. They exploit our desire to be in the know. They profit from the data we freely surrender.

Stretching boundaries

When Seymour talks about scripturience, he doesn't just mean words. He means video, images, all the media which get encoded or “written” in the digital domain. He thinks of our texts and tweets and posts and updates, and says “never before in human history have people written so much, so frantically”.

He asks: “What else could we be doing with writing, if not this?”

Will you join me in finding answers to this question in 2020? Like Seymour, I want to stretch the boundaries of literacy – but not too much. I was a kindergarten teacher once; I think that figuring out how to put language on a page, and decode it again, is its own special beast. In a world of financial, visual, cultural, and other literacies, the word can lose its power. Maybe it shouldn't be lumped together with, say, knowing how to manage household finances.

Still, there's something to be said for thinking about literacy as the mastery of a system of representation. We might learn by attending to other domains in which we can empower people to “read” – and write – for themselves.

Illuminating challenge and opportunity

New years tend to orient us towards the future, and what's coming for the UK in 2020 merits special attention. That's why I wanted to start with “futures literacy”. UNESCO's Riel Miller defines it as “the skill that allows people to better understand the role that the future plays in what they see and do”.

With turbulent times ahead – the climate crisis, political volatility, technological change – being able to read the future is a vital skill for everyone from specialist institutions to local neighbourhoods.

We might not be able to scry what's coming in a crystal ball, but today's best foresight techniques are humble: instead of predicting the future, they seek to illuminate the situations that will be most challenging or opportune. Using them can help with anticipation, empowering us to think strategically about choices and consequences.

Futures literacy is complemented by “risk literacy”, as described by Gert Gigerenzer in his book *Risk Savvy*. Gigerenzer directs a branch of the Max Planck Institute in Berlin but, surprisingly, he echoes Michael Gove in seeming to have had enough of experts. To be fair, Gigerenzer hasn't lost respect for the notion of expertise. He just lacks patience with paternalistic policy making. “As a general policy,” he writes, “coercing and nudging people like a herd of sheep instead of making them competent is not a promising vision for a democracy.”

Instead, Gigerenzer proposes getting all of us better acquainted with risk and uncertainty. We need to understand which outcomes can be known and calculated, and which can't. We must better acquaint ourselves with the ways in which probability is presented, too: do you know what it means if the weather forecast says



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there's an 80 per cent chance of rain? Can you explain it?

Futures literacy draws on current information to create better visions of the future: richer, more nuanced, more challenging, more useful. Risk literacy empowers people to make better choices for themselves, rather than simply assuming that experts know best and should decide for us.

Is the information profession currently futures literate and risk literate? If we want the communities we serve to make better choices, and do so with a clearer picture of what's ahead, what should we be doing? Which practices should we abandon? Which should we adopt? How can we help people to read the future, to read the risks and uncertainties which await them – and perhaps write their way into a better world? **IP**