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Media as a Specific Technology of Culture. The Digital Field is Already Here.

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Culture has its communicative dimension. This means that external form must be given to all ideas, so that they are accessible to human senses. This is a basic prerequisite that culture should be social. Raymond William's (William's, 1962, p. 16) succinctly defined culture as “a particular way of life” that is shared by a community and shaped by values, traditions, beliefs, material objects, and territory.

From this perspective, “culture is a complex and dynamic ecology of people, things, world views, rituals, daily activities, and settings/.../is our way of doing things” (Lull, 1999, p. 130).

By speaking about culture (in many respects) we tend to identify culture as rather stable biological, spiritual, social and material forms that follow us and influence us since the day we were born.

We inherit language too (our basic patterns of verbal and non-verbal communication).

Language (as the communication part of the culture) contains volitional and valued aspects.

At first we understood language as audio code, but later - as a visual code.

Our belief that visual codes can also help us compose culture was the second step.

Photography, film, television, video and computer graphics all have codes which require special literacy.

Language coordinates social activities of all cultures.

Ultimately, language is limitless. “People play with language. They style it. Abuse it. Invent it. Give it accents. Sing it. /.../ Like all symbolic forms, language is a resource for the social construction and deconstruction of culture.” (Lull, 1999, p. 139)

Language tends to be affected by various factors, including media. Internet, the most recent and most influential technological development, where the vast majority of international/intercultural communication is carried out in English, is one of the strongest influences on the language right now.

The global ascent of a language signifies the global ascent of a culture.

Leadership of the English language takes place through a hierarchy of cultures in the world meaning that, if you are not a native speaker of English, your culture is not on the top in global terms. Consequences make conditions conflict.

What's happening today with the non-English language cultures due to the Internet?

What's happening today with the mass communication due to the Internet?

What's happening today with the culture as communication dimension due to the Internet?

What effect the Internet has on their users' language learning process?

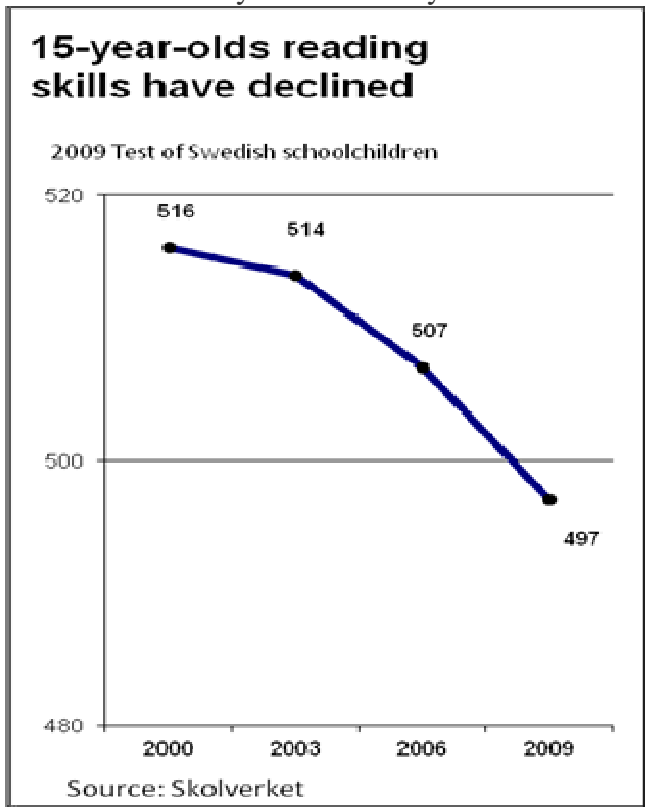
Does the Internet make those processes for users more difficult, or vice versa: easier?

All these problems can be illustrated in different ways, which is very interesting.

My interest about the Internet's actuation of language skills was the first step in my research: how using the Internet may influence cultural values and activities.

Today I chose to analyze how the international cultural patterns (through the Internet) affect children and youth in Sweden.

My research is based on the recently published works by Ulle Findhal (Findal, 2012). They describe the use of media by children and youth on the Internet today.

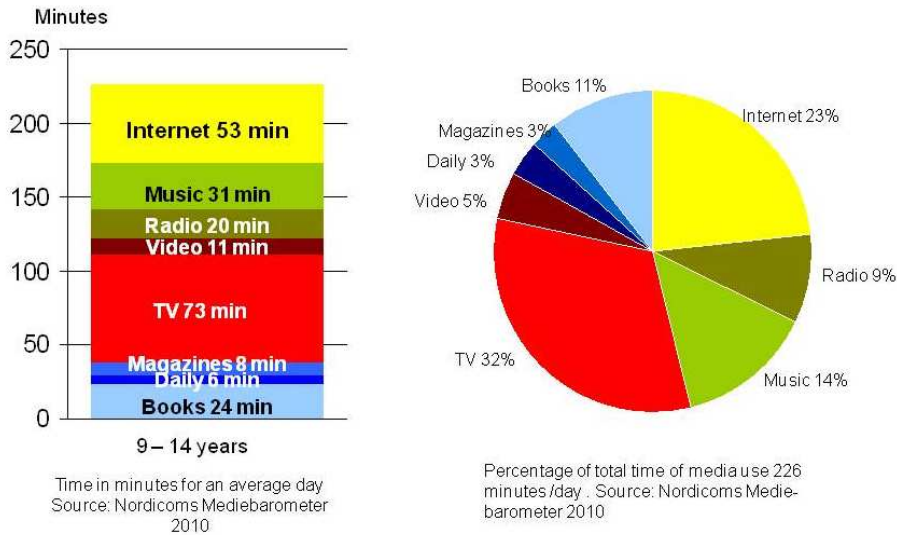


On 13 March 2012 the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* summarized that “computers are forcing Swedish children to read less and less”. (Björling, 2012, p.4)

Reading skills have dramatically reduced among Swedish children and youth, and, especially during the recent decade. “Use of computers is one of the explanations to this problem,” says Monica Rosen, professor at the Department of Education at the University of Gothenburg (Björling, 2012, p. 4).

She believes that the use of computers causes reading problems for primary school students. They read less and less or do not understand content of the text.

Use of mass media 2010: 9 - 14 years



Several studies show that in Sweden both 9 to 10 year old and 15 year old children have become increasingly less able to read. Even with respect to other countries we can see the situation becoming even worse.

Now Swedish children are on the same level as the majority of children in Europe.

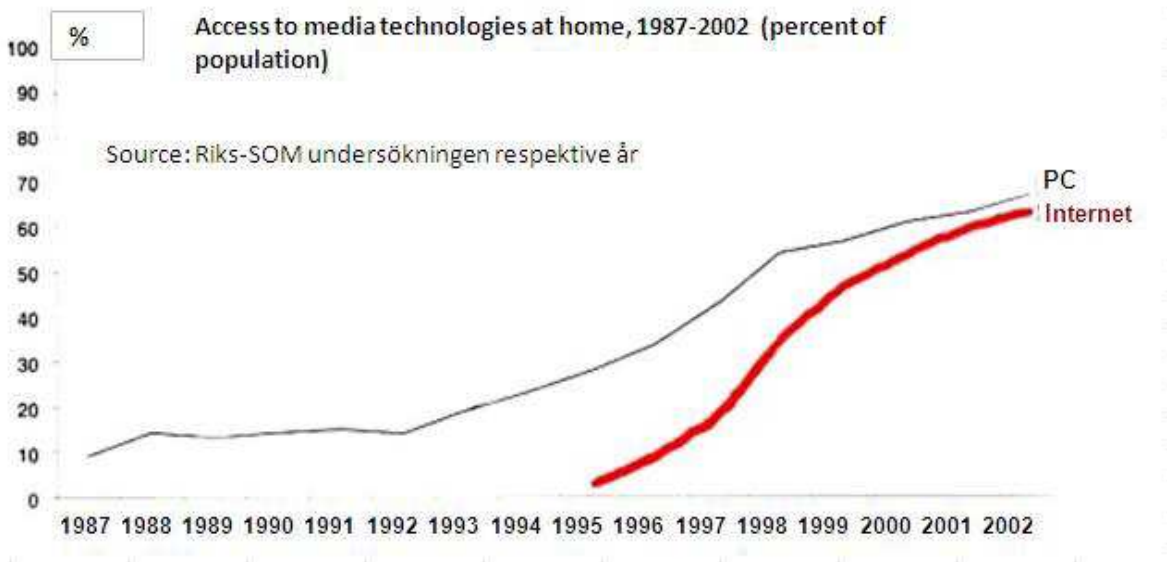
The change became apparent during the 2000's.

However, Swedish children's literature has always attracted the little readers and Swedish children have always fluctuated as frequent visitors at the municipal library.

Right now the situation is different.

Is the Internet the culprit?

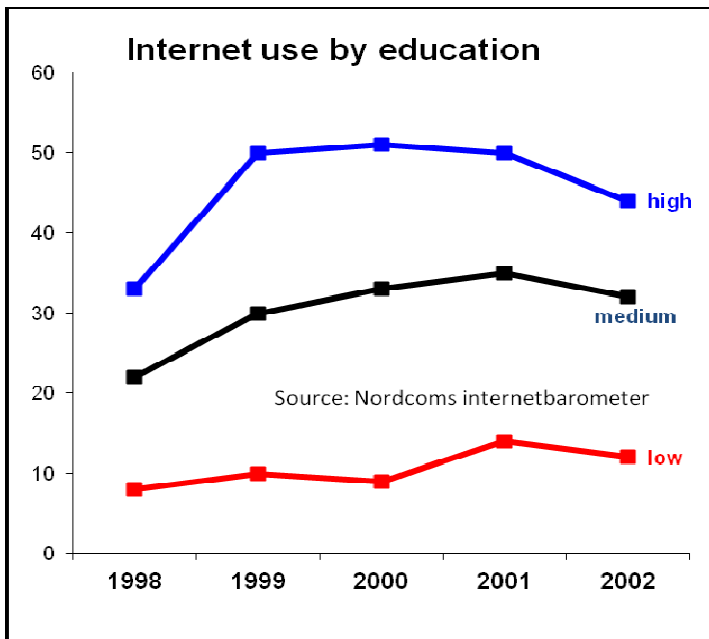
Sweden quickly introduced the Internet both in private homes and at schools.



Internet became available to Swedish public in 1994 when Algonet, the first operator, connected the Internet to the Swedish telephone network through modem pools.

In 2010 over 8.3 million (approximately 92%) of the Swedish population used the Internet, making Sweden the country with the largest number of Internet users in terms of population in Europe.

Across Europe, only Iceland, which is ahead by 97%, can be compared to the rate of Sweden.



According to table No. 4, adults with the higher education were the most enthusiastic Internet users.

How could this happen to their children that today they read less and understand written text less efficiently?

Have we introduced the Internet to reduce the literacy of our children?

Have the actual increase in the use of computers affected the reading and comprehension of Swedish children and adolescents?

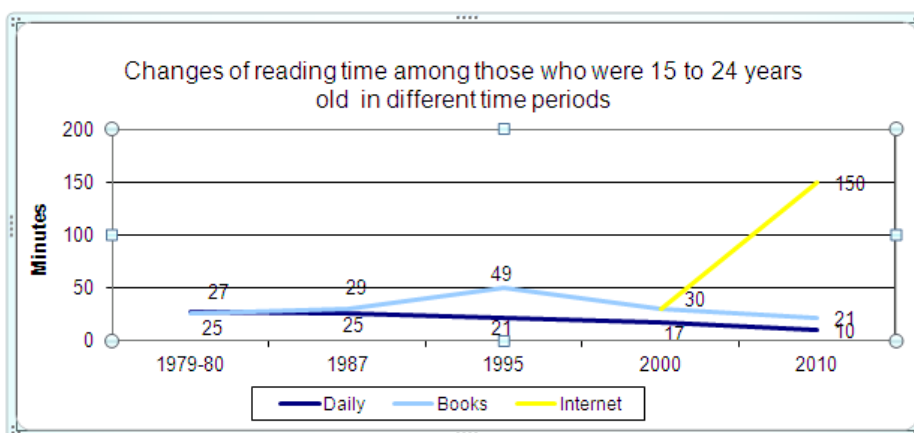
While teachers continue to discuss computers or iPads regarding their usefulness in the educational process and do not really know right from wrong, I (as a media researcher) am willing to address the problem.

Firstly, the problems that Swedish children have are now typical for children in the entire Europe as most of them have computers.

It is important for us to understand **is it really true that the computer screen change the reading ability?**

Sweden (in this case) is a gratifying example due to its extensive traditions of children's literature (which is not characteristic for other countries). So far, Swedish children read a lot.

Is the use of computers harmful to reading? I think that not everything in this situation is that bleak.



According to Table No. 5, also today reading books is a strong media habit.

Moreover, today Students have better knowledge at reading texts that contain maps, charts and the type of graphic paper information that is common on the Internet.

Is it possible that children no longer want to get into the position where they constantly read books in large quantities and no longer can be bookworms?

Those days are gone.

What has really happened?

Right now the media landscape is in transition.

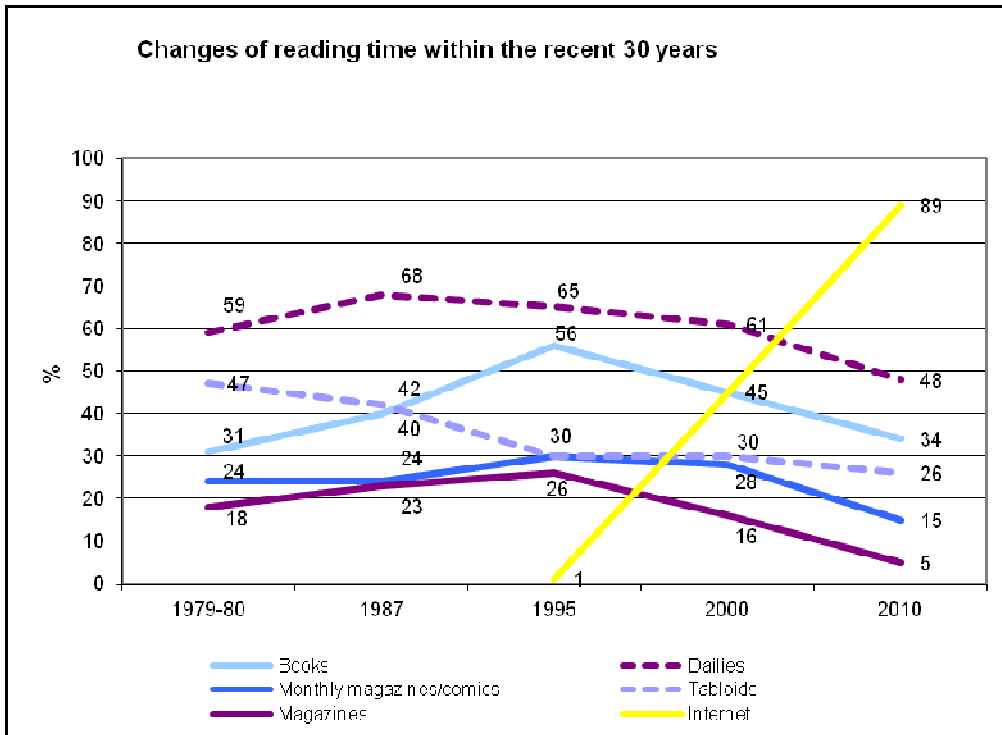


Table No. 6 shows the changes of reading time within the recent 30 years.

The world of media changes quickly.

The digital technology has introduced the term of convergence. It is an idea meaning that various forms of media are converging and boundaries between them may be blurred or completely disappeared.

What is the effect of this ongoing transformation on the media?

The ongoing process is quite complicated. We do not know if it is the end of the modern paradigm or if it "we are approaching the twilight" (Von Wright, 1994, p. 14)

Can media convergence affect children's ability to read and understand the text?

The forecast of the media guru Marshall McLuhan said that the media will influence our consciousness through its peculiar way. He believed that electronic media would make us think in directions other than the ones that dominated in the written language so far.

McLuhan was convinced that radio and television bring us back to talk (face-to-face conversation). This way we would be more intimate in our wireless communication. He preached about the global village.

It is a paradox that it was not true then, but his guesses have become today's reality.

His technological determinism is today's tribute to the Internet.

Our civilization is tied to the text and the written culture. All our documents are fixed on the basis of written language. Despite of the fact that the verbal forms of the language are closer to our way

of thinking and automatically are easier to understand (redundant), written language (entropic) is the king of the house.

The written language is capable of binding all generations together. We all have passed through the same life cycles; however, different generations have grown up under different social and cultural circumstances.

The fact that today's children and young people no longer treat book readers badly means neither that they hate the written text nor that the capacity to understand the text has deteriorated.

The recent study of Nordicom shows that development of the use of media has been stable over the last 30 years (Mediebarometern, 1993).

The number of minutes per day when Swedish people are engaged in various media is a straight line.

Behind this steadiness there has been a change with respect to the young people.

They use media as much as their parents, but their habits to use media have changed.

Little children grow up in the media world of their parents.

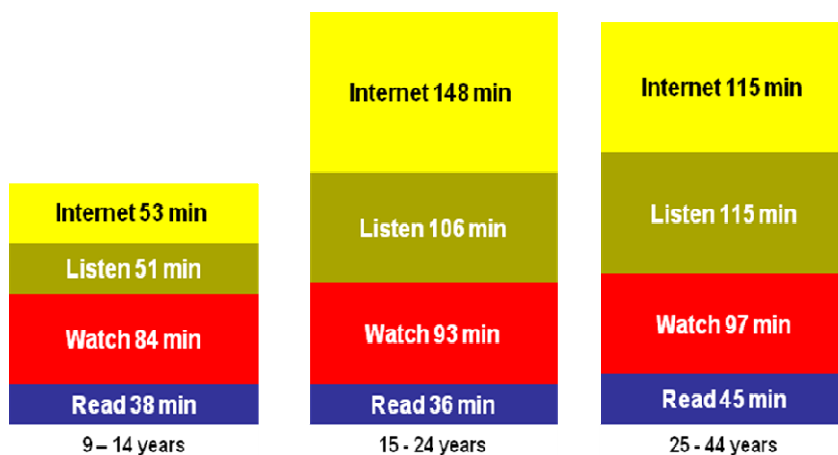
They spend their time at very early age with the noise from the radio or music player.

Then they start watching TV and videos.

Studies which investigate young children (at the age of 3 - 6 years) using media show that the youngest children watch television 101 minutes a day (Filipson, 1998, p. 5). TV is the most important and dominant media.

Currently half of the 3 year olds use the Internet in some way.

The most common activities include playing games and watching video. (Findal, 2011).



Number of minutes an average day, as young people of all ages listen, watch and read (Nordicor Mediebarometer 2010)

Later, the observed rate of the use of Internet (at the age of 6 - 7 years) is up to 90%. Majority of children is online at some point in time. 69% of them use the Internet few times a week and 25% of children are online on daily basis.

The littlest children just watch pictures because they can not read yet.

Reading comes into picture together with the school. (Findahl, 2012, p. 12).

School age children (at the age of 9 -14 years) spend more than 3.8 hours a day using different media.

Listening and watching movies/playing video games are the most popular activities.

Over the next decade we can expect an increase in the use of media, except for reading.

So we can return back to the PISA test about reading comprehension.

It is remarkable that children showed poor results when they read traditional text on paper, but they presented better knowledge with the digital test (where they read the text on the computer and wrote down their answers on the computer).

The difference was also considerably smaller between girls and boys with respect to the digital reading comprehension compared to the traditional reading comprehension (Skolverket, PISA test, 2011).

The hypothesis states that “more time at the computer leads to less time for reading” (Rosen, 2011; Findahl, 2012, p. 58), which, in my opinion, is wrong.

Every time a new medium is established, there is a discussion about the possibility that the new medium will annihilate the old media field. Television was the major threat to the written culture (Postman, 1986, p. 7).

There is a belief amongst researchers that the media with the dominating role during the growing period of a child has created a way for interpreting reality (McLuhan, 1964).

If TV has been the most important media for children, we can expect that they could never be really incorporated in the written culture.

Such was the case in the U.S. in 1977 when the number of adult readers drastically decreased (period from 1957 to 1977). Similar trends were noticed in Holland and France, where the reading time for adults decreased by 50% in the period from 1955 to 1975. (Findahl, 2012, p. 58).

In Sweden, there were a number of people who read on stable and high level until 2000.

Delayed effect of television can be explained in Sweden with the late arrival of private channels in the country during the 1990s.

It can also be explained with the new language that introduced the audio-visual media and most of the Internet.

TV is changing the way of oral representation of information (audiovisual narrative technique is different now).

Internet uses similar narrative technique that is different from the traditional literary language.

McLuhan was right. Media is a message. Information changes its appearance due to a special way of communicating, and that is characteristic for the Internet.

The same information in a book, television or the Internet looks differently.

TV has offered us the audiovisual language.

Internet goes a step further and provides the reader with the option of entering text. You can modify, adapt and live your own life or a life of another person through heavy cyber-experiences. I think that a child (who starts reading on the Internet) clearly shows that the text on the computer screen is different from the text in books.

The digital text is short, laconic, and the reader can start a discussion with text (the author).

The digital text, just like the old telephone directory, provides information rather than a readable text.

In the case of longer texts the Internet reader becomes nervous and stressed.

You cannot write two sentences on the same line or a story without illustration.

A long, old-fashioned text is simply hard to read on computer screens.

Everything must be short, dynamic, and written with inner intensity.

There is no chance that the reader will read the so-called *text next door* (that is characteristic for paper journals and magazines).

They use the Internet host to find things they want to capture.

Users look for information just as they pick mushrooms - you fill your basket only with the mushrooms you are looking for. Unknown fungi are uninteresting.

The crucial question (in this context) is complex.

Language transformation is still continuing. This is evidenced by a child who has learned the written language only through the computer screen.

Could it be that the changes a language is a sign of deeper changes in our culture?

“Culture is a conceptual system whose surface appears in the words of people’s language” (Lull, 1999, p. 130).

As the American anthropologist Michael Agar points out above, language is a level of the surface of a deep and complex system of concepts we call culture, and we can not exclude that changes in the surface area (language) indicate profound changes in the whole cultural system.

Today the communicative dimension of culture looks differently.

The fact that changes on the linguistic level take place as a progress today is incontrovertible true.

The reason and the answer for this is the arrival of the Internet or the computer monitor at the core of “Central railway station” for mass communication processes.

Until now the entire mass communication was one way traffic (mass media). Now we have the Internet with feedback. The Internet can enjoy this privilege. The established media (right now) hastens their websites to perform as the Internet conditions require. They strive to employ the possibilities of the Internet to receive feedback. Books are the last standing and waiting in the line. In addition, Internet assumes a form of “imaginary audience” (Anderson, 1983). Although the Community is not in the same room and audience probably have never been in contact with each other, they usually do as cinema or theatre audience. We can conclude that the Internet arranges an illusory, unlimited community which the print media would not be able to create.

Currently the diversity of the media and the intensification of the use of media have come to a steep hill. The established media are on the one side and the Internet and social media are on the other side of the ravine.

So far, the established media (press, radio and television) have not responded seriously against bloggers and other online discussion clubs. However, the times change and the social networks begin showing their strength and can decide the agenda for media market.

In this context there are two interesting things: language trying to move away from the written language logic to the oral language style and the changes in relationships amongst media.

The censorship and bloggers is the third aspect.

The media will not disappear; they are only gaining or losing their dominance (Veinberga, 2008, p. 332).

Gutenberg did not disappear because of Marconi and radio and newspapers still remained after all of McLuhan's prophecies implying that the electronic media will take over for good.

Today no one disputes the hegemony of written language in Western culture. Long time ago TV and radio did the impossible. They blew up the leading role of the written language in the air. Due to the television a whole new language was born, which incorporated the melody of the 80's and we learned to monitor the political theatre with symbolic expression forms (Reagan's blue eyes, Gorbachev's factory visits, etc.).

Bourdieu believes that television is indeed a real threat to all forms of cultural production: art, literature, science, philosophy and judiciary. Television is purely damaging also for politics and democracy. It is interesting, what would he write now about the impact of the Internet on art and culture?

The established culture of journalism is now forced to accept the special way of the Internet of talking to the reader.

It is clear that it is time to learn new forms of communication with the new media and public.

An extreme blog in Sweden (Avpixlat) says that "political correctness" that causes people not to dare to express their opinions is the greatest threat to the democratic society in Sweden.

People just reading silently and not daring to react.

The text on the Internet always requires a reaction from the reader

The Internet has opened doors and we have no chance of returning to the quiet reading of paper books.

We get the newspapers we deserve (Gripsrud, 1999, p. 32).

No doubt that the modern age is giving us the signals that changes are necessary.

Books needed a better look. They can be produced in multiple parallel channels more efficient than before.

We live in a paradigm shift where everything, even the habitus is under transformation.

“The system of dispositions which makes up the habitus has a generative quality in much same way a language does” (Chomsky, 1972; Lull, 199, p. 159).

If the language is in the sway, what is the health condition of the journalistic and the literary field?

The storm is over.

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