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Paul A. Soukup

*Santa Clara University*, [psoukup@scu.edu](mailto:psoukup@scu.edu)

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# Orality and Literacy 25 Years Later

Paul A. Soukup, S.J.  
psoukup@scu.edu

## 1. Introduction

Walter Ong, S.J., published *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* 25 years ago, in 1982. The book appeared in Methuen Press's New Accents series, under the general editorship of Terence Hawkes, along with titles on literature, literary criticism, and popular culture. The series holds particular interest for communication scholars, as it presented general introductions to a number of areas that greatly influenced communication studies for a new generation of students. These included Hawkes's *Structuralism and Semiotics* (1977), Fiske and Hartley's *Reading Television* (1978), Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), Bennett's *Formalism and Marxism* (1979), and Ong's *Orality and Literacy* (1982). (Ong's book proved popular and the publisher re-issued it in 1988, leading some citations of *Orality and Literacy* to have the 1988 date.)

In his General Editor's preface, Hawkes explains that the New Accents series responds to the growing importance of literary studies. "Each volume in the series will seek to encourage rather than resist the process of change, to stretch rather than reinforce the boundaries that currently define literature and its academic study" (in Ong, 1982, p. ix). The series set out to explore new methods of analysis as well as "new concepts of literary forms," including electronic media. Though rooted in the academic area of literary studies and "contemporary approaches to language" (p. x), Hawkes consciously chose an interest in communica-

tion for the series. Hawkes concludes with this general guideline:

Each volume in the series will attempt an objective exposition of significant developments in its field up to the present as well as an account of its author's own views of the matter. Each will culminate in an informative bibliography as a guide to further study. And while each will be primarily concerned with matters relevant to its own specific interests, we can hope that a kind of conversation will be heard to develop between them; one whose accents may perhaps suggest the distinctive discourse of the future. (p. x)

Given the influence of the series and particularly of *Orality and Literacy*—"Ong's most widely known book; translated into 11 other languages" (Farrell, n.d.)—this issue of COMMUNICATION RESEARCH TRENDS looks back at *Orality and Literacy*: the book, its reception, and its subsequent use in communication studies. Ong's work certainly influenced more than communication, but to attempt to review all of that runs well beyond the possibility of a focused review. However, TRENDS will attempt to indicate the scope of the influence of *Orality and Literacy* with several bibliographies. And so, this issue also includes a (most likely incomplete) citation bibliography as well as—in the spirit of Hawkes's "informative bibliography"—an abridged classified bibliography of themes introduced in *Orality and Literacy*.

## 2. Orality and Literacy

### A. The Book

Even though, as Hawkes indicated in his preface, the book serves as a stand-alone survey of developments in its field, Ong regarded the book as the third member of his trilogy on studies of the word, preceded by *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for*

*Cultural and Religious History* (1967b) and *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (1977). Ong flagged the connection to these previous works with his subtitle, "the technologizing of the word." The first two books explored themes of oral expression in the context of the "senso-

rium” or combination of human senses; stages of technological involvement with the word (writing, printing, electronic); characteristics of sound and the role of silence; ways in which technological transformations interact with psychological transformation; the relationship of developments in culture and consciousness; and ideas about the relationship of primary orality to secondary orality, particularly as manifest in newer electronic media.

The ideas presented in *Orality and Literacy* had long germinated in Ong’s thought, with some elements appearing as early as in his published dissertation on the Renaissance scholar Peter Ramus (1958), and others in his three collections, *The Barbarian Within* (1962), *In the Human Grain* (1967a), and *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology* (1971). Essays in these collections developed ideas about the history of rhetoric, visual representation and visualism more broadly, systems of thought, modes of conceptualization, the sense of audience, and the general interaction of culture and communication forms. Dance (1989) regards *Orality and Literacy* as a kind of summary of Ong’s thinking, particularly in terms of how sound affects human thinking (p. 186), though the book does much more. For him it reveals Ong’s concern with human culture, life, and the role of sound—or the neglect of sound (p. 196).

In all of his explorations of these topics—visualism, sound, the representation of thought, systems of consciousness, and so forth—Ong begins phenomenologically, as an historian of rhetoric and rhetorical forms. Evidence drawn from the changes in rhetoric and the contrasting understanding and expression of knowledge in Greek and Hebrew cultures grounds his explorations and eventually directs his attention to the role of communication media. His historical data pointed to the impact of the printing press. But he shortly came to understand that writing first highlighted the changes he noticed.

Ultimately *Orality and Literacy* summarizes and presents research on “basic differences . . . between the ways of managing knowledge and verbalization in primary oral cultures (cultures with no knowledge at all of writing) and in cultures deeply affected by the use of writing” (p. 1). By his own reckoning (Chapter 1) and one confirmed by Havelock (1986, pp. 25-26), an explosion of interest in oral culture and the growing impact of literacy occurred in the early 1960s, with the publication of several books on oral and written verbalization, as well as on the composition of the Homeric epics (Lord, 1960; Levy-Strauss, 1962;

McLuhan, 1962; Havelock, 1963; Mayr, 1963; and Goody & Watt, 1968).

Ong structures *Orality and Literacy* quite simply. The introductory chapter introduces the general concept of orality, with the next two chapters explicating that concept. Two following chapters address writing and literacy, with the next chapter examining narrative from oral and written perspectives. Ong concludes with a number of “theorems” in which he ties the historical information in the first six chapters to current trends in literary studies.

In Chapter 1 Ong introduces and situates his main concepts, all concentrated on the understanding of the “oral character of language” (p. 5). Here Ong reviews work in linguistics, applied linguistics, and sociolinguistics, particularly as they examine the dynamics of oral versus written verbalization. Ong’s concern lies with language, but his background in literature cautions him and his reader against the academic prejudice towards and emphasis upon writing. And so here he stresses the importance of oral expression in cultures as well as the then-newly-growing appreciation for expressions like epic poetry and performances.

Chapter 2 provides a history of the awareness of the oral tradition, from ancient times to—really the focus of the chapter—the modern exploration of the Homeric question. That question dealt with the understanding of the composition of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and their subsequent place of honor in the Western canon. Who “wrote” those poems? How? Generations had debated the question and Ong summarizes the responses, which he uses—particularly the work of Milman Parry (1928), Albert Lord (1960), and Adam Parry (1971)—to situate the current understanding of orality and primary oral cultures. He also shows how this newer understanding of primary oral cultures has informed the study of African, Asian, Arabic, and American narratives and expression. Finally, Ong introduces the work of Havelock (1963) that explores the consequences of the shift from primary orality to writing as a means of expression. In this context, he calls for more research from a wide variety of disciplines, but especially those that address questions of consciousness (pp. 28-30).

When many people think of *Orality and Literacy*, they perhaps immediately recall Chapters 3 and 4 since these two central chapters offer elegantly crafted summaries of the studies of orality and literacy. In Chapter 3, “Some psychodynamics of orality,” Ong sets out “to generalize somewhat about the psychodynamics of pri-

mary oral cultures” (p. 31). Acknowledging the difficulty that a literate person has in imagining how one who does not have an experience of writing expresses oneself and, based on those expressions, thinks, Ong begins with a consideration of sound and the human experience of sound. Sound is immediate, temporal, and active. Words are not marks on a page, but names, incantations, events (pp. 32-33). Within the oral culture, people only know what they can recall and so memory techniques become vitally important as do memorable forms of expression (pp. 33-36). Ong then continues to list nine characteristics of orally based thought and expression, along with the evidence from anthropology, linguistics, literary studies, and rhetorical studies that supports his argument. (One difficulty arises here, as in other places in the book: Ong’s clear, almost effortless, writing sometimes leads readers to reduce his chapter to a bullet list of the nine headings, omitting the carefully nuanced descriptions.) After describing those nine characteristics, Ong returns to the nature of verbal memory and how the techniques of memory (music, rhythm, or movement, for example) interact with the remembered material. These considerations lead again to a consideration of how the demands of memory affect the life style of the members of an oral culture, including how they shape narrative characters and community identity. These things, in turn, affect ways of thinking and ultimately consciousness.

Next comes a contrast with literacy. Writing, widely acquired only slowly over centuries, changes cultures through changing patterns of expression, or, in Ong’s title of Chapter 4 “Writing restructures consciousness.” The restructuring Ong has in mind comes to individuals through their cultures and comes in different ways: for example, where writing replaces a dependence on memory to preserve culturally important things, people both remember more and have time to think about other things (pp. 96-101). But before Ong tells that story, he describes writing and doubts about it (“context less,” p. 78; absent an author, p. 79; external to an individual, p. 79; passive, p. 79; destroying the social order, p. 80). Writing is artificial, a technology (p. 81) with a particular history of scripts developed in a number of cultures, but only one alphabet (pp. 85-96). Cultures had to adapt to this new technology of writing, which they did, but over centuries, inventing uses for it and adapting existing customs to it, as for example its status as legal evidence (pp. 96-101). With this general introduction setting the stage, Ong suggests “some dynamics of textuality” (p. 101),

not quite in parallel to his treatment of orality, but calling attention to what writing does to cultures and people. For example, writing removes people from direct or live interaction with one another, justifying solitude (pp. 101-102); writing allows or even encourages a distance between person and text (p. 103); writing supports an economy of style and the ability to polish text, removing inconsistencies (p. 104); writing establishes a “correct” form of a language (p. 107). Ong returns to the history of rhetoric to show how modes of expression, persuasion, and proof change with writing (pp. 109-112): the evidence remains frozen in texts preserved across the centuries. In all this, though, orality and traces of oral expression do not disappear—oral expression remains natural to humans where writing is always something learned.

As he did with the paired chapters on orality, Ong does here as well, but in the instance of Chapter 5 “give[s] some brief attention to print, for print both reinforces and transforms the effects of writing on thought and expression” (p. 117). Drawing on the work of scholars as varied as Clanchy (1979) and Eisenstein (1979), Ong examines what happens with print. Because of its automated nature and its identical pages, print promotes indexing texts (p. 123); it more definitively creates a sense of an object that contains information (p. 126); and it allows the creation of meaningful space—not only words but page layout can convey meaning (p. 127). Over time other consequences of print emerge: dictionaries (p. 130-131); private ownership of words and ideas, leading eventually to copyright (p. 131); and a sense of closure on the one hand and intertextuality on the other (pp. 132-133). Ong takes the opportunity of this chapter to briefly note electronic media as the next stage in the evolution of communication technologies and to introduce in this context what he had first noted in his 1971 *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology*: the idea of secondary orality, that is, the re-emergence of orality in these new acoustic media, bringing with it again the distinctive characteristics of oral cultures (p. 135-138).

So far, then, *Orality and Literacy* introduces its twin concepts of spoken expression and written expression, paying close attention to the research that reports discoveries about their nature and consequences. In Chapters 6 and 7, Ong stays closer to his roots in literary studies and the history of rhetoric in order to better demonstrate the impact of this kind of study. Chapter 6 addresses narrative, story line, and characters as they appear in oral expression and in written texts. As

authors internalize writing, Western literature (the object of Ong's study) shows a shift in narrative structure as well as a change in the kinds of characters that inhabit that narrative. These shifts, he notes, correlate as well with the different sensitivities of hearer or reader.

Ong concludes the book with what he terms "some theorems" in Chapter 7. They are "more or less hypothetical statements that connect in various ways with what has already been explained here about orality and the orality-literacy shift" (p. 156). In these theorems Ong shows the relevance and promise of examining media shifts by engaging key elements of literary theory: literary history, New Criticism, Formalism, structuralism, deconstruction, speech-act theory, and reader-response theory. In each instance he makes claims as to how the historical and psychological understanding of oral cultures (and writing cultures) challenges basic assumptions of each theory. In turn, he invites students of each area to more fully engage the orality-literacy discoveries. He closes by moving the discussion in an interdisciplinary way. Any discipline that engages texts needs to know more about the nature of texts; any discipline that has an historical consciousness needs to know how even the very conceptualization of a "text" changes over time. Here, he invites philosophers, Biblical scholars, and social scientists in particular to re-visit long-held conclusions. Finally, in a forward-thinking expansion consistent with the New Accents series, he opens the door to a consideration of the media. While resisting a transportation model of communication, he stresses communication's human dimension and—true to his discussion of the impact of writing—notes that the transport model shows the impact of writing, since writing cultures "regard speech as more specifically informational than do oral cultures where speech is more performance-oriented, more a way of doing something to someone" (p. 177).

### B. *The Book's Reception*

Reviewers, particularly those associated with rhetorical or communication studies, generally received *Orality and Literacy* quite favorably, recognizing its scope and noting that it provides a solid introduction to the areas under study. Some reviewers noted limitations and others felt that Ong's division between oral cultures and literate ones proved too stark.

Lippert (1982) sees the book as "an unprecedented work of synthesis" that "weaves a tremendous amount of material into a single compact thesis" (p. 401). Predicting that the book will become a "landmark" (p. 402) for cultural and communication studies,

he highlights its method, particularly in focusing the examination on the interface between cultures, as occurred in the culture of classical antiquity or the medieval period when oral cultures (the culture of the great mass of people) more clearly interacted with the chirographic ones of the educated elites.

Writing in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Gronbeck (1984) praises the book as "both accumulative and analytical," "traditionalist and radical." "It solemnly pays homage to great anthropological, rhetorical, linguistic, and classical scholarship" (p. 207). He finds it an invaluable resource, but he recognizes that it will not satisfy all.

How might we evaluate it? Students of rhetoric, of course, will applaud its celebration of their self-interests and its discussion of rhetoric's classical/renaissance/contemporary heroes. Though Father Ong is careful to note that: "Orality is not an ideal, and never was" (p. 175), oral language and culture assuredly are the foci of the book. Perhaps this is only natural for someone underscoring the existence and operational features of oral culture in a time when writing and print dominate communication studies. But, more than that, given Ong's position on the interiority of the spoken word—his ability to harmonize psychological and experiential life—he certainly does more than present us with dispassionate evidence of orality-literacy relationships. In spite of his effort to discuss briefly the virtues of literacy cultures (especially in Chapter 5), Ong cannot help himself; orality and life in oral culture are lionized. Rhetoric and rhapsody together forge mind and life into a whole.

The book, however, will be read, one suspects, in quite a different manner by literary theorists and critics. The arguments of Chapter 7 . . . are not dilated fully enough to have an impact on the works of such giants as Claude Levi-Strauss, Jacques Derrida, Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, H. P. Grice, Tzvetan Todorov, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Lacan. Ong's pivotal notion of "oral residue" which ultimately makes writing a "pre-text" needs more complete integration with the methods of these currently popular theorists before his arguments can run. (pp. 207-208)

Gronbeck's balance seems prophetic. Reviews in journals of rhetoric, communication studies, and philosophy do indeed praise the book, while those in literary studies appear more cautious.

Enos (1984) in the *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* calls the book "brilliant" and then highlights what for

him forms the book's lasting importance. "Ong's great contribution is in showing how the transformation and adaptations of classical rhetoric from oral to written discourse helped transform the cognitive processes of cultures; in brief, the adaptation of rhetoric to new technologies helped restructure thought—even in societies which retained a 'heavy oral residue' (p. 99)" (p. 157). This recognition that Ong concentrates on rhetoric and expression will set the stage to refute the claims of some that Ong sets up a "great divide" between human cultures based on writing.

Bacon (1983) also praises the book, but cautions about its generalizations:

It is probably out of necessity that Ong yields (with enthusiasm) to large generalizations. It would require, as he notes, a far longer book to deal with all the ramifications of the views he champions. One must be sympathetic; but it is also possible to feel that the generalizations are often too large, the considerations of physiological processes of the human mind too briefly sketched, to quiet the uneasiness which readers may feel in following the flood of detail amassed in the volume. While the essential view is persuasive, to accept the argument in full remains in part an act of faith. (p. 271)

Theological journals accepted that "act of faith," as their reviewers recognized *Orality and Literacy's* sweeping view of culture and communication, and its implications. Farrell (1982) and Rule (1983) praise the book in brief reviews, with Farrell providing a nuanced support for Ong's arguments by reference to the work of Bettelheim (p. 365). Another theological reviewer connects Ong's key question—"What difference has the advent of written language made in how people think, in how they see the world and act in it, and how they communicate their experiences to others?" (Kerr, 1984, p. 346)—with the more contemporary concern of "whether we will see similar change with move to computer- and video-based electronic communication" (p. 354).

Not everyone agreed with these purely positive evaluations. Of the reviews contemporary with the book's initial publication, Blom (1983), writing in *English Studies*, raises the most issues. Noting that Ong begins by rejecting a number of received notions about oral cultures, Blom questions Ong's own suggested theorems in Chapter 7. Then he adds:

However, even if most of the book is speculation (in spite of the semblances of scientific evidence every now and then) Ong makes a number of

points worth contemning. His main theory is that "orality"—meaning the culture of non-literate societies—implies a framework of thought that is fundamentally different from that in any literate society. (p. 183).

Noting Ong's use of Luria's research to support some of his conclusions about oral cultures, Blom concludes, "One might well wonder here how far Ong's conclusions relate to primitivism rather than to orality" (p. 183). He goes on to adduce the sophistication of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in refutation of Ong's position and later, in another context, draws a parallel to "Ong's pious manipulation of scientific evidence" (p. 184).

Not everyone in literary or discourse studies rejected the book. More recently, on its 20th anniversary re-printing, Dafouz-Milne (2004) praises the book for its interdisciplinary value:

It has offered me the opportunity to go beyond a linguistic framework and adopt an interdisciplinary view in which literature, anthropology, social psychology, and philosophy intermingle in a surprising and compelling way. To conclude, I believe that Ong's lucidly articulated theories and firmly documented examples make this book a standard introduction to the topic of orality and literacy, but, most importantly, make this book a pleasure to read. (p. 794)

Most reviewers of the book have given it a positive critical reception, though, as we have seen some have raised questions about Ong's seeming dichotomy between oral cultures and literate ones. More general press reviews judged it less suitable for the general reader. Leader (1983), writing in *The Times Literary Supplement*, objects to the repetitive and summary quality of the first chapters, but welcomes the newer material toward the end. Moore (1983) in *The Christian Century*, while finding the book rich in detail, raises "the minor criticism" that it seems like an annotated bibliography. Whatever the overall judgment, *Orality and Literacy* did receive wide attention. In addition to those mentioned here, reviews also appeared in the following publications: *Comparative Literature* (1984), *Choice: Current Reviews for Academic Libraries* (twice: 1983, 1995), *College Composition and Communication* (1985), *Commonweal* (1992), *Journal of Communication* (1984), *Journal of Education* (1989), *L'Esprit Createur* (1984), *New Catholic World* (Gaffney, 1983), *The Review of English Studies* (1985), *The Sociological Review* (1984), *Village Voice Literary Supplement* (1984), and *World Literature Today* (1983).

### C. *The Great Divide and Other Criticism*

One part of Ong's presentation—the contrast between oral cultures and literate ones—has perhaps received more attention than other parts of the book. The status of this thesis, particularly what Blom calls primitivism and others have regarded as a “great divide” theory, has triggered debate over the years. Ong's need to generalize in the presentation of so much prior work allowed critics to read into the text, particularly in terms of a long-standing anthropological debate about the development of cultures.

In reviewing Havelock (1986), Connors (1988) notes the criticism after remarking how Ong had brought Havelock's work to bear on any number of literary and cultural issues. “Goody and Ong have in their turn been strongly criticized by other students of literacy, most notably Brian Street, for their equation of an autonomous and monistic ‘literacy’ with rationality, logic, and meaningful cultural development” (p. 380). He goes on to write that Street “makes the point that there are numerous literacies, and that to believe that reading-writing abilities in contemporary culture *create* cognitive abilities or constitute the only meaningful sort of literacy is narrow and discriminatory” (p. 380). Connors defends Havelock as taking a more narrow view, one restricted to his work as a classicist, but does not address the larger criticism he reports about studies of orality and literacy.

In his review of the same book by Havelock (1986), Enos (1987) sees Havelock's book as a companion piece to *Orality and Literacy* and notes that “Ong impresses by breadth, Havelock by his depth” (p. 209). However, he adds a word of caution to those who might conclude that Ong supports a “great divide” theory:

So enticing are their insights that both tempt the reader to over-extend, and over-estimate, the impact of literacy. Perhaps, however, that is a fault resting with the reader rather than with these two authors. In our eagerness to (at last) offer the scholarly world a clearly stated concept that makes speaking and writing relationships apparent, we have taken the observations of these two men more as definitive claims rather than cogently articulated descriptive frameworks waiting for research that will sharpen understanding further. Ong and Havelock have not answered the questions surrounding orality and literacy, they have shown that valid and important questions exist, ones that need to be answered. (pp. 209-210)

These two views (Connors and Enos) sketch out in a very rough fashion how readers have evaluated this one disputed reaction to *Orality and Literacy*.

The reaction gathered fuel from the publication within a few years of *Orality and Literacy* of a number of studies about the relationship of oral cultures to those with writing. Connors mentions Street (1984). Ruth Finnegan in *Literacy and Orality* (1988) sketches the argument against a “great divide,” noting that the ethnographic and historical data do not support such a strict division. The next year Schousboe and Larsen in *Literacy and Society* (1989) support Finnegan's position by, like Street, emphasizing the uses of literacy, while other contributors to their collection criticize a focus on technologies in addressing the basic questions. (For more on this debate, see Collins, 1990.) The collection edited by Olson and Torrance (1991) attempts to present both sides of the debate, drawing on cognitive or psychological evidence as well as examining ethnographic case studies.

Other scholars have lined up in various ways. In his intellectual biography of Ong, Farrell (2000) strongly argues against those who attribute a “great divide” theory to Ong, agreeing with Enos that they have read things into *Orality and Literacy* that simply are not there (pp. 16-26; 156-163). Tannen (1988) rejects any kind of reading that orality and literacy form a dichotomous pairing, but argues that they are “complex and intertwined.” In support of this, she cites Ong's work: “My current understanding of the complexities of discourse derives from analysis of strategies that have been linked to orality and literacy and was inspired by the vast and deep body of work Fr. Ong has given us, as well as by the work of many others who were inspired by his work” (p. 40). However, the confusion triggered by the debates has led her to move away from the orality/literacy terminology. She then further develops the point and clarifies that she does not regard Ong as holding for any kind of divide theory:

Underlying the imputation of causality between orality on the one hand and a deficiency in literacy on the other is an assumption of mutual exclusivity—in other words, that individuals and cultures are either oral or literate, not both. Father Ong's monumental work has shown the complex interrelationships between orality and literacy (his bibliography lists 18 books; for a succinct statement of his views see Ong 1982). My own research affords crucial counter evidence as well. . . .

I have tried in this paper to reinforce the point

frequently stated by Father Ong but sometimes forgotten when his theories are applied, that orality and literacy are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they are complex and intertwined dimensions, the understanding of which enriches and enables our understanding of language. (p. 42)

Finally, Rubin, Hafer, and Arata (2000) offer a more recent elucidation of the issue as they report their empirical testing of “reading and listening to oral-based versus literate-based discourse” (p. 121). Like Tannen, they choose not to use the terms, orality and literacy, because of the confusion about whether their use implies a divide. Ong’s work as a cultural historian of literacy may sketch things too broadly, they note. Following Gee (1989) and Street (1984), they prefer to look at “the functions to which cultures or individuals put literacy” (p. 123).

Others have criticized *Orality and Literacy* on other grounds. Some find Ong dismissive of orality or prejudiced in favor of literacy (Dauterich, 2005, p. 27—though he acknowledges that such an interpretation is misleading) while others credit him as a “staunch defender of oral literacy” (Long, 1986, p. 3).

While recognizing the value of *Orality and Literacy* in laying out the issues, Jensen (1990) notes in passing that “earlier work [in which he includes *Orality and Literacy*] has overstated the transition from a print culture to a visual culture” (p. 135). He then goes on to qualify the transition based on historical evidence uncovered by other scholars. Similarly, though they make use of the book to support their argument about writing, Ono and Sloop (1992) feel that some of the claims made in *Orality and Literacy* need revision in the light of later research:

For example, Ong’s (1988) argument that primary orality was fundamentally a pre-Gutenberg Press phenomenon might now be revised with greater consideration given to the cultural differences between African and Asian orality before the European shift (importation) of orality to Greece. We are not saying that Ong believed orality was conceived by the Greeks. We are suggesting that Ong privileges a moment in Western culture, the typographic printing of the Gutenberg Bible, to the exclusion of a wider perspective of culture that sees Africa and Asia as central moments in the genesis and revelation of orality (one is hard pressed to find more than a sentence or two on Africa in his book). (p. 57)

Elmer (1997) also finds the book valuable, noting that “. . . most researchers of the Internet have turned to the likes of Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong in communication theory or William Gibson and James Joyce in literature to sketch a largely corporeal view of contemporary Internet culture. . .” (p. 182). His own interest in the process and consequences of an index leads to a footnoted critique of one small part of the book: “By way of comparison, Walter Ong’s (1982, p. 123) discussion of the index tends to conflate its possibilities or qualities with that of the simple list, in so doing limiting an understanding of space to that of the structure of the printed word on a page (which is forthwith juxtaposed against the form and structure of the spoken word)” (p. 190). Each of these criticisms generally accept the overall accomplishment of *Orality and Literacy* but find that the book does not go far enough.

More serious criticism comes from those who question one or another premise of the book. Ess, Kawabata, and Kurosaki (2007) do so in the introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* in which they connect Ong’s work in *Orality and Literacy* to that of Harold Innis (1951), terming the perspective the Innis-Ong thesis—“perhaps the single most influential theory in communication studies in the latter half of the 20th century.” They continue, “however, this approach has come under criticism on several points, beginning with its tendency toward a technological determinism that is no longer seen to hold up in the face of empirical evidence” (p. 953, note 1). Ess had made that point in greater detail in an earlier essay where he questions the claim that changes in communication media (from orality to literacy, for example) lead to a “profound *cultural* revolution” (Ess, 2004, p. 30, italics in original). For him, “the categorical distinctions between *orality* and *literacy* are increasingly suspect—precisely in light of more recent analysis of computer-mediated communication” (p. 30, italics in original). What he finds in these studies indicates a continuity of the categories. He also criticizes the thesis for its philosophical assumptions of technological determinism and neutrality of media (p. 31). Given that he conjoins the work of Ong with that of Innis as well as McLuhan, he may read into *Orality and Literacy* things left unsaid by Ong.

Biakolo (1999) also faults the general thesis about orality and literacy and sees problems both with Ong’s dependence on other scholars and with his underlying assumptions. Under the first heading, one problem lies in “the binarism represented by the contrast of the two

terms” (p. 42), a criticism voiced by Ess and other post-modern thinkers. The separation of orality and literacy also raises for Biakolo the warning flags already indicated by the “great divide” theory (p. 50). The latter heading leads him to focus on just one aspect of the book:

But before going on to the actual mental and cultural paradigms that his description entails, we need to address the validity of his interpretive strategies and of his foundational premises. This can be done by examining his notion and use of the categories of time and space. Ong’s arguments are so skillfully and authoritatively presented, with such a welter of scholarly references, that some elementary questions that need to be raised are quickly forgotten in the breath-taking force and boldness of the conceptualization. For instance, how can it be said that sound is oriented to time merely because it cannot be arrested in time? Is not the contrary equally true, namely, that sound is not oriented to time for the very reason that time cannot capture it, that it too quickly progresses through it? . . .

At the source of the problems that Ong’s description raises is his conception of time and space. These two terms are notorious for the central but not always convincing stage they have occupied in philosophical debates since Newton and Leibniz. Those debates are only of marginal concern here, but it is important to note that Ong sometimes speaks of time in chronometric terms, and at other times in a kind of philosophical absolutism that is not even Newtonian but, rather, grossly physicalist. Time seems to him to be an inert mass spread-eagled in some nondescript reality and from whose bulky continuum

the spoken word is in a hurry to get away. We can compare this to the very sensible Kantian idea of time and space as a priori intuitions that do not inhere in the objects of experience, and enable us to represent them as distinct from ourselves and each other. (p. 44)

Biakolo continues his well-reasoned criticism by drawing on examples and experiences of African culture. He concludes with an acknowledgment of the challenge that Ong faced in *Orality and Literacy* and of the benefit of the development of postmodern thought: “It is to the credit of Walter Ong that he has unearthed, howbeit unintentionally, how cognate the oral-literate dichotomy is with the variety of cultural and racial prejudices which are dignified with the appellation of science . . . No field seems to be immune from this” (p. 62). He finally notes that all studies tell us as much, if not more, about the cultures in which they originate as they do about those they would study.

The benefit of all of these critiques comes from the debate about orality and literacy spurred on by Ong’s book. Ong himself noted that the area calls for more research and understanding. Part of that understanding will emerge from agreement on terminology; agreement on just what different scholars study under the rubric of “orality” or “literacy”; and agreement on how we might assess the personal, cultural, psychological, and epistemological impact of communication technologies. Scholars in a variety of areas certainly took up the challenge. In addition to those already mentioned, the late 1980s also saw work published about orality and literacy in classical antiquity (Lentz, 1989; Harris, 1989; see also Russo, 1991, for other titles).

### 3. After *Orality and Literacy*

*Orality and Literacy* has had a continuing influence upon communication studies, becoming one of those books that appears on a great number of reading lists for graduate students and cited in undergraduate syllabi too numerous to count. Farrell (personal correspondence, September 30, 2007) even suggests that it is not cited more frequently because a generation of graduate students has come to intellectual maturity hearing of it so often that they take for granted its impact. A number of studies noted below do indeed seem to assume its importance and cite it almost in passing. More, however, use *Orality and Literacy* for

general background for a given research or experimental study; for specific evidence to support a contention about speech or writing, for example; or for material to situate a particular thesis.

In an attempt to sketch the impact of the book, this review will briefly examine studies in the following seven categories, staying mostly within the ambit of communication or communication-related research: orality and literacy or writing; oral cultures; rhetorical studies; studies of writing and print culture; new media and media ecology; computer-mediated communication; and more general studies.

### A. *Orality and Literacy Studies*

Not surprisingly, any study done after 1982 exploring oral cultures or the acquisition of writing by oral cultures will make reference to Ong's work, either to disagree, as noted above (Street 1984; Finnegan 1988; Schousboe & Larsen, 1989) or to address the contentious issues (Olson & Torrance, 1991). De la Cardid Casas (1998) draws on *Orality and Literacy's* sketch of the relationship between speech and writing, especially the idea of a "grapholect" to analyze how Caribbean English creoles serve as a "poetic resource for the subversion of English colonialism" (p. 5). Kaschula (1995) approaches oral cultures and the interaction with literacy from an African perspective, in the analysis of the use of Xhosa poetry techniques in preaching styles. He warns, "One needs to be careful not to be rigid in one's views of what exactly should make up orality as opposed to literacy in a society where both clearly co-exist side by side" (p. 72) and feels that Ong's description is too close to the great divide theory. His observations begin in a close reading/hearing of discourse, both written and oral. As we have seen, Biakolo (1999) most clearly sets up a debate with the thesis of *Orality and Literacy* as he attempts to develop the "theoretical foundations" of orality and literacy, drawing also on the experience of African expression. He does, however, recognize that his perspective in writing 17 years after Ong and from a different cultural reality allows him to identify aspects of oral cultures and their encounter with writing that Ong could not have known. On the other hand, the very form of Tannen's (1988) published conference paper allows her to show the interrelationships between oral expression and writing. These forms are "complex and intertwined dimensions" as she has shown through "close analysis of tape-recorded, transcribed casual conversation" (p. 42).

A number of others opt for the complexity indicated by Tannen. Dauterich (2005) refers to it as "hybrid expression" in his analysis of the writings of Toni Morrison. "In *Beloved* and *Jazz*, Morrison works with ideas of storytelling that compare to Walter Ong's ideas of 'primary oral cultures' in his book, *Orality & Literacy*" (pp. 26-27). But Dauterich notes how the novelist weaves the oral into the narrative of the written and so concludes that both forms affect the other, something he says that Ong had already pointed out. "Ong recognizes the interdependence of forms and the impossibility of understanding oral forms through writing alone" (p. 27). While he is more interested in the representation of oral culture and follows Ong's work

there, he could just as well have pointed out that the written forms move back into oral expression in the complex process of secondary orality. Though examining a different kind of discourse—here a global magazine—Machin and van Leeuwen (2005) find that the same kind of hybrid expression works to create a global attractiveness in the writing of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, across all of its various regional editions. Their analysis of the oral style draws directly from *Orality and Literacy*; they suggest that the magazine writers, consciously or unconsciously, use oral devices to "make sure that people will remember the brand, the product, the message" (p. 591).

As noted above, Rubin, Hafer, and Arata (2000) essay an empirical test of people's comprehension of oral-based or literate-based discourse. Though they disagree with the perceived split between oral and literate, they do note a number of characteristics of literacy drawn from Ong's report (p. 123). Their study found that college students did better when tested on understanding of oral-based work, whether exposed to it orally or in writing. Comprehension of writing took more effort, though writing, as a form, served better for acquiring information.

A number of other applied studies in communication use *Orality and Literacy* to ground their discussions of the different modalities of discourse. In a study of discourses in advertising and the cognitive and linguistic processes revealed in ad copy, Koll-Stobbe (1994) finds its summary helpful, particularly as it balances oral and literate and acknowledges secondary orality. In another business study, this time of government communication and management, van Woerkum (2003) applies the different characteristics of oral and written discourse to resolve problems in communication. "The main argument is that the orality of officials is text-bound, inclining towards the literary style, language, and features of documents, which means stressing details and differences. Meanwhile, citizens—as listeners—are more strongly oriented towards the speakers' intentions and the gist of the story" (p. 105). Finally, Lo and Wong (1990) use *Orality and Literacy's* summary of the characteristics of oral and literate thought to analyze discourse strategies in Chinese press reports, noting that the quality press uses literacy-oriented strategies while the popular press uses orality-oriented ones (p. 27). They note how this pattern also resembles that of spoken Cantonese, in contrast to standard Chinese—a written language.

## B. Oral Cultures

Some scholars using *Orality and Literacy* as a source take a more narrow approach, examining, for example, just oral cultures or the orality of a culture. Many times, Ong's book provides a context for a particular examination of discourse patterns. Kwansah-Aidoo's (2001) exploration of Ghanaian communication and its reliance on storytelling turns to oral characteristics as a methodological issue in research in the Ghanaian culture. Since individuals often would not give information to a stranger but would tell stories, the stories themselves serve as data. One key for the researcher lies in recognizing the role of the spoken word, what Ong terms "the word as event," in the culture. Nelson (2000) relies on a similar context of orality to inform her case study of a Tongolese women's musical organization and its characteristic choric communication. She notes that "although Aiyele and many of the group members can read and write, their musical tradition stems from an oral culture" (p. 280) and that the somatic memory described by Ong in oral cultures holds great importance for this group. She continues, "Ong also makes the important point that while the economy of written texts dissects and distances, sound envelops, unifies, and harmonizes, leading to a 'participatory economy'" (p. 280). Such participation makes the choric communication of the group "intensely enculturating" (p. 268).

Johnstone (2003) studies American dialectic and discourse usages. He notes that ethnographers have long explored the use of narrative and have found, for example, that "for Athabaskans, experiences and stories about them are the primary source of knowledge, as reality is socially constructed through narrative" (p. 86). He then acknowledges the wider application of this claim to oral cultures, drawing his information from *Orality and Literacy*. Though discussing McLuhan and providing a kind of history of McLuhan's development of the idea of spatial communication, Cavell (1999) turns to Ong to clarify the notion of "acoustic space," conceptualized and better understood as a product of an oral culture.

## C. Rhetorical Studies

Closely related to an interest in oral cultures and oral expression, the rhetorical studies tradition also looks to Ong's work. Because he drew heavily on his own work in the history of rhetoric, Ong provides a natural source for later students. In probably the most sweeping application, Blondheim and Blum-Kulka

(2001) examine 2000 years of Jewish rhetoric. Though they take their research lead from Innis (1951), they acknowledge (in a general footnote) the scholarship of *Orality and Literacy* as a framework to describe the transition from oral cultures to script-based cultures. As their study moves closer to the present age, they again cite Ong, this time for the concept of secondary orality (p. 513). Haskins (2001) provides another historical study and "argues for a reconsideration of the role of the 'literate revolution' in the disciplining of rhetorical practice in the fourth century BCE. Specifically, the argument addresses the tension between oral memory and literate rationality in Isocrates and Aristotle to illustrate two divergent possibilities of appropriating oral linguistic resources of a culture" (p. 158). She acknowledges *Orality and Literacy* (particularly for its discussion of the impact of writing on consciousness), but generally stays closer to Havelock's more focused studies of ancient Greece.

Situated in the contemporary period, Kowal, O'Connell, Forbush, Higgins, Clarke, and D'Anna (1997) turn to examining inaugural addresses for their "complex interplay of literacy and orality." These addresses, they note, are oral performances but written texts. Their general hypothesis, tested through a variety of linguistic measures and discourse techniques, is "that changes in media technology and in Presidential governance have moved both text and performance of inaugurals in the 20th century in the direction of 'conversational style'" (p. 1). Ong's work provides a general background, particularly in terms of the role of script and its relationship to consciousness (pp. 26-27). The written text, they note from Ong, is not real words but codes that evoke real words in the consciousness of readers. Examining the inaugural addresses of 42 U.S. presidents from Washington to Clinton and comparing audio recordings where available, they found that oral characteristics increase in the contemporary period.

Enos (1999) offers a general reflection on rhetorical scholarship and the importance of seeing the relationship between orality and literacy. At the same time, he bemoans the seeming loss of interest in historical studies of rhetoric and oratory in the National Communication Association, despite the popularity and influence of *Orality and Literacy*. Fisher (1984), however, did take up that challenge. He extends the history of rhetoric far beyond ancient Greece to argue for what he calls "the narrative paradigm." This approach envisions a particular understanding of reason and rationality based on the "universal function" of

narrative, support for which he finds in *Orality and Literacy's* description of the role of storytelling in oral cultures (pp. 8, 14). Reid (1994) also turns to *Orality and Literacy* to provide historical grounding for his study of narrative technique in the Gospel of Mark. He notes, "During the past quarter century Walter Ong and Eric Havelock have made a convincing case for a model of gradual but persistent change and adaptation in the process of transition from the oral to the literate culture, change characterized by a simultaneous attending to overlapping diversity of audiences for any given discourse" (p. 429). He credits Ong with showing how the art of rhetoric emerged from written analysis and then goes on to examine sophisticated compositional theory and its recommendations about style. In a wonderful application, Reid shows how the Gospel of Mark in the New Testament conforms to these stylistic forms. What biblical scholars had long regarded as the most oral of gospel texts finds, in Reid's analysis, a textual ground.

Several other rhetorical theorists also use *Orality and Literacy* as a support or foil for their own work. Engnell (1998) adopts its primary versus secondary orality distinction as a pattern for his own critical re-reading of the work of Kenneth Burke. Cyphert (2001) references the same pattern in order to call attention to the ways in which new communication media (the product or manifestation of secondary orality) made new forms of rhetoric "possible, effective, or necessary" (p. 387). He goes on to argue "that contemporary critical vexations are not unrelated, but stem from a single theoretical source: a failure to consistently distinguish between culture-bound rhetorical practice and the transcultural processes by which humans create and maintain rhetorical community" (p. 378). As seen above, Ono and Sloop (1992), however, feel that Ong's treatment of writing "might now be revised with greater consideration given to the cultural differences between African and Asian orality before the European shift (importation) of orality to Greece" (p. 57). Acknowledging Ong's breadth of argument, they still suggest that he privileges a moment in Western culture, "to the exclusion of a wider perspective of culture that sees Africa and Asia as central moments in the genesis and revelation of orality (one is hard pressed to find more than a sentence or two on Africa in his book)" (p. 57).

Finally, Anderson and Cissna (1996) and Cissna and Anderson (1998) draw on *Orality and Literacy* in developing a rhetorical theory of dialogue. Its general approach allows them to situate different approaches to rhetoric, moving from the classical study of the avail-

able means of persuasion to more contemporary interactions. "We believe conceptions of rhetoric should not be confined or limited to occasions of focused speaker-to-listener, goal-derived, and goal-directed behavior. Indeed, the movement away from an exclusively intentional, unidirectional, formulaic, and agonistic influence model is, with some exceptions, the vector of 20th century rhetorical thought" (Anderson & Cissna, 1996, p. 89). Here they turn to Ong for their context of the history of rhetoric. Their more explicitly theoretical article (Cissna & Anderson, 1998) similarly relies on Ong's work for context.

#### D. Writing

With its sweeping history and review of the different modes of communication, *Orality and Literacy* also provided a source for those interested in writing or print. Kalthoff (2005) acknowledges its analysis of the effects of writing, which includes "the new ordering of culture and time" (p. 93, note 23), as part of the background to a study of the "aspects of calculation as it is carried out in risk management departments" (p. 69). The book serves a similar function in Athwal's (2004) application of the work of Innis to understanding comparative politics. For Athwal the key change happens with the shift from ear to eye triggered by print (p. 270). Brumberger (2004), in a study of the effects of typography on reading time, comprehension, and communicator ethos, uses the book's section on writing for a theoretical understanding of how writing or print locks words into a visual field and renders them "context-free" (p. 13). The same process bestows a power upon typography analogous to that of rhetoric in oral discourse. Maun (2006) also relies on Ong in his empirical study of "the impact of visual format on readers' affective responses to authentic foreign language texts" (p. 110). Kotchemidova (2005), noting Ong's conclusion that literacy "has made us more analytical and critical" (p. 13), draws on this evidence in her analysis of "the history of the toothy smile as a standard expression in snapshots" (p. 2). She traces how the Kodak corporation's advertising used visual elements—often in contrast to print—to circumvent that analytical and critical mind set in order to change people's attitudes to photography. In each of these cases, the description of the cultural changes introduced by writing and print provides evidence used by the researchers in support of their arguments.

Others focus on more specific results of writing or print. In their analysis of postmodern rock culture, Herman and Sloop (1998) offer a case study of a par-

ticular band whose record company withdrew a song due to worries about copyright infringement. They refer to *Orality and Literacy* for the historical background of copyright theory: "If, as Walter Ong (191-92) argues, ideas of copyright and ownership come from the logics tied to literacy and print, their transformation comes with the dominance of electronic media, especially hypertextual forms of consciousness" (p. 14). Dresner (2006) similarly relies on Ong's research, though in the very different context of presenting Donald Davidson's philosophy of communication. In Dresner's case, the aspect of print culture most relevant is the dictionary—"an artifact of script and print culture" (p. 167). The role of the dictionary in the mapping of languages and the translation of texts informs Davidson's theory of meaning. Grey (1999) also relies on Ong to provide evidence of the alienation triggered by print: "Print, being something that is possessed and looked at rather than spoken, gave rise to a sense of alienation produced by objectification" (p. 326, note 36). This attribute of print leads to particular attitudes toward printed materials, especially probability and statistics and the "visualist impulse . . . as a way to define knowledge" (p. 303).

Rufo (2003) draws more extensively from *Orality and Literacy* and its treatment of print in order to lay the foundation for his reinterpretation of Jacques Lacan's "mirror stage." "Beginning with a critical/deconstructive reading of Lacan's position, I argue that the mirror stage, and perhaps the whole of Lacan's psychoanalytic project, is premised upon the media ecology of print" (p. 117). Rufo's dependence on Ong's interpretation draws on the very nature of print:

In his landmark introduction to the nascent discipline of media ecology, Walter Ong (1982, p. 150) writes: "The very reflectiveness of writing—enforced by the slowness of the writing process as compared to oral delivery as well as by the isolation of the writer as compared to the oral performer—encourages growth of consciousness out of the unconscious." This brief statement, written to explain the rise of the modern detective story and the modes of its resolution, poses a much more substantial mystery: can the whole of the psychoanalytic enterprise, from Freud through to Lacan, be explained by indebtedness to particular media of communication?"

This capacity to turn back to a text constitutes what Ong (1982) describes as the reflectiveness of writing; the reader can think both about the

text itself and the distance between the text and the reader. (p. 119)

Rufo's re-reading of Lacan follows Ong's situating of new literary forms in the characteristics of print. Rufo also credits Ong (as do many others) with providing a foundational text for media ecology.

### *E. New Media and Media Ecology*

Media ecologists have quickly taken up *Orality and Literacy* (and indeed all of Ong's vast corpus) as foundational for their enterprise. Media ecology studies media environments and the ideas that communication media, technology, techniques, patterns, institutions, and so on play a role in human life (see Strate, 2004). Ong's examinations of how written expression differs from oral expression, of the impact of print, and of the possibilities of secondary orality fit quite well into the perspective and methodologies of media ecology. And so, any number of media ecology scholars as well as those interested in new media draw on Ong's work. Alexander (2006) makes the connection explicit in her review of Lum (2006), as she discusses how that work addresses "oral or typographic cultures" and the always present danger of treating "media as causal mechanisms for changing social structures" (p. 366). Strate devotes a section of his introduction to and review of media ecology to Ong and orality and literacy studies (2004, pp. 12-15).

Though he makes no explicit reference to media ecology, Anton (2002) takes that perspective in a phenomenological analysis of discourse, spatiality, and temporality. Here he draws on Ong's analysis of how, for example, "the modern printing press, literacy most broadly, has magnified this surpassing of space and time, and thus, transformed the meaning of world" (p. 195). Altheide (1994), again independently of the media ecology tradition, sketches his own ecology of communication in trying to understand the contemporary social order. He, too, recognizes in *Orality and Literacy* a legitimate approach, though he wishes to emphasize "less the 'messaging' component of the meaning process described by Ong (1982) . . . and address the logic and principles of technologically informed communication that have become a more important part of our effective environment" (p. 666). Kluver (2002) sees Ong as a fellow media ecologist who has argued "that various media formats differ in multiple ways, including the nature of the media/user interaction, content, production, audience use and reaction." Kluver then outlines a project to set forth "the

ways in which these media formats affect the public imagination of international relations” based on the logics of media format (p. 501).

Other scholars take Ong as a point of departure, particularly in studying new media. While Jensen (1990) feels that Ong may have “overstated the transition from a print culture to a visual culture” (p. 135), he nonetheless accepts that new media have led to a new media environment. Haynes (1988) depends more clearly on *Orality and Literacy*, using it as a key source in developing his own phenomenology of media:

For present purposes, this thesis has been explored most cogently in the work of Walter J. Ong, S.J. Father Ong’s essays trace the evolution of rhetoric from its oral epic beginnings in a state of culture he labels Primary Orality to the recent state of High Literacy and beyond. Ong believes we are now entering a time of Secondary Orality, when the linear thought modes of High Literacy are being countered by an instantaneous kind of experiential communication that in many ways resembles the preliterate mode of Homeric Greece but that inevitably retains much literate process as well. (p. 74)

Ong’s proposed concept of a secondary orality holds attraction for many scholars attempting to understand contemporary communication contexts. Bertelsen (1992) sees it as a way of understanding, for example, how people interact with government. He sets out his purpose in this way: “This essay particularly explores manifestations of democracy—government systems of, by, and for the people—in three cultural systems characterized by their dominant communication technologies: oral, literate, and electronic” (p. 325). The last group, electronic, is constructed around secondary orality.

#### F. Computer-Mediated Communication

Another area of communication research that draws heavily on the concepts of secondary orality, media ecology, and the cognitive impact of communication examines computers and computer-mediated communication. Because their focus of study constitutes a relatively new area of communicative interaction, scholars have looked to Ong’s book to help craft a theoretical grounding for their work. Strate (1999) offers a taxonomy both of cyberspace and of the term, “cyberspace,” as he explores what scholars have done and might do in studying computer communication. He draws on *Orality and Literacy*’s analysis of space, presence, and absence to show what might happen in

cyberspace (p. 399). Bardini and Horvath (1995) propose a social construction of the personal computer user and find secondary orality a helpful way to frame mediated interpersonal interaction (p. 60). The next year, December (1996) reasoned in the opposite direction, seeing computer-mediated communication as helping to understand “how literacy and orality are affected by communication technology” (p. 15). Here, too, Ong’s work provides the context, this time for a more general methodological approach to computers and communication. Feenberg and Bakardjieva (2004) examine the idea of virtual communities, drawing a parallel to the impact of print outlined in *Orality and Literacy*, and wondering whether a similar impact could be found in the phenomenon of online community (p. 39). Following “Ong’s pioneering work on examining orality and literacy in light of emerging understandings toward communication in these more technologically sophisticated times,” Moss and Shank (2002, abstract) proposed that computer-mediated interaction be studied “as a post literate technological change of language itself.”

In a careful examination of online urban legends, Fernback (2003) notes the blend of oral expression, folklore, and written forms appearing on the Internet. Ong’s characteristics of oral cultures provides the points of analysis of online discourse; his concept of secondary orality, the theoretical basis for the study (pp. 37-38). Kibby (2005) also uses secondary orality as the theoretical background for his study of online folklore—this time in the form of items forwarded from one user to another via email. “Email communication is a form of secondary orality. Although based on writing, it privileges orality, in that the dynamics of an exchange reflect a participatory event that heightens a feeling of community” (pp. 771–772). In a general review of communication textbooks, Cole (1999) frames contemporary culture in the world of secondary orality, contrasting that with the world of the traditional textbook.

This [secondary orality] implies it may be foolhardy for educators to maintain an outpost of literary defense against the rationality-shaping and communication-shaping influence of television, music, computers, and visual arts. At very least, Ong’s position suggests we supplement the linearity of the textbook with the non-linearity of popular forms of mass media in order to unfold the often subtle and nuanced contours of oral communication concepts. (p. 327)

Others use Ong's division of communication modes (oral, literate, secondary oral) in studies of computer-mediated communication. Dreyer Berg (1991) examines word usage and cultural characteristics in tracking how computers have affected literacy, noting the contemporary period as the era of secondary orality. Mejias (2001) explores the creation of virtual reality, highlighting the material and immaterial dimensions of technology. Here, *Orality and Literacy* provides not only a sense of changing technology, but more importantly a theoretical grounding for the interior effects of technology (p. 213) and for the bias of literacy (pp. 217-219). Schmidt (2003) develops a study of Russian cyberculture and literary discussion in public chat rooms and blogs against the background of Ong's media theory. As noted earlier Ess, Kawabalta, and Kurosaki (2007) acknowledge the importance of the "Innis-Ong thesis" (p. 953, note 1) as they introduce their special journal edition on religion and computer-mediated communication. They not only highlight the role of technology today, but also point out how various contributors to the journal situate online religious behaviors as participating in secondary orality.

Finally a number of studies refer only to specific parts of *Orality and Literacy's* description of communication modes. Cali (2000) examines the logic of web-based documents, noting how this kind of rhetorical analysis differs from that applied to speeches or printed versions of speeches. He draws on Ong's comments on the privacy of a text, as well as on the role of footnotes and references in printed works. Elmer (1997) "investigates the significance of the index in the process of first, mapping and formatting the sites, spaces, and words on the Internet and, second, diagnosing, tracking, and soliciting users" (p. 182). But the study argues that the role and function on an online index differs from that of the printed index, as described by Ong, since the printed index depends on "the structure of the printed word on a page (which is

forthwith juxtaposed [by Ong] against the form and structure of the spoken word)" (p. 190, note 2).

### G. General Studies

While the above six categories give some sense of the impact of *Orality and Literacy* on communication studies, they do not tell the whole story. Others, in related communication areas, also draw on the book. Cobb (2003), for example, uses its data to provide background from "the extensive work on defining the characteristics of written texts, i.e., on defining the differences between speech and writing" (p. 415) for a replication study of language learning and language acquisition and the suitability of measuring such learning "using computerized learner text as its evidence" (p. 395). Hatim (2004) relies on "residual orality" to frame a study of translation. He investigates the concept of "markedness" of texts, where the style of how a speaker or writer expresses something matters rather than the speaker's or writer's content. Translators, of course, must convey both but a good translator must distinguish between intended stylistic features and those resulting from residual orality. Thomas (2000) attempts to expand Ong's concept of secondary orality to one of "secondary ritualization" for a post-literate culture. Perlina (1998) also focuses on the postmodern by bringing Ong's work into dialogue or symposia with such figures as Olga Freidenberg, Carlo Ginzburg and Mikhail Bakhtin. Rich, Johnson, and Olsen (2003) report on performance studies where teachers seek "to dislodge traditional notions of orality and literacy" in seeking "a more embodied human experience" (p. 1). Finally, Honeycutt (2004, qtd. in Bates & Southard, 2005) applies the concept of secondary orality to dictation: "the analysis shows how dictation's shifting role as a form of literacy has been influenced by the dual mediation of technological tools and existing cultural practices" (Bates & Southard, 2005, p. 110).

## 4. Conclusion

Ong's book has stood the test of time well. Even 25 years after its original publication, it remains in print, is recognized as a still valuable source by scholars, is taught in graduate programs, and commands attention from those interested in areas as divergent as rhetorical studies and media ecology. Several reasons might

explain the book's longevity. First, it summarized and introduced to a wider scholarly public (particularly those in communication studies) an interdisciplinary body of research that opened people's eyes to a different vision of communication. Rhetorical studies certainly knew the spoken word, but rhetoric treated and analyzed

words in a particular way, according to its canons of interpretation and quality. *Orality and Literacy* stepped back from that to ask how the very speaking of words marked out a way of being human. Mass media studies knew technologies of communication, but they often skipped over the printing press and looked not at historical data but at the data presented by more recent studies of the electronic mass media. *Orality and Literacy* again stepped back and called attention both to print and to what print does to our being human.

Another reason for the book's longevity lies in its general approach, what Strate (2004) and others have termed its media ecology. *Orality and Literacy* does indeed present a different way of studying communication because it looks at the grand sweep, the environment for communication, the environment of communication, and the environment created by communication. It shows how all of these connect to one another. Presenting an open-ended thesis, it invites more research and reflection on how media and content and humans interact.

## Editor's Afterword

Walter Ong's book, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, has been a major contribution to scholarship on the border area between the two modes of communication highlighted in the book's title in at least two ways: first, by drawing together in a coherent presentation the many diverse approaches that had previously been made to the subject, and second, by doing so in an eminently accessible way. The topic is not one of mere academic or theoretical interest. It impinges on all aspects of contemporary life that involve people of diverse cultural or language backgrounds and/or different levels of education, even among those from the same population. It can block communication between the "functionally illiterate" urban or rural poor and those who hold positions of responsibility in their communities and take for granted assumptions derived from literacy. It also operates at the national and international levels, where politicians reject or ignore the needs voiced by their constituents or fail to understand and acknowledge validity in the demands of rival states in negotiations.

In the contemporary world we cannot expect to find purely "primary" oral cultures, since even the

Finally, the book has fared so well because, as the initial reviewers pointed out, it is so well written. One need not struggle with its expression. But this may well present a danger: we read it so effortlessly that we think we understand more than we might.

Ong never meant *Orality and Literacy* to constitute a final word on the topic; rather it serves as a snapshot of the state of thinking and research in the early 1980s. Ong urged continued research of every kind. Perhaps some of the greatest tributes to the book come in the form of those who would refute it, argue with it, lay hold of it, think with it.

The evidence of its impact lies in the bibliographies that follow. And that is quite a tribute from any academic community. The fact that *Orality and Literacy* influences communication studies, literary studies, sociological studies, anthropological studies, business studies, education studies, political science studies, medical studies, and on and on makes that tribute so much the greater.

most secluded societies are inevitably influenced, at least indirectly, by literate cultures. On the other hand, few, if any societies can claim to have no oral cultural components. Mixtures of oral and literate influences in modern cultures are complex and so interwoven as to defy simple analysis. The rise of electronic media with their dominantly oral patterns of (albeit mostly one-way) communication has added additional complications and given rise to their classification as instruments of "secondary"orality.

As many of the writers cited above have concluded, Ong's work does not support a dichotomy between oral and literate cultures. Instead it lays a foundation for understanding how the two tendencies interact within the same cultural environment. Exploration of their interaction has barely begun, but it offers a fertile field for both speculation and empirical research. Some directions in which that exploration might go offer hope of building greater understanding among peoples whose communication may thus far have been hampered by their opposed perspectives that stem from an oral/literate dichotomy. As we have mentioned, and Ong recognized, that dichotomy is a false

one, and efforts to overcome it can offer a step towards peaceful resolution of at least some of their differences.

—W. E. Biernatzki, S.J.  
General Editor

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## Classified Bibliography of Key Themes in *Orality and Literacy*

Professor Thomas J. Farrell compiled the majority of these bibliographic items for the second edition of his *Walter Ong's Contributions to Cultural Studies: The Phenomenology of the Word and I-Thou Communication* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, forthcoming). The editors of COMMUNICATION RESEARCH TRENDS have arranged them in categories and added some titles.

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## Book Reviews

### Featured Review

### Re-defining activism, re-constructing change

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