David CRYSTAL
Bangor University – Bangor

ON MYTHS AND MINDSETS

Following his visit to Montenegro in April 2012, the author of this paper discusses the local and global effects of the digital era and the Internet on reading and writing, with an emphasis on younger generations.

Key words: *Internet, technology, abbreviations, EMC, reading*

There is an enormous myth circulating the globe: young people don't read any more. It's a myth perpetrated by the less young, who see modern children preoccupied with computers, cellphones, and online games, and not reading Shakespeare, Dickens, and Twain. And one myth leads to others. We're rearing a new generation that can't spell. It's all because of those newfangled abbreviations in text-messaging. I encounter this argument all the time in Britain, and I expect it is heard just as often in Montenegro.

It doesn't take long for myths to capture the public imagination, but it can take a lifetime to eliminate them. Text-messaging is hardly a decade old, and yet it has already generated several fictions. It's widely believed that text messages are full of abbreviated words introduced by young people because they don't know how to spell... that they are using them in schoolwork and in examination scripts... that the practice is fostering an unprecedented decline in literacy.

All these beliefs are wrong. Only about 10 percent of the words used in a typical text message are abbreviated. Moreover, the abbreviations are not a totally new phenomenon: the older generation used them too, as did their grandparents. You'll find playful sentences like 'I C U 2' in 19th-century English books of leisure activities. Students know very well they shouldn't use them in essays and examinations. And research studies are showing that text messaging helps literacy, because it provides huge amounts of practice in reading and writing.

There is actually plenty of literacy among young people, but it is a different kind of literacy from what older people are used to. To understand

it, we need to appreciate the role of electronically mediated communication (EMC) - not only the Internet, but the whole range of devices which communicate electronically, such as mobile phones, satellite navigation systems, and automatic voice recognition machines. This is a world which has evolved only in the past twenty years, as a review of the leading innovations shows.

In 1990 there was no World Wide Web: that arrived in 1991. Although email had been available for some years, most people did not send their first message until the mid-90s. Chatrooms and online games became popular at roughly the same time. Google arrived in 1999. Mobile phones, with associated text-messaging, emerged as the new millennium dawned. The word *weblog* was created as early as 1997, but blogging as a genre didn't take off until the arrival of easy-to-use software, such as Blogger, in the early 2000s. Instant messaging is another development of the early 2000s, soon to be followed by social networking - Facebook, YouTube, Hi5, and over 100 other networks. In 2006 we encounter Twitter. And next year, we will encounter - what?

The point of this chronology is to draw attention to its recency, diversity, and unpredictability. If someone had said to me, in 2005, that the next EMC development was going to be a system where you were given an online prompt, 'What are you doing?', and a limit of 140 characters for your reply, I would have written them off as deluded. But Twitter, a microblogging platform, has proved to be one of the most successful EMC developments to date, the fastest growing Web brand in the past few years. Nor is its story complete. As with all Internet activities, we have to be prepared for sudden change. In November 2009, Twitter altered its prompt from 'What are you doing?' to 'What's happening?', thus eliciting a very different kind of message from users. Twitter became more of a news reporting service, at that point.

The recency of all this means that anyone under the age of 20 is, in effect, a native speaker of EMC. The rest are, to a greater or lesser extent, speakers of EMC as a foreign language. For some, this message is brought home very quickly when, after spending ages trying to work out how to change the settings on a new device, a passing six-year-old performs the activity with contemptuous aplomb. This new generation has gone under various media labels, such as the 'online generation', the 'screen generation', or 'the Net generation'. I don't like labels much, but there is an underlying truth here about the young person's communication mindset which has important implications for any debate on the future of reading, whether in Britain or in Montenegro.

For me, and I suspect for most readers of this journal, literacy is identified, first and foremost, with the world of print: it is a world of books and journals, newspapers and reports. Books especially are central in our literacy worldview. We are all aware of the online world, and increasingly use it, but

we see it as marginal, something additional, an alternative medium, something we haven't quite got to grips with yet. One of the big talking-points today is 'will the book survive?' The online world is seen as something new, a threat.

That is not how young people see it. In their literacy worldview, it is the screen that is central, the world of print that is marginal. It is not that they have stopped reading and writing. On the contrary, young people are reading and writing more than I ever did at their age, but they are doing it using their computers and mobile phones. Books for them are ebooks. Newspapers are news online. Letters to editors are comments to forums. Diaries are blogs. The mobile is central, and will become even more so as time goes by. At the iMedia Breakthrough Summit in Florida in 2009, representatives of the industry were predicting that by 2020 some 80 per cent of all Internet access would be made via a mobile phone. It is already thus in some parts of Africa, where a wired connection is difficult or impossible.

This mindset reversal presents everyone with a challenge. We are all aware of the importance of books as a means of opening minds and inspiring imaginations, and we do not want the next generation to lose those opportunities. The educational world is already trying to find solutions to the challenges, showing how the two domains - electronic and traditional print - can be brought together. Libraries are altering their balance of resources, introducing a digital dimension. Teachers are exploring ways of exploiting the technology in the classroom - for example, using mobiles for learning rather than banning them. The children themselves play an active role in negotiating their learning. As one child told me recently, 'my mobile lets me read anywhere'.

That child's world is not, in the first instance, the traditional world of books and newspapers. It is a world of Facebook, the Web, the videogame, the blog, the text, and the tweet. Nor, if you think of reading as 'reading aloud', is that child's audio world the traditional one of face-to-face conversations, classroom interaction, radio, and television. It is a world of mobile phone, Skype, iChat, the podcast, and YouTube. Policy-makers should not be resisting these new graphic and audio worlds, but managing them to make them enticingly readable. They can't do this if they continue to think of them as marginal or ancillary.

Young people actually don't need persuading that they should read, as is obvious by just looking at the way they intently send and receive text messages. They are reading all the time. The task is to direct that enthusiasm for reading in more ambitious and rewarding directions, and to provide easy opportunities for this to happen. Whether they read Shakespeare or Dickens or Montenegrin authors on the page or on the screen is beside the point. The medium is not the message. The aim must be to get them to read more widely,

regardless of medium, and to get them eventually to appreciate what each medium has to offer. The book provides one experience: a pride in personal ownership, as any bookshelf illustrates, and an interaction with the physicality of the product, such as its weight, touch, and even smell. The screen provides another experience: an awareness of the possibilities of personal exploration, through interactive notes and searchable text, and a sense of connectedness and up-to-dateness - of having the world at your fingertips. Young people need both, to make the most of modern living. So do we all.