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Reading Hasn't Become Obsolete

COMPUTERS are becoming commonplace in our business, recreational and personal lives, but they will never make reading, writing and arithmetic obsolete.

Nearly everybody we know can do these things. Thus it amazes us to read that upwards of 20 million adults in the United States are "functionally illiterate." They can't read and write well enough to handle demands of daily living.

These individuals have trouble holding jobs. They suffer loss of self-esteem and fear discovery. They tend to have more accidents because they can't read signs and instructions. They are deprived of the sheer enjoyment of reading.

Illiteracy may be due to misdirection of emphasis. An example is the athlete who obtained a degree from an Iowa college and then discovered he couldn't read or write well enough to use it.

He was a victim of the system that says, "If he's six feet tall and can handle the ball, he has a C average."

There is too much of that but ath-

letes do not account for all the illiterates being turned out or dropped out by our high schools and colleges.

Other explanations offered include poor eyesight or hearing that goes uncorrected, absences from school because of illness, lack of discipline, or home and family problems.

As one educator has pointed out, if a youngster doesn't learn to read well, he probably won't do well in other subjects.

An obvious hazard society faces is that our electronic devices may accelerate, rather than remedy, the illiteracy problem. A pupil may reason, "Why should I read the lesson when I can hear it read to me on the classroom TV?"

Even adults may follow the same line of thought, because books and news reviews are available on tape cassettes. Congress adopted a resolution last year to study "the future of the book." It isn't clear what the lawmakers had in mind but we may infer an assumption that books

might be on the way to oblivion.

The electronic age has changed reading habits of American families to the point that afternoon newspapers have disappeared from most major cities. Magazines have shifted, in the main, from family interests to specialized audience interests.

We live in a world where it is said that each 40 minutes enough knowledge is produced to fill a 24-volume edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica. If we can't read well and comprehend clearly, we aren't keeping up with the world.

Public schools apparently are trying to reverse a downward trend in reading abilities of youngsters, but what about adults?

If you suppose that hearing is as good reading, think about this: Even an average reader with a speed of 400 to 600 words per minute can acquire information three times as fast by reading as by listening to an average speak talk at 150 to 200 words per minute.