

Is the decline of reading poisoning our politics?

Vox (<https://www.vox.com/politics/414049/reading-books-decline-tiktok-oral-culture>) · Eric Levitz · June 3, 2025

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If you aren't feeling the itch yet, you will soon.

It could come by the end of this sentence or, on a good day, the fifth paragraph. But before long, a little voice in your head will whisper, “Click away for just a second” — just long enough to take a quick glance at your email or Instagram feed or group chat or 401(k) or chatbot's answer to “how to tell if a mole is cancerous” or Amazon results for “joint-smoking garden gnomes (

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At least, this will happen if you’re anything like myself. And I am not alone.

Americans still consume plenty of text. Social media platforms teem with words — even video-based apps like TikTok are replete with captions and comments. And on average, we spend more than two hours scrolling (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1484565/time-spent-social-media-us-by-age/>) through such platforms each day.

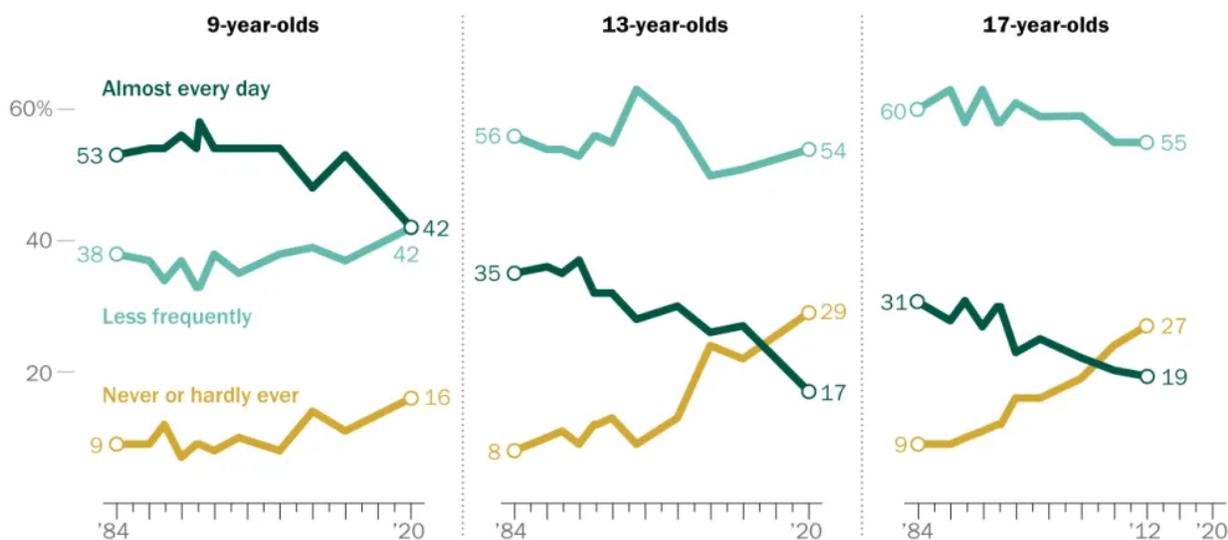
But not all reading is created equal. The mind can skim over the surface of a sentence and swiftly decode its literal meaning. But deep reading — sustained engagement with a longform text — is a distinct endeavor. As neuroscientist Maryanne Wolf explains (<https://www.maryannewolf.com/reader-come-home-1>), when you give your complete attention to a stimulating book or longform article, you activate a wide array of the brain’s linguistic and cognitive capacities. In this contemplative state, the reader rapidly draws connections between the text and their background knowledge, generating original thoughts in the process.

And this vital form of reading is in sharp decline. In 2021, American adults read fewer books on average (<https://news.gallup.com/poll/388541/americans-reading-fewer-books->

past.aspx#:~:text=Reading%20appears%20to%20be%20in,in%20all%20but%20one%20survey) than in any year on record, according to Gallup. Among young Americans, the dwindling of deep reading is especially stark. In 1984, some 35 percent of 13-year-olds said they read for fun (https://www.common sense media.org/sites/default/files/research/report/csm-childrenteensandreading-2014_0_1.pdf) “almost every day,” according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). By 2012, that figure was 27 percent (https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/highlights/ltr/2023/). By 2023, it had fallen to 14 percent. Similar declines have transpired (https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/11/12/among-many-u-s-children-reading-for-fun-has-become-less-common-federal-data-shows/) among the nation’s 9-year-olds and late adolescents. Meanwhile, daily screen time among all age groups is surging to record highs (https://www.statista.com/statistics/565628/time-spent-digital-traditional-media-usa/).

U.S. 9- and 13-year-olds read for fun less often than they used to

% of U.S. students of each age who say they read for fun ____, by year



Note: 2020 assessment was not fielded to 17-year-olds. Totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding. “Less frequently” combines responses of “once or twice a week,” “once or twice a month” and “a few times a year.”

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2020 Long-Term Trend Reading Assessment.

<https://platform.vox.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2025/05/Screenshot-2025-05-22-at-1.38.19%E2%80%AFPM.png?quality=90&strip=all&crop=0,0,100,100>

Pew Research Center

Even among the rising generations' academic elite, reading books is an increasingly niche hobby. According to a recent report (<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/11/the-elite-college-students-who-cant-read-books/679945/>) from The Atlantic's Rose Horowitz, many students at America's most selective colleges now lack the *capacity* (or at least, the wherewithal) to read a book cover-to-cover.

In the view of some analysts, these trends don't just threaten to curtail bookworms' literary lives or stunt young Americans' intellectual development. Rather, digital media's displacement of books is propelling our species back to an ancient mode of cognition and communication: After a brief dalliance with literacy, humanity is returning to its oral roots.

According to such varied commentators as media theorist Andrey Mir (<https://andrey4mir.medium.com/replaying-history-backward-3021277869e3>), Bloomberg reporter Joe Weisenthal (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2025-02-07/we-re-completely-re-wiring-the-logic-engine-of-the-human-brain>), historian Adam Garfinkle (<https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/the-erosion-of-deep-literacy>), and culture writer Katherine Dee (<https://thedispatch.com/article/digital-orality-tiktok-short-video-speech-literacy/>), the digital age's modes of thought and discourse increasingly resemble those of pre-literate oral cultures. In making this claim, these writers draw heavily on the work of Walter Ong, a philosopher who developed a deeply influential — but somewhat controversial

(<https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1091&context=comm>) — theory of how the oral and literate minds diverge.

For Mir and Garfinkle, America’s reversion to “orality” underlies much of today’s political dysfunction. In their telling, print media laid the foundations for liberal democracy. Now, as deep reading declines, the electorate’s commitment to pluralism, objectivity, universalism, individual rights, and the rule of law is swiftly receding.

The analogies between ancient oral cultures, as described by Ong, and today’s digital one are striking. And it’s reasonable to fear that scrolling TikTok doesn’t prepare a voter for rational self-government as well as reading the New York Times does.

This said, writers are liable to overestimate the social harms of our own cultural marginalization. And I suspect that Mir and Garfinkle are doing precisely that, when they blame the decay of American liberalism on the erosion of “deep literacy (<https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/the-erosion-of-deep-literacy>).”

The human mind before literacy

For roughly 98 percent of our species’ history, people could only communicate through the spoken word — and this constraint fundamentally shaped human thought and expression.

In his 1982 book *Orality and Literacy*

(https://monoskop.org/images/d/db/Ong_Walter_J_Orality_and_Literacy_2nd_ed.pdf), Ong detailed the characteristic features of communication and cognition in

oral societies. Ong noted that, in a world of “orality,” information must be verbally repeated to survive: If spoken discourse doesn’t keep the timing of the harvest in a society’s working memory, farmers can’t fall back on an almanac or calendar. Therefore, in an oral culture, all important ideas must be expressed in a manner that is both memorable and easy to recite.

This entailed, among other things, the heavy use of repetition, formulaic lines, mnemonic devices and epithets. For example, in his oral epic, *The Iliad*, the Greek poet Homer persistently refers to Achilles as “*swift-footed Achilles*” — a phrase that helps the listener more easily recall both the character’s name and his defining trait.

Oral cultures’ reliance on memory also limited their capacity to generate complex, logical arguments. The complicated sentences typically found in a philosophical treatise, legal brief, or Vox article — with their prepositional phrases sandwiched between em-dashes — could not plausibly perpetuate themselves in the absence of written text.

Separately, in an oral society, communication must always happen face to face, often within earshot of one’s fellow villagers or clansmen. According to Ong, this imbues discourse with a combative spirit, as statements tend to double as bids for status and social affirmation.

Perhaps most importantly, these limitations of orality made it incapable of accommodating abstract thought. In an oral culture, people have no means of isolating ideas from their social context or subjective experience, which makes it difficult for them to formulate general principles, abstract categories, or rules of logic.

Ong illustrates this point with reference to the research of Soviet neuropsychologist A.R. Luria. In the 1930s, Luria studied the condition of illiterate peoples in remote regions of Uzbekistan, and found that their thinking was inflexibly concrete and tethered to personal experience.

For example, Luria tested his subjects' deductive reasoning with a word problem: *In the Far North, where there is snow, all bears are white. Novaya Zembla is in the Far North and there is always snow there. What color are the bears?* His illiterate respondents replied with variations on the sentiment, "I don't know. I've seen a black bear. I've never seen any others. ... Each locality has its own animals." By contrast, the minority of the community that had attained literacy generally comprehended Luria's syllogism and said that the bears were white.

This is your brain on books

In Ong's account, the advent of writing radically restructured thought. Language was liberated from the limitations of human memory. Through text, people could express ideas with an eye to precision rather than repeatability, while building upon the accumulated knowledge of all who came before.

Literacy did not just *enable* abstract thought but inherently inspired it, according to Ong and his acolytes. The very act of reading trains the mind in the arts of abstraction: Text conjures a voice that speaks *inside* the reader's head rather than through her ears, prompting her to detach from sensory experience and turn attention inward. In so doing, literacy facilitated modes of thought that were more independent, rational, individualistic, and universalistic than those of oral societies.

Writing isolated ideas from social context — or, in Ong’s words, “the arena where human beings struggle with one another” — thereby enabling the reader to evaluate claims more impartially, in the privacy of her own mind. And when readers did this, text encouraged them to prize logical coherence: Writing inherently promotes sequential reasoning because it is processed linearly, as the eye moves across the page.

By facilitating such introspection, literacy heightened self-consciousness, laying the foundation for individualism. And by encouraging abstract, systemic thinking — and enabling ideas to disseminate widely across space and time — writing spurred the development of universalistic worldviews, in which general rules, rights, and moral precepts apply to all peoples or contexts. Taken together, these features of writing made the advent of science and liberal democracy possible.

How the internet is (purportedly) reviving orality

Reading is a profoundly unnatural activity. Our minds process spoken words and moving images much more readily than they decipher written language. Many people, therefore, found it difficult to immerse themselves in literature once TV became available. By the 1970s, Walter Ong was already arguing (<https://ntweblog.blogspot.com/2008/05/orality-and-literacy-iii-secondary.html>) that humanity had entered into a second oral age.

And yet, compared to today, the era of broadcast television looks as dull and conducive to contemplation as a monastery. In 2025, everyone with a smartphone has instant access to an effectively infinite supply of audiovisual entertainment, while social media provides an endless stream of bite-sized video clips and snippets of text, each handpicked by an algorithm to prompt one’s personal engagement.

This is not a friendly environment for deep reading. And it is also one that directly revives many of orality's defining features, according to Ong's disciples.

Unlike ancient oral peoples, Americans today have the capacity to preserve knowledge through written records. In fact, more of our lives are immortalized in published information than ever before.

But the effects of superabundance can sometimes approximate those of total scarcity: Devoid of all data storage, humans in oral cultures had to communicate in statements that were easy to remember and enjoyable to repeat, lest their ideas swiftly pass from collective consciousness. Drowning in an ever-rising tide of data, people in digital cultures must effectively do the same. As Katherine Dee argues (<https://thedispatch.com/article/digital-orality-tiktok-short-video-speech-literacy/>), on the internet, "Information doesn't stick when it's stored; it sticks when it circulates."

The canonical "truth" for hundreds of millions of people today is whatever gets repeated incessantly on their social feeds. And what goes viral in 2025 bears a resemblance to what got recited in 10,000 BCE — pithy, formulaic lines (such as those that follow meme templates) and memorable epithets. As Joe Weisenthal notes (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/newsletters/2025-02-07/we-re-completely-re-wiring-the-logic-engine-of-the-human-brain>), one of our era's most effective communicators, Donald Trump, emulates Homer in his approach to referencing persons (the latter celebrated "swift-footed Achilles" and "wily Odysseus" while the former scorned "Lyin' Ted" and "Crooked Hillary.")

Meanwhile, social media re-embeds discourse in "the arena where human beings struggle with one another." Communication takes on a combative and preening tone. Ideas are tethered to personas and social contexts. People generally apprehend the factional valence of an argument — which groups endorse it and

which do not — before they ever give it independent consideration. And since every internet user is confronted with more information than they can critically process, they have a strong incentive to interpret an idea’s social desirability (which can be quickly ascertained) as indicative of its empirical validity (which takes time to assess). This temptation to outsource your critical judgment is all the stronger, when your every utterance receives a quantifiable amount of communal affirmation or repudiation.

More straightforwardly, digital media revives oral culture by enabling humans to communicate through speech and facial expressions — and through real-time textual exchanges that resemble oral conversations (including their nonverbal aspects, which are conveyed via emoji) — albeit at an unprecedented scale.

Put all of digital media’s effects together and you have a recipe for reversing many of literacy’s impacts on consciousness and culture: Our thinking is becoming less abstract and more narrowly practical; less rational and more emotive; less universalistic and more tribal; less individualistic and more conformist. And this intellectual regression is driving our nation’s democratic decline.

Or at least, this is what some critics of “digital orality” allege.

Does post-literacy lead to post-liberalism?

In his book *Digital Future in the Rearview Mirror* (<https://www.city-journal.org/article/is-the-rise-of-digital-media-causing-the-fall-of-literacy>), the media theorist Andrey Mir argues that “digital orality” has plunged many conservatives and progressives into the abyss of Plato’s cave — the allegorical realm where subjective intuitions are mistaken for objective truths. The right

subordinates reason to Trump's cult of personality, while the left values empiricism less than "intersectionality." The result is "identitarian tribalism," polarization, and a crisis of representative democracy.

Neuroscientist Maryanne Wolf, meanwhile, fears (<https://www.maryannewolf.com/reader-come-home-1>) that the public's fading deep literacy is leading "ineluctably to a vulnerability to demagoguery, where falsely raised hopes and falsely raised fears trump reason and the capacity for reflective thinking recedes, along with its influence on rational, empathic decision making."

The historian Adam Garfinkle gives more pointed expression to Mir and Wolf's concerns. He contends (<https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/the-erosion-of-deep-literacy>) that abstract reasoning is "integral to liberal-democratic politics." After all, "the concept of a depersonalized constitutional order" and "the virtues of doubt, dissent, and humility" are "very abstract ideas." As deep literacy declines, the public possesses less reverence for — or even, comprehension of — such rational abstractions.

Instead, like ancient peoples who were innocent of the written word, post-literate voters' understanding of politics is bifurcated between concrete concerns (egg prices) and mythic beliefs (QAnon). What exists is the directly observable and the phantasmagoric, grocery bills and conspiracy theories. And this is why, in Garfinkle's account, (<https://adamgarfinkle.substack.com/p/the-age-of-spectacle-no-30>) so many voters "cared more about inflation than Trump's authoritarianism: the latter is an abstraction that occupies "a foggy zone between the eggs and the conspiracy theories. One has to actually think about them, even maybe read something about them, to understand them."

Garfinkle believes that this aversion to the rigors of abstract thought underlies the left's illiberal dogmatism, and the right's xenophobic populism. Indeed, he goes so far as to venture that "populism of the illiberal nationalist kind" is, by definition, "what happens in a mass-electoral democracy when a decisive percentage of mobilized voters drops below a deep-literacy standard."

Is social media killing democracy — or do I just want the kids off my lawn?

The theory that humanity is returning to a second oral age has some appeal.

Walter Ong died one year before Facebook was founded. When he published his account of orality in 1982, he couldn't possibly have been projecting the dynamics of social media culture onto oral societies. It's therefore striking that his portrait of pre-literate communication so often calls to mind the digital variety.

This said, Ong's account of the distinctions between oral and literate consciousness isn't universally accepted within the academy (<https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1091&context=comm>). And some empirical research suggests (<https://greenfieldlab.psych.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/168/2019/01/203-Greenfield1983-1.pdf>) that the link between literacy and abstract thought or analytical reasoning is not as automatic as Ong supposed.

Further, even if Ong's theory of orality were undoubtedly correct, its applicability to our present moment would be debatable. Historical analogies often obscure more than they reveal. And this may be true of the notion that we're living in a second oral age. Most Americans today know how to read, have ready access to

virtually all human knowledge, can instantly communicate with people all across the world, and enjoy greater material comfort than nobles did for most of human history. These conditions surely generate forms of consciousness and culture that are radically distinct from those of ancient oral peoples.

Nevertheless, the concept of “digital orality” does spotlight a truth that’s easy to overlook: Many of our society’s foundational institutions were formulated in a highly unusual era of human history — the short window between the advent of literacy and development of electronic media.

For much of that interval, books enjoyed a cultural relevance that they currently lack. And generative AI appears to be accelerating deep literacy’s marginalization, enabling even humanities majors (<https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/openai-chatgpt-ai-cheating-education-college-students-school.html>) to eschew the cognitive burdens of reading and writing. It is reasonable to worry that the mental habits instilled by TikTok and ChatGPT might prove less conducive to liberal democracy than those promoted by the written word. In particular, Garfinkle and Mir’s concerns about social media’s corrosive influence on independent thought, and tendency to promote polarization (<https://www.npr.org/2022/09/09/1121295499/facebook-twitter-youtube-instagram-tiktok-social-media>), seem well-founded.

And yet, even as Mir and Garfinkle lament the post-literate tendency to substitute “lived experience” for objective evidence, they themselves often make *very* strong claims on the basis of little more than intuition.

It is difficult for writers to analyze the decline of deep literacy objectively. By disposition and profession, we’re predisposed to think that reading is virtuous and vital. It is inevitably tempting to believe that the marginalization of our craft

isn't just bad for us, but for all of society. That doesn't necessarily mean we're wrong to argue the latter. But it does mean that we should subject our assumptions to heightened scrutiny when doing so.

And this is something that Mir and Garfinkle often fail to do.

Mir's book has its insights. But it is also riddled with odd, unsubstantiated assertions. For example, to support the claim that literacy promotes a commitment to objective truth, he argues that literate athletes tend to accept unfavorable — but accurate — rulings by referees, while illiterate players often get into altercations “with the referee after the decision has been made as if the application of the rules is a matter of persuasion or, even more strangely (for the literate mind), a matter of post-factum persuasion.”

No data whatsoever is cited to back up this bit of armchair anthropology. And anyone who has watched a Knicks game with bookish Brooklynites knows that deep literacy is no obstacle to raging against the refs.

Similarly, Garfinkle's assertions about “screen addled” Trump voters' inner lives lack evidence. Did some Americans prioritize concerns about discontent with Biden-era inflation last November because they could not comprehend the very concept of authoritarianism? Or did they simply doubt that Trump was an authoritarian? Garfinkle is certain of the former, but it's unclear how he arrived at that conclusion.

In any case, there are several reasons to question the broader premise that declining deep literacy is *the* driving force behind illiberal politics in America today.

For one, reading does not reliably induce a commitment to (small-l) liberalism, which is to say, to pluralism, toleration, universalism, and individual rights. It's true that college-educated voters in the US are more likely than non-college-educated ones to prioritize democracy (<https://www.vox.com/politics/380750/harris-trump-closing-message-fascism-democracy-authoritarianism>) and dislike Donald Trump. Yet many of the foremost proponents of right-wing authoritarianism in the United States — from Peter Thiel (<https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2016/10/31/13477236/trump-seriously-literally-thiel>) to Curtis Yarvin (<https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/23373795/curtis-yarvin-neoreaction-redpill-molddbug>) to JD Vance (<https://www.vox.com/politics/360283/jd-vance-trump-vp-vice-president-authoritarian>) — are well-read men.

Likewise, illiberal leftists — such as those who authored apologies for the October 7 massacre (<https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2023/10/a-left-that-refuses-to-condemn-mass-murder-is-doomed.html>) — are not typically distinguished by their *lack* of literary erudition (and much the same can be said of liberal intellectuals (<https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2023/11/sam-harriss-fairy-tale-account-of-the-israel-hamas-conflict.html>) who've rationalized Israeli war crimes (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/11/14/israels-crimes-against-humanity-gaza>) in Gaza). Nor were the Stalinists of yesteryear especially unacquainted with libraries.

And such scholarly dogmatists aren't necessarily exceptions to the general rule. Deep literacy encourages abstract thought. But abstractions can be morally beneficent or abominable, illuminating or obfuscatory. As George Orwell argued (<https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/politics-and-the-english-language/>), euphemism is often the handmaiden of atrocity. Those who wish to insulate their ideologies from the

protests of empathy can conceal mass murders beneath foggy abstractions like “pacification.” Sometimes, a tendency to think in concrete terms isn’t the worst thing in the world.

And there is another problem with blaming America’s illiberal drift on the marginalization of literary life: The timeline doesn’t really work. It isn’t the case that American liberalism reached its zenith before television diverted popular attention away from print (which, in Garfinkle’s account, marked the beginning of deep literacy’s decline). To the contrary, America only became a liberal democracy for all its citizens in the 1960s. And electronic media is widely credited with aiding the Civil Rights Movement’s triumphs, as television coverage of Bloody Sunday (<https://www.history.com/articles/selma-bloody-sunday-attack-civil-rights-movement>) galvanized public support for the Voting Rights Act.

It’s also far from clear that today’s digital media have rendered the American people less liberal or universalistic.

Trump’s conquest of US politics is often ascribed to a reactionary turn in public opinion. But this isn’t necessarily the case. Consider one element of Trump’s illiberalism: his xenophobic nationalism. When he was first elected in 2016, support for slashing immigration had been steadily declining (<https://news.gallup.com/poll/1660/immigration.aspx>) for more than two decades, according to Gallup. Americans did not elect a rabidly restrictionist president in 2016 because they had become more nativist but rather, because the nativist segment of the American public had secured control over a major political party. What changed was the workings of a key democratic institution, not the attitudes of voters.

To be sure, digital media was not irrelevant to the GOP's transformation. The internet eroded the capacity of the Republican Party's relatively cosmopolitan elite to gatekeep conservative discourse and thus set the terms of intra-right debate.

This is a more general phenomenon: Across the political spectrum, educated elites have lost influence over the contours of public debate. The Democratic pollster David Shor argues (<https://www.vox.com/politics/403364/tik-tok-young-voters-2024-election-democrats-david-shor>) that this has enabled the spread of illiberal ideologies, since writerly types have historically been more committed to liberal universalism than the public as a whole. This is an interesting hypothesis. But to say that digital media has unmuzzled illiberal Americans — and to say that such media has multiplied their number by reviving oral consciousness — are two different claims.

And there's some reason to doubt the latter one. After all, by some markers, the American public is as committed to individual rights, toleration, and human equality as it has ever been. Since the rollout of the iPhone in 2007, approval for interracial marriage (<https://news.gallup.com/poll/354638/approval-interracial-marriage-new-high.aspx>) has risen by more than 15 points in America to a nearly unanimous 94 percent, while support for same-sex marriage (<https://news.gallup.com/poll/646202/sex-relations-marriage-supported.aspx>) has jumped by 23 points to 69 percent.

Granted, one can find signs of digitally induced illiberalism if one looks for them. Some surveys of college students show a flagging commitment (<https://www.natesilver.net/p/free-speech-is-in-trouble>) to free speech. Young men in a large number (<https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/millennials-and-gen-z-less-favour-gender-equality-older-generations>) of Western democracies (<https://osf.io/7z2va/download/>) appear to be souring on gender equality

(<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/gen-z-men-and-women-most-divided-on-gender-equality-global-study-shows#:~:text=Have%20we%20gone%20so%20far,women%20who%20hold%20this%20opinion.>). And some polling suggests that TikTok (<https://www.vox.com/politics/403364/tik-tok-young-voters-2024-election-democrats-david-shor>) could be turning its users more reactionary.

Perhaps, these are portents of where “digital orality” is taking us. As America’s test scores fall (<https://www.npr.org/2023/06/21/1183445544/u-s-reading-and-math-scores-drop-to-lowest-level-in-decades>) and its screen time rises, narratives of cultural decline become hard to dismiss outright.

Yet it’s worth remembering the perennial appeal of such pessimism. More than 2,000 years ago, Socrates decried the novel media technology of his day — the written word — in much the same terms that many condemn social media and AI in 2025. Addressing himself to the inventor of writing, the Greek philosopher declared, “You have not discovered a potion for remembering, but for reminding; you provide your students with the appearance of wisdom, not with its reality. Your invention will enable them to hear many things without being properly taught, and they will imagine that they have come to know much while for the most part they will know nothing.”

I do not like what modern media is doing to my brain, nor what illiberal dogmatists are doing to my country. And like Mir and Garfinkle, I’m tempted to draw a line between the two. It *feels* true to me that technology is coarsening America’s culture and poisoning its politics. And that sentiment may well reflect reality. But if I wish to be objective, it might also reflect the fact I’m a Twitter-obsessed, millennial writer who’s starting to get old.

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