

Critical Thinking and Media Shifts: Exploring the Ethical Implications of Technological Change through the Thought of Walter Ong and Other Media Theorists

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This paper is delivered in the context of a conference broadly concerned with the contemporary cultural shift to new media of communication and information storage and its effect on lived experience. Prominent in the background of the discourse in this area of inquiry is the work of Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, Neil Postman, and other figures in the realm of media ecology who have investigated the meaning, nature, and cultural consequences of the decline of “print culture” and the rise of new media technologies such as radio, television, and, more recently, computer-mediated communication.¹ Of key importance to these figures was an understanding of the cultural shift that resulted from the invention of the printing press in Renaissance Europe.

Walter Ong is connected to these discussions of media ecology primarily by virtue of his investigations into the cultural consequences of the initial invention of alphabetic writing (written representation of speech) in the Near East. His best-known work, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, first published in 1982, explores the differences between oral cultures, which had not been shaped by writing, and chirographic (writing) cultures, which have been shaped by this invention in ways that are not obvious to us.² (Ong also had a more specific connection to these discussions,

in that Marshall McLuhan supervised his master's thesis at Saint Louis University in 1941.)³ Ong had less to say about the invention of the printing press in Europe (mainly that it amplified the cultural legacies of the initial invention of alphabetic writing) or about the new-media phenomena that he termed "secondary orality," but he did pay some attention to these more recent cultural shifts and found them important.⁴

In Ong's view, much about the way we think and the way we see the world, as well as the way our societies are structured, owes its character to the advent and influence of literacy. Ong showed this by way of contrast through a description of the features of oral culture that have been superseded or submerged by the development of writing. Much of his thought derives from earlier studies of "oral literature," meaning, primarily, epic poetry and sacred texts that had originally been communicated orally but were written down early in the literate phase of a culture. Important figures in this area of literary study were Milman Parry and later Eric A. Havelock. Ong also relied, to some extent, on anthropological studies of existing cultures where literacy is relatively new, and on thought experiments that involved attempting to imagine what it would be like not to have certain concepts and practices that must derive from writing, such as "looking up something.")

The key difference that Ong found between a primarily oral and a chirographic culture, to put it very simply, is that the technology of writing created a realm of thought that is outside of space and time, since speech, in being recorded, gained an existence outside of the body of the speaker, a persistence in time such that it could be referred to later, and a visual manifestation and character. What had been knowable only as behavior (a body communicating with physical sound), became something that we can relate to as

a non-physical object or medium with a primary connection to the sense of vision rather than the sense of hearing, and something that has some manner of existence outside of ourselves. A spoken sentence became something that could be considered as true or not true in any place or time, without connection to the situated person speaking it, and something that could be visualized.

The physical qualities of spoken language once held an importance that has waned as culture became more visually oriented through the visual representation of speech. To be able to visualize sentences and to consider them as referring to a realm of “truth” or “mind” that is connected to but separate from the physical world meant the genesis of a new kind of silent thinking—of a private, interior mental dimension. This led, in Ong’s view, to the individualism, abstraction, and intellectual separation from the human lifeworld that are part of what characterizes Western culture. These developments led to especially Western values of privacy, individual freedom, democracy, objective fact, and technological control. There is an overlap between the cultural characteristics brought about by literacy and the European cultural transitions from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance and the Renaissance to the Enlightenment. These transitions can be considered, following Ong’s thought to its logical conclusions, as amplifications of the tendencies generated by the invention of writing, aided by the invention of further technologies for the recording and dispersal of the written word.

Ong mostly did not take a normative stance in his descriptions of the differences between oral and chirographic cultures. Though one can find a modest interest in recovering aspects of oral culture that have been submerged, he was mostly descriptive, and it happens that his descriptions were of characteristics that concern cultural values.⁵

The accuracy of his characterization of primary oral cultures is open to debate and, perhaps, empirical investigation (primarily anthropological), with the possibility of finding that the invention of writing was less determinant of culture and values than he believed. Ong's ideas have an intuitive appeal that might make it easy to overestimate the influence of the invention of writing on cognition. Empirical findings that call Ong's ideas into question would be comforting to anyone who wants to resist specifying cultural values that on their face have a universal character, such as abstract thought, democracy, individual freedom, or critical rationality as uniquely or specially Western in their origin. On the other hand, if Ong's views on the importance of the invention of alphabetic writing in the development of Western culture were confirmed or supported by further research, questions of how to evaluate its effects would remain open to critique from many angles.

Part of the character of our culture as shaped in part by literacy is the worldview and values-dimension that serves as our standpoint for judging and evaluating changes and potential changes in the way that we live and the way that society is organized. At issue in the shift to new media and the development of "secondary orality" is the problem of sorting out our values, their possible technological origins, and their connection to changing conditions. Ong took a mostly neutral stance toward the cultural legacy of writing and a modestly positive stance toward the changes in progress now, but others in the media ecology field have not. Neil Postman, for example, viewed the decline of print-culture values and the rise of new media in decidedly negative terms, judging these changes from the standpoint of Enlightenment values, which he felt were in jeopardy.⁶ A difficulty arises when working with ideas about media and culture in a mode of cultural

criticism: if the values that shape one's judgments are rooted in a technology rather than in something more universal, then what is the foundation for challenging a technological change that has an effect on cultural values? This question is not avoidable; yet, to think in a situated way, as a person living in space and time, one can't avoid owning a worldview and a framework of values.

While Ong approached the values generated by the development of writing in mostly neutral terms, his identification of their origins in a specific technological change could be used as a supporting argument for postmodern critiques of Enlightenment ideas, since it serves to undercut any universal claims one might want to make for those values (equality, individualism, rationalism, etc.), and, for that matter, any claims one might want to make for a sphere of universal, perennial truth per se. (This is not to suggest that the values of chirographic culture need to make a claim to universality in order carry weight; some might find support for them on pragmatic grounds.)

This set of questions about values is particularly worth thinking about in terms of those professions and occupations that are based on texts and the communication, storage, and use of recorded knowledge. These professions, and their role in society, have a strong connection to the influence of literacy on culture, where occupations less tied to texts have a less strong connection and are guided by and promote a somewhat different set of values. One of the consequences of the transition from an oral to a chirographic culture was that documentation gradually emerged as a source of authority regarding what is true, where, formerly, verification was necessarily through the local authority of a leader. Authority moved from the person to the text. A second major consequence that Ong alluded to was that the distancing of the physical world engendered by the private

sphere of thought provided for and provoked scientific investigations that, as they went deeper into the workings of nature, required more and more textual and analytical (internal) space for the discovery, formulation, and expression of its laws.

Examples of occupations rooted in the use of text and shaped most strongly by aspects of culture that belong to the influence of writing would be scholarly work (whether in the sciences or the humanities), law, journalism, and librarianship. These professions, like any other aspect of society, are being affected and potentially reshaped by new media technologies in ways that we do not fully understand. It is possible to identify cultural values that these professions characterize and support. If this inheritance of values comes from these professions' genetic basis in written language, questions necessarily arise about the use to which new communications technologies are put by professionals and with what ultimate consequences for professional practice and for society.

To be more specific, in terms of law, will the rise to primacy of a secondary orality lead to methods wherein documentation, evidence, and rational procedure are less relevant, and the quality of personal testimony more relevant? In terms of journalism, similarly, will a personal mode of storytelling or a growing emphasis on visual and aural spectacle supplant the currently expected emphasis on objectivity and citation of sources? In terms of scholarly work, will a generation of students who are given the option of creating videos to complete assignments become a generation of scholars who blur distinctions between traditional scholarship and art and entertainment production, with consequences for our conception of truth and the role of the academy? In terms of

librarianship, will the profession be re-defined in terms of cultural production generally, or will it fade in relevance as it focuses on preserving access to documentation and texts?

It would be a mistake to understand the influence of new media that communicate by means other than written texts as simply marking a return to an oral culture. Their influence will be something different but related, and not within the scope of this paper to try to understand. It is worth mentioning, however, that although Walter Ong did not focus on contemporary media shifts and their likely consequences, Marshall McLuhan did investigate the interplay between new and older media technologies and the way that older media technologies continue to play a part in defining culture as it changes through time.⁷ (Ong, for his part, held that Western culture has retained strong elements that go back to pre-literate periods.) Older technologies continue to be used and have a place in the order of things, along with the cultural values that they had generated. Thus, we can assume that as new values take hold, the “older” values of privacy, the independent self, democracy, objective fact, and technological control will continue to exist and to motivate people alongside (or underneath or behind or within) competing values.

The question for text and document-based professions is whether to remain oriented to texts and to continue to represent the role of the written word in a context where it has become less relevant to every life, or whether to become transformed by new media to such an extent that their heretofore-defining values no longer define them. As a way out of the paradox of the technological origin of values and a step toward answering this question with more than an appeal to values, one might consider that values produce outcomes that can be weighed in practical terms. So, rather than valuing democracy because we value democracy, we can value democracy because it results in a world of

greater happiness than the alternatives. Likewise, we can value privacy, the independent self, objective fact, and technological control because these values lead to outcomes that have, we might want to say, improved the world for us. The question of whether this is the case is one that can be discussed with at least a degree more objectivity than a discussion of values per se. So, while we can recognize the ways in which the invention of writing led to such values as critical thinking, privacy, and democracy, we can refer to other reasons to be glad that it did. By the same token, one might criticize the Western, Enlightenment framework of values according to its consequences as well, with reference to such things as social alienation, environmental degradation, and alienation from the Self.

Walter Ong did not address the question of evaluating values that arises from his work, as his approach was mainly to be descriptive. It is, however, a question that people who make decisions concerning the use of technology in their professions should grapple with. Technology does not act on its own; it only has its effects according to the decisions that people make regarding its use. It is worth reading Ong to help in thinking about everyday questions in the use of new media technology, for the technology of communication, whether alphabetic writing, the printing press, radio, television, or the personal computer, has consequences for culture that, while not obvious, are open to investigation and understanding, and carry ethical weight.

¹ Lance Strate, "Media Ecology 101: An Introductory Reading List," Media Ecology Association, http://www.media-ecology.org/media_ecology/readinglist.html

² Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge., 2000)

³ Bruce E. Gronbeck, preface to *Media, Consciousness, and Culture: Explorations of Walter Ong's Thought*, Bruce E. Gronbeck, Thomas J. Farrell, and Paul A. Soukoup, eds. (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1991) xi.

⁴ Thomas J. Farrell, "Secondary Orality and Consciousness Today," in *Media, Consciousness, and Culture: Explorations of Walter Ong's Thought*, Bruce E. Gronbeck, Thomas J. Farrell, and Paul A. Soukoup, eds. (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1991) 194-209.

⁵ Thomas J. Farrell, *Walter Ong's Contributions to Cultural Studies* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2000) 29.

⁶ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985) 48.

⁷ Marshall McLuhan and Eric McLuhan, *Laws of Media: The New Science* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988)