A Crusade Against Ignorance:
Thomas Jefferson’s Enduring Values in the Digital Age

By [name redacted]

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SUMMARY

While serving as Minister to France in the late 1780s, Thomas Jefferson witnessed for himself how ignorance kept the “common people” in a constant state of misery and oppression. This experience reinforced his fervor for state-sponsored public education in the United States and compelled him to argue its necessity in his correspondence. In 1786, upon hearing that an education bill would be up for a vote, Jefferson pleaded with his mentor George Wythe to argue the case that a strong republic rested on the shoulders of an educated and engaged citizenry.

In the end, it took the transformative power of the Industrial Revolution to convince policymakers that Jefferson’s values had merit. An evolving landscape of technologies, demographics, and global politics required all strata of American society to learn a whole new set of skills and knowledge that only universal education could impart. After nearly a century of public education, now spread far and wide across the world, modern science has vindicated Jefferson’s values, showing that public education is indeed the foundation for a democratic society.

We are now poised at the beginning of the Digital Revolution. The landscape of public education is changing in similar magnitude to the Industrial Revolution, but this time the new technologies have the power to bring our system closer to Jefferson’s vision. Digital learning tools can transform the authoritarian, restrictive, and test-based public education and redefine that model on the basis of discovery, active participation, and the unhindered exchange of ideas. As we move into an era of accelerating global challenges, we must remember Jefferson’s big-picture and forward-thinking attitude. We must embrace power of digital technologies to allow more citizens of the world to intelligently engage in the political process and become better “conservators of the public happiness.”
A NOTE ON GENRE

This essay is about the promise of digital technologies. In this spirit, I have built a multimedia website as my submission for your consideration. The site hosts the full text of this essay, as well as pictures, video, interactive links, and a full bibliography. My goal is not to fill the page with fluff and clutter, but to augment the reading experience and ultimately demonstrate concepts I argue in the essay.

The site can be accessed at http://www.digitaljefferson.wordpress.com/ and is designed to work with your computer or tablet. You will find the essay on the main page. To view footnotes, either hold your curser over the number that looks like “[X]” and the note will appear. You may also click the number and a new page will open that contains a list of notes.

I understand there may be practical limitations that prevent the committee from considering the online version. Therefore this document also includes my piece in a traditional essay format. It is my hope, however, that the multimedia essay will prove to be accessible. I hope the online experience exemplifies, in a small way, how new technologies can transcend the boundaries of print. Click here to begin.
LATE IN THE SUMMER OF 1786, AFTER DUNKING HIS FEET IN A bucket of ice water, the United States Minister to France sat down to complete his morning routine. Thomas Jefferson—the tall, lean, soft-spoken and increasingly famous Virginian—had become somewhat of a star in Paris as his authorship of the Declaration of Independence became more widely known. In his official capacity as Minister, and as a matter of principle throughout his life, Jefferson devoted long hours each morning dutifully responding to letters. In the early hours of August 13, 1786, Jefferson took up his pen to address a great mentor: former colleague and esteemed professor of law George Wythe.

He began with a complaint. Jefferson said that his recent book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, was written only for a private audience there in Paris. However, much to Jefferson’s dismay, a French bookseller got his hands on a copy and widely republished it *en français* and *sans permission*. A deeply sensitive writer—and an equally purposeful rhetorician—Thomas Jefferson felt the translation butchered his words and contorted his ideas.1 The leak, he said, would “probably oblige me to publish the original more freely, which it neither deserved nor was ever intended.”2

It was more than three centuries since Gutenberg’s printing press colonized Medieval Europe, but individuals and institutions were still grappling with the evolving technological landscape. How could governments encourage the publication of High Art, like translations of Aristotle, but restrict the treasonous pamphlets of a Martin Luther or a Thomas Paine?3 And how might a careful writer ensure his

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3 One contemporary attempt to control such media attacks, aimed in no small part at Jefferson and his supporters, was the set of Alien and Sedition Acts signed by John Adams in 1798.
ideas wouldn’t be leaked for the wrong audience? Jefferson would contend with these kinds of questions about communication technologies throughout his life. Scandals and political attacks from partisan newspapers would continually threaten both his political career and his beloved agrarian peace at Monticello. But for an audience as noble as Wythe, Jefferson didn’t linger on such complaints.

The letter quickly moved to substance. Jefferson observed that European papers were abuzz with news about the Virginia General Assembly, which was soon to vote on key provisions. Of particular interest to Jefferson was a version of a bill he designed as young man while serving in the state legislature. Bill 79, “A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge”, would have guaranteed, among other things, three years of free public education to both boys and girls, and select particularly brilliant boys for further education—regardless of their families’ ability to pay.

His year’s experience as Minister to France reinforced a belief that the liberty and happiness of all people depended on access to education and that only an educated citizenry could rule a nation for this common good. Should Wythe encounter anyone who “thinks that kings, nobles, or priests are good conservators of the public happiness,” Jefferson wrote, “send them here. It is the best school in the universe to cure them of that folly.” In France especially, he could attest, uneducated masses were “loaded with misery” by tyrants and hopeless ignorance, a fate he sought to suppress early in the first decades of the new American republic.

Jefferson closed his letter to Wythe with a sacred admonition:

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4 As noted in Meacham (2013), Jefferson was haunted by political attacks on his religious beliefs (he was a deist, not quite an atheist as his enemies libeled); for fleeing his duties as governor of Virginia during the Revolutionary War; and for his rumored affair with his slave Sally Hemmings—which has now been proven using genetic evidence from his and her descendants.


7 Just how serious was Jefferson, a life-long Anglophobe, in his description of French oppression? Later in his letter: “The people of England, I think, are less oppressed than here.”
“Preach, my dear Sir, a crusade against ignorance; establish & improve the law for educating the common people. Let our countrymen know that the people alone can protect us against these evils, and that the tax which will be paid for this purpose is not more than the thousandth part of what will be paid to kings, priests & nobles who will rise up among us if we leave the people in ignorance.”

While some Jeffersonisms can be manipulated to serve just about any ideological purpose, the need for an educated citizenry was at the core of Jefferson's vision. From his work in the Virginia General Assembly, his vast library, his fascination with science and native peoples, to his meticulous instructions for his own daughters, Jefferson was a constant advocate of lifelong learning. In fact his whole plan for the United States rested upon the informed political participation of “pure republican” citizens who would not only keep tyrants at bay, but who would also require a minimally intrusive federal government.

As a testament to these principles, Jefferson spent the last years of his life designing, building, and growing the University of Virginia. He hoped the school in Rockfish Gap would serve as a national model for the education of republican leaders. Jefferson felt the university was one of his greatest triumphs, listing it as one of three life achievements to be carved on the obelisk marking his grave. While

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8 As Ellis (1998) explains, much of the modern distortions come from the fact that Jefferson deftly tailored his letters to each specific audience, resulting in many contradictory statements over the years. We might say that many would-be Jefferson experts adhere to a style of research that implies that he who reads Jefferson best, reads him least.

9 In 1783, just a year after his wife Martha’s death, Jefferson wrote to his eleven-year-old daughter Patsy with the following instructions: “I expect you will write me by every post. Inform me what books you read, what tunes you learn, and enclose me your best copy of every lesson in drawing. Write also one letter a week either to your Aunt Eppes, your Aunt Skipwith...Take care that you never spell a word wrong. Always before you write a word, consider how it is spelt, and, if you do not remember it, turn to a dictionary.” Jefferson, *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. 4, 1904.

he was known to lock himself to a few dubious ideas, Jefferson’s faith in public education does seem right on track, given what we know about how individuals and societies create and maintain personal liberty, happiness, and prosperity—what we might call the common good.

And as Jefferson would be delighted to know, this relationship can now be quantified and studied.

Universal public education—and the set of cognitive abilities it unlocks, like literacy and numeracy—have been implicated in the success of democratic societies through time. In a landmark analysis, German psychologist Heiner Rindermann compared countries’ education and cognitive ability with their levels of democracy, prosperity, and rule of law during two periods, 1960-1972 and 1991-2003. The results were overwhelming. Even when other factors like wealth were held constant between the two periods, higher levels of education in a society were strongly correlated with better democracy, prosperity, and rule of law later on. In other words, Rindermann’s data suggests that Thomas Jefferson was right to value education as an investment in democracy.

Before modern science, however, the relationship between education and the common good remained opaque, and in Jefferson’s day the idea of extending education beyond legal or theological training for wealthy men was heretical. Eighteenth century education limped along in the United States as a chimera of the English grammar schools fused with a European university system that evolved in the Middle Ages. It wasn’t until some decades later, after Jefferson’s death in 1826, that a new force brought about the universal public education he envisioned. That

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11 Ellis (1998) points out that Jefferson held several patently false beliefs, for example about a supposed utopian past of the Scots before formal governments. Perhaps Jefferson’s most glaringly wrong idea was that black and white Americans could never live in social harmony with one another.


force was the Industrial Revolution.

A shifting landscape of technologies, demographics, and foreign political challenges rumbled through the traditionally agrarian United States. Factories brought millions of Americans and immigrants off of family farms and into cities. Suddenly, even Jefferson’s three years of free education was insufficient; accelerating technological development and growing work opportunities required more people to have a new set of competencies. No longer could society afford to teach kids just a few years of mathematics and Latin. The need for a more comprehensive education—one that could prepare students for a vastly different life than that of their parents—drove serious reform, restructuring, and expansion.¹⁴ This revolutionary system, which cultivated the last century of American youth, is by any measure a testament to the height of our nation’s power and ingenuity.

Or at least it was. A great many experts have argued that education in this country today is closer to a global embarrassment.¹⁵ We continue to slide backward internationally, placing at or below average compared to the rest of the world in reading, math, and science.¹⁶ In public schools around the nation, teachers are reckoning with widening achievement gaps and a drop-out pandemic. They struggle to provide for the unique needs of an increasingly diverse population of students, many historically underrepresented or underserved.¹⁷ College students later suffer from ill preparation, mountains of debt, and a shrunken job market when they leave school.¹⁸ The debate on how to mold policy to fit these challenges seems unending. Combine these complications with the economics of the Industrial Revolution—which turned our nation’s financial structure into a Hamiltonian nightmare—and we can expect that Jefferson would have much to rant about, perhaps through blog

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¹⁷ Howard, Gary. “As Diversity Grows, So Must We.” *Educational Leadership,* 64, no. 6, 2007.

¹⁸ Collins and Halverson, *Rethinking Education in the Age of Technology,* 2009.
posts from his Head to his Heart.\textsuperscript{19}

But all of that is about to change. If the Industrial Revolution slipped our nation into a Hamiltonian nightmare, the Digital Revolution is waking us up to a Jeffersonian dream. Instead of following the old paradigm of restricted access, authoritarian style, and monolithic curriculum, digital learning tools are flipping this educational tradition on its head. They suggest a future of education much closer to the core of Jefferson’s vision—that an educated citizenry is the foundation of a republic and the only possible conservator of the common good—without the contradictions inherent in nineteenth and twentieth century implementation.\textsuperscript{20} The new tools are distributed, they are participatory and interactive, and they promote an uninhibited exchange of ideas.

Once again new technologies are redefining the landscape, threatening to send another earthquake through the project of public education as institutions begin to notice the educational opportunities unlocked by digital technology. Instead of prohibiting mobile devices in the classroom, some teachers—at levels ranging from primary school to higher education—are discovering that incorporating digital learning tools in the classroom makes them more effective, equitable, and experiential educators.\textsuperscript{21}

Take games, for example. Founder of the game publisher E-Line Media Alan Gershenfeld, writing in \textit{Scientific American}, highlights that games can teach children all kinds of new skills, modes of thinking, and concepts that are unthinkable in a traditional classroom setting.\textsuperscript{22} Interactive games on mobile phones can teach young boys and girls economics, biology, or a second language

\textsuperscript{19} One of Jefferson’s most famous letters was styled as a dialogue from his head to his heart, written to the lovely Maria Cosway in 1786. Read the letter here: http://www.tjheritage.org/jeffersondocuments/Head%20and%20Heart.pdf

\textsuperscript{20} i.e. restricting women and non-white Americans from education


after a long day in the fields of India. With an Internet connection, scores of students from all over the world can be immersed in full-scale simulations of the global community, where they must collaborate to solve complex real-world problems.

Other online tools such as Skype allow students to talk directly with people all over the world and even take classes on the web. Online news, social media, and video hosting sites allow students to expand their horizons while they are in school, and they create the opportunity for limitless learning throughout life: in languages, trades, sciences, and literature. Social media and blogs allow students to add to a global conversation, where they can create content from their phones and tablets, where they can share ideas and perspectives, rather than simply absorb an Anglo-European worldview on the authority of textbooks and lectures. And they can do this from anywhere—not just the crowded college towns of England or New England, but also the farms and fields and “little mountains” of the world. Moreover, the falling cost of electronic devices means that more young people than ever—first in Tahrir Square, but perhaps also in the jungles of the Congo Basin, or even the streets of Pyongyang, North Korea—will have access to these interactive and globally connected learning devices.

This optimism is not to doubt the serious questions that we must answer about the dangers of cyberterrorism, for example, or how computers affect brain development and attention in young children, or even how artificial intelligence might upend our society. These questions need careful consideration and thoughtful answers—perhaps even formal restraint. But the balance of the Digital Revolution so far means that more people, in more places, have new tools to strip the saddles

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24 European naturalists famously claimed to know that the American West had an inferior population of mammals than Europe, prompting Jefferson to have the land searched far and wide for evidence of imposing mammals. Failing to find the wooly mammoths as expected, he settled for a set of giant Elk horns as proof. Were the skeptics of Jefferson’s time so inclined today, they could hop on Google Earth, scan every inch of the American West, and read hundreds of articles or watch dozens of documentaries on the delightfully monstrous megafauna that once roamed it. See: Meacham, Jon. *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power*, 2013.
from their backs and unload the misery set on them by today’s veiled iterations of tyrants, clerics, and aristocrats. In other words, they have the opportunity to intelligently engage in the political processes necessary to promote public liberty and well-being, the common good as Jefferson saw it.25

Educators who avoid the newfangled gadgets of the Digital Age on the basis of Facebook distractions might reconsider in light of these developments. They might remember Jefferson’s big picture, forward-thinking attitude, which asked that no generation “tread with awful reverence in the footsteps of our fathers.”26 Jefferson understood education as a fundamental part of the human trajectory, where “each generation [succeeds] to the knowledge acquired by all those who preceded it...handing the mass down for successive and constant accumulations.”27 To Thomas Jefferson, molding each generation of students based on new insights and tools “must advance the knowledge and well-being of mankind,” and in fact that “it cannot be” otherwise.28 To wield a Jeffersonian perspective in the Digital Age is to transcend the pedantry of implementation—a problem best left to the pragmatists like Adams and Madison—and to consider this big picture. It’s to embrace the power of digital technologies in building and refining our republic, to envision these tools taking the paradigm of authoritarian, restrictive, and test-based public education and redefining that model on the basis of discovery, active participation, and the unhindered exchange of ideas.

But crucially, Jefferson also understood that civilization is a merely mortal experiment; it is a living, dynamic, and ultimately uncertain project. Historical and

25 In some contexts, however, the diversity of information online can allow users to insulate themselves from reality according to their preconceptions and beliefs. In the context of climate policy, former New York Times science writer Andrew Revkin demonstrates how damaging this phenomenon can be to reaching a social consensus, in addition to spelling out the wonders of the Digital Revolution. See: MIT Climate CoLab. Andrew Revkin: Creative Tools for Communicating Climate Change, 2013.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
scientific inquiry have revealed our nakedness to cosmic, natural, and self-inflicted injury, and they now suggest that we may only be armored through expanding our collective and individual knowledge of the world and of each other. And that armor is growing thicker. Today we have the chance to enrich the next generation of children worldwide with awesome tools of the Digital Age. We sit at a moment when a ten-year-old can surf the Internet and know more about how her universe works than all the sages of antiquity combined. Our institutions should not expect this magnanimous feat to be the end of our digital path, which is met in both force and magnitude by accelerating global challenges; nor should they assume that our present institutional structure will endure as long as Jefferson’s values and premonitions.

Education “must advance the knowledge and well-being of mankind,” Thomas Jefferson wrote, “not infinitely, as some have said, but indefinitely, and to a term which no one can fix and foresee.”

29 And so can you: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universe

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