Nearly everyone reads. Soon, nearly everyone will publish. Before 1455, books were handwritten, and it took a scribe a year to produce a Bible. Today, it takes only a minute to send a tweet or update a blog. Rates of authorship are increasing by historic orders of magnitude. Nearly universal authorship, like universal literacy before it, stands to reshape society by hastening the flow of information and making individuals more influential.

To quantify our changing reading and writing habits, we plotted the number of published authors per year, since 1400, for books and more recent social media (Blog, Facebook, and Twitter). This is the first published graph of the history of authorship. We found that the number of published authors per year increased nearly tenfold every century for six centuries. By 2000, there were 1 million book authors per year. One million authors is a lot, but they are only a tiny fraction, 0.01 percent, of the nearly 7 billion people on Earth. Since 1400, book authorship has grown nearly tenfold in each century. Currently, authorship, including books and new media, is growing nearly tenfold each year. That’s 100 times faster. Authors, once a select minority, will soon be a majority.

Today, at 0.1 percent authorship, many people are trading privacy for influence. What will it mean when we hit nearly 1 percent next year and nearly 10 percent the year after as the current growth predicts? Governments, businesses, and organizations must adapt to population that wields increasing individual power. Protestors used Twitter to discredit the election in Iran. When United Airlines refused to reimburse a musician for damaging his guitar, the offended customer posted a song online—United Breaks Guitars—and United’s stock dropped 10 percent.

Public discussion creates a social conscience. In July, Dawn Staley, University of Southern California’s women’s basketball coach, complained on Twitter of rude service at her favorite pizza spot; the employee responsible was fired the next day. The judgment of Southern California’s women’s basketball coach, complained on Twitter of rude service at her favorite pizza spot; the employee responsible was fired the next day. The judgment of the vice-chancellor of Buckingham University was widely questioned after he claimed that “curvy” female students are a “perk” of his job. For better or worse, as more people make public comments, we all share more thoughts and are more subject to public opinion.

In our analysis, we considered an author’s text “published” if 100 or more people read it. (Reaching 100 people may seem inconsequential, but new-media messages are often read by millions.) Extrapolation of the Twitter-author curve (the dashed line) predicts that every person will publish in 2013. That is the ceiling: 100 percent participation by a year under this model.

But does increasing authorship matter? And is this increase a blip or a signpost?

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Increasing the stringency of the criterion for “publishing” from 100 to 1,000 readers would reduce new-media authorship tenfold, but merely delays the predicted 100 percent participation. But does increasing authorship matter? And is this increase a blip or a signpost? NEARLY UNIVERSAL LITERACY IS A DEFINING CHARACTERISTIC OF TODAY’S MODERN CIVILIZATION; NEARLY UNIVERSAL AUTHORSHIP WILL SHAPE TOMORROW’S.