

The Death of Gutenberg

Is the rise of digital media causing the fall of literacy?

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Digital Future in the Rearview Mirror: Jaspers' Axial Age and Logan's Alphabet Effect,
by Andrey Mir (Popular Media Ecology, 330 pp., \$25)

For a brief period after the near-simultaneous birth of the smartphone and social media, euphoria prevailed. Instant web-enabled communications networks, it was widely believed, were delivering into the hands of the masses the means to fulfill the brightest hopes about globalization that had been raised at the end of the Cold War. Abroad, advocates of democracy would use the new technologies to beat back the forces of tyranny and repression; within the liberal West, the same technologies would rejuvenate democratic culture and civic life. An array of disparate ideological factions—from liberal internationalists to libertarians to anarchists—seized on versions of this narrative. And for a time, it seemed to be borne out, as tech-savvy young people challenged entrenched power and scored some remarkable (if short-lived) victories, notably in the Middle East.

But a backlash began toward the second half of the 2010s, with the shocking political convulsions usually placed under the heading of “populism.” Around this time, the technologies once heralded as unprecedented tools for spreading democracy were proclaimed as the choice instruments of actual and aspiring despots. But the liberals who loudly denounced the authoritarianism of their enemies, from Vladimir Putin to Donald Trump, simultaneously became enthusiastic about the use of authoritarian methods—notably censorship—to fend off the threat. Silicon Valley, hailed by the Right for its economic dynamism and by the Left for the democratizing effects of its tools in the early 2010s, was broadly reviled by liberals by the end of the decade for not doing enough to rein in their political enemies, and by conservatives for doing too much of the same.

Today, it's easy to conclude that much of the utopian and dystopian rhetoric deployed around communications technology over the past two decades was overblown. Despite the hopes and fears invested in the digital revolution, the world looks much the same, but a bit worse (to borrow a phrase from French novelist Michel Houellebecq). But what if the advent of universal, always-connected communications devices has been far more consequential than either techno-utopians or the most jaundiced Luddites could have realized—just not in the way they imagined?

Media ecologist Andrey Mir, a sometime contributor to *City Journal*, advances just such an argument in his fascinating new book, *Digital Future in the Rearview Mirror*. The upshot of Mir's analysis is that, over the past two decades, civilization has undergone a shift comparable with that experienced over the much longer period during which literacy displaced orality. The spread of digital communications technologies, he argues, has put a definitive end to what Marshall McLuhan called the "Gutenberg galaxy" dominated by literacy—already eroded in McLuhan's own time, especially by the emergence of television. Succeeding it is a new hybrid Mir calls "digital orality," which is "simultaneous and impulsive like instant oral exchange but recordable, shareable, and transportable like writing and print."

The characterization of our current media dispensation as a variant of orality may seem counterintuitive. After all, much of our communication now occurs in textual form: emails, tweets, WhatsApp messages. This might seem to *restore* literacy to its position of primacy after a post-literate hiatus in the late twentieth century, when the television and the telephone held sway. But for Mir, the opposition between orality and literacy "is not about 'listening versus reading' but rather about 'immersion versus detachment.'" The crucial effects of literacy, in his account, are to separate vision from the other senses, while imposing linear temporal succession on the mind through the flow of text on the page. In orality, by contrast, all manner of sensory input intermingles in an immersive space, habituating the mind to processing varied sense data simultaneously. Digital communication, embedding text in a hodgepodge of graphics and sounds, resurrects this basic "oral" situation.

The historical emergence of literacy, in the account Mir adapts from media theorists Walter Ong and Robert Logan, cultivated sensory detachment from the surrounding environment. This posture, in turn, encouraged the development of qualities that included abstract thinking and individualism. This was especially true of alphabetic literacy, per Logan, because the alphabet operates at the greatest remove of abstraction from spoken language, parceling it into arbitrary sound units that get reassembled on the page. Logan's 1986 book *The Alphabet Effect*, one of Mir's main reference points, argues that the emergence of the first recognizable philosophical and proto-scientific thinking in ancient Greek society was possible only because of the prior introduction of the alphabet, which had reset its users' default cognitive settings.

If literacy made the major achievements of the modern world possible, then its undoing would seem to call their future into question. As Mir puts it, borrowing terminology from McLuhan, the new media regime "reverses" many of the attributes of literate society, while "retrieving" previously obsolesced qualities of the prior dispensation: orality.

M McLuhan anticipated much of this analysis, declaring at the height of the television era that "electronic man shares much of the outlook of preliterate man, because he lives in a world of simultaneous information." This insight was the basis of his famous formulations regarding the "global village" and "retribalization": progress into the televisual future also entailed regression to our primordial origins.

Mir's more original contribution is his synthesis of the media ecology of McLuhan, Ong, and Logan with an unjustly neglected hypothesis developed by the philosopher Karl Jaspers in *The Origin and Goal of History*. Jaspers's 1949 book is best known for introducing the notion of the "Axial Age": a "spiritual process," as he describes it, "that occurred between 800 and 200 B.C.," in which "[m]an, as we know him today, came into being." The basis of this supposition is the enigmatic fact that the civilizations of China, India, the Middle East, and Greece attempted to articulate abstract philosophical accounts of the nature of humanity and its place in the universe, as well as universal moral precepts, within the same period, without much communication with one another.

What exactly occasioned this "shift of human thinking from everyday concerns to the enquiry into the meaning of life" across civilizations is a question Jaspers never resolved. Mir postulates that media ecology furnishes the most compelling answer: the rise of writing, and alphabetic writing in particular, for all the reasons that Logan adduces. Notions of abstract universality, the subjection of thought to logical rigor, the separation of the knower from the known that enables an objective conception of the world—all of these, in Logan's account, proceed from the cognitive habits that alphabetic writing instilled. (To his credit, Mir devotes a chapter to a piece of evidence that works against his theory: China underwent an Axial Age revolution, despite not having developed alphabetic writing.)

If rationality, objectivity, and individualism are downstream from the acquisition of alphabetic literacy, the consequences of a "reversal" of the latter and concomitant "retrieval" of pre-literate cognitive norms are profound. This is indeed Mir's dramatic take on the digital revolution: "The essence of today's Axial Decade," he says, "is the reversal of Jaspers' Axial Age." One might expect him to derive a prognosis of impending civilizational collapse from this bold assertion, but Mir is no Jeremiah. He does insert some of his tweets within the flow of his text, in effect drawing upon the communicative forms of digital orality—much as McLuhan, in his time, made a deliberate effort to present his ideas about TV *on* TV. But Mir largely takes the posture of cool detachment that he associates with literacy.

His assertion that "all the disruptions we identify as the consequences of political or cultural turmoil are, in fact, media effects" invites a sober reinterpretation of the uproar of the past decade or so. Beyond our polarization, most of us share the feeling that the barbarians are at (or near) the gates. We just disagree on who the barbarians are: the woke Left, the MAGA Right, or some other basket of deplorables? Mir's answer is, in effect, that we have all become more "barbaric" as digital orality has reversed some of literacy's civilizing effects. The collective effervescence of a Trump rally or an online cancel mob are two forms our "retribalization" is taking. And the increasingly common demonization of barbaric others—of, say, "[white rural rage](#)"—is also itself a recrudescence of tribal "agonism."

This insight helps pinpoint what those who foresaw a social-media-facilitated democratic efflorescence failed to anticipate. They imagined digital communication as a new technology of literacy, extending the means to participate in democratic deliberation to more people than ever before, much as the printing

press had done before. But if, as Mir argues, the actual effect of the smartphone revolution was a dramatic erosion of literacy and its attendant habits of mind, the enabling conditions of civic comity have been weakened. The result: an increasingly toxic political culture, and a resuscitation of old fears about democracy as the rule of the ignorant, irrational mob.

Where does all this leave us? Are we doomed to collapse into tribal warfare due to the nature of the tools we have adopted? Focused as he is on linking accounts of literacy in the ancient world to Jaspers's theory of the Axial Age, Mir necessarily leaves out a good deal of intervening history that might complicate such a deterministic conclusion. In the long run, the mass literacy enabled by the printing press may have facilitated the cognitive settings we associate with the healthy functioning of liberal democracy. But this outcome was by no means evident during the first centuries after Gutenberg, which witnessed a level of violence and upheaval across Europe that makes our own era seem placid. What appears clear from history is that politics can take some time to catch up with media revolutions, and that the long-term political fallout of these revolutions may take some time to manifest itself.

In a less developed thread of his argument, Mir takes up Jaspers's teleological account of history as leading inexorably to the unity of mankind. Writing after the cataclysm of the Second World War gave way to the rise of the first global institutions, Jaspers hoped that the philosophical universalism that arose during the Axial Age would be fulfilled in a global human society built on shared values. To this prognosis, Mir adds a technological prophecy: "humankind will become one, but it will become one with its medium and its environment when all three merge into the ultimate medium: a networked cognitive interface with AI."

In other words, Mir appears to embrace a version of the hypothesis of the Singularity, according to which humanity is somehow fated to fuse with its technological tools. This line of thought risks undercutting his broader argument. After all, if a media revolution is underway that promises to be even more consequential than that of the printing press, confronting the potential dangers of this mutation in history is surely the most urgent political task facing us today. But if a digital apotheosis awaits us, regardless of what we do, what is the point?

Early in his book, Mir tries to preempt the standard criticism of "technological determinism," often directed at media theorists in the McLuhan tradition: that they fail to recognize the role of forces other than technology in history—including human agency and politics. As he argues convincingly, a *media-ecological* approach isn't reductionistic. An ecologist understands that the intrusion of a single factor—whether the reintroduction of a few dozen wolves to Yellowstone or the arrival of a new app—can cascade in its effects across an entire system. That new media technology can ultimately alter the system's coordinates doesn't mean that the relevant developments are reducible to that factor, but merely that its influence shouldn't be underrated, regardless of how small it may first seem.

When Mir takes up the Singularity, however, he sounds like a thorough determinist. “The technological imperative leaves humankind no choice: singularize or die,” he declares. The popularization of this view might itself be understood as a symptom of the developments Mir describes. If literacy, as Logan’s account holds, was crucial to the emergence of belief in individualism and free will, perhaps its digital reversal has helped birth a neo-pagan fatalism, in which we are mere playthings of a new God—in this case, AI.

Yet, technology isn’t a deity looming above us, decreeing our destiny; it’s a human creation. Legal and regulatory battles over its essence and ramifications are underway globally. Mir’s examination of media ecology provides valuable insights into the disruptions anticipated from new technologies like AI—disruptions we were ill-equipped to handle with the advent of smartphones and social media. We should leverage such perspectives when deliberating the appropriate roles and applications of technology, as we’ve now begun to do, albeit tardily, with social media. This approach could aid in mitigating the severe disruptions currently threatening us.

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