

The future of reading – a historical perspective

Pharaoh Den, fourth Egyptian king of the first dynasty called upon his royal seal bearer, "Tell me, Hemaka, of this roll of cloth made from the reed of the papyrus?"

"As you wish", replied Hemaka. "They say that words can be engraved on its surface with dye and rolled away to be stored and read again at a later date. As you know, our people have always recorded our heritage on the monuments of our time and the walls of our tombs. I don't trust this papyrus, master, it just seems so impermanent."

The empty roll of papyrus found in the tomb of the first Egyptian dynasty is the oldest known remnant of this world changing technological advancement, but, being blank, it gives no testament whatsoever to the abovementioned conversation.

Perhaps Hemaka was not technologically savvy. Or perhaps, since his fate was to be sealed in the tomb with his master, he thought this might finally be his chance to write that novel he had always dreamed of.

It wouldn't have been successful, as the novel was not popularised until the development of the more advanced and cheaper technology of paper and print. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

It is believed that language developed in Homo sapiens between 100 000 to 50 000 years ago, perhaps due to a mutation of the brain, or perhaps evolving over millennia. This development occurred alongside advances in sophistication of tools and the migration out of Africa throughout the world.

Language enabled our ancestors to communicate complex concepts, such as how to fashion tools, hunt, travel, and, in general, how to survive. Language provided Homo sapiens with innumerable advantages which enabled them to evolve, even though their actual bodies have changed little in nearly 200 000 years.

It is not surprising then that Homo sapiens next sought to find new ways to capture their new-found language. Phonetic language systems of writing are believed to have evolved over many millennia and in multiple locations. Sumerian Cuneiform script is perhaps the oldest and was reasonably well established by the 34th Century BCE, in what is now southern Iraq.

The development of written scripts coincides with the transition from the Neolithic period or late Stone Age into the more advanced Bronze Age. Significant leaps in the development of Homo sapiens as a species have coincided with these major advances in language.

Since then new technologies in writing have continued to be introduced at an exponential rate. Papyrus was used for the creation of scrolls beginning in the 4th Millennium BCE. Parchment was also later used. These technologies, however, were expensive to produce and therefore only available to the elite.

Have the Homo sapiens reached the pinnacle of their evolution? Or is there still room for growth?

The invention of paper and then finally the moveable type printing press in the 1450s meant that reading was able to spread to the masses. And spread it did; we are now at an unprecedented point in history where more than 5 billion of the Earth's 6 billion population are able to read.

A recent step forward in writing technology, is an invention we call 'the computer'. The computer is a tool which has not only streamlined production of writing: it has also enabled the introduction of a wide reaching network of communication, which we call 'the internet'. We now find ourselves in a world where information (bits of writing) can be communicated almost instantaneously across the globe.

If this is the present, then what is the future of reading? By what means will the Homo sapiens read next?

Writing and reading is a natural extension of language. The ability to develop language and writing, and to be able to read and understand this writing has provided Homo sapiens unprecedented opportunities for advancement.

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Whatever it is that the future descendants of Homo sapiens will read, they are now faced with a new challenge. There is now more writing available than any of them can begin to comprehend, let alone read.

Perhaps they will find new ways to expand their minds. Perhaps they will discover ways to combat the challenges to their survival, such as climate change. Perhaps their reading will even enable them to spread further into the galaxy, as the early development of language enabled their ancestors to venture out of Africa and into the world. The possibilities seem endless.

Perhaps there will be a group of professionals who could themselves evolve with the ever changing technology to guide and assist the Homo sapiens through this vast and changing web of information.

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