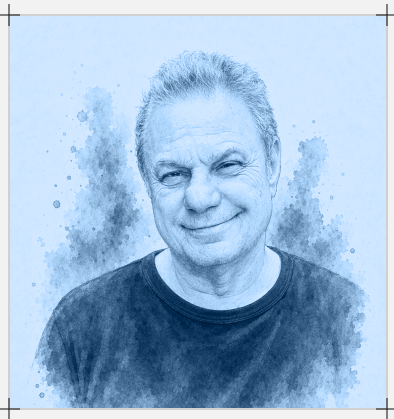


PERSPECTIVES — AUGUST 2026

Can an Industry Improve If People Can't Read?



Andrew Olah

Consultant, Gherzi Americas

I recently read an article in *The Guardian* about ESPN and basketball. And strangely enough, it made me think about the textile industry.

ADAPTED FROM THE LATEST EDITION OF THE JEANSLAND PODCAST, HOSTED BY ANDREW OLAH
· JEANSLAND.CO

The Guardian article argues that serious basketball analysis is disappearing and being replaced by highlights, shouting, arguments and hot takes. Why watch the game when you can watch the highlights? Why understand why a play worked when somebody can tell you in thirty seconds who won and who screwed up? The author describes it beautifully: we are seeing more basketball and understanding less of it.

And then the article suddenly turns to literacy. The numbers are disturbing. In the United States, 32 percent of 12th-grade students now read below the basic level. Among American adults, the percentage at the lowest level of literacy rose from 19 percent in 2017 to 28 percent in 2023. And the percentage of American 13-year-olds who read for fun almost every day fell from 27 percent in 2012 to just 14 percent in 2023.

But this isn't only an American story. The OECD, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, actually tests adult literacy internationally. The average score among the countries tested is 260.

ADULT LITERACY SCORE	OECD, 2023
The United States	258
France	255
Spain	247
Italy	245
But then look at the other end.	
Canada	271
Denmark	273
The Netherlands	279
Sweden	284
Japan	289
Finland	296

In Japan, only about 10 percent of adults are considered to have low literacy proficiency.

And here's something else that bothers me. Literacy has declined over the last decade in many countries. The United States dropped 12 points. France dropped 7. Italy dropped 5. Japan, despite remaining one of the world's best-performing countries, dropped 6. There are exceptions. Denmark improved. Sweden improved. And Finland actually improved substantially. But the overall direction isn't particularly encouraging.

Now you might be thinking: what the hell does this have to do with jeans? Everything.

For fifteen years, our industry has told itself that knowledge will transform the supply chain. More reports. Does anyone read them, or more importantly, who actually understands them? More transparency and traceability, or Life Cycle Assessments? Or regulations. Who out there has actually read them? And understands them? That's all thousands of pages of PDFs.

But there's a little tiny detail. Somebody has to read the things. Comprehend them. Read various reports to come to an intellectual conclusion.

Cotton is complex. If someone says it takes 10,000 liters of water to make a pair of jeans, okay. But what water? Rainfall or irrigation? Where was the cotton grown? What was the yield? What methodology was used? What exactly was measured?

Those questions require reading, or worse, comprehension. But in the end it's much easier to remember: cotton uses too much water. That's only 2 seconds and it's done. You are an expert. You have made an opinion.

Polyester? We can discuss petroleum feedstocks, carbon, energy, microfibers, recycling and end-of-life. Or let's just go with the 2 second fact: recycled polyester is sustainable. Done.

Indigo? We could understand the chemistry, wastewater, worker exposure, hydrosulfite, effluent treatment and the enormous industrial system required to put blue onto cotton. Or we can say: clean indigo. Done.

We have created our own version of ESPN. We have the highlights without the game. Sustainable. Circular. Regenerative. Responsible. Net zero. Preferred fiber.

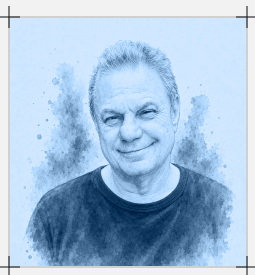
These words aren't necessarily wrong. The problem is that without literacy, knowledge and curiosity, nobody asks the next question: what exactly do you mean?

And that may be one of the biggest obstacles to improving our industry. Or perhaps even legislation in our governments. Because you cannot have progressive laws without literacy. Putting a 150-page sustainability report on a website isn't transparency if nobody reads it.

I think *the Guardian* is a credible publication. They bring up a great point. Our society is going downwards in literacy because our governments spend less on it. Or don't care. The trajectory of France, Japan and the USA all going backwards is not a good sign.

With all this said: how are we ever going to improve the textile industry if the people making decisions about it don't read?

Because you cannot improve what you don't understand. And you cannot understand something as complicated as our industry from the highlights.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Olah

Consultant, Gherzi Americas

In denim since 1979, founder of the Kingpins Show and the Transformers Foundation, advancing collaboration, transparency, and environmentally responsible practice across the global denim supply chain.

CONTACT a.olah@gherzi.com | jeansland.co