



Orality and Literacy

Information Technology and Social Life

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Question

- Why is it important for us to understand the history of orality and the origins of literacy?



Walter Ong

- 1912-2003
- Retired professor of humanities from St. Louis University
- Thesis adviser - Marshall McLuhan
- Studied what he called the psychodynamics of orality and literacy
- How peoples' minds work in oral/literate cultures
- Assumes that the way people handle, present information has some bearing on how they think
- Nature of sound - evanescence

Evanescence - related to time; of short duration; passing quickly
There is no way to stop sound and have sound



Features of oral culture

- Potency and power of words
- Knowledge based on recall
- Participatory and communal
- Memory systems aided by verse, rhythmic language, proverbs
- Interiority - related to human consciousness
- Word has reference only to sound; no visual representation
- Transitional literacy - elements of both oral and literate cultures; written text serve as record of events
- Secondary Orality - implications to “global village”

Magic sense of naming things; not labels

You know what you can recall p. 65.

Interiority - The consciousness of each human person is totally interiorized, known to the person from the inside and inaccessible to any other person directly from the inside.

Presidential debates - primary orality - included interplay with audience; less so or non-existent in secondary orality.

Relationship to technological determinism



Eric Havelock

- 1903-1989
- Professor of Classics at Yale
- Equates alphabet w/ literacy
- Alphabet made possible democratization vs. “craft literacy” of scribal cultures
- Posits psychological effects; don’t have to think about it once learned; reduced need for recall
- Allowed for establishment of a large corpus of prose
- Separation of knowledge from knower; increase in abstraction
- Made possible “the development of codified law, monotheism, abstract science, deductive logic, objective history, and individualism”



Function of Alphabet

- Greek alphabet developed around 700 B.C.
- Democratization dependent not only on invention of alphabet; but the acceptance and dissemination in culture
- Elite status of scribe
- First used to record oral literature of Greece; not for human conversation
- Transcribe complete vernacular of human language
- “The important and influential statement in any culture is the one that is preserved.”
- Relinquished mental energy; increased expansion of knowledge.
- Availability of materials/perishability; ability to copy/distribute becomes important
- Printing press developed centuries later maximized the utility of alphabet.