RENEWING THE CULTURE OF CRITICAL THINKING: THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF LIBRARIANS IN AN AGE OF AI AND DISTRACTION

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Introduction: A Shifting Educational Landscape

Picture a college student juggling coursework with endless TikTok scrolling, while asking ChatGPT to draft an essay that should have been an exercise in deep analysis. This image, once hypothetical, now mirrors the everyday realities in higher education. The confluence of pandemic-era learning gaps, the social media attention economy, and the explosive rise of artificial intelligence (AI) tools has created a perfect storm of cognitive dilution.

For institutions, faculty, and students alike, this moment can feel destabilizing. Yet among academic professionals, librarians are uniquely positioned to confront such times. Librarians stand at the intersection of information literacy and pedagogy, and cannot remain silent.

Three Forces Reshaping Student Learning

COVID-19's Lingering Shadow

The pandemic disrupted learning in unprecedented ways. Entire school years were fragmented by shutdowns, and students were often_"just passed through to the next grade level" without mastering foundational skills.[1] One educator described it bluntly: "Gone were skills in studying, sitting in classrooms, and taking notes."[2]

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has repeatedly highlighted how these disruptions weakened literacy outcomes. Commissioner Peggy Carr noted that school shutdowns derailed learning "across all subjects (including reading)."[3] While colleges hoped students would catch up, many arrived with weakened habits of sustained reading, study, and comprehension. These are the same students now confronting higher education's demands with fragile skills.

The Social Media Attention Economy

At the same time, social media has reshaped how young adults consume information. The Pew Research Center found that 39 percent of U.S. adults under 30 now regularly get news from TikTok compared to only 19 percent of those aged 30 to 49.[4] This reliance on fast, visual snippets may be convenient, but it undermines habits of sustained inquiry, something which we as librarians enshrined in the Pillars of Information Literacy.[5]

The Surgeon General has already flagged social media's impact on youth mental health, while the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development Study tracks its effects on healthy brain development.[6][7] Beyond health, another concern arises: "how and under what circumstances can social media impair literacy and literary imagination?"[8]

The rapid-scrolling environment discourages depth. For students, it often means information is accepted without evaluation, thus undermining skills in Media Literacy. For educators, it means learners not only arrive in classrooms woefully under-informed, but also less prepared to wrestle with nuance or critically interrogate sources. Too often, because it is on the internet and/or social media, students choose not to investigate the veracity or derivation of information which is a major flaw and gap in their educational process.

1. Trattner, 2025
2. Perfas, 2024
3. NAEP, 2023
4. Tomasik and Matsa, 2025
5. Bent and Stubbings, 2011
6. OSG, 2023
7. ABCD, 2021
8. Iyengar, 2024

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The Allure of Artificial Intelligence

No factor looms larger today than AI. Universities are struggling to decide how to respond. As Princeton professor D. Graham Burnett references in an article published in the New Yorker, “In one department, a recently drafted anti-AI policy, read literally, would actually have barred faculty from giving assignments to students that centered on AI."[9] In another case, an external review panel warned that institutions must urgently address "the looming AI disruptions to our teaching and research."[10] Yet, the initial reception to such warnings was "notably cool."

Meanwhile, students aren't waiting for guidance. They are embracing AI tools, sometimes as learning aids, but too often as shortcuts. As Spanish and social science teacher, Jamie Davis González, noted, "So many kids are struggling to develop the most basic level of comprehension and analysis skills because they offload all of that to machines to do for them."[11]

The dangers are compounded by findings such as those from a recent study, which revealed a significant negative correlation between frequent AI tool usage and critical thinking abilities.[12] In other words, the more students rely on AI, the less capable they become at independent reasoning. Fast Company’s Ryan Trattner has further warned that direct-answer AI may be creating a "COVID 2.0" generation of students who have not lost a single year, but instead have lost a significant portion of their educational development.[13]

The Perfect Storm of Cognitive Dilution

Individually, each of these forces—pandemic gaps, social media saturation, and AI-reliance—would pose a challenge. Together, they amount to cognitive dilution: a weakening of sustained attention, authentic literacy, and the ability to think critically and independently.

This phenomenon is measurable. According to the NCES, the percentage of U.S. adults ages 16 to 65 who fall in the lowest level of literacy has increased from 19 percent in 2017 to 28 percent in 2023.[14] As Dr. Maria Novello further notes, "This problem extends far beyond simple test scores; rather it reflects a broader collapse in critical thinking."[15]

The link between literacy and critical thinking is inseparable. Literacy is not just decoding text; it is the foundation of interpretation, synthesis, and judgment. Without it, critical thinking cannot flourish. Without critical thinking, literacy becomes rote. When both weaken, students lose their intellectual agency and society loses informed citizens capable of democratic participation.

The Stakes of Ignoring the Trend

If we fail to respond, the consequences will reverberate across every level of higher education:

- **For students:** reduced problem-solving skills, weaker writing and communication, dependency on tools instead of their own cognition. This diminishes their abilities and skills as future members of society.
- **For faculty:** frustration with underprepared learners, heavier remediation burdens, and difficulty sustaining rigorous curricula. Faculty struggles with changing teaching styles and developing strategies to create solutions that work academically and sociologically.
- **For institutions**: declining retention rates, eroded academic credibility, and reputational risks.
- **For society:** diminished civic engagement and the erosion of shared intellectual life.

Collectively, these outcomes point to more than a set of academic challenges: they signal a deeper erosion of independent thought itself.

When higher education ceases to cultivate critical minds, society loses its capacity to question, to reason, and to imagine collectively. The stakes, then, extend well beyond the classroom: they touch the very core of what it means to participate in a functioning democracy.

9. Burnett, 2025
10. Burnett, 2025
11. Ruvalcaba, 2025
12. Gerlich, 2025
13. Trattner, 2025
14. U.S. Dept. of Education, 2024
15. Ruvalcaba, 2025

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Why Librarians Must Lead

Libraries have always been at the crossroads of information and education. Today, our role as literacy stewards makes us uniquely qualified to confront this storm.

First, we must acknowledge the deficiencies without stigma. Students are not at fault for the disruptions and digital landscapes they inherited. What is untenable is the assumption that we can restrict new tools and expect teaching and learning to proceed unchanged, as though the world has not shifted around us. This is not the first time technology has created new standards; the inception of tools such as the ballpoint pen and the computer had similar reactions. Libraries rose to meet the challenge. It is time for us to do so again.

Second, we must understand the contributing factors deeply. That means equipping ourselves with knowledge of AI's risks and potential, analyzing trends in social media use, and interpreting data on learning loss. Librarians are trained in information literacy, positioning us to lead conversations about evaluating sources, questioning tools, and practicing reflective learning.

Finally, we must coalesce as academic professionals. This is not work librarians can do alone. But we can initiate partnerships with faculty, propose collaborative workshops, and design interventions that embed literacy and critical thinking into curricula.

Toward Mitigation: Steps Forward

While there is no panacea, librarians can take practical steps to help mitigate the damage:

- **Develop AI Literacy Programming**
  - Help students understand both the potential and limits of AI.
  - Train them to critically evaluate AI outputs, verify sources, and use these tools responsibly.
- **Reinforce Information Literacy Frameworks**
  - Update the ACRL Framework for today's realities.
  - Emphasize evaluating online content, especially in fast-moving social media environments.
- **Promote Deep Reading and Critical Dialogue**
  - Curate programming that values slow, intentional reading.
  - Facilitate reading groups, writing labs, or dialogic workshops that counteract shallow consumption habits.
- **Support Faculty Partnerships**
  - Collaborate on assignment design that resists easy outsourcing to AI.
  - Provide teaching resources that integrate literacy and critical thinking reinforcement.
- **Advance Professional Development**
  - Stay ahead of technological trends to better guide students and faculty.
  - Build inter-institutional collaborations to share best practices and resources.

Conclusion: A Call to Coalesce

The storm cannot be reversed. The pandemic happened, social media is societally entrenched, and AI will only grow more sophisticated. Librarians must embrace our roles as front-line responders, advocates, and partners. We cannot afford to be passive service providers while students lose the very skills higher education was built to cultivate. Instead, we must lead with conviction, collaboration, and creativity.

The future of literacy and critical thinking in higher education may be uncertain, but one thing is clear: without librarians, the storm of cognitive dilution will leave even deeper scars. With us, however, institutions and students have guides who can steady the ship, reclaim the value of inquiry, and keep alive the human capacity to think for ourselves.

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