Social media and videogames are often blamed for individual behavioural delinquency, but rarely praised for cultural creativity, social innovation, or helping us to form new social groups or work through new ideas. Videogames are now a political football, both in the US (where they’re blamed for gun crime) and in China (where they’re blamed for childhood myopia). Every new media form has grown up surrounded by those wanting to control it.

Popular literacy has never been free and open. Popular novels and the press; cinema and TV; and more recently digital and social media, have all attracted the wrath of incumbent commercial, government or social interests. But in the era of open access, open science, open knowledge, what about open literacy? Can it be extended to whole populations, across demographic borders, at global scale, for purposeless but nevertheless pedagogic play, and for social innovation? Or will it, like predecessor forms, be dismissed as a delinquent waste of time or commodified instrument for profit, power and mass persuasion?

Keywords: open literacy; partisan politics; knowledge systems; myth; Helen of Troy; culture wars; Richard Hoggart; purposeless play; insurrection; Greta Thunberg

‘Resolutely curb indulging’

Social media and videogames are often blamed for individual behavioural delinquency, but rarely praised for cultural creativity, social innovation or helping us to form new social groups or work through new ideas. Videogames are now a political football, both in the US (where they’re blamed for gun crime) and in China (where they’re blamed for childhood myopia and ‘excessive consumption’).1

In November 2019, China’s central government authorities issued new regulations for minors who play online games and the corporations that supply them. A spokesperson for the State Press and Publication Administration was interviewed by Xinhuanet. They explained: ‘In recent years, China’s online game industry has developed rapidly. While satisfying the needs of the people for leisure and entertainment and enriching the people’s spiritual and cultural life, some minors are addicted to games and excessive consumption, which are worthy of high attention’. The regulation imposes ‘strict implementation of corporate responsibility, performs government supervision duties in accordance with the law, promotes coordinated management and effective participation of all sectors of society’, thereby linking ‘government, enterprise, and society.’ The regulation introduces six measures (Figure 1):

1. Real-name online registration;
2. Time limits on individual gaming with an overnight curfew;
3. Age and payment limits for minors;
4. Strengthened industry supervision;

5. Revisions to the age-adjustment system, noting that age-appropriate reminders are not equivalent to Western grading systems, and harmful content such as pornography, bloodyness, violence, and gambling must not be allowed in games for adults;  
6. Parents, schools and other social forces to provide those under their guardianship ‘effective supervision and support’.  

In linking the family responsibilities of parents and social responsibility of corporations with the coercive control of children by the state, China is following a well-worn path, in common with Western nations and control agencies going back several centuries. Every new media form has grown up surrounded by those wanting to control it, from the invention of print and the industrialisation of mass media with the press, broadcasting, cinema, popular fiction and so on, to computational play, digital culture and online affordances. Throughout modernity, authorities have greeted new-media usage by unregulated, untutored populations – always imagined as the vulnerable or unruly child – as dangerous, deviant or disordered. Most recently, the American Psychiatric Association has designated a new condition called ‘internet gaming disorder’ in their influential and widely used *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5),

Figure 1: ‘Resolutely curb indulging and protect the healthy growth of young people’. New regulations ‘Preventing Minors from Indulging in Online Games’ are announced (November 5, 2019). Source: Xinhuanet.
thence authorising the clinical part of the psy-complex to swing into action on ‘internet addiction,’ a move that was quickly noticed and deployed in Chinese internet research papers.

Despite this seeming agreement across countries and agencies, not everyone does agree that there is evidence for negative social effects. As the New York Times recently commented:

_A sizable faction of scientists also disputes the idea that video games are addictive. The arguments against the validity of video-game addiction are numerous, but they generally converge on three main points: Excessive game play is not a true addiction but rather a symptom of a larger underlying problem, like depression or anxiety; the notion of video-game addiction emerges more from moral panic about new technologies than from scientific research and clinical data; and making video-game addiction an official disorder risks pathologizing a benign hobby and proliferating sham treatments._1

The New York Times quotes Andrew Przybylski, director of research at the Oxford Internet Institute at Oxford University: “It’s absolutely not an addiction. This whole thing is an epistemic dumpster fire.” People enjoy and sometimes form all-consuming passions for countless activities — fishing, baking, running — and yet we don’t typically pathologize those. In his own research, Przybylski (2016) has identified ‘mischievous responding’ as an explanation for ‘Internet Gaming Disorder indicators’ self-reported by gamers. He explains (NYT): “jokesters” do in fact provide extreme and untruthful responses that can dramatically effect the generalised estimates drawn from questionnaire data. Indeed, Przybylski claims that ‘internet gaming addiction’ is itself a meme – a ‘moral panic’ that ‘lives its own life’ beyond the reach of science.4

**Game changing?**

With hindsight it is clear that the popular uses of previously dominant (print and broadcast) media have not fulfilled the worst fears of critics, but instead have played a significant social role in developing modern knowledge systems, coordinating, cementing and informing national and other identities at population scale. It is equally clear that contemporary platforms continue to play the same role, but much less scholarly attention has been paid to the process by which users, organisations (both public and private) and sociocultural groups produce and communicate _knowledge_ using social and digital media, how it is shared across demographic borders, and the uses to which it is put. While ‘fake news’, ‘deepfake’ images, hate speech, online trolling and confrontational (‘tribal’) uses of popular media for political purposes can cause consternation among those who suffer their consequences, the question of how mediated groups (as opposed to isolated individuals, addicted or otherwise) work as _communicative knowledge agencies_ goes unasked. To the extent that they do, does this result in social innovation, rather than individual addiction and pathology? Popular media have all attracted the wrath of incumbent commercial, government or social interests, each of which may nevertheless attract ‘mischievous responses’. In the era of open access, open science and open knowledge, can we do better than that? If the science is inconclusive, why not let people work it out for themselves?

This brings us to ‘open literacy’. Popular literacy has never been free and open; but on the other hand it has always been used in ways that confound official surveillance. Can it be nurtured, and extended to whole populations, across demographic borders, at global scale, for purposeless but still pedagogic play, and for social innovation, instead of being a mere instrument for profit and power among commercial interests and for population control and mass persuasion among state agencies? Popular literacy has never been free and open. Popular novels and the press, cinema and broadcasting, and more recently digital and social media, have all developed within control regimes favouring incumbent commercial, government or social interests. But in the era of open access, open science, open knowledge and now ‘open communication’, what about open literacy? Computer-based games and social media now enjoy global popularity, but regulatory regimes remain preoccupied with their behavioural impact on individuals (‘games addiction’ and ‘screen time’), rather than on their role in the growth and spread of knowledge among diverse populations.

This paper departs from prior approaches to literacy, whether chiefly literary (Richard Hoggart), educational (David Buckingham), social-psychological (Sonia Livingstone) or technological (Microsoft).5 Arguing that literacy needs to be rethought as a property of systems (the semiosphere) not persons (individual

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behaviour), and to include what cultural semiotician Yuri Lotman (2009) calls creative ‘explosion’ (dynamics of change), not just rule-governed acculturation (compliance), open literacy’ proposes that transformational innovation emerges by ‘opening’ such systems (limiting the will to control), such that purposelessness (play), insurrection, rebellion and rule-breaking (protest) – not just personal creativity and technical skills (productivity) – are valued as ‘literate’. Of course, literacy includes ‘discipline’ as well as ‘openness’, but both may better be modelled in digital games and informal gaming culture than in disciplinary regimes inherited from legacy media systems.

Having said that this is a divergent approach to digital literacy, it must be pointed out that different approaches are convergent upon the problems it causes policymakers. The ‘openness’ of games, digital literacy and media literacy to different interpretations and usages confuse the question of their social impact, and appropriate policy responses remain decidedly ‘open’. Here are two of the most prominent observers:

Call it what you will – media literacy, digital literacy, critical literacy, news literacy – educational alternatives to the regulation of the digital environment are suggested on all sides. Yet oddly, this rarely results in concrete policies or resources to increase the media literacy of the public. It seems the mere suggestion is enough to deflect attention from the politically undesirable or practically-challenging. Media literacy, conveniently, is someone else’s responsibility and they (teachers, experts in pedagogy, the Department of Education) are rarely present when “fake news” or platform regulation or journalism standards or data exploitation are being discussed. (Sonia Livingstone, 2018)

The abandonment of media literacy also raises the question of how far governments really want citizens to adopt a critical stance towards media, however much they might pay lip-service to the idea from time to time. It might be worth speculating – whether it is time for the zombie of media literacy to be prodded back into life. (Richard Wallis and David Buckingham, 2019)

Whether it is seen as ‘someone else’s responsibility’ or ‘the zombie of media literacy’, or, as in this paper, a ‘mischievous response’ with insurrectionary and rebellious potential, it seems that ‘the media literacy of the public’ remains a very hot potato. And that’s an old story...

Litteacy as Helen of Troy

Literacy has become an attractive token, meaningless and helpless by itself, over possession of which entire societies, led by hotheads who should know better, contend for years at a time, to destructive effect on all sides, all for the sake of a story. In other words, literacy is the ‘Helen of Troy’ of the culture wars, which have already lasted longer than the Trojan War.

As for Helen herself, what she thought of her various abductions, suitors and husbands remains uncertain, not least because, of course, she’s an artefact of story and mythology, not history. As with other manifestations of culture, it’s the uses to which something is put, and who uses them, that count, even when the artefact in question is a social institution like literacy.

Indeed, both Helen and literacy stand for impersonal forces, social tensions, historical transformations and collective dynamics – in Helen’s case, the end of the age of divine-born heroes; in literacy’s case, the promise of heroic futures to come. Both stand in for forces they themselves can’t control, one of them personified in the myth of the Trojan Wars; the other kicked about as a political football in the culture wars.

Understanding that literacy has a mythic dimension is as important as knowing that Helen’s mythic status – Marlowe’s ‘face that launch’d a thousand ships’ – explains her (Figure 2). Thus, stories in the Murdoch press about literacy are more decisive than whatever reality lies behind them: be it abduction and rape, or prize and power.

Literacy: institutional not individual

We are well past the time when literacy can be defined, or its value assessed objectively, without taking account of its status as a prize (willing or otherwise) in conflicts in which ‘defining’ it is what’s at stake in the game. We have to recognise that literacy’s meaning, purpose and fate are determined by those conflicts.

6 Helen was the daughter of the Swan (a.k.a. Zeus), who raped Leda, queen of Sparta: Helen was abducted as a child by Theseus of Athens; rescued by her brothers (Castor and Pollux); married Menelaus; was abducted (or eloped) as a prize by Paris of Troy; married Paris, and Paris’s brother Deiphobus after his death; returned to Sparta with Menelaus after Troy was destroyed. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_of_Troy.

7 Christopher Marlowe, Dr Faustus: https://www.bartleby.com/19/2/23.html.
Just as Helen of Troy means much more as myth than any Bronze-Age trophy-bride, so it is important to analyse not only literacy itself but also how it is represented and narrated; what ‘character’ it is given by those who argue over it in public debates; what value is ascribed to it in the media, politics, technological and industrial discourses; what ‘plot’ is contrived to deliver its promised redemption to the ‘winner’. And, as with any good story worth a series on Netflix, so much depends on the showrunner – so we need to ask, who is its Homer?

The idea that literacy is explained by reference to the behaviour or demand of individuals is itself a myth. Literacy can only be understood in the context (and as a product) of the organised institutional agency of the state, not the individual behaviour of a culture warrior or even storyteller. In other words, literacy is not an individual accomplishment but a strategic resource for states, where organisation and institutional scale and the ability to manage complexity are more important than trophies of war (or ‘geras’ in Homeric terms).
Focusing on individual competitiveness as the main ‘use’ for literacy impoverishes our understanding of how it works, because – like vaccination – literacy can only work at group level. Further, it inhibits or ignores the development of new literacies, emergent from ‘new’ media (literacies associated with orality, writing, print, broadcasting, computation and the internet), organised into new knowledge systems (e.g. evolutionary and complexity theory), or emerging out of previously neglected cultural struggles and group-forming movements (e.g. identity politics and emergent countries).

The expansion of literacy is not typically driven by centralised state policy but by population-wide actions in self-organising adaptive systems, where human capabilities intersect with technologies and complex institutional organisation under uncertainty. New literacies are driven by innovations from the margins (technological or social), which often stabilise later as mainstream productive knowledge. ‘Old’ literacies do not always disappear, however; they are supplemented not supplanted.

This is where the concept of ‘open literacy’ comes in, drawing analytical attention away from the security anxieties of control-culture, beyond the economic needs of the ‘big end of town’ or the authoritarian nation-state, and beyond behavioural individualism, directing us towards possibilities emergent from media, knowledge systems and struggles that currently don’t figure in official policy, except as threats (where they count as costs, not benefits).

Education – abduction or abducted?

We need to think about Greeks bearing gifts. As scholars of culture, media and communication, we need to identify the ‘uses of literacy’ as something more than a rhetorical token in adversarial politics; and to expand what counts as literacy beyond the current packaged form, where state coercion and control over wayward populations require the compulsory abduction of children to strange places, where they must spend the next ten years while others fight over their still uncertain future. If literacy is our culture’s Helen, then schools are its Troy: their ‘topless towers’ seemingly impregnable, but – both sides of the culture wars seem to agree – doomed.

Public education has attracted a persistent campaign by libertarian and conservative culture warriors, who agitate for the privatisation of state assets and institutions, in order to reduce the burden of government on free-market enterprise, while adding the perceived advantages of the market. Here, the modern state monopolisation of literacy (and its public representation) is no longer seen in collective terms as a strategic investment in national capacity. Instead, one kind of literacy – based on print, taught by phonics and monitored by psycho-linguistic testing of individuals – is selected over others. Next, state education systems are criticised for ‘failure’ to improve competitive scores in such tests (and because what is taught doesn’t get used directly in employment), all as part of a larger agenda which keeps pushing for the wholesale privatisation of education.

Mass literacy is reduced to ‘costly signalling’: the ability to pay for it and to endure its disutility and waste qualifies you as a docile employee, while the real market is not the content or quality of your literacy but the brand-power of the school or college in which you endured it. In The Case Against Education (2018), libertarian warrior Bryan Caplan draws the inevitable conclusion:


Literacy becomes a token in a political tug of war. The real struggle is between state regulation and market deregulation. Ground gained by either side may change who wins control over the prize, which – like Helen in Homer – seems to be what they’re fighting over but has no effect on the outcome.

Instrumental literacy and the promise of progress

Literacy remains a familiar topic in both news and the academy. It has escaped the confines of its origins as a term to describe the ability to read and write, and is generally accepted as a foundational social technology of modernity.

The definition of literacy has become broader but more abstract in order to apply it across:

- Technologies – digital as well as analogue,
- Symbol-systems – mathematical and audio-visual as well as alphabetic,
- Languages and cultures – global as well as national.
Thus, for UNESCO, OECD and other transnational agencies, literacy entails acquiring skills and competence to access knowledge through technology:

"Literacy is now understood as a means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich and fast-changing world. (UNESCO)."

Literacy is a proxy for development and for progress towards wider access to education around the world. In turn, education is seen as the chief means for poverty eradication globally. Improving literacy through education underlies the UN’s sustainable development goals’ of 2015, which are already unlikely to be met, owing to ‘a lack of teachers’, ‘damage by war’, and ‘broken promises’. This kind of literacy is understandably focused on instrumental and functional skills, aimed at boosting employment and wealth-creation among ‘low-income’ countries and families, historically in the modernising West; latterly in the global south and among disadvantaged demographics.

Critical literacy and the promise of intellectual emancipation

However, the transactional approach has never seemed sufficiently open, being all too easily bent to the will of corporate firms and state authorities. Can you: comply with instructions; pay your taxes; use Office Windows; consume ideological goods?

It encourages neither radical nor unpredictable uses. In Umberto Eco’s (1989) schema of ‘open works’ and ‘closed works’, instrumental literacy confines its users to ‘closed’ works. This is why critics see it as only a portal to something of greater value: ‘critical literacy’ (Turner, 2008). Here, alphabetic competence to cope with closed texts is augmented by further work (on the part of the reader) to identify and assess the quality and credibility of any cultural production: can you tell the con artist from compelling art; knowledge from ideology; truth-seeking from attention-seeking; and the differences – if any – among fact, fiction, fraud and fake-news?

Here, literacy combines scientific and political scepticism with critical discrimination, a taste for originality and astute creativity, in open-ended uses of literacy.

Richard Hoggart’s influential book of that name (1957) took it for granted that if mass literacy goes no further than engagement with the ‘closed’ texts of TV, the flicks, pulp fiction and salacious magazines, then this is a useless kind of literacy.

Critical literacy, not ‘education’

Hoggart argued that popular literacy left ordinary people intellectually and politically unemancipated. He wanted to encourage ‘uses of literacy’ that would arm them against ‘being conned’ by what they read in the papers, and enable them to use literacy for their own imaginative life, based on class, community and critique.

In a sense, this was also a developmental agenda (indeed, Hoggart went on to take a top position at UNESCO), albeit not instrumentalist in the ‘jobs and GDP’ mode. He wanted to transform ‘the overwhelming immobility of British working-class lives’ and ‘the damp putting up with things’, where intellectual emancipation and the freedom to express different kinds of truth was inhibited by the dished-up literacy of:

a class-based and class-biased education system at all levels and an apparatus of mass communications which appears to be open and sometimes even radical but which hardly ever takes on directly the major engines and processes which keep things as they so unacceptably appear to anyone who tries to stand apart and take stock. (Hoggart, 1988: 130–1)

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8 Source: https://en.unesco.org/themes/literacy.
9 See: https://www.bbc.com/news/education-48909386; and http://uis.unesco.org/en/blog/world-track-deliver-its-education-commitments-2030: ‘50 million adults cannot read today, and while literacy rates are growing steadily, around 20% of youth and 30% of adults will still be unable to read in low-income countries by 2030 on current trends.’
10 ‘In 1969, at the age of 51, he was offered ... an assistant director-generalship at Unesco. ... He travelled three times round the world but was appalled by what he regarded as the misconduct, bureaucracy, infighting and laziness he found within the organisation. In 1975 he resigned and wrote a critical book about it, An Idea and Its Servants (1978)’: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/apr/10/richard-hoggart.
Hoggart’s breakthrough book stood apart and took stock at a time of deindustrialisation and decolonisation, within a post-war cultural ferment identified with the ‘angry young men’ of the arts, theatre and cinema. He originally wanted to called it The Abuses of Literacy. He wanted literacy’s uses to be critical not consumerist; determined by those whose literacy it was, as part of their own culture and need for radical change, not by education and media systems with other loyalties.

Thus, critical literacy was political – adversarial – from the start: not only opposing the status quo and the establishment, but also opposing the popular culture in which the working class was immersed, even as it fragmented and changed along with new patterns of work, consumer culture and postcolonial migration.

**Open literacy: discovering difference and informal systems**

However, in the very midst of his forensic critique of ‘publications and entertainments’ of the kind that were foisted on ‘people like us’, Hoggart discovered a previously unexamined world where purposeless literacy, Americanised and popularised for mass consumption, was not useless but a resource, not only for working-class communities but also, perhaps especially, for displaced young people, girls and women, migrants and people of colour.

The very ‘apparatus’ that he found ‘unacceptable’ was gaining traction with them in ways that he couldn’t see. He was notoriously impatient with youth, loitering in milk-bars, jigging about to American music on the juke box (1957: 202–5). Here they are, ‘ground between the millstones of technocracy and democracy’, the ‘directionless and tamed helots of a machine-minding class’:

*The hedonistic but passive barbarian who rides a fifty-horse-power for threepence, to see a five-million-dollar film for one-and-eightpence, is not simply a social oddity; he is a portent (1957: 205).*

But what did they portend? Here, Hoggart missed something that educated, critical and literate opinion has struggled with from that day to this, which is that ‘play’, understood here as conspicuous time-wasting, daydreaming and mischief, choosing to adopt semiotic in-group preferences designed to annoy others, are the crucible of creative innovation and new forms of sociality, solidarity and radical opportunity; using the texts at hand as ‘open works’ in Eco’s sense (1989).

**Expansion of literacy – to ‘open literacy’?**

In other words, leisured purposelessness with new technologies and ‘entertainments’ – dismissed by Hoggart as ‘a peculiarly thin and pallid form of dissipation, a sort of spiritual dry-rot amid the odour of boiled milk’ (1957: 204) – can be very far from useless, as the subsequent youth cultures of the 1960s proved – not only commercially in the global music business, but also politically, as insurrectionary and ‘alternative’ lifestyles.

Hoggart wanted to reform traditional working-class culture; the ‘juke-box boys’ and girls wanted to rock and roll. It may be argued that the politics of intellectual emancipation shifted decisively at this point, and not just in the UK. Without anyone intending it, and just when its self-organising history was being documented by class-conscious intellectuals such as Hoggart, Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson, the strongly institutionalised and internally disciplined industrial working class yielded place to a more chaotic market-led pop culture that was less about class solidarity than individual expression and social mixture. This in turn became the techno-democratic ground that nurtured new forms of consciousness (and music) that led to the protest songs and countercultures of the 1960s and – incidentally – to new types of cultural studies (Hall, CCCS). Out of these emerged new social movements organised around gender, sexuality, ethnic identity, alternative lifestyles and peace, whose own ‘literacy’ was written in music and dance, dress and design, cars and cinemas, travel and technology, not so much in the union, Co-op and Labour movements. These youngsters were literate in ways that previous technologies of mass organisation were slow to recognise, much less adopt – from ‘protest’ songs like Peter Paul & Mary’s ‘If I Had a Hammer’ to Charles Manson’s supposedly Lennon-inspired Helter Skelter, shedding Johnny Cash’s Bitter Tears along the way – creating new but different myths.

Since then, literacy has expanded, not only around the world, as measured by UNESCO, but conceptually too, in three main ways:

• First, hyphenated ‘multiliteracies’. Literacy was not confined to reading or writing. It extended to audio-visual, media and digital literacies, expanding out to cognate concepts such as emotional literacy, health literacy, financial literacy, cultural literacy etc.
Second, **disciplinary bias**, where literacy could refer to quite different things depending on a given disciplinary approach and method, ranging from history, literature and linguistics in the ‘old’ humanities, via cultural, gender and subaltern studies in the ‘new’ humanities, to scientific approaches grounded in psychology and economics in the quantitative disciplines dedicated to methodological individualism.

Third; **political hot potato.** Literacy – what it’s for; who should be in charge; how to teach it; for what purpose – is captured as a trophy for whoever wins the culture wars.

The last of these alternatives – the culture wars – has had a decisive structuring effect on the others, so that now you can’t approach the topic historically, by discipline or medium. First, you have to align with a political ideology. Even if your work is scrupulously scholarly and politically neutral, ‘literacy’ is still not ‘open’, either as a field of study or as a practical skill. Instead, it is taught and deployed as an ideological weapon in larger-scale contestations. It’s a proxy for partisan politics.

### Phonic wars: Teaching children to kill children – videogames, or white supremacy?

One of the most toxic (and incomprehensible) examples has flourished in the Australian culture-wars, lasting for at least as long as the Trojan Wars. Are you in favour of teaching literacy using a ‘whole language’ or a ‘phonics’ approach? If you read *The Australian*, the Centre for Independent Studies, or the Institute for Public Affairs, your choice will – literally¹² – determine the future of Western Civilisation:

> Many teachers are far more concerned with creating legions of mini-me social justice warriors than they are with ensuring that their students actually know how to read and write. ... Let’s start by depoliticising education by getting rid of these dangerous, ideologically driven fads and Left-wing platitudes masquerading as values and return to the fundamentals of what education is all about (D’Abrera, 2018).¹³

But this is not a parochial Australian storm-in-a-teacup. Ian Bogost has recently argued in *The Atlantic* that what various media literacies ‘teach’ their users is now a partisan issue in the US (Bogost, 2019). This brings us inevitably to videogames. For some, videogames (like video nasties, television, comic books and the cinema previously) ‘teach people’ how to be aggressive, violent, to use guns, to kill children:

> In the aftermath of the El Paso shopping-center shooting ... Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick claimed that the video-game industry ‘teaches young people to kill.’ (Bogost, 2019)

But the people who say such things – and those who read and re-cycle such notions – are not randomly distributed through the population. Does the games industry teach children to kill children? If you’re a Republican (NRA-supporter), the answer is yes; but if you’re a Democrat (gun-control supporter), the answer is no (Figure 3):

> President Donald Trump blamed violent video games for the massacre, setting off a media frenzy of follow-ups. ... Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez tweeted, ‘Video games aren’t causing mass shootings, white supremacy is.’ (Bogost, 2019)

### ‘Tribal’ vs ‘armed’ knowledge

This rift goes deep, beyond the reach of reason and evidence, and not just in the USA. Literacy has tribalised into non-overlapping, adversarial ‘we’-groupings that only interact through competition and mutual hostility, not by translating ideas and knowledge (and the competence to use them) from one knowledge domain or group to another.

The evolution of knowledge systems has produced two kinds of knowledge at macro-level, quite apart from all the specialisms.

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‘Connective’ or *tribal* knowledge, is organised at personal (micro) scale. Connective knowledge is primarily oral, finding new impetus in electronic (digital, computational) social media.

‘Productive’ or *armed* knowledge, operates at institutional (meso) scale. It is a product of complex societies, not of individual knowing subjects. Productive knowledge is literate, expressed most completely in the era of print-literacy, where *science*, the *novel* and *journalism* (the textual systems of modernity) were able to expand the ‘frontiers’ of knowledge to the furthest reaches of the cosmos, human imagination and public affairs, at planetary macro-scale (Hartley, 2018, 2020).

Where pre-modern, tribal groups could get by on ‘connective’ knowledge, later monarchical-imperial societies also needed ‘productive’ knowledge.

The connective type is based on recognition of the ‘we’ community and conformance to its rule systems. This was an oral security system, enabling detection of threatening outsiders or duplicitous insiders by semiotic means, a more efficient mechanism than immediate recourse to violence. It’s a device still evident in a closed community’s suspicion of foreign accents, habits and ideas. Closed but connective ‘tribal’ communities can persist at national/ethnic level (Brexit!). Connective knowledge is based on high-trust (but small-world) relations, where ‘we all speak the same language’ (not doing so is evidence of danger).

The productive type requires a combination of three elements (Malešević and Ryan, 2013; Malešević, 2017):
- complex organisation (bureaucracy);
- binding ideologies (gods or kings – or their contemporary homologies); and
- ‘microsolidarity’ (mateship) among specialised/expert units.

These elements work together to *abstract* knowledge from local context and use it to further the interests of macro-scale systems – typically, to defend states and religions against incursion from outsiders with ever more lethal weaponry (Turchin et al., 2013), and to spur economic development and growth (Graff, 1987). This is why such knowledge is both *productive* (used to invent new things) and *armed* (needed to repel intruders) (Whitehouse et al., 2019). Productive knowledge is based on low-trust (but universal) social relations, as societies grew to impersonal scale, requiring security and hierarchy under centralised control.

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There are obvious overlaps between this model and a more familiar one derived from Ong (2012), McLuhan (1962), Goody and Watt (1963) and others (including Laslett 1965/2015, Lotman 1990: 245–253), on the modes of thought and cultural consequences of orality and literacy. However, the idea that once we lived in an oral culture but now we live in a literate one is not sustainable. Important components of modern life remain oral – family interactions, gangs, certain trades and rituals, are conducted without writing. Even where writing is used, the practical ‘mode of thought’ may remain oral, now among leadership elites as well as users; but connective knowledge now requires literacy – the internet, social media and any interaction augmented by mobile devices.

Contemporary political populism has learned to exploit this type of connective but ubiquitous literacy, e.g. where the Tweeting President uses strongly oral, tribal, connective means to conduct statecraft, and counters scientific scepticism with scepticism about science, dubbing modern, literate, institutional and productive knowledge ‘fake news’, ‘a hoax’, the ‘Washington swamp’, etc., making things up to suit his own narrative arc, and pressuring state agencies to fall in line – as with the track of Hurricane Dorian.

Literacy is a phenomenon that only works at meso (institutional) scale, but it is treated and taught as a micro-scale (individual) ‘skill’. Something’s got to give. As the University of Miami’s Brian McNoldy told BuzzFeed News:

“You don’t want a hurricane to become a Democrat or Republican object. … A hurricane doesn’t care what political party you’re affiliated with, and I really hope it doesn’t turn into that.”

It’s already too late. Hurricane Dorian was clearly a Democrat…

**Literacy and the state – coercion or subversion?**

According to historian Peter Turchin, writing in 2013 before a Trump presidency was even on the horizon of the imaginable, the ‘leading indicators of political instability look set to peak around 2020’, when ‘the US will be particularly vulnerable to violent upheaval’.

Using long-term analysis of wealth-inequality and social-wellbeing indicators, Turchin argues that ‘social wellbeing’ does not coincide with increasing ‘wealth-inequality’, but rather the reverse (Figure 4). Over

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Inequality moves in cycles

- Individualism vs the common good;
- Literacy for self vs literacy for society/state

**Peter Turchin (2013): Inequality moves in cycles: Inverse relationship between well-being and inequality in American history.**

The peaks and valleys of inequality (in purple) represent the ratio of the largest fortunes to the median wealth of households (the Phillips curve).

The blue-shaded curve combines four measures of well-being: economic (the fraction of economic growth that is paid to workers as wages), health (life expectancy and the average height of native-born population), and social optimism (the average age of first marriage, with early marriages indicating social optimism and delayed marriages indicating social pessimism).

**Figure 4:** Peter Turchin’s data-map for ‘inequality moves in cycles’. Illustration © Peter Turchin 2013.

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16 Turchin’s measures of well-being: economic (the fraction of economic growth that is paid to workers as wages), health (life expectancy and the average height of native-born population), and social optimism (the average age of first marriage, with early marriages indicating social optimism and delayed marriages indicating social pessimism).

17 Measured by the ratio of the largest fortunes to the median wealth of households (the Phillips curve). See also: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-09-17/ceo-bonuses-soar-as-qantas-boss-alan-joyce-tops-list/11518356 – the top Australian CEO’s pay package in FY 2018 was over 275 times higher than the average Australian take-home pay.
the long-run, periods of luxury and extreme inequality not only promote extremes of ‘intra-elite competition’ and conflict, but also erode ‘norms of cooperation and collective action’. The state itself is vulnerable to capture by ideologues of untrammeled individualism:

Social Darwinism took off during the original Gilded Age, and Ayn Rand (who argued that altruism is evil) has grown astonishingly popular during what we might call our Second Gilded Age. The glorification of competition and individual success in itself becomes a driver of economic inequality. (Turchin, 2013)

The resources of both the state and corporate – or ‘carceral’ – capitalism are used to tighten control (Wang, 2018), while, simultaneously, commitment to using them for social welfare, education and cohesion recedes. Cutting education budgets slows or reverses the collective improvement of literacy at population scale. The presumption that elites are entitled to the spoils of competition, and that the poor must deserve their disadvantage, come to be stated as an explicit ideology of entitlement.

How to keep disparate and conflicted societies together? Current trends suggest that although surveillance, authoritarian control and the erosion of mass privacy are ascendant in both public and private sector enterprise, social polarisation and instability are still on the increase. Turchin’s data analytics indicate that – sooner or later – the pendulum swings:

Governing elites tire of incessant violence and disorder. They realise that they need to suppress their internal rivalries, and switch to a more co-operative way of governing, if they are to have any hope of preserving the social order. (Turchin, 2013)

Is this an argument for a return to the ‘consensus’ about literacy that was reached in the industrial era of the nineteenth and twentieth century? If so, it’s a very limited consensus:

The emergent consensus stressed schooling for social stability and the assertion of appropriate hegemonic functions. This view emphasized aggregate social goals—the reduction of crime and disorder, increased economic productivity, and, first and foremost, the inculcation of morality—rather than the more individualistic end of intellectual development and personal advancement. (Graff, 1987: 260–4)

Harvey Graff pointed out that the first mass literacy was only promoted to the extent that it satisfied those goals, but no further:

Dominating the rhetoric promoting systems of mass schooling, these goals represented primary motives for controlled training in literacy. Literacy alone, however—that is, isolated from its moral basis—was feared as potentially subversive. The literacy of properly schooled, morally restrained men and women represented the object of the school promoters. (Graff, 1987: 260–4)

It seems that such a constraint – ‘controlled’ literacy for ‘properly schooled’ and ‘morally restrained’ populations – is still the goal of front-line culture-warriors like the purportedly libertarian IPA and supposedly ‘free-market’, ‘free speech’ News Corp:

What we are seeing is evidence of the degree to which Australian children, from preschool to Year 12, are being actively politicised in our classrooms by ideologically obsessed individuals masquerading as professional educators.

But the educator’s job is to educate children, not indoctrinate them.

The students participating in the #schoolstrike4climate were clearly encouraged by their teachers to dodge their lessons to engage in a political activism. (d’Abrera, 2018)

Literacy is good for teaching the ideology of individualism (‘instructing them about the values around individual rights, parliamentary democracy and equality before the law’); not for collective values and action (‘identity politics, environment and social justice’). The (purportedly libertarian) IPA and (supposedly ‘free-market’) News Ltd. become the cheer-squad for authoritarian, partisan politics:

Critiquing ‘carceral society’ is now a distinct area of research. See for instance: https://journal.abolitionjournal.org/index.php/abolition.
Prime Minister Scott Morrison is spot-on when he says that there should be less activism and more learning in the classroom (d’Abrera, 2018).19

If schooling has been captured as an Althusserian ‘Ideological State Apparatus’, then where is the pressure for change going to come from? Turchin’s historical model provides an answer: elites only ‘tire’ of ‘inter-elite competition’ after a period of ‘incessant violence and disorder’. Counter-intuitively, a ‘more cooperative’ mode of governing and hope for ‘social order’ are triggered by political activism and instability. It seems that ‘open literacy’ and ‘social responsibility’ are insurrectionary forces, made more urgent by impending climate and environmental catastrophe.

Can ‘open literacy’ connect the scientific traditions of ‘productive knowledge’ with the group-cohering solidarity of ‘connective knowledge’ to promote ‘social responsibility’ for the planet, and not just for the home nation? A glimmer of hope comes from the margins, uniting ‘open access’, ‘open science’ and ‘open knowledge’ with activism such as Extinction Rebellion, schoolstrike4climate and many such organisations. Can that model be extended to whole populations, across demographic borders, at global scale, for social innovation, instead of confining literacy as a mere instrument for securing profit, power, mass persuasion and surveillance?

Of course, the answer must rewrite myth as well as history. Deliverance cannot come from within the walled fortresses of Troy or Trump, but from outsiders who sail across the world to change everything (Figure 5). But now, it seems that ‘Helen’ is no longer a trophy but a leader (‘the ignorant teenage climate puppet’ of Fox News) – a 16-year old self-described autistic girl who catalyses a transformed future, to ‘Make America Greta Again’.20


**Figure 5:** Greta Thunberg, outside the Swedish parliament. (2018). Photo Anders Hellberg, Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Greta_Thunberg_4.jpg.

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19 It’s not just News Corp; it’s the public broadcaster too. When hundreds of thousands of school students and their supporters joined the global #schoolstrike4climate across Australia (20 September 2019), the ABC looked in vain to represent ‘both sides’ of the story, until they found Kevin Donnelly. The story included this: ‘The movement has been controversial in Australia, with some teachers being accused of bias and bringing politics into the classroom, and the Federal Government linking the demonstrations to flagging test results… In a statement, Education Minister Dan Tehan drew a link between the global strike movement and flagging test results around the country. “The true test of the protesters’ commitment would be how many turned up for a protest held on a Saturday afternoon,” he said.’: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-09-20/school-strike-for-climate-draws-thousands-to-australian-rallies/11531612. For Donnelly, see: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-03-14/politically-correct-teaching-to-blame-for-climate-change-strike/10897682.

20 For ‘the ignorant teenage climate puppet’ (Fox News) and ‘Make America Greta Again’ (Swedish placard), see: https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/aug/14/greta-thunberg-sets-sail-plymouth-climate-us-trump.
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