

deserves more constructive attention than it has received so far.

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## Thomas Paine and The Horizons of Democracy: An International Symposium

University of East Anglia, Norwich  
18-20 February 1994

Organised jointly by UEA and CSD.

Early in 1994 UEA will host a major international symposium on the life, times, and works of Thomas Paine (1737-1809). It will aim to shed new light on Paine's activities in England, France, Belgium and America and to develop fresh accounts of his intellectual, literary, and political significance, past and present. Among the issues to be examined are: previously undiscovered writings by Paine; hitherto unknown activities in which Paine was involved; the little-known influence of Paine's writings outside of the United States and western Europe; and new interpretations of the strengths and weaknesses and relevance of Paine's thinking on such topics as citizenship, the emancipation of women, slavery, religious intolerance, nationalism, empire, international peace, revolution, and the role of the political writer.

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## What is Literacy?

by Niels Jacob Harbitz

When Plato wrote his memorable dialogue, *Phaedrus and the Seventh Letter*, a discussion was started in the West about the promises and perils of literacy. Intellectual development, the rise of the modern subject, the emergence of the idea of the nation and the growth and

survival of democracies are among the phenomena that numerous writers consider to be closely related to the spread of literacy. Paradoxically, the notion of literacy itself nevertheless remains vague and, arguably, misleadingly defined.

During the last thirty years a field of distinguished research on this theme has emerged. It has come to be known as the orality-literacy debate. Initially this debate was strongly dominated by contributions subscribing to a 'Great Divide theory'. This position held that changes in communication technologies have wide-ranging historical significance and that communication provides the glue that binds every culture together, and that the means and modes of communication should thus figure at the centre of every account of human history. Both on an individual and on a societal level of analysis, communication technologies were seen as the causes of developmental progress. This initial phase of the orality-literacy debate, as its name suggests, was also strongly biased towards an almost exclusive interest in the shift from speech to writing. The distinction between oral and literate societies, or the tripartite division between pre-literate, non- or semi-literate, and literate cultures, were widely used as ways of identifying different developmental stages of any particular society.

There are two main reservations that have been raised against these arguments. First, empirical evidence has been used to challenge unjustified presuppositions held by most 'Great Divide theorists'. Such theorists defined literacy, usually implicitly, as the basic ability to read and write texts. Since the mid-seventies, the inclusion on equal terms in the orality-literacy debate of script systems other than alphabets has added valuable nuance to this debate. A favourite argument among classicist enthusiasts, for instance, has been that the Greek-Latin alphabet, due to its limited number of signs and high level of abstraction, is best suited to be the

script system of a true democracy. This has been 'proven' a number of times in comparative studies of Ancient Greece and China.

The second reason for rethinking traditionally held notions of literacy is the accelerating development of communication technologies. The present multi-media situation also contains a strong tendency to combine old technologies in new and more complex ways, such that the notion of a text is extended far beyond the exclusively verbal. It then follows that our understanding of reading, writing and literacy should no longer refer solely to verbal discourse.

These two points prompt us to ask, as Robert Pattison does, whether we are becoming insufficiently literate as a consequence of having inadequate ideas about literacy. While the means and modes of communication are currently undergoing radical change, the dominant understanding of literacy - as the ability to read and write a verbal text - remains unchanged. This problem is evident for instance in national educational policies and literacy programmes for development aid, where the simple definition of literacy is retained largely intact.

During the past few decades the social sciences and the humanities have become increasingly preoccupied with 'the textual/linguistic' and 'the political'. These intellectual currents flow through a number of different disciplines, most obviously in anthropology and literary theory and criticism. An encounter of the orality-literacy debate with these currents, combined with an expansion of this debate to include all post-writing technologies, is vital. It has the potential of updating and adjusting widely held notions of literacy to meet the challenge of increasingly complex media systems affecting the lives of ever greater numbers of people.

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## The Contradictions of Media Freedom

by Richard Barbrook

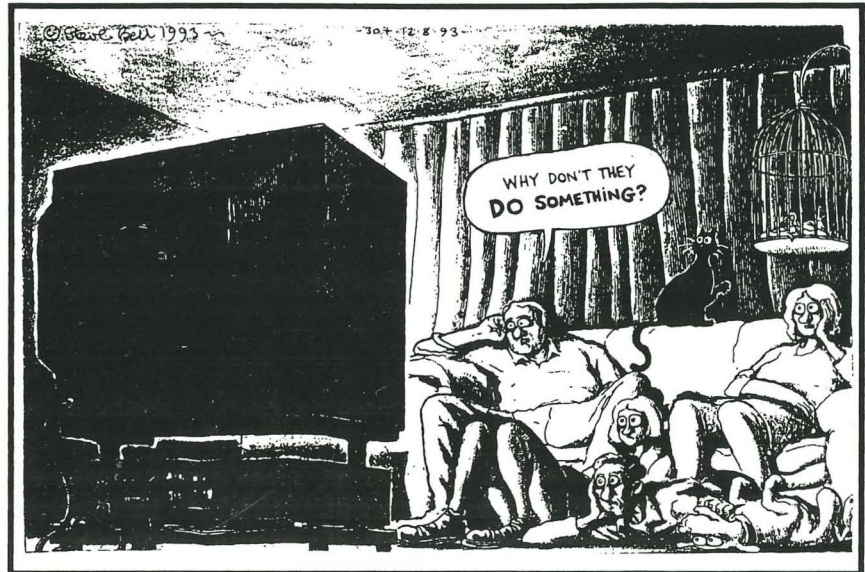
Nowadays, almost everybody believes that the freedom of the media is an essential prerequisite of a modern democracy. Yet, at the same time, many people are also convinced that the media are turning democratic politics into a branch of showbusiness. Instead of rational debate between rival ideas, contemporary politics have been trivialised into a series of soundbites and photo opportunities for couch potatoes watching the television news bulletins. Yet, for the Enlightenment philosophers, the struggle for media freedom was fought to create the conditions for the participation of the common people in democratic politics. In their view, citizens of a democratic republic had to decide the issues of the day amongst themselves through public debate, including in print. In the late-eighteenth centuries, this participative form of media freedom was put into practice. With the help of a few assistants, revolutionary heroes such as Benjamin Franklin or Jean-Paul Marat were able to print their own publications on their own printing presses. Although the philosophers usually defended media freedom with political or moral arguments, the exercise of this fundamental right was made possible by the widespread ownership of cheap wooden printing presses.

Despite its libertarian claims, this classical liberal form of media freedom was in reality restricted to a minority of male property-owners. With artisanal printing methods, only a limited number of expensive copies of any publication could be produced. However, with the industrialisation of printing, economies of scale allowed printed material to become cheap enough for almost everyone to purchase. When the new electronic media were introduced, the productivity of information production became so great that radio and television

broadcasting could be paid for by subsidies from advertisers or the state and provided free to their audiences. But, although the industrialisation of the media made available prodigious quantities of information and entertainment to the public, the end of artisanal methods of production also closed off the possibility of popular participation in the media. Thus neither the direct producers nor their audiences could directly

real differences, all these political positions assumed the same thing: the complete passivity of the audience. Although almost everyone could receive the output of the media, most people weren't able to use the media to express their own views. Instead of being actors within the political process, they were only spectators of the pronouncements of professional politicians and media pundits.

Over the past twenty years,



control the output of the media. Instead, its content was determined by the management hierarchies of collective institutions, such as joint-stock companies, banks, political parties or the state. As a consequence, the definition of media freedom was fundamentally transformed. While still paying homage to the ideal of active citizens propagating their own thoughts, media freedom was increasingly defined as the representation of actual or supposed views of the audience. Between the Left and Right, there were bitter arguments over what was the correct form of this representation. For some, the interests of the audience were best served by the media being unbiased and truthful in its reporting. For others, the media had to serve the future interests of the people by disseminating revolutionary ideas. According to some, market competition for audiences would make the media respond to the wishes of the public. Despite their

the introduction of new information technologies has intensified this centralisation of the media. For example, using satellites, media corporations are now building worldwide television news services, such as CNN or BBC's WSTV. Although these new channels can benefit from economies of scale on a global scale, the rise of the multinational media corporations has exacerbated the growing crisis of representation within national politics. Just as the power of the world market restricts the autonomy of national democratic decision-making, so the global news media can also escape from any form of influence outside the cash nexus, such as regulations for balance and objectivity. Yet the increasing productivity of the media hasn't only created the conditions for spectacle-politics on a global scale. Over the past thirty years, the spread of new technologies has also encouraged the reemergence of self-produced media, such as alternative