

Solve Literacy, Digital Literacy Will Follow

 huffpost.com/entry/solve-literacy-digital-li_b_8052694

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August 28,
2015

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September 8 is International Literacy Day. Even though Google's recent restructuring has nothing to do with literacy, it is a curious fact that the parent company that Larry Page and Sergey Brin created, is called, Alphabet. As Larry wrote in his blog, speaking for Sergey and himself:



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"From the start, we've always strived to do more, and to do important and meaningful things with the resources we have... We liked the name Alphabet because it means a collection of letters that represent language, one of humanity's most important innovations, and is the core of how we index with Google search!"

Larry and Sergey are superpeople who were able to organize the world's information and make it accessible. Well, not quite. Organize, yes, make it accessible, no! Full access to information is far more challenging because it requires two critical conditions to be met - access to the internet and an ability to read texts meaningfully.

Addressing both, the technical and cognitive access conditions, globally, has remained for many decades, an unfinished task of governments. But since governments in many countries have failed to deliver on creating the basic conditions for access, we also look up to superpeople who have the necessary wealth, resources and ability to do good through a smart spend on disruptive innovation.

Among superpeople, there is a gold rush to innovate and commit resources to solving technical access. Broadband internet for all - balloons, drones, satellites - and digital literacy get the lion share of commitments. Yet, arguably, it is the cognitive access piece that needs solving. Basic literacy is a pre-condition for digital literacy and if we solve the former, the latter generally follows through self-drive or is easy enough to achieve through targeted interventions.

Delivering literacy, globally, is still mostly the responsibility of governments. Imagine where we would be if connectivity, the internet, search, social media were all left to governments. Literacy is at core of each of these capabilities, yet it is not at the center of big global

innovation.

We know, at least in developing countries that despite the progress, there is a long way to go in achieving genuine literacy. The word 'genuine' is important. A country's literacy rate is NOT a good measure of a population's ability to read, even simple texts.

Take India, for example. According to the latest round of the National Sample Survey (2015), 75% Indians above age 7 are literate. Almost everyone immediately makes the assumption that 75% can read. Studies have shown that over half of India's "literate" cannot read a Grade 2 level text (or a newspaper headline). At the low level of alphabetic knowledge that the government is comfortable calling people "literate," no parent would ever call his/her own child literate.

Alphabet's founding close to International Literacy Day was not intended, but it's a symbolic opportunity for those of us who have worked in the literacy space to raise an important issue for superpeople. Innovate around genuine literacy, and not just leave it to governments. Not only is it a meaningful thing to do, it has a direct bearing on your companies' bottomline. Google, Facebook and Twitter's longterm success depends on, both, technical and cognitive access to the alphabet. There are an estimated 2 billion people around the world who, even if they had access to the internet in their own language, would not be able to Google anything, let alone do something meaningful with the search results.

The longstanding global challenge of genuine literacy will not be solved by governments, nor companies led by superpeople, nor social innovators, alone. But if they come together around ideas known to work, and innovate further, genuine global literacy is achievable.

To borrow from your thoughts, Larry and Sergey, the world trusts you when you say you want to do important and meaningful things with the resources you have. Now that you've made Alphabet the parent, a hugely important and meaningful thing for you to consider would be to unleash your unparalleled innovation might to solving one of humanity's most intractable challenges, illiteracy.

Happy International Literacy Day and good luck with the Alphabet!



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