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## ABSTRACT

Given the strong sense of passing time which seems to be wired into human beings, it is only natural that the Year 2000, or Y2K in contemporary jargon, should lead to serious speculation about the future. Reading and literacy, old skills relatively speaking, continue rightly to figure in those predictions (along with the technologically advanced media) owing to their perceived importance in the contemporary world. This paper discusses the prediction of the educational and media future which was made by an American futurologist P.H. Wagschall in 1978. The paper reviews where Wagschall was correct--the capacity of the computer to communicate vast amounts of information, for example--and where he was wrong--understating and undervaluing people's reasons for reading, for example. It then considers the reasons human beings read, for utility and for pleasure, principally. It also discusses how governments have encouraged literacy education (sometimes intervening directly), and the transformation of libraries and publishing in recent years. The paper notes that readers have the hardback book, the paperback, the Book Club edition, the audiobook, the abridged book, and now the e-book. And it muses about a way to combat the failure to read voluntarily by those who know how to read. (NKA)

# Reading the Future.

by Keith Nettle

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***Reading the Future***

I have allowed myself a deliberate ambiguity in my title. Taken straightforwardly, 'reading the future' means something like 'predicting the future', because we use 'reading' in that way, with the sense of deciphering, comprehending. If, however, we pause slightly after the word 'reading' – even more so if we put in a punctuation mark such as a colon or a dash – the sense is quite different. We mean, in effect, the future of reading.

Either interpretation seems to me to suit the times. On the one hand, the millennial shift encourages predictive efforts. Almost everyone lives through only one change of century, and few (though including everyone alive seven months ago) ever experience a change of millennium. Given the strong sense of passing time which seems to be wired into human beings, it is only natural that the Year 2000, or Y2K in contemporary jargon, should lead to serious speculation about the future. Given also that we live in an age of mass media, it seems equally natural that the enormous technological changes of the past half century should make the future of the media figure large in predictions of the future. Reading and literacy, old skills relatively speaking, continue rightly to figure in those predictions owing to their perceived importance in the contemporary world.

But the moment we consider particular predictions we become aware of the recklessness of the venture. H.G.Wells's *War of the Worlds* and George Orwell's *1984* remain fascinating but the detailed predictions never materialised: clocks don't strike 13 and Britain isn't part of Airstrip One, whatever the problems over adopting the Euro! What the books represent is a nightmare extension of certain tendencies in the age when they were written – in Orwell's case, the Cold War and the emptiness of the political jargon it spawned.

In much the same way, a more recent prediction of the educational and media future was made by an American futurologist, P.H. Wagschall, in 1978:

'What I am suggesting is that we are witnessing the demise of the written word as our primary means of storing and communicating information. By the time my 4-year-old son reaches adulthood, there will be hardly any compelling reason for him to be able to read, write, and do arithmetic. He will have more – not less access to the accumulated wisdom of the peoples of the globe, but the three Rs will have succumbed to the influence of fast, reliable computers that call up information instantly in response to the spoken word.' (1)

Mr Wagschall's son must have reached adulthood several years ago, but the world he inhabits is significantly different from the one predicted by his father. Far from computers having replaced books, books are the leading product sold on the Internet, making the PC a service element on the way to real reading, which most people still prefer to do from a book. Another point is that the computer itself is no longer favoured as a book substitute; developers such as Microsoft and Rocket Book have moved away from the PC to smaller, more compact electronic reading devices closer in character to the traditional book.

Clearly Wagstaff was right about the capacity of the computer to communicate vast amounts of information. The world indeed now runs on the information flow provided online, and computers control most processes and systems that modern societies depend upon. For information retrieval, individuals too can locate, read and download short stretches of content material such as encyclopaedia entries, avoiding the purchase and shelving of large sets of heavy books which inevitably date. But information retrieval is not the only or even the main type of reading carried out by most people, or by children at school. Extensive reading continues to be regarded widely as most comfortably carried out from print on paper. Perhaps the new generation of E-book Readers will have a part to play, but that is still in the realm of prediction.

The part of Wagschall's prophecy which turned out to be most wrong was what he said about the three Rs. Reading, writing and arithmetic – often now called literacy and numeracy – are seen by most Governments as the cornerstones of primary education. In Britain, Tony Blair made 'education, education, education' the mantra of his New Labour administration, and the Secretary of State for Education has staked his job on the attainment by 11 year olds leaving primary school having reached an acceptable level in literacy and numeracy by 2002.

Why was Wagschall so wrong in 1978? The answer relates both to computers and to education. It must have appeared to a computer specialist 22 years ago that the vast computational power of the computer could be harnessed to take over all the drudgery suffered by human being in the past. Some of this has occurred. Clerks no longer have to sit at desks all day entering figures in ledgers (though teleworkers have to sit at phones and screens all day long!). But computers are fairly dumb, and have in any case been programmed to work through language and complex human systems which are best understood and operated by literate and numerate people. Research studies have shown that good readers are able to use computers most effectively.

Wagschall was also wrong in understating and undervaluing people's reasons for reading. He said there would be 'hardly any compelling reason' for his son to read. Yet for many educationists and psychologists, reading for pleasure is regarded as a highly satisfying and humane activity. We use the PC for work and for some leisure pursuits, but for the book lover there is no satisfaction greater than curling up with a book. As Umberto Eco puts it:

'To read a computer screen is not the same as to read a book. After spending twelve hours at a computer console, my eyes are like two tennis balls, and I feel the need to sit comfortably down in an armchair and read a newspaper, and maybe a good poem.'

I think that computers are diffusing a new form of literacy, yet they are incapable of satisfying all the intellectual needs they stimulate.’ (2)

This brings us to a key point: human beings do not simply use information – they read to be educated and entertained, and for these purposes a book is still generally perceived to be the best medium. At present it appears that literature, consumer books and educational books are least at risk from the development of electronic publishing. Data-heavy material, where a relatively small amount of content is needed at any one time, transfers most easily to electronic delivery. Where extensive discursive reading is required, there seems less likelihood of a substantial shift to the electronic medium in the next few years.

In case I am now falling into the same trap as Mr Wagschall, I should add that nothing is certain. Perhaps the e-book will quickly gain market share. The distinguished English critic George Steiner, a great lover of traditional books, wrote in 1996:

‘My colleagues in the Cambridge engineering department tell me that they are very close to a “small-scale, portable, total display” computer – meaning that you will carry it with you or have it on your desk or by your bed, for bedtime reading, this small and versatile screen. It will be on-line to the libraries of the world; the 14m books of the Library of Congress will be at your fingertips and it will be clearer, easier to carry, infinitely more responsive to your interests and need than any book. Then, we are in a new world. Then, truly, we are in a new world.’ (3)

Presumably it was what has now become the Microsoft Reader that the Cambridge engineers were describing to George Steiner four years ago. Microsoft are busily signing up publishers around the world to the scheme, though I doubt whether all the 14m books in the Library of Congress will ever be available. But was George Steiner right to become so ecstatic at the prospect of the e-book, as we now call it? Is the very comprehensiveness of the electronic Reader actually an advantage in most cases? To take an obvious example, if you had all 14 million books from the Library of Congress in your Reader, wouldn’t accessing particular titles be rather a complex operation? A scholar might be prepared to go through the necessary stages, but the ordinary reader wanting to get hold of a novel might still prefer the single book. Steiner himself, in the same article from which I have already quoted, celebrated the traditional book:

‘From my boyhood I remember the smell of books, immensely different, the different kinds of savour, the paper, the print. Books are complex phenomena. The way we hold them. Where we store them. The way we can return to them. The paperback is a revolution of its own, as was the folio, the quarto, the duodecimo. Books, and the libraries in which they were kept, shaped much of what we think of as literature, history, and philosophy.’ (3)

This relates to another point about books read for pleasure. They are individual. We read one novel at a time, and so we want a particular novel, not a necessarily a whole library of novels in one small receiver. Books that we own become familiar: we can write in them and shelve them in particular ways. Many people find scrolling on screen less convenient than riffling through a book – holding one page open while scanning several more. Perhaps this is a temporary feeling for those brought up on

books, but I doubt it. There is something about a book – vegetable-based, not metallic – which is comfortable to people. Microsoft and Rocket E-book have both laboured for years to try to achieve in a metallic device the legibility and convenience of the paper book!

In one sense, the implication for reading of the advent of the e-book is not profound. As we have seen, the e-book developers have tried hard to create a book-like device, with the opacity and contrast as similar as possible. There is likely to be little physical difference in the act of reading a paper book or an e-book. The effects are likely to be more to do with the organisational aspects of reading.

In an article called ‘Familiar Future’, Steven Pinker, the MIT psychologist, asks rhetorically

‘Will electronic media transform the arts? Will they transform our minds?... Some imagine technology-enriched Summerhillesque schools where literacy and knowledge will simply blossom, free from drudgery. Others hope that playing Mozart to the bellies of pregnant women will transform children into super- learners. But an alternative view is that education is the attempt to get minds to do things that they are badly designed for. Although children instinctively speak, see, move and use common sense, their minds may be ill at ease with many of the fruits of civilisation: written language, mathematics, and the very large and very small spans of time which are the subjects of history and science. If so, education will always be a slog.’ (4)

As already noted, Wagschall’s prediction failed partly because Government’s saw the central importance of reading, and encouraged literacy education. This is a worldwide concern, as indicated earlier this year by the Dakar conference which characterised primary education and universal literacy as the key tool for reducing poverty, increasing economic development, and lessening the likelihood of civil conflicts and wider wars. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is estimated by UN agencies that there are 1 billion illiterates in the world, a rise from 800 million as recently as 1980. In the developed nations, literacy is seen as essential to full participation in democracy, and to efficiency at work. These social and economic aims are valuable, but it is important for reading organisations to emphasise also the cultural aspects of reading.

The great child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim expressed most clearly the two contrasted faces of reading:

‘There are two radically different ways in which reading (and the learning of it) can be experienced: either as something of great practical value, important if one wants to get on in life; or as the source of unlimited knowledge and the most moving aesthetic experiences. Which of these two ways or in what combination of them the child will experience being taught reading, depends on the impressions he receives from his parents and the atmosphere of his home, and on how reading is taught to him in school. The image of literacy impressed on him by those who significantly shape his view of things during his most impressionable years is decisive.’ (5)

The Latin American educationist Emilia Ferreiro made a similar point this year, when she said that:

'There are children who approach written language through magic (a challenging cognitive magic), and children who approach written language through a training consisting of "basic skills". By and large, the former become readers; the latter become "illetterates" or functional illiterates.' (6)

This dichotomy between reading for utility and reading for pleasure is highly significant in advanced societies. In Britain the Government has made compulsory in all State schools a National Literacy Strategy for primary schools which has divided opinion among educationists. Despite some reservations among teachers about the previously unheard of curricular control, the majority seem to have incorporated it into their teaching approach, with many finding it really helpful. The Strategy is wide-ranging and includes the literary aspects of primary English as well as the utilitarian, but the controversy has largely concerned the phonics which dominate the early stages and the grammar which is fairly pervasive throughout. For the 30 years that preceded the Strategy, grammar had been largely absent from British education, abandoned in the 1960s when linguists pointed out the inappropriateness of the Latin model to contemporary English. The result is that teachers whose own schooling was grammar-free now have to be taught some grammar themselves in order to be able to teach the children.

Another reservation expressed about Britain's National Literacy Strategy is that it entails teaching all children in a way which is necessary only for a minority, that is to say, explicitly covering all the phonetic features which most children do not necessarily need in order to learn to read. (It is reckoned that 70 to 80 per cent of children learn to read regardless of the method used to teach them). Research has shown for some time that Britain has 'a long tail of underachievement', and some critics feel that in the laudable aim of ameliorating this situation the Government has gone too far in imposing the same centralised curriculum and methodology on all schools. Writing in the UKRA journal *Reading*, last year, Teresa Grainger expressed the concern of teachers over the strictness of the new regime:

'In a recent staff meeting I attended, the question of play in the Literacy Hour was raised. Several teachers, initially uneasy, became increasingly agitated and concerned. Finally they announced with conviction to the rest of the staff that they were not prepared to shortchange their principles, ignore their years of classroom experience or abandon their understanding. Children, they argued cogently, deserve teachers who, whilst always open to further learning, do not drop everything and dance in unison to a new tune played by a different set of pipers. I agree with them. A hermetically sealed English curriculum, delivered in regularised chunks of scribalism by disempowered conformists, is the last thing our children deserve.' (7)

These are strong and quite angry words, reminding us that Governments run risks when they intervene in the school curriculum. The risks are of alienating the teachers who must finally deliver the new syllabus favoured by the Government. It is unlikely that such a consensus will exist on the methodology of literacy that all teachers will 'dance in unison' to the same tune. It is also likely that particular aspects of the whole Strategy will come to the fore, making it probable (in the present case) that the utilitarian focus will assume greater prominence than the pleasure focus: reading will

be seen as job-related, for the economic good of the country, rather than being primarily related to the personal development of the individual.

One further aspect of the National Literacy Strategy which has led to criticism is the tendency within the new syllabus, and specifically within the daily Literacy Hour, for a controlled segmentation of the language work, and the related use of extracts rather than whole books. In a curious way, this reminds me of the tendency discussed earlier of typical computerised communication to consist of information content rather than material demanding discursive reading. There is also a possible link with what Michael Ignatief calls 'the three minute culture' – referring to the short attention span which might be encouraged by multi-channel television, where many viewers are thought to hop channels after three minutes. The risk of a short attention span being encouraged by the National Literacy Strategy may be slight, but insofar as the segmentation and extracting seems inimical to extended reading for pleasure, it must be regretted, just as the 'three minute culture', particularly insofar as it affects children, must be regretted if it has the same effect.

What seems to be at risk in terms of the prospects for extended reading is time. We are bombarded with printed, electronic and visual media. In a typical day in an advanced country most people see hundreds of items: letters, emails, brochures, advertisements, leaflets, PC documents, books, newspapers, magazines, television channels – the list goes on and on. In the case of many children, one should add electronic games, where quick response to sensational stimuli is at a premium, and where there is encouragement to altering the presented image. Perhaps the huge success of the Harry Potter books is related to the fact that, though linear, they have some of the stylised features children associate with computer fantasy games.

But most fiction of quality demands a longer attention span and a different kind of appreciation. Most small children have these features, and Emilia Ferreiro shows us their value:

'Reading is a grand stage on which it is necessary to discover who are the actors, the *metteurs en scène*, and the authors. Part of the magic consists in that the same text, (that is, the same words in the same order) gets re-presented again and again. What is it in those marks which not only elicits language, but brings forth the same oral text again and again? Children's fascination with the reading and re-reading of the same story has to do with this fundamental discovery: writing fixes the language, it controls it in such a way that the words do not get dispersed, they do not fade away nor do they substitute one another: the same words, time and again.' (6)

There are many fine books for young children which fulfil the requirements specified here. An example is Michael Rosen's *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*, with its poetic repetition of key lines, first in an unhurried way on the outward journey, then hurriedly as the children rush back to the safety of home pursued by the beast. It would be inconceivable here to vary the words in any way. For young children it is 'the same words, time and again' that enable the crisis of the story to be overcome, that make it possible to sleep because the children get back safely to their beds – time and again.

Yet this kind of certainty through familiarity of words is not characteristic of many computerised stories and games, where the technical flexibility of the medium often tends in a different direction. In many computer games, alternatives are frequently given, enabling the player to determine the plot development and even the words. The fact that most children spend some time playing such games does not automatically mean that they fail to read traditional or contemporary fiction, but it has implications for literacy education, which somehow must balance all these diverse skills and media.

To quote Emilia Ferreiro again:

‘Democracy, that form of government that we are all staking our hopes on, demands, needs and requires literate individuals. Full democracy is impossible without levels of literacy that surpass the minimum of spelling and signing. It is impossible to continue to support democracy without making the necessary efforts to increase the number of readers – complete readers, not spellers. During the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century it appeared that it was sufficient to “understand simple instructions and to sign”. But today, social and labour requirements are far higher and more demanding. Internet navigators are merely ships adrift if they do not know how to take quick decisions and select information.’ (6)

Few would want to dispute Professor Ferreiro’s observations, though in this passage she seems to be dealing with the utilitarian side of Bruno Bettelheim’s dichotomy. Literacy education has to produce readers of a practical kind, able to get on in life. How should this relate to the more personal aspect of reading – the aesthetic side? There is some research evidence to suggest that extensive voluntary reading is beneficial to utilitarian reading. One example is a piece of research carried out under the direction of Professor Keith Stanovich of the Ontario Institute. This involved observation of people waiting for their flight at Washington’s National Airport. Individuals were selected from among those reading books and those not reading at all, and through interviews and tests it was established that the readers turned out to be much better informed than the non-readers, suggesting that being a voluntary extensive reader produces a payoff in terms of the practical aspects of life. It is also clear that extensive reading for pleasure makes it easier to handle reading tasks in work. Familiarity with books and text characteristics crosses over naturally from one type of reading to the other.

It begins to seem less difficult to plan for literacy education that caters for the various literacy demands made upon individuals in modern societies. There should be no automatic incompatibility between the idea of reading to learn and reading for pleasure. We have evidence, in fact, that utilitarian literacy is supported by reading for pleasure. What also seems clear is that literacy thrives when introduced as early in the life of individuals as possible. In Britain the Bookstart scheme, which has been running for several years, works with mothers of babies, co-operating with health authorities to ensure that parents of 9-month-old babies receive a simple book and poster, and details of joining their local public library, along with the samples of baby food, nappies etc supplied at that time. Cohort studies of the Bookstart babies and a control group have shown that the children who received this service as babies score more highly on reading and maths tests in their first year at school than children outside the scheme. Beyond that, the ultimate benefit is incalculable, as many of the

Bookstart children are likely to form a new generation of adult readers and book buyers.

Another feature supportive of reading in Britain and elsewhere in recent years has been the transformation of bookselling, both by the Internet bookshops and by developments in terrestrial bookshops. This has partly been as a result of conglomeration and the arrival of large superstores, and partly reflected the changes in shopping generally, with bookshops often being sited in the shopping malls. The bookshops usually have coffee shops and other comfortable features encouraging browsing at leisure, and making the bookbuying experience a pleasurable one. Children's departments are often attractively designed, with low chairs, toys, and clearly labelled sections. Clearly the idea is to encourage the whole family to come and spend time and money in the bookshop. A less attractive aspect of the new book chains has been a controversy in one over management instructions to branches to reduce stocks of slower selling backlist books, increasing the modern commercial tendency to concentrate on best sellers, such as the much hyped Harry Potter books.

Libraries too have been changing, and the British Government has recently produced a set of standards for public libraries, setting out minimum standards of opening hours, book stocks etc relating to each 1,000 local residents. Libraries have seen their best hope in a combination of books and computers, the latter providing Internet access for those who lack it at home. Public libraries are perhaps in a difficult position in developed countries, in that affluence and the quality of the bookshops makes their service less important to most people than in the past. Nevertheless they continue to represent a valued aspect of civic life and an element in the overall literacy picture.

What of publishing itself? I have been an educational publisher all my working life, actively until 1996 and subsequently as a consultant, mainly with the UK Publishers Association, whom I advise on literacy and numeracy, as well as undertaking other research.

This is not an easy time for publishers, who face uncertainty over the future – the degree and rate of change to electronic delivery, with the attendant issues of trading, copyright, territory, and disintermediation (the possibility many people have to publish material on the Internet without needing an intermediary such as a commercial publisher). A recent example from the United States indicates the prospect that may face many publishers. Several publishers producing dentistry materials for seven dentistry courses in universities were asked to come up with an alternative to the swathe of textbooks, manuals, slides etc. that the students needed. As a result, a single DVD must now be bought for \$3,000 by each student at the start of their course, totally replacing all the books and slides previously supplied. At a stroke, a whole set of books and other printed materials becomes redundant, and a DVD weighing less than 1 ounce replaces pounds and pounds of weighty tomes.

Interestingly, however, neither the content nor the copyright ownership changes with the medium. The \$3,000 will be shared out according to the contract, with each party receiving something like the return it formerly earned from the books. In other areas of education, such a relatively simple transition to the new medium is proving more elusive. As we have seen, there is no clear evidence yet that most readers want to migrate to e-books, though the take-up for Stephen King's novella this spring was

impressive – for the two days it took before someone had broken the encryption, making the online book free! In education, terms still have to be worked out in most countries for schools to pay for online educational material, though there are many hybrid schemes involving a textbook and linked material on the publisher’s website. At present no obvious electronic successor to the subject textbook has appeared.

There is beginning to be greater optimism among publishers that their editorial and entrepreneurial skills will still be needed in the supposedly electronic future. Publishers also control most of the content that the telecoms and others would like to deliver electronically, which gives the publishers some power in the bargaining. Disintermediation no longer seems the problem it did a few years ago: most journal readers prefer the articles to have been peer-reviewed and few people actually seem to want to publish privately.

For the reader as consumer, the future looks reasonably bright. As Umberto Eco has observed, new media do not generally destroy old ones. The photograph did not destroy painting, nor did television or video kill the cinema. Readers already have the hardback book, the paperback, the Book Club edition, the audiobook, the abridged book, and now the e-book. The market will over time decide which, if any, of these media should disappear, but in the meanwhile the reader can take his or her choice.

As we have seen, there are some problems over the teaching of literacy, particularly where governments intervene directly. But at least the high profile these interventions give to literacy ensures that the issue involved stay in the public consciousness. In worldwide terms, the conquest of illiteracy in poor countries is a major international priority, though, as Emilia Ferreiro reminds us:

‘We do not know if the starving will learn to read and write so as to get on the Internet, or if once again they will be excluded. It is too early to make predictions.’(6)

In the advanced countries, the future of reading for those who read will be made safer if some way can be found to combat ‘illetteracy’ – the failure to read voluntarily by those who know how to read. We shall do better economically, and have happier populations, if reading thrives in our societies.

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