





**Synchronic Analysis of Verbal Technology's effect on Thought, Memory, and Communication**


**Ong's Argument:** In *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong claims that the human thought process, as well as the human social process, changes with regard to each culture's use of verbal technology, including writing, print, and electronics. He states that "differences have been discovered between the ways of managing knowledge and verbalization in primary oral cultures ... and in cultures deeply affected by the use of writing" (1).



Stages of Verbal Technology	Primary Orality	Chirographic/ Manuscript Culture	Typographic/ Print	Electronic Culture: "Secondary Orality"
   	<p><b>100,000 – 6,000 B.P.</b>            Mainly prehistoric Greek, Asian, African, and Arab cultures. For example, the time of Homer in Greece.</p> <p>Note: Still today, "hundreds of languages in active use are never written at all" (Ong 7).</p>	<p><b>3,500 B.C. – 1439 A.D.</b>            First script (cuneiform) developed by Sumerians in Mesopotamia around 3,500 B.C. (83). 2,000 years later, they created the first alphabet (all consonants). Around 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Greeks added vowels. All alphabets used today are based on this alphabet. Famous manuscript cultures include the ancient Greeks and Medieval Europeans.</p>	<p><b>1439 A.D. – 19<sup>th</sup> C.</b>            Gutenberg invented "alphabet letterpress printing, in which each letter was cast on a separate piece of metal" (116). This was the time of the European Renaissance (115). Printing made words and books into "commodities" using the "first assembly line" production technique (116), eventually leading to the Industrial Revolution.</p>	<p><b>19<sup>th</sup> C. – Present</b>            This era includes invention of telegraph (ca. 1832), telephone (ca. 1844), radio (ca. 1896), television (1930's), and the internet (1970's) (Wikipedia). The 1980's and 1990's have become known as the "information age" (Wikipedia).</p>

Structure of Thought, Phrase, and Memory	Primary Orality	Chirographic/ Manuscript Culture	Print	Electronic Culture: "Secondary Orality"
	<p>Bards depended on the "shape of the hexameter line"(21), the use of epithets, prefabricated materials, and standardized formulas and themes (23). Originality was defined as the speaker's ability to adjust information to suit the current audience (41)</p>	<p>Writing allowed thought to become philosophical and analytical. The ability to review and revise allowed for a more precise and expanded vocabulary (103). Specific narrative structure was established (Freytag's Pyramid) (145). <b>Quasi-oral:</b> Lists still structured in a narrative form (as in the Bible and Torah) (98).</p>	<p>Print gave rise to the novel and the detective story, both following the tradition of a tight plot (130). Multiple print resources led to the idea of "'correctness' in language" (128).The use of white space on the page, type font, and "concrete poetry" began to carry meaning beyond words (127). "Originality" now meant creating a work that appears free from previous influences (131). Words became copyrighted property as "human consciousness [drifted] toward greater individualism" (129).</p>	<p>As narrative structures published on the internet stray from traditional structures, so too does the thinking process itself, shortening the term of retention and the amount of patience required for delayed gratification: "On the internet, readers skate through cyberspace [composing] their own beginnings, middles, and ends" (Rich). Many stories on the web "have elliptical plots and are sprinkled with spelling and grammatical errors" (Rich). Information on the internet is "[injected] with hyperlinks, blinking ads, and other digital gewgaws" (Carr). Other media have imitated this "to adapt to the audience's new expectations" (Carr).</p>
<p><b>Intellectual Implications</b></p>	<p>Thinking [was] in "mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence" (34). Thoughts/ phrases were in "fixed, often rhythmically balanced, expressions" (35).</p>	<p>The mind became free from the burden of remembering everything, so that it could begin to reason, analyze, dissect, and classify information. The first biological dissections, incidentally, took place at this time in Ancient Greece, first by Alcmaeon, later by Galen - This process eventually ended for most of the Middle Ages ("History").</p>	<p>"Print enclose[d] thought in thousands of copies of a work of exactly the same visual and physical consistency" (130). Print "diffused knowledge as never before, made universal literacy a serious objective [and] made possible the rise of modern sciences" (116). Leonardo da Vinci's anatomical studies, which emphasized the "significance of visual descriptions," coincided with the invention of the printing press (Veltman).</p>	<p>Some fear that thinking "has taken on a 'staccato' quality" and that the mind will become "hyperactive, data-stoked [and even] machinelike" (Carr).</p>

<p>Psychological implications</p>	<p>Oral cultures tended to think “bicamerally,” lacking “introspectivity ...analytic prowess ...concern with the will... [or any] sense of difference between past and future” (30).</p>	<p>“Writing is a <u>solipsistic</u> operation” (100). The writer, writing alone, became conscious of the self. The reader, who read alone, did the same. Thinking became greatly introspective and abstract, giving “attention to the interior of the individual person as distanced ... from the communal structures in which [he] is enveloped” (174).</p>	<p>Print led to further distancing of the self from the community, and created a greater sense of organization of thoughts: “Print encouraged human beings to think of their own interior conscious and unconscious resources as... impersonal and religiously neutral... [that the mind’s] possessions were held in some ... inert mental space” (129).</p>	<p>Consciousness begins to reflect from the self back onto the community, as electronics allow for faster and easier communication among the masses, leading us back to an oral culture. At the same time, the internet allows the communicators to remain faceless, and often nameless. The current era, then, contains the characteristics of all previous eras: “The oral world... ties human beings to one another in society... Writing introduces division and alienation, but.. intensifies the sense of self and fosters more conscious interactions between persons” (Ong 175). The increasing anonymity/ pseudonymity of the internet may either confuse or embolden this sense of self.</p>
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<p>Characteristics of Communication</p>	<p>Primary Orality</p>	<p>Chirographic/ Manuscript Culture</p>	<p>Print</p>	<p>Electronic Culture: “Secondary Orality”</p>
	<p><b>Participatory and interactive.</b> Listeners formed an audience. <u>Situational</u>: frames of reference were defined by the use of objects in everyday life (49). “<u>Highly somatic</u>” through the use of hand activity and gestures (66).</p>	<p>“<u>Autonomous discourse</u>” (77): the book relays “an utterance from a source... the author cannot be reached in any book” (78). Writing is a ‘one-way’ communication where writer and reader never have to meet. <b>Quasi-oral</b> in that “many texts... were commonly for public recitation... aloud to family and other small groups” (154).</p>	<p>Did away with the <b>quasi-oral</b> characteristics of manuscript culture, causing the “hearing-dominance” of communication to yield to “sight-dominance” (115). Multiple copies of texts led to the evolution of the “reading public” (133). Also led to a “sense of personal privacy” (128). “The word ‘anonymous’ entered the English language with the advent of the printing press” (Weicher).</p>	<p><b>Participatory and interactive</b>, “fostering a communal sense, [and concentrating on] the present moment” (Ong 134). Listeners form an audience “immeasurably larger than primary oral culture – ‘<u>Global Village</u>’” (134). Oral media such as television and radio depend on printed scripts (134). Communication now includes use of “social networking site[s] ... [and even] role-playing site[s]” (Rich). Thus, cyberspace also promotes “anonymity/pseudonymity” (Weicher).</p>

<p><b>Religious implications</b></p>	<p>The spoken word forms listeners into “close-knit groups” (73). This ability to unite an audience allows orality to function regularly and “integrally in ceremonial and devotional life” (74).</p>	<p>Writing preserved the stories and beliefs of most major world religions: “The great introspective religious traditions such as Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. All these have sacred texts. The ancient Greeks and Romans... developed no sacred texts... and their religion failed to establish itself” (104).</p>	<p>“The age of print was ... marked in Protestant circles by advocacy of private, individual interpretation of the Bible, and in Catholic circles ... by the growth of frequent private confessions of sins, and ... examination of conscience” (149).</p>	<p>Religions now share their beliefs openly on the internet: “Virtually, all religious movements now have Web sites, and many have very extensive materials. Some groups, like the Hare Krishna movement, have encouraged members to build Web pages, and they responded with literally hundreds of well-constructed sites. To my knowledge, only the Jehovah’s Witnesses have discouraged members from creating Web pages”(Hadden).</p>
<p><b>Political implications</b></p>	<p><u>Homeostatic:</u> word definitions and even “facts” would change to suit the audience, or current political ruler (48).</p>	<p>Writing allowed Aristotle to define and classify the parts of rhetoric into an art (108). <b>Quasi-oral:</b> rhetoric focused on speaking skills. Politicians maintained orally-based agonistic style of rhetorical debate.</p>	<p>Print allowed political discourse among the masses, often produced anonymously: “The perceived effect of anonymity on the social good includes promoting freedom of expression, enabling the free flow of information... and fostering an atmosphere where ideas are judged on merit” (Weicher).</p>	<p>“Radio and television have brought major political figures... to a larger public than was ever possible” (134). Current political candidates utilize internet sites such as YouTube and MySpace to help spread their messages (Wilson).</p>
<p><b>Academic implications</b></p>	<p>Learning was by “apprenticeship, [repetition, and] by mastering proverbs [and] other formulary materials” (19).</p>	<p>Subjects could be defined and “studied” as “arts” (108). Education was focused on rhetoric and learned Latin (both <b>quasi-oral</b>), both excluded female students (112). Teaching remained <b>quasi-oral</b> as most instructors lectured out of books, and assessed student knowledge through oral examinations (113).</p>	<p>“Print [gave] rise to Formalism and the New Criticism... [and the] modern issue of intertextuality”(130). Dictionaries evolved and grew. The first dictionary to include ordinary English words, not just “hard words,” written by John Kersey, was printed in 1702 (“Dictionary”). “With print came the catechism and the textbook” (Ong 131).</p>	<p><u>Debate:</u> “Teenager’s scores on standardized reading test have declined or stagnated” due to the amount of time spent surfing and skimming the internet, rather than reading from books (Rich). <b>vs</b> “The internet is... one of the most important tools in the educator’s toolbox [allowing for] media-rich...resource-based...self-paced...individual... learning” (Jung).</p>