Audio Essay Script

(research excerpts highlighted)

Me: It seems like the concept of literacy is becoming more complicated every day. We no longer talk about simple literacy, but break it down: digital literacy, global literacy, even American literacy.

By definition, digital literacy refers to an individual's ability to find, evaluate, and compose clear information through writing and other mediums on various digital platforms. Doug Belshaw touches on this concept in his TED talk.

Researcher: “So my grandma she loves football she always has done and now that she's ATH has got a lot of chance to watch as many football matches as she wants. So my dad recently arranged for her to get Sky Sports installed, and there's a problem, you can't just get Sky Sport, you have to get all those other hundreds of channels as well so where was previously she would have pressed channel up or channel down to go to the right channel, now she has to deal with a menu system. (2:46-3:09).

Me: The aging population is finding more and more trouble getting over the learning curve in modern devices, and that tends to cause a rift in everyday life. Advancements in technology are designed to make life simpler and more efficient, but tend to have the opposite effect on seniors in the US.

We also now take up literacy in terms of its impact globally. John Trischitti’s TED Talk touches on the effects of illiteracy around the world.

Researcher: “Illiteracy: the basic inability to understand or produce written information. Those of us that make our way through life off of sight, words, images, just being able to sign our name, those folks are functionally illiterate. And as vaccines help to eliminate and stop the spread of disease, literacy can help us eliminate the stop the spread of hunger, poverty, and crime. It is the tool necessary to break those harsh social cycles.

Me: Trischitti isn’t wrong to call literacy a driving force for social change, as it is an essential aspect of everyday life that can be a cornerstone of a healthy and efficient life.

Researcher: The data is telling and troublesome. Students who exit fourth-grade without being able to read proficiently have a 78% chance of not ever catching up. 90% of welfare recipients are either high school dropouts or illiterate. 85% of individuals that interface with a juvenile court system are either functionally illiterate or don't read with proficiency. No one factor can so drastically shape a person's chance of success, earning potential, health, and well-being while helping to break the cycle that leads to daily poverty and struggle.

Me: The data speaks for itself, and it’s troubling. The idea that literacy can so heavily affect the outcome of someone’s life means that it simply can’t be ignored. Many may think that for Americans, this problem isn’t a pressing one. They would be wrong.

In the US illiteracy is alarming. For a nation as developed and technologically advanced as the United States, reading proficiency should be much higher. In her NPR podcast “Take a Number”, Audie Cornish speaks with experts on the daily struggle facing millions of Americans.

[NPR Transcript]

MELISSA BLOCK, BYLINE: At the tiny public library in Winterport, Maine, Robert Hartmann bends over a book and gets to work.

ROBERT HARTMANN: Chug. Right?

SANDY DELUCK: Yeah.

HARTMANN: Chug. Chug. Puff.

BLOCK: He's a burly guy with five facial piercings, his arms inked with tattoos. This is his second session with volunteer tutor Sandy DeLuck.

HARTMANN: Her car - cars...

DELUCK: Cars.

HARTMANN: ...Were filled - yeah, filled, right?

DELUCK: Yeah.

HARTMANN: Full of good things for boys and girls.

DELUCK: Yes. Perfect. Cars were full of good things for boys and girls.

BLOCK: At age 43, Robert Hartmann reads at about a first-grade level. He did manage to graduate from high school, worked in mills and factories. Now, with a bunch of physical and mental health issues, he's unemployed. And to keep his government benefits, he's required to take literacy classes. He'd also like to be able to read to his young children.

[End Transcript]

All of these researchers show the overarching effects of illiteracy plaguing the globe. Initiatives are in place to support those in need, but efforts still appear to be falling short. It is imperative that the US start taking this issue seriously, and until it does, the bad will continue to become the ugly.