Illiterate Me

Today it seems nearly impossible to function socially in the 21st century without some medium of literacy assaulting our senses. Whether it is print billboards, screen advertisements, never-ending emails, radio shows, podcasts, or commercials, we are interpreting and understanding the ways in which messages are relayed to us from various sources. I can vividly remember a time in my childhood when I was not attuned to these things as much as I am today. Though they were likely present, they held no significance to me as a child. Now, they are an integral part of my daily life. Though I am cautious of this change, the role that literacy and technology have come to play in society has evolved and changed to encompass almost any imaginable form of communication. Authors such as Dennis Baron, Barbara Jones-Kavalier, Suzanne Flannigan, and Elizabeth Daily have explored some of the ways in which the concept of digital literacy has evolved into a valid form of communication and what this has done for authors and audiences alike. I believe the general attitude toward these literacy mediums to be quite positive, but there are some drawbacks to surrounding ourselves with so much digital literacy.

Literacy encompasses the rhetorical arguments. Often, these arguments are able to reach such large audiences, that the term “mass media” is now exactly that, a media that meets the masses. The rhetorical arguments, logos, ethos and pathos are engrained within print and digital
texts so flawlessly sometimes audiences don’t realize they are being directed toward a specific conclusion. Although I now feel as though I can’t escape and ‘turn off’ the world of communication, this wasn’t always so. I remember a time when the only means of literacy I understood was contained within the four walls of my sixth grade English class. Subject, verb, direct object, prepositional phrase...read aloud...now write the word...spell it correctly! Day in and day out Mrs. Roller drilled grammar and reading into us with her steely stare and perfect chalkboard script. A classmate and I wrote letters to each other during class and would exchange them in the hallway to read at home. Sometimes they were five to six pages long! To this day they sit, collecting dust in a drawer in my room, memories of when we found such use for our humble pencils. The only technology I was privileged to use was an extremely attractive silver flip phone with a blue-black striped cover. Only an inch and a half thick, it was the latest and greatest gadget. It had twelve buttons, two speakers, and a screen the size of a mini post-it-note. Texting was just beginning to become popular and even then, few students paid much attention to it. As a public school student in Hanover County, there was little need to use technology.

Ironic enough, my legitimate relationship with the computer began after I became homeschooled. Contrary to how many would envision a homeschooled atmosphere, I did not sit around a worn wooden table, studiously scribbling on a miniature piece of slate with my six siblings clustered around me. The computer enabled me to access schooling material through online classes. The computer became my instructor. All my work was submitted through my school website or email. As high school progressed, I typed many papers and became comfortable with email and internet search engines. I discovered chat rooms with friends and experimented sending texts to peoples’ phones from my laptop. I downloaded music, edited
pictures, made short movies, and discovered apps. Upon my graduation from high school, I considered myself fully competent with the computer. I assumed I was literate, given that I was able to navigate what I needed to in order to accomplish simple tasks. Phones had become sleeker and smarter, computers had become lighter and thinner, and Facebook was beating out Myspace. Technology was making leaps and bounds and I thought I was keeping up.

Much to my dismay, I soon encountered an ITE 115 and 140 class. These may not sound like very difficult classes, but it was nothing like the computer literacy that I had encountered before. I was forced to operate on HPs, a computer alien to me as I had grown accustomed to Macs and their operative ease. I was completely ‘illiterate’ when it came to composing on this different system. If this was what being digitally literate meant, I wanted no part in it! Although they were frustrating and slow courses for me, they allowed me to realize how much there really was to the computer world that I had not been attuned to for many years. In his work, “From Pencils to Pixels,” Dennis Baron talks about the stages of literacy technology. Certainly the direction technology has taken has happened in these stages. Over time, new forms of literacy technologies have been introduced and accepted by audiences. Barbara R. Jones-Kavalier and Suzanne L. Flannigan could not be more right in stating that, “[p]rior to the 21st century, literate defined a person’s ability to read and write, separating the educated from the uneducated. With the advent of a new millennium and the rapidity with which technology has changed society, the concept of literacy has assumed new meanings” (8). Observe the phenomenon of social media, which often utilizes the power of precise wording to convey a message. A new form of literacy must be how to interpret and decipher the messages in many of these social media sites. Twitter, Facebook and Instagram all utilize a language of their own. Being literate now “assume[s]”
audiences can understand these mediums of communication. But many people like myself are averse to communication such as this.

“[T]he greatest challenge is moving beyond the glitz and pizzazz of the flashy technology to teach true literacy in this new milieu” (Jones-Kavalier and Flannigan 9). What does that mean? It means that many forms of digital literacy contain more dazzle than content. I think here, Jones and Flannigan are hinting that not all digital literacy is valuable. Even Baron states, “[A]s the technology spreads, so do reactions against it from supporters of what are purported to be older, simpler, better, or more honest ways of writing.” (Pencils to Pixels). I don’t necessarily believe that “true literacy” is solely simple written forms of work; however, I do believe Jones and Flannigan are implying that not all digital literacy technology provides valuable information and audiences need to sometimes move beyond the ‘white noise.’ The danger is, after being surrounded by these digital forms of literacy for so long and committed to them to the nth degree, how does one decipher the ‘white noise’ anymore?

I take these new forms of literacy in stride. But be it caution, superstition, ignorance, or stubbornness I have never put much stock in the digital realm. While these mediums serve a monumental purpose, I think it imperative that audiences realize they are tools used to communicate. They are tools that serve a purpose. They are tools that function to assist us. Digital literacy today does include being able to analyze and interpret these mediums of communication. Digital literacy is reading and writing in any digital form. But if this is the case, then I must be illiterate. Illiterate to the nth degree. Woe illiterate me.
Works Cited

