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Twitter and Literacy of the 21st Century

In light of the technological age, there has been an emergence of a number of tools and gadgets created to increase convenience and efficiency of performance in our mundane tasks. Consequently, the incorporation of technology in our lifestyles changes the way in which we live our lives. Contemporary lives have changed, given that the way we learn, interact with one another and view ourselves is very different than before. While technology changes the way we learn and read, people are starting to realize that “contemporary reading practice is co-extensive with, and in many senses, inseparable from, other media and forms of cultural consumption” (“New Directions and Methods in the History of Reading” 376). Hence, we will analyze Margaret Atwood’s claims that the use of the Twitter gadget has boosted the rate of literacy in society today. This paper will argue for her case, back up her claims, and address the concerns people have with the use of Twitter. In accordance with the definition of literacy, Twitter does in fact help boost literacy rates in society.

To begin the discussion, the Online Oxford English Dictionary states that literacy is “the ability to read and write”. My definition of what it means to be literate is being able to use discretion to interpret and understand the language of the present day. Other individuals may state that literacy has more to do with grammar and spelling and involves formal practices of writing. This might mean that reading and writing on a computer is not really reading or writing. From these basic definitions, how does technology contribute to the reading experience? What people commonly agree with in terms of the advantages of modern technology is that it makes it easier to communicate with others. All over the world, people and communities are connected in a way that brings forth new ways to exchange

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information such as discussion forums that burst with creativity and new ideas. Information is exchanged faster than ever before with just a click of a button or a swipe of the hand thanks to new touch screen technology. Atwood mentioned that this form of communication has for the most part replaced ‘old technology’ such as the telephone and letter writing. Although people still use letter writing today, many prefer to type up their letters instead of writing them out by hand in the traditional way; it is simply faster, more efficient, professional looking and convenient – especially if you need to send out multiple copies to more than one addressee. Arguably, people may read and write more these days than they ever have before. For example, people now use email frequently. Handling this form of technology may take more skill in literacy than picking up a phone and pressing speed dial because you are actively using reading and writing skills to generate original text.

Twitter is one of the many gadgets in technology that people use for social media. It helps people connect around the world and is a method of communication and information exchange. One of the biggest criticisms in regards to the usage of Twitter is spelling and grammar. Since only 140 characters are allowed per tweet, many people engage in short form language. Atwood makes the comment that “we use very short form for very succinct purposes” (Dugan, “Twitter Boosts Literacy”). Short form language which includes examples such as “LOL (Laugh out loud), TGIF (Thank God it is Friday), and BFF (Best Friends Forever)” are used commonly in texting practices today because it is simply easier and faster to type out. Consequently critics argue that the use of slang or short form language creates a downward spiral in literacy rates. However, even short form language is still a form of language.

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From history we can observe that language has always been fluid and dynamic. It is an organic form of interpretation and occurs in both long and short forms. Even if words are abbreviated, it does not mean that those words have lost their validity as they still hold meaning for many people. Given the increased usage in technology, short form language is prominently used more than ever before. In new generations to come, there will be even more additions of words to short form language. Perhaps in the future dictionaries will be required to include these ‘slang words’ because literacy also entails the ability to read and understand the language of the day. We have already seen the emergence of an online dictionary for short form language, widely known as The Urban Dictionary. According to The Urban Dictionary there have been 7,012,068 definitions since 1999 as of today.

Language continues to evolve over time. There have been many changes from Old English to Middle English to what we know now as Modern English. The many words that we use in modern times were spelled and pronounced much differently in the past. For example, here is a passage and the translation of the passage following it from a famous work in Old English, *Beowulf*:

Hwät! we Gâr-Dena in geâr-dagum
 þeód-cyninga þrym gefrunon,
 hû þâ æðelingas ellen fremedon.
 Oft Scyld Scêfing sceaðena þreátum.

Lo! the Spear-Danes' glory through splendid achievements
 The folk-kings' former fame we have heard of,
 How princes displayed then their prowess-in-battle.
 Oft Scyld the Scefing from scathers in numbers

(Mabillard, “Shakespeare’s Language”)

There is a difference between being correct and being literate. Spelling and grammar implies

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correctness, that people must follow a set of rules. Perhaps, “See you later” as opposed to “C u L8tr” is the correct way to spell out the sentence because it follows proper form. But many people today can still read and understand the latter although it is not grammatically correct. Additionally, foreigners studying a new language may be able to perfect the grammar of a given language, but find the meaning incomprehensible. One of the questions we should then ponder is if being literate goes deeper than the simple definition of just reading and writing.

Going back to Twitter, another critique of only allowing 140 characters per tweet is that it stifles elaborate thought and complex arguments. But what can we say about poetry then? For example, Japanese Haiku’s are very short and concise but people find them to be deep, insightful and thought provoking. Thus it does take a lot of skill to be able to fit your thoughts into a fixed amount of characters, whether in a Haiku poem or on Twitter. As well, complex arguments do happen over Twitter. One of the advantages of Twitter is “[its] textual, written medium [...] combined with the ability of the commentator to reread and reflect upon previous postings carefully, [which] can lead to more developed analyses” (Fuller 419). The most heated and noted ones that we know about are mostly found in celebrity feuds. Even though tweets contain a couple sentences only, they can subtly imply more than what it stated which can initiate a long string of conversation between two parties and others observing. It is possible to find out news that has not even been covered by mass media yet because of the instantaneous quality of tweets.

Atwood believes that Twitter has “helped [...] people find a new love of reading” (Dugan, “Twitter Boosts Literacy”). This may be especially true for the new generation. Children nowadays are

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growing up with technology already embedded in their learning system at school, at home, etc. Knowing that not all children grow up to love reading from experience, Twitter may be used as a tool, a platform to encourage reading. Grant has stated that for Twitter, “the application’s utility far outweighs its drawbacks” (Grant, “Five arguments you can use to convert Twitter sceptics”). In regards to the future generation, critics are especially worried about the usage of autocorrect. Most critics say that autocorrect proves to be a threat to the future generation’s grammar and ability to correctly spell properly. Personally, I believe this issue can be addressed by reinforcing the importance of traditional practical reading, writing and speaking skills when children are brought up. With the emergence of anything new, there will always be issues and worries that arise.

The Twittersphere is described as “an odd and uncanny place[...] [i]t’s something like having fairies at the bottom of your garden. How do you know anyone is who he/she says he is, especially when they put up pictures of themselves that might be their feet, or a cat, or a Mardi Gras mask, or a tin of Spam?” (Atwood, “Atwood in the Twittersphere”). The issue that comes from this statement is the skepticism of online or digital publishing. Today, it is much more difficult to facilitate what can be published. It would be easy for a person to pretend to be someone else and publish a post. Consequently how do we know what information is valid? People should thus personally filter what they read and use discretion and judgement based upon their own knowledge when reading any online text. It is a skill that people eventually develop from absorbing so much information. This is another part of what it means to be literate in the world today.

Margaret Atwood believes that Twitter can help boost literacy rates. Although this topic has

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received much criticism, everyone is entitled to their opinion. In order to look at this topic considering the influence of technology to literacy, one must first define what literacy means in the world we live in today. It is important to keep an open mind as there are always pros and cons with any issue. I agree with Atwood and her claims because by definition, reading on Twitter is still considered to be reading. Although I am a fellow user of Twitter myself, I realize it is difficult to take on an objectivist view even though I previously did not use it. Undeniably, the role of social media in our society only increases in this technological age. I recommend those who have not seriously used Twitter to attempt to engage, because it enables one to build a more rounded view of the contemporary reading experience.

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