

## **On the Question of Access in the Age of Digital Technologies**

**Shweta Sen**

In 1936, Walter Benjamin, the Jewish German philosopher, literary critic, and essayist, in his article, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," claimed that films had revolutionized the common audience's reception of art presented in this new form. He argued that a movie audience was empowered by this medium itself to receive the film critically. The very equipment with which a movie was made, namely camera, lighting, crew, and machinery as well as the techniques employed in the making of the movie such as close-ups, slow motion, editing of scenes, mixing of sounds and so on facilitate the processes of audience enjoyment as well as their critique of the movie. Benjamin stated, "Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of masses toward art. The reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into the progressive reaction toward a Chaplin movie". Essentially, he claimed that film had an intrinsic potential to afford to the audience the role of a critic, thus placing them in an unprecedented position of power. Before the advent of film, art was accessible to common viewers only in churches and monasteries, palaces and courts, and subsequently in museums, salons, and art galleries where "a collective reception of paintings did not occur simultaneously, but by graduated and hierarchized mediation". Films, on the other hand, he said altered the relationship of the masses with art and democratized mass access to art. In this context, access, to Benjamin, did not simply mean physical access but intellectual and aesthetic access as well. He wrote: "The progressive reaction is characterized by the direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert. Such fusion is of great social significance." Benjamin here assumed that film, freed from the constraints of wealth, power, and patronage by which art had always been bound, could automatically equip its audience with the critical faculty of an expert. The medium of film, he maintained, had an inherent capacity to turn passive consumers into critical thinkers and even film critics.

What is intriguing is that not for once throughout the entire article did Benjamin, influenced as he was by Marx's materialist conception of history, question if the public's "progressive reaction" to a Chaplin movie was to its progressive content or to the farcical elements on which the Chaplin movies are replete with. *Modern Times*, Chaplin's celebrated satire on mechanization and industrialization, opens with the words, "Moderns Times. A story of industry, of individual enterprise—humanity crusading in the pursuit of happiness" against the backdrop of a clock face with its seconds hand ticking away followed by the scene of a herd of sheep, with a black one caught in the middle, juxtaposed with that of factory workers marching to the rhythm of clock time in order to mass produce goods for the market and its consumers. The implication is that these workers are marching onward to sacrifice themselves on the altar of the American god of happiness deified by the *Declaration of Independence*. Chaplin's left-wing sympathies expressed in this film ring loud and clear to those who are familiar with the socio-economic and ideological contexts surrounding the movie with its allusions to industrial mass production, crass consumerism, labor movements, the spiritual ennui of industrial laborers, the indignities that they had to suffer on a factory floor, and the exhortations of the *Communist Manifesto*. But the question is when the contemporary masses reacted to the comic scenes in *Modern Times*, were they all reacting to the implicit imagery and symbolism of the film or simply to the hilarious ordeal of a factory worker trying to screw nuts on an ever-accelerating assembly line? If a viewer, let's say, does not possess the contextual knowledge of the disparities in wealth and living conditions and the social complexities brought about by the Industrial Revolution, does the medium of film possess an inherent ability to fill in those gaps for the audience? Could the movie, with its direct references to class antagonism, itself be a substitute for the *Communist Manifesto*? Without having read Marx's outline of the evolution of the bourgeoisie in the *Manifesto*, without being familiar with his assertion that "free development of each is the condition for the free development of all," would Chaplin's contemporary audience have ready access to the message that he was trying to convey? If, according to Benjamin, the

viewers, while being entertained, also became “experts” on Chaplin’s movie, what constituted that expertise? In other words, when lay viewers gained access to this art form through film, as Benjamin claimed, did they also, simultaneously, gain access to its content and meaning? Yes, it can be argued that their understanding of *Modern Times* would stem from their own involvement in the system, but if that understanding remained tethered to their own experiences only, then its scope would be very limited. A deeper insight could only happen if the viewing of the film could be supplemented by the knowledge of the historical and socio-economic contexts surrounding the movie.

Benjamin’s euphoric discussion of the inherent accessibility of films comes to my mind every time I hear the word “access” mentioned alongside the term, “digital technology.” I am left wondering about the complexities that are lost in that association. It has become commonplace in secondary and postsecondary education to link student access, engagement, motivation, and success to digital technology. The idea is that, as Benjamin had claimed about movies in his 1936 article, integrating digital technology in the classroom would automatically empower and motivate students and engage them in the learning process. Some of the common assertions made by the apologists are that teenagers and youth, with the help of digital technology, are “radically changing the face of literacy,” that multimodal composition can “offer students multiple ways to understand, analyze critique and respond emotionally” to texts, that “education is undergoing fundamental changes as a result of innovation in technologies.” A significant number of these enthusiasts bemoan the fact that conservative educators are not harnessing the potential of digital technology to engage and motivate students to learn. Instead, they go on a reactive mode against its intensive use in the classroom. Implicit in these assertions is the belief that technology is all powerful, that it is the answer to a lot of the issues plaguing secondary and post-secondary education, that to provide students with technology is to equip them with knowledge—a very reductive approach to the complex processes of teaching content

and acquiring literacy, that, more dangerously, deemphasizes the need to teach our youth the means to protect themselves from manipulation by political and powerful corporate entities.

Digital technology has the capability to accumulate immense quantity of data, organize it, and generate algorithms that can be used by the institutions of power. In order to prevent being manipulated first by the technology and then the individuals and entities behind it, students have to be able to contextualize the information that they retrieve with the help of digital technology, assess its validity and veracity, ponder the questions that emerge in the process of this inquiry, and draw informed conclusions. And most importantly, they have to be able to communicate their findings, analyses, and reflections in coherent and meaningful ways. This is the process of becoming literate, and every group in an organized society has a role to play in this process. That role cannot simply be outsourced to technology. To lose control over our own learning and literacy is to lose control over our own growth and individuality. Unfortunately, often the discourse surrounding digital technology in secondary and post-secondary education forgoes that discussion and launches upon unqualified encomiums of the technology itself just as Benjamin waxed eloquent on the democratization of art through the form of film.

The language used to extoll the virtues of these “cool tools” in popular as well as academic publications is particularly noteworthy. In one such article, the authors claim that students are “ensured of discussion, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity when offered assignments that rely on social media for completion.” They wonder why educators struggle over student engagement when the “cool tools” are available in such a profusion, when a tool like Fakebook can help with “deep investigation of a subject,” when a platform like the Google Classroom can keep students motivated throughout the day, when a tool like Educreations can “empower students to take ownership of their learning.” Champions of digital technology offer happy lists of useful apps like Kahoot!, Remind, G Suite Apps, Padlet, Seesaw, VoiceThread to name a few. They assert that these tools give students agency over their own learning. A vast majority of these articles make unqualified assertions about the utility of these tools in the

classroom and make promises that cannot be met if the processes of technology integration, content mastery, and distraction management are not thoughtfully and seamlessly woven into the fabric of the whole classroom experience. While many of these articles offer inspiring ideas and explore the possibilities of these tools, very rarely do any of these arguments extend the conversation further to include a discussion of the attendant complexities. Education does not have to be dry and boring. On the contrary, it needs to be fun and captivating. But after the fun, comes the gritty part, namely, converting soft skills into hard and tangible ones, and that is where matters get more complicated. Recording student responses to narrative texts in sound files and scanning images to represent literary characters can be fun, but turning them into a coherent and fully-formed composition is challenging. Selecting Google images of the Civil War and composing a pictorial story with the images can be engaging, but fitting them into a larger historical schema necessitates careful guidance on the part of the instructor. Thus, the dual process of content instruction and technology integration has to be thought out and implemented carefully. Unfortunately, only too often, the administrative need for speed, innovation, and implementation trumps the more real and felt needs of students as well as educators, that is the needs of those who are actually in the classroom.

Further complicating the situation to no end is the monster of distraction. Adam Gazzaley and Larry D. Rosen in their book *The Distracted Mind: Ancient Brains in a High-Tech World* cite a study done by Dr. Rosen's lab that observed "students—ranging from middle-school to college age—studying for fifteen minutes in an area where they normally study. Shockingly, students could not focus for more than three to five minutes *even when they were told to study something very important.*" Gazzaley and Rosen note that "Today's college students own an average of seven high-tech devices, and most students have at least three—smartphone, laptop, and tablet—in the classroom...In the classroom, these devices provide a ready source of interruption that has been validated in many studies. For example, one study found that nine in ten students used their laptop computers for nonacademic reasons during class time, while

another 91 percent of students reported texting during class.” While technology and the nifty “cool tools” may allow students to be creative and have fun while learning with their peers, the tools themselves do not have an inherent capability to plunge the students headlong into a deep intellectual inquiry, nor to help them self-manage. The devices may come with in-built self-monitoring chips, but the desire to use them will come only when we are in touch with other humans and our inner selves, not simply with the Wi-Fi.

Moreover, technology has advanced, but reading and mathematics scores have not. According to the [“NAEP Report Card: Reading,”](#) “In 2019, average reading scores were lower for both fourth- and eighth-grade students compared to 2017: scores were lower by 1 point at fourth grade and lower by 3 points at eighth grade.” In 2022, for both fourth and eighth grade students, the scores dipped even further by 3 points. According to [“NAEP Report Card: 2019 Mathematics Assessment,”](#) “In 2019, at both grades [4 and 8], the percentages of students performing at or above *NAEP Proficient* were not significantly different than in 2017”. In both math and reading in [2019](#), only 34 percent of students in grade 8 scored at or above the NAEP proficiency level; in reading, this reflects a 2% decrease in 2019 from 2017. The 2022 report shows a further decline in the mathematics scores of the fourth graders by 5 points and that of the eighth graders by 8 points. “Disruptive technology” has indeed truly disrupted learning.

The question of access, thus, is not being readily resolved with the ever-increasing integration of technology in the classroom, but rather it is becoming more and more complex. Access is not going to happen simply by using more technology, but through a very conscious process that takes into account a host of variables—social, economic, psychological, and personal. Where the situation is so disconcerting, it is naive to assume that simply instituting newest technologies in the classroom would grant students “access” that would in turn lead to greater student success. Readiness for a digitally driven world seems to be the prime emphasis of secondary and post-secondary curricula these days. From distance education to massive open online courses (MOOC) to open educational resources (OER), to the newly popular AI

chatbots like ChatGPT, technology continues to offer us numerous means and media of instruction in order to help our students prepare for a techno-centric world, but in our euphoria over the fast-evolving technologies, we often forget that digital technologies can only supplement learning but cannot take charge of it as we often expect it to do. Every new technological innovation brings about a capital-fueled administrative rush to urge educators to embrace it. Some innovations stay for a longer time only to be eventually replaced by new ones. Others peter out as abruptly as they appear. In this ever-morphing technological landscape, the elemental need that persists stubbornly, unflinchingly is that of teaching our students how to read, write, and think critically, effectively, and creatively, so that they become competent professionals, family members, and citizens. As elemental and simple-sounding as this need may appear to business-owners, corporate executives, and institutional administrators, it cannot be outsourced to technology. Even Benjamin, who unreservedly extolled the virtues and potentialities of film, stated that “technology has not been sufficiently developed to cope with the elemental forces of society,” and it holds true still, eighty-seven years after the article was published. Access, in this context, means access into the deeper nature of things, not a click on a keyboard or a touch on a screen.