

## Introduction: the rise of mass writing

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In meetings of the First Federal Congress in June 1789, as James Madison experimented with wording that would eventually become the First Amendment, he proposed to include the following:

The people shall not be deprived or abridged of their right to speak, to write, or to publish their sentiments.

Roger Sherman, representative from Connecticut, concurred in a committee report filed in the following month, declaring that among the “natural rights” of the people are “speaking, writing, and publishing their sentiments with decency and freedom.”

But by the time that the Bill of Rights was enacted, references to the people’s right to write and publish had been subsumed into what we know today as the free-speech clause of the First Amendment, which states simply that: “Congress shall make no law . . . prohibiting the freedom of speech, or of the press.”<sup>1</sup>

Why the people’s explicit right to write was excised from the language of the Bill of Rights is lost to history. Perhaps it was merely to repair a redundancy, as writing is a form of speech. Perhaps it was to more singularly enshrine the press as “the greatest bulwark of liberty,” to borrow language from yet another early version of the amendment. Perhaps it was a concession to the fact that few commoners of that day would have had the literacy skills necessary to render their political sentiments in publishable form – let alone access to material means to publish them. Or perhaps it was a point of deliberate semantic retrenchment, from fear that a popular claim to the full powers of writing might take this experiment in democracy a step too far. While the founders would have been ready to foster and protect a nation of readers, it would have been difficult, for a variety of reasons, to imagine a nation of writers.

But erasing writing from the language of the Bill of Rights may have had ramifications that are especially felt now as digital technologies finally make feasible the idea of the writing/publishing citizen. For in the intervening years the rights of everyday Americans to write and publish became enmeshed in

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complicated legal and economic encumbrances that had long been associated with writing and publishing: systems of patronage, control, regulation, and surveillance through which written expressions emerge as products of modified ownership, multiple interests, and distributed responsibility and reward. Not a week goes by without a headline that brings attention to some of these complications, whether about the employee fired for the injudicious blog entry or Facebook's latest strategy for exploiting those who publish on its pages.

From the earliest years of the Republic, mass reading – but not mass writing – was considered indispensable to liberty and to the workings of democracy. Citizens needed unfettered access to the widest array of information in order to vote intelligently and be critical watchdogs of their government. The quintessential citizen was the informed citizen, the reading citizen. Where the press and other expressive dimensions of literacy were protected, it was in order to serve this reading citizenry (Brown 1997). Over time, deep-seated connections between literacy and democracy heaped legal protections upon people's reading freedoms; justified the spread and continued maintenance of public libraries; led to massive investments of time and money in reading education; and fed the anxiety that changes in people's reading habits or skills were threats to the health of the democracy.

All the while, mass writing developed through a different cultural heritage. It became connected not to citizenship but to work, vocation, avocation, and practical living. The writing skills of everyday people were captured largely for private enterprise, trade, and artisanship. Writing belonged to the transactional sphere, the employment and production sphere, where high-vaulted values of personal autonomy, critical expression, or civic activism rarely found traction and where, in fact, unauthorized writing could well lead to recrimination, if not incrimination. Rather than being protected in the Bill of Rights, the people's writing came to be regulated by contract, labor law, and copyright, as writing skills were rented out as part of production and profit-making. It is not surprising, given this heritage, that the idea of the quintessential citizen as an informing citizen, as an independent writing citizen, would have a wobblier presence in the national imaginary. If, as the founders reasoned, the people's literacy developed through their reading and the people's democracy developed through their reading, then people's writing and the civic protections around it mattered less from a political or educational perspective. Reading was the dominant literate skill, the skill of consequence, and democratic values tacitly relied on its standing as such. From the founding of the Republic forward, these assumptions about reading as dominant and writing as recessive conditioned the ways that mass literacy was supported, experienced, regulated, and valued. But do these relationships still hold?

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When it comes to what is new about literacy these days, digital technology tends to capture the attention, as it is likened to the printing press (only speedier) in its radical impact on communications and social organization (Bolter 2001, Eisenstein 1982). But this attention glosses over what may be a more radical – if quieter – transformation, namely, the turn to writing as a mass daily experience. Largely congruent with the rise of digital communication but not synonymous with it, the rise of mass writing has accompanied the emergence of the so-called knowledge or information economy, first identified by Fritz Machlup in 1962 (Machlup, 1972) and elaborated by Marc Uri Porat in 1977, an economy based not in the manufacturing of things but in the manufacturing of services – knowledge, ideas, data, information, news. In this economy texts serve as a chief means of production and a chief output of production, and writing becomes a dominant form of manufacturing. Millions of Americans now engage in creating, processing, and managing written communications as a major aspect of their work. It is not unusual for many American adults to spend 50 percent or more of the workday with their hands on keyboards and their minds on audiences, spending so much time and energy in acts of writing, in fact, that their appetites for reading often wane. As the nature of work in the United States has changed – toward making and managing information and knowledge in increasingly globalized settings – intense pressure has come to bear on the productive side of literacy, the writing side (Brandt 2004, Drucker 2003). For perhaps the first time in the history of mass literacy, writing seems to be eclipsing reading as the literate experience of consequence. What happens when writing, not reading, becomes the dominant grounds of daily literate experience? How does a societal shift in time and energy toward writing affect the ways that people develop their literacy and understand its worth? How does the ascendancy of a writing-based literacy create tensions in a society whose institutions were organized around a reading-based literacy, around a presumption that readers would be many and writers would be few? Of special concern is the alienation of mass writing from the civic protections afforded mass reading. What happens to the associations between literacy and democracy when writing takes over?

In the fanfare over the digital revolution, the intensifying recruitment of writing literacy into economic productivity on a mass scale has been largely overlooked – as has its inevitable spillover into the leisure lives of young people, who are being invited by commercial interests to invest their scribal skills (as well as money and time) in online writing activities. Writing – paid and unpaid – is keeping the economy, especially the Internet economy, afloat. While until recently it would have been difficult to fathom how people could be writing

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more than reading, it is indeed happening for many. This shift represents a new, uncharted, and unsettling stage in the history of mass literacy, one with serious social, political, and cultural implications for which we are unprepared.

Mass literacy has almost exclusively been understood and described from the reading perspective. Now we must take writing seriously, in its own right, as a set of practices and dispositions that is shaping the experience of mass literacy and the values associated with it. *The Rise of Writing* weaves together historical perspectives on mass writing and mass reading with an analysis of the experiences of everyday, contemporary literates to understand the dynamic, human consequences of this major cultural transition. In each chapter and from different angles, the focus moves backward into the past to attend to writing as initially a minor strain of mass literacy, one with a distinctively different and even alienated cultural heritage from mass reading. Then, I explore how these legacies come forward into contemporary literate experience, as I study the accounts of ninety people, aged 15 to 80, who use writing regularly in their vocations and avocations. In in-depth interviews that I conducted between 2005 and 2012, people discussed with me the writing they do, how they learned it, how it affects them and their families, and how they experience shifting relationships between reading and writing, whether directly in their own literacy experiences or in the wider world. Through their experiences we will be able to see how a growing rivalry between writing and reading sets up potential contradictions in the meanings and values of literacy upon which our society has long rested.

In educational circles it is not uncommon to think of reading and writing as mutually supportive and interrelated processes, drawing on similar underlying language skills and similar social, pragmatic, and rhetorical knowledge (Tierney and Shanahan 1991). In school especially, reading typically initiates writing assignments and writing is often used to assess reading. Reading is always part of a writing process (if only to read over one's own words) and writing is often part of a reading process. In many literacy practices, the two are thoroughly intertwined. But these conjunctions of reading and writing within contemporary school experience gloss over their different cultural histories or what I would call their sponsorship histories. Initially mass reading spread under the auspices of church and State, institutions that sought to universalize reading in order to integrate initiates into shared belief systems. Reading was for learning how to be good – in worship, citizenship, work, and school. Books had value because their goodness was thought to rub off on readers. This moral valence around reading still holds strong today, as reading to young children is treated as the hallmark of good parenting and reading is almost always treated as a wholesome alternative to rival entertainments. Writing has played a role in this moral system when it has served as part of spiritual practice or a tool for learning or disciplining the mind (Burton 2008; Foucault 1988; Miller 1998). But writing has always been

less *for* good than it is *a* good. While reading has productive value for a reader, writing has surplus value that fuels other enterprises. The commercial value of writing, the way it can be transacted and enhance other transactions, the way it can fit into systems of work, wage, and market, all make writing unique among the so-called language arts, giving it a different cultural history from reading. In the colonial period, writing was taught separately from reading, often in private pay settings and as part of practical training for the world of work. It took longer to democratize, and its subversive and deceptive powers marked it for heightened control (Monaghan 2005). Practically speaking, writing has flourished not in the civic sphere but in the realm of patronage, where writers enter into some sort of give-and-take relationship with more powerful others in exchange for access to tools, audiences, or remunerations of various kinds. “To be a writer,” David D. Hall (2007) observed of literacy conditions in the seventeenth century “was to enter into a relationship of dependence” (p. 76). This statement remains most true today – the only difference being that many more people are writing now.

For most of the history of mass literacy, the value of writing has resided in the reading of it, not the doing of it. Authorship gained its prestige from its power to morally uplift a civic readership. Reading has been seen as the avenue to intellectual and moral improvement. The capacity for ordinary, functional writing to develop a person’s character, or ensure social well-being, or strengthen democratic processes has gotten little consideration in our public discourse about literacy, and paltry protection from our legal institutions. In short, at least until now, the potentials (and pitfalls) of mass writing as a grounds for democracy have been stifled within the ideological arrangements of a reading literacy – not only in the nation’s educational mission but more broadly in the culture. Now, as writing gains in economic and social power, attraction, and consequence and as writing takes on a more formative role in literacy development across the lifespan, reading inevitably grows more subordinate and writing’s alternate sponsorship history surges into prominence. With it comes potential challenge to bedrock beliefs, values, and practices associated with a healthy mass literacy.

### Origins of this study

In 2001 I published *Literacy in American Lives*, a book that sought to characterize the changing conditions for literacy learning as they were felt in the lived experiences of everyday Americans across the twentieth century. The book was based on eighty in-depth interviews conducted in the mid-1990s with a diverse group of people born between 1895 and 1985, individuals who were asked to recount everything they could remember about how they learned to read and write across their lifetimes. Working closely with their accounts led me to develop an analytic concept I called *sponsors of literacy* – constellations of

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agents and entities who develop, exploit, or suppress people's literacy and gain economic or political advantage by doing so. As the society grew more reliant on literacy, sponsors of literacy proliferated, their competing interests palpable at the recollected scenes of literacy learning. This competition of literacy sponsors lent to conditions of stratification and change in literacy across the twentieth century, raising standards for literacy achievement while shaping the manners in which everyday people pursued their literacy. Sponsors of literacy leave their mark not only on individual learners but also on whole communities, regions, economies, and social eras in ways that linger, for better or worse, for subsequent generations.

Two major discoveries came out of that project (discoveries at least for me!). One was the curious contrast in the ways that most people cast their earliest memories of reading versus their earliest memories of writing, more readily associating reading with leisure, worship, pleasure, intimacy, and social approval and writing more readily with work, adult business, trouble, embarrassment, subterfuge, and trauma. As I came to realize, these modern-day memories carried echoes of the earliest arrangements of mass literacy, especially the divergent sponsorship histories of reading and writing and their different statuses in schooling. The other discovery was the enormous influence of the workplace as a reported site of significant literacy learning and relearning. Over the lifespan, literacy change reached people most directly through their jobs, making once serviceable skills obsolete and new skills compulsory, affecting, in turn, how reading and writing took place at home. On any given day, workplaces may expend more time, effort, and resources in the teaching and learning of literacy than schools do, merely as part of routine word production, putting enormous technological and linguistic know-how into the hands of (at least some) employees while putting enormous pressure on everybody's literacy performance. In retrospect, I knew that I had only scratched the surface of these two phenomena: differences between reading and writing; and the role of the workplace in catalyzing change in literacy. More research was needed. Adding to this imperative was the fact that all of my interviewing for *Literacy in American Lives* had concluded in 1995, the year, according to most observers, that the Internet went into mass circulation, affording stupendous changes in how communication could occur and where and when work was done, as well as inviting new ways of encountering literacy, including new genres for writing and reading.

*The Rise of Writing* was born, then, out of these gaps. I set to work by studying available cultural histories of mass reading and writing, helped by the publication of the multi-volume *A History of the Book in America* (Hall 2007–2010), a comprehensive project that makes unusual attempts to attend to the social history of writing where it can, even as those efforts reconfirm that we know much more about reading and readers than writing and

writers.<sup>2</sup> Paul Starr's *Creation of the Media* (2004) was an influential resource, as it shows how communication systems tend to remain entrenched in the political arrangements through which they are initially developed and regulated. I also found help in Charles Bazerman's *Handbook on Writing Research* (2007), a multidisciplinary and multi-thematic volume that puts writing at the center of attention, as well as Nancy Torrance and David Olson's *Cambridge Handbook of Literacy* (2009), another transdisciplinary collection that takes a broad cultural and historical approach. I also continued reading economic theory and history, particularly work that focused on the formation of the so-called information or knowledge society, as well as cultural and legal studies having to do with literacy and labor. Especially helpful were Alfred Chandler's classic *The Visible Hand* (1977), which showed how symbol-based work grew out of speed-ups in production and communication; JoAnne Yates's *Control Through Communication* (1993), a work rich with incidental evidence of how workplaces manufacture new literacy practices; Catherine Fisk's highly informative, *Working Knowledge* (2009), an account of employers' gradual legal control over employees' skills, including their mental and scribal skills; as well as such work as Alan Burton-Jones's *Knowledge Capitalism* (2001) and the prescient writings of Peter Drucker (2003).

Cumulatively, this background reading provided theoretical and historical perspectives helpful for the design of another interview-based project, preparing me to trace the phenomena that interested me most: how divergent sponsorship histories of reading and writing might continue to manifest and matter in current literacy experiences and how an intensifying use of writing for work might affect how people experience and value their literacy. The aim was to investigate along two main tracks: (1) to explore how writing's differences from reading might be pulling mass literacy in new directions; but also (2) to see, despite differences in circumstances, whether people might consider writing a site for the same kinds of moral and intellectual growth that is habitually attributed to reading. What does day-in-day-out writing do for – and to – the people who carry it out? Reading is associated (some would say overly associated) with just about every positive human quality imaginable, from empathy to critical thinking to civic engagement. How does writing stand in relationship? These two lines of investigation – one focused on differences and one on similarities – were meant to attend to what Harvey Graff (1987) has called contradictions and continuities in the history of mass literacy, as they are being carried forward through the rise of writing over reading.

### Framework

*The Rise of Writing* borrows most directly from the methodological perspective of French sociologist Daniel Bertaux (1981), who uses interviews and other



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biographical material to understand how sociopolitical developments register in felt experience – how people move through history and how history moves through them. Sometimes called a “realist” approach to narrative inquiry, with antecedents in the work of Oscar Lewis, C. Wright Mills and others in the Chicago School, Bertaux’s biographical sociology uses systematic comparisons of biographical materials to uncover the structuring forces behind a given social phenomenon (in his case, intergenerational social mobility). The method is not designed to explicate individual lives or individual intentions or to celebrate individual heroics. It is “to make explicit the traces of social phenomena and processes that are showing – to the informed eye – on the surface of somebody’s life, [as] experiences narrated to the interviewer” (Bertaux 2003, p. 40). Like oral history, biographical sociology often explores the lives of the overlooked, everyday people whose voices are usually absent from official representations. The aim is to gather facts about their lives, in the words of Bertaux, to learn: “what people have done, where and when, with whom, in which local contexts, with what results” as well as “what has been done to people *and how they reacted to it*” [author’s italics] (Bertaux 2003, p. 39). Uncovering systematic patterns across these facts reveals the structuring forces, or what Bertaux calls the social logics, up against which people live their lives (Bertaux and Delacroix 2000).

As in Bertaux’s work, *The Rise of Writing* treats research participants not so much as objects of study but as witnesses to socio-historical change. Individuals and their stories are not my focus per se. Rather, what matters is what can be systematically and objectively gleaned from them about how the history of mass literacy – past, present, and future – manifests in particular times, places, and social locations; how particular members of society enter into its force; and with what effects on them and others. While people’s accounts provide a finite universe of available facts for study, those facts must be queried and interpreted to yield understanding. The subjective viewpoints of research participants are an essential ingredient – but not where the interpretation begins or where it ends. What matters is how and when people appeal in their accounts to historical and social formations of mass literacy, as resources, constraints, explanations, puzzles, and problems of their existence. The more these appeals turn up across contexts, the closer I come to what I pursue.

This realist perspective has been subject to criticism, above all, for its lack of attention to the interview event itself as a powerful structuring agent – considering, for instance, how a researcher uses questions to structure attention or how both interviewer and interviewee use available discourse to structure their sense of history, meaning, or identity and do so on the spot, as a production of the interaction itself. Another limitation of this perspective, according to critics, is how it takes what people say at face value, without concern about memory failure, unconscious drives, or the influence of power dynamics or



anxiety as elements of questions and answers.<sup>3</sup> These criticisms are serious and legitimate. Yet it is a fundamental assumption of this study that the field of literacy studies, in both its research and pedagogical dimensions, could better appreciate – from a sociological perspective – how an accumulating history of mass literacy and its transformations manifest as individual literate experience; how anyone’s literacy development is inside that contingent historical development, not in a fated, deterministic way but in a practical way that matters and can be analyzed. The macro-force of literacy is an ongoing cultural production that exceeds any single verbal version of it, making itself present in stories about reading and writing. Understanding this historical contingency is important for understanding aspirations, problems, and practices around literacy, whether they show up as educational policy, in a legal ruling, or at the scene of an individual’s learning.

### Project design

In 2005 I began to interview people who held positions that required them to write on average for at least 15 percent of the workday. Given constraints of time and resources, I sought participants whom I could meet face-to-face in the general region where I also lived and worked, a Midwestern, mid-sized city that is home to a large public university and state government with an additional economic base principally in health care, insurance, biotechnology, light industry, and retail. Using information from the US Census Community Survey, I identified economic sectors that employed large numbers of people as well as occupations that depended on writing, and I began what amounted to a process of cold calling to recruit participants to the study. I emailed individuals directly when their addresses (and often brief bios) appeared on company or agency websites, or I called business owners or personnel or information officers in business and government for leads. Sometimes colleagues or friends provided contacts after learning about the study, and in a few cases those I interviewed encouraged me to talk with co-workers, which I did. I sought avenues and contact strategies that I hoped would lead to an inclusive pool of participants in terms of gender, age, race, and ethnicity, as well as occupation and size of organization. As the questions of the study clarified themselves, I crafted the participant pool into thirty people working in the private sector and thirty people working in the public sector.

Interviewing continued over a period of seven years, as I could find the time and willing participants. About half the people I contacted declined to participate or declined permission to allow me access to their employees. One CEO explained that her employees did not have time to talk with me. Other people simply did not respond or declined without explanation. As with other

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projects of this kind, my ideal aim of developing a census-based sample of the workaday writing population gave way to exigency as I began to take any interview I could get, resulting in overrepresentation of some populations and occupations and underrepresentation of many populations and occupations.<sup>4</sup> Missing from this study, by design, are people whose jobs require little or no writing. Heavily represented are people who do a lot of writing and thereby participants who have higher levels of education and higher-paying jobs than the population overall. Characteristics of the sixty participants appear in Appendix 1. Additional information about particular participants appears in individual chapters.

Interviews took place at times and places chosen by the interviewees, sometimes at work, sometimes in public places like restaurants and coffee shops, and occasionally in their homes. Interviews lasted about one hour, sometimes two, and were semi-structured, focusing on straightforward questions about the writing people do at work, how they learned to do it, and how it relates to other aspects of their literacy experiences. Reading–writing relationships also were probed. Of course, many unanticipated topics emerged in the conversation, leading to gradual adjustments in subsequent interviews. The basic interview script appears in Appendix 2. I audiotaped all interviews and transcribed them myself for analysis.<sup>5</sup> Using principles of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), I coded each interview for evidence of sponsorship histories, differences between reading and writing, and effects of writing on self and others, coding and recoding over a number of years as patterns evolved into consolidated concepts. Additional information about coding appears in individual chapters.

In 2011 I added a third population to the study: thirty young adults aged 15 to 25 who pursue writing as an avocation. Specifically I sought participants who wrote on a regular basis outside of school for creative or political/civic expression or else as journalists, freelance writers, or entrepreneurs. This sub-study allowed me to examine current elective writing and publishing practices and to include a younger population not present in the larger study.<sup>6</sup> I found participants locally by contacting guidance counselors, teachers, coordinators of pre-college programs, people who worked with community youth, and other personal and professional connections. I also searched websites and campus and community publications to locate writers to contact. In all cases I used recruitment strategies that would favor inclusion in terms of gender, race and ethnicity, and socioeconomic background. Parental permissions were obtained for minor participants. Agreement to participate was higher in this study than the employee study, perhaps because I relied more on intermediaries; five individuals declined requests to be interviewed. Characteristics of participants in this sub-study appear in Appendix 3 and additional information about particular participants appears in Chapter 3. Interviews were held at mutually arranged times and places, during lunch hours or after school at high schools,