

Chapter 17

Back to the Future: Secondary Orality as the Foundation of a New Literacy

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ABSTRACT

As the Internet rises as a center for reading and writing, many are expressing concerns about fractured reading, shallow knowledge, and shorter attention spans that digital media encourages. These criticisms miss the point: a new literacy is rising, and this literacy is bringing about a change every bit as profound as the change from oral to literate culture. Using Walter Ong's concept of secondary orality, this study explores the likelihood that oral culture and literate culture are being forged into a new type of literacy that restores some of the virtues of oral culture to our society. Current statistics and studies indicate there is a renaissance of reading in the United States, likely as a result of reading online.

INTRODUCTION

Anyone involved in the educational universe has heard the concerns about today's students and how the nation's rising generation cannot think clearly, write well, or express themselves in an acceptable manner. Generally, the reason for student deficiencies in these areas is blamed on the rise of technology, and the Internet in particular.

Authors like Mark Bauerlein (2009) and Nicholas Carr (2010), journalists like Motoko Rich (2008) and Kevin Kelleher (2010), online experts such as Jakob Nielsen (2006), and a number of pundits (Bell, 2005; Tetrault, 2010) have examined

the digital landscape as it connects to literacy and found the future fairly grim. These ideas have made a splash in the mainstream media and are now a part of the conventional wisdom regarding the future of education and literacy.

But it is worth approaching this subject from a different perspective, a more historical perspective. Communication scholar Daniel Czitrom (1982) reminds us that every major spread of communication technology has been met with serious concerns about its detrimental impact on individuals and on culture. For example, as the telegraph spread breaking news quickly, a writer for *The London Spectator* opined:

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The recording of every event, and especially every crime, everywhere without perceptible interval of time—the world is for purposes of intelligence reduced to a village. All men are compelled to think of all things, at the same time, on imperfect information, and with too little interval for reflection . . . the constant diffusion of statements in snippets, the constant excitements of feeling unjustified by fact, the constant formation of hasty or erroneous opinions must, in the end, one would think, deteriorate the intelligence of all to whom the telegraph appeals (as cited in Czitrom, 1982, p. 19).

The development of motion pictures, radio, and television were also met with worry. Movies spread immorality that would coarsen culture. Radio would turn its listeners into mere marketing channels for advertisers since advertising could now enter the home uninvited, leading to acquisitiveness and poverty (Czitrom, 1982). One of television's drawbacks was the fact that it created a closed culture apart from mass culture in addition to filling the mind with fluff (Hutchinson, 2012). Looking at these developments as a whole thing, the history of media advances is also the history of shortening attention spans. The famed Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858 are considered a bit of a high-water mark for extended intellectual engagement, with crowds of more than 10,000 enthusiastically listening for 3 hours as the speakers sparred over issues (Ong, 2007). As media technologies became rooted in culture, however, our ability to extend this level of attention declined.

Even so, the period of world history from roughly the 1850s to the present time should be considered as one of great social, humanitarian, and material advance—and maybe even the greatest period of advance in world history. So how are we to reconcile this advance with the fact that our great media revolutions have typically resulted in more utilitarian communication, shorter writing, facile entertainment, and shorter attention spans (Rekart, 2011)? Before we answer this question,

it is worth a moment to do two things. First we should define the terms literacy and understanding, as the author understands them. When we use “literacy,” we are defining it as the ability to read and write, and using that ability to collect general knowledge. “Understanding” is the mental processing and synthesizing of information. Understanding is important because it reflects the outcome of literacy (Bortins, 2010). The purpose of literacy is to achieve some outcome; perhaps it is to develop engaged citizens, or to obtain some practical knowledge that permits one to achieve a specific task, or it may be to provide hints about how one is to act in certain cultural contexts. Both of these things together—literacy and understanding—work to create socially functional individuals (Bortins, 2010). Second, let's take a look back to concerns about the rise of literate culture in the late-oral world.

SOCRATES AND COMPLAINTS ABOUT LITERACY

The change from oral culture to literate culture was not without its detractors. In the classic *Phaedrus*, Plato wrote about reservations Socrates had about the written word and how it would come to destroy the search for moral excellence, which he saw as the main purpose in education and in life.

There is a great deal that can be said about Socrates's worries, but for our purposes suffice it to say that Socrates felt the written word did not permit meanings to be teased out and developed in the crucible of give-and-take (Plato, 2005). Written words, he feared, would soon become fixed things that lacked life or particular meaning. Instead, these words would carry a sense of vague meanings and associations. And because these meanings and associations were vague, understanding would suffer. Without a robust understanding, moral excellence (or as Plato put it, virtue) would become very difficult to achieve. The end result was that humanity will be able to

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