Orality, Literacy and Cultural History

A roundtable discussion on the historical consequences of changes in the communication environment

This first *Antenna* forum is based on a conversation held last March between four scholars whose work has focused on the relationship between communication technologies and culture:

> *Joe Ashcroft,* associate professor and chair of the Department of Speech Communications Study, East Stroudsburg University, has examined the shift from immanent to transcendent deities with the introduction of writing.

> *Lori Breslow,* lecturer in the Sloan Communication Program, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has studied the interactions between writing, print and conceptualizations of the self.

> *Paul Lippert,* associate professor in the Department of Speech Communications Study, East Stroudsburg University, has explored the methodologies used to study the relationship between communication media and society.

> *Lance Strate,* assistant professor in the Communica- tions Department, Fordham University, has looked at changes in the concept of the hero within oral, print and electronic cultures.

The purpose of the round table was to explore the commonalities in the participants' work as a way to understand better the influences of communication technologies on historical shifts in cultural phenomena.

Breslow: I thought we could all get together this afternoon because it seemed to me that there were a great many similarities in the work we've been doing. We all seem to be trying to understand the ways in which communication technologies have influenced, or had consequences for, or affected — and maybe the choice of verb is one thing we need to talk about this afternoon — a range of cultural phenomena. And maybe that's the place to start — by asking each of you to explain the work you've been doing.

Strate: I began with the idea of shifts in conceptions of the hero, particularly the recent shift from a reality-based hero known for particular abilities and accomplishments to the media star or celebrity. This shift coincides with the transition from a typographic to electronic media environment which, in turn, led me to the idea that another shift occurred earlier, corresponding to the orality-literacy transition. The change at that point was from mythic and legendary heroes to historic and realistic ones.

Breslow: Talk a little bit more about those shifts — what were you looking at in particular?

Strate: In some ways, I was essentially looking at content — the hero as text — so it was a question of how the media influence and shape content. But we also know that content reflects social structure, so I was studying how media influence society itself, thereby indirectly influencing the concept of hero.

Lippert: This is close to something I've been looking at as I've been studying the methods that are appropriate for investigating the relationship between communication and society. It seems to me that when we're talking about orality, for instance, we need
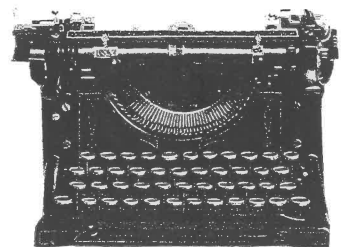
to look at an entire cluster, an entire web of social and cultural relations through the medium of communication that is dominant in that society. That means what we're really talking about is a particular snapshot of the human drama as it is going on, and that would include technological, political and social factors.

Breslow: My question is whether or not communication technologies are the prime movers of cultural change. But I'm jumping the gun to bring that up at this point. What does your work entail, Joe?

Ashcroft: When I began, I was looking at whether the invention of writing had anything to do with the historical shift in the worship of female goddesses to the worship of made gods as primary deities, a change which occurred from about 3500 B.C.E. to 1000 B.C.E. in Mesopotamia and the cultures of the Mediterranean .

Breslow: And what did you discover?

Ashcroft: First, that I couldn't find any direct causal relationship between writing and the shift from goddess to god. But what I did find in my research was that the invention of writing was one of the important elements in a change in the conceptualization of the deity's presence in the world.

Breslow: What do you mean?

Ashcroft: I used the modern theological terms "immanent" and "transcendent" to describe the shift. An "immanent" deity is one seen as physically present in the culture; that is, the deity is · perceived as a physical, material presence — the sun god, the moon goddess. A transcendent deity is one who is conceived as originating beyond the realm of ordinary experience. A transcendent deity is an other-wordly deity whose existence is beyond the material world.
For example, the central deity in most of the cultures I studied was the one involved in fertility or creation. I made a distinction between procreation, which was an immanent action, and creation, which was a transcendent action. When you move from procreation to creation — from immanence to transcendence — it becomes a lot easier to transfer powers of creation from the female, who was birth giver, to the male, who could create from nothing.

Breslow: And how did writing influence this shift?

Ashcroft: Writing encouraged the development of abstract thinking, and transcendence is a highly abstract notion. Writing facilitated the release of thought from its immediate context, and the move from immanent thinking to transcendent thinking is precisely that.
The related concept of creation *ex nihilo* also seems to have been stimulated by the development of writing. The concept of nothingness, like the concept of transcendence, is highly abstract and suggests something that is not a part of the material world. Without thought that is capable of being separated from its material environment, the conceptualization of creation from nothingness seems highly unlikely.

Breslow: To finish these summaries, I've been looking at the ways in which relatively high degrees of literacy, first made possible by the phonetic alphabet and then by the printing press, helped to foster the idea of individuality.
I began with an idea in anthropology that all cultures deal with the problem of the relationship between the individual and the group by subscribing either to what I call the "collective self" or the "individual self." In cultures in which the idea of the collective self is dominant, people are defined by the social roles and relationships in which they are involved. In cultures where the idea of individuality has taken hold, people are defined by personal traits, internal feelings, unique characteristics. An "individual" sees him or herself as a distinct entity, a distinct "I," modified and governed from within. What Ong, McLuhan and others observed is that individuality seemed to flourish first in fifth-century Athens and then in Europe after the invention of the printing press — both relatively literate societies. I wanted to figure out why.

Strate: And what did you find out?

Breslow: That literacy brought more information to individuals from sources outside the primary group, and that tended to produce less conformity. But it's a little more complicated than that. Literacy changed the information environment, as well as the political, economic and social institutions in which individuals functioned, and within this new environment people were not only capable of forging individual identities, but it became advantageous to do so as well.

Strate: I'm not sure which comes first — social or individual change — but for my purposes it isn't necessary to grapple with that. For example, we understand that in oral cultures you tend not to get a lot of high-level abstractions; the content of thought and discourse is concrete, situational. Why is that? One explanation is social — that this is the best form in which information can be remembered and preserved in the cultural memory. But the other explanation is cognitive — that without literacy, there is no capability to make high-level abstractions. Which of these two is the best explanation? I'm not sure you can single out one or the other; it could be that they work in tandem.

Breslow: Is that what you found when you looked at the shift in concepts of the hero from an oral to a typographic culture?

Strate: There was a change from mythic and legendary types of heroes to more realistic heroes based on what we call historical fact. This shift followed — not by necessity, of course — but it followed the development of literacy. As more information was preserved in writing, there was no longer a need to limit the number of heroes in a culture. Literacy allowed people's names to be written down and thereby preserved. And the more information you have about heroes, the less they tend to be superhuman types of characters. More is known about them so they become more realistic.

Running parallel to that, there is no longer a need to make heroes serve extra functions. In an oral culture, the hero is not just an historical figure; that figure is, in turn, used to preserve other kinds of information. Achilles, for example, is used to preserve information about being both a warrior and a moral person. Heroes end up doing double, triple and quadruple duty.

With literacy, we tend to bring these heroes down to earth. Leo Braudy writes in *The Frenzy of Renown* that Alexander the Great was the first famous person to present himself as a unique personality because he looked at the world so bookishly. He was a product of Aristotle's method of education ...

Ashcroft: He was a literate man.

Breslow: And he lived in a world in which the Socratic concept of the psyche — as the individual self that thinks — had infiltrated the culture ...

Strate: Alexander was self-conscious about himself as a hero. He tried to make himself into a god, but at the same time he would laugh about that with his own troops. He no longer took the myth-making process seriously.

Breslow: I would still like to get back to the question of exactly how communication media exert their influence. Lance, you've been talking about the storage capabilities of writing ...

Strate: It's true — the fact that I found most important in the shift I studied was the development of a means to store information outside of human memory. The problem of storage and the dependence on various mnemonic techniques are the key factors, I think, in defining an oral culture. In fact, I would go so far as to say that it's not so much whether literacy is absent in a culture as whether or not the ability to use mnemonic techniques is present; it is those techniques that really account for a large number of the characteristics of oral culture. The ability to store information outside of memory makes possible — although it doesn't necessarily lead to — many of the characteristics of literate culture.

Breslow: I also found the storage capability of writing was a key trait. As I said, one thing that helped foster the growth of individuality was the fact that there was simply more information available from which a person could construct an identity for him or herself. In cultures in which people can only get information orally, individuals tend to be more alike because they're working with the same ingredients, so to speak. When people have access to information from other places, they can begin to say, "I don't want to be X; now I know about A, B, C and D, and I think I'll be B and D." Joe, did you find

the storage capability of writing to be important?

Ashcroft: I don't think storage was as important a factor in the shift I looked at. I keep coming back to a line Havelock uses — "separating the knower from the known." The ability of literacy to enable the removal of information from context and therefore allow abstract ideas was the most important characteristic of writing I found in the change from immanent to transcendent deity.

Strate: In other words, you see decontextualization as a crucial characteristic of writing ...

Ashcroft: Right. While there have been scholars who have written about decontextualization in other arenas, the contribution I think I've made is pointing out its influence in religious thinking. The whole notion of the transcendence of God — an abstract deity who could create from nothing — is something that I don't think exists in a strictly oral culture.

Strate: That question comes up for me in a different way because I deal with the extent to which religion influences the nature of the hero. One of the things that is clear is that in oral cultures, religion is very localized. Each little area, each tiny community will have its own religious tradition that is somewhat different from the epic tradition that is a late development in oral cultures. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey,* for example, are followed by the degeneration of Greek oral tradition.

Lippert: ... which occurred at the time of the codification of various oral traditions and their standardization into a more widely read and widely used orthodoxy.

Strate: Yes, this coincides with pan-Hellenism, and it's no accident that pan-Hellenism and Homeric verse coincide with the development of the alphabet. You start with many different local traditions. For instance, Apollo, Hercules and Achilles are almost different people as you go from place to place. Writing brings these local traditions together. Through categorization and reasoning, people start to try to make sense of local traditions and combine them into a coherent whole so that by the fifth century B.C.E., you wind up with the idea of the twelve Olympians as the Pantheon. Writing makes it possible to sort out all the local traditions and construct a more homogeneous one.

Breslow: In a sense that's true, but writing also created the seeds of destruction of the homogeneous tradition. After all, it gave the Greeks a tool with which they could both criticize their orthodoxy and build their empire — two processes which worked against homogeneity.
In fact, in the Hellenistic Age people begin to bemoan the breakup of a coherent worldview. That, in part, accounts for the appearance of sects like the Stoics and Epicureans. Nothing is absolute anymore; the clan and the city-state are gone; new ideas and new beliefs are everywhere. And as people begin to live in a less coherent world, they become less coherent personalities.

Lippert: What I hear all of you saying, I think, is that literacy facilitates certain kinds of ideas and processes.

Ashcroft: I think that's a good way to describe it because I don't think you can look for one-to-one connections. We can certainly see that there are ways in which things correlate — where one thing may facilitate a certain situation and may make it easier for something else to follow. There's a very big chance that certain things are going to happen as you move from an oral culture to a literate one.

Breslow: But Joe and Lance — would either of you go so far as to say that literacy is the sole influence in the shifts you studied?

Strate: I wouldn't say sole because there are other factors that go along with the change I saw. I think the process is really very complex. What I find is that in some cases literacy has direct effects, and in other cases it has indirect effects which then rebound and create secondary effects on the same phenomena. It's like making a big splash in a body of water. The effect isn't linear although there might be one cause. The force lines don't go out in one direction; they're all criss-crossing each other and having reverberations.
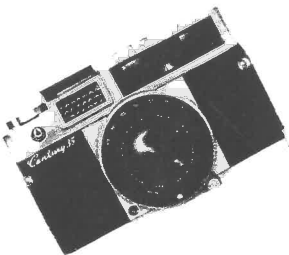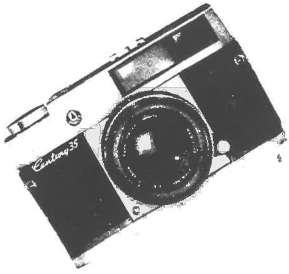
Lippert: Maybe rather than drawing lines or arrows, we need to think of cultures as mosaics or spheres of influences. This isn't to say that certain factors within the mosaic — and here I'm trying to stay away from spatial metaphors — are more central or have more closeness to some rather than to other aspects of society, but I don't think we want to slip into talking about things as if they can be reduced to very simplistic notions of point-to-point causality.

Breslow: Joe, do you see literacy as the sole influence in the change from immanent to transcendent deity?

Ashcroft: I would hesitate to identify literacy as the central influence, but it might come close. It's hard to see how these ideas of transcendence and creation from nothing could exist in cultures that didn't have the ability to decontextualize.

Breslow: And I think what literacy did was create certain conditions that were conducive to individuality and certain economic and political structures in which individuality worked very well. But I don't see literacy necessarily as the prime mover ...

Lippert: I think even in the earliest works of McLuhan or Ong there is this idea of literacy as being just one of several factors — albeit an important one.

Breslow: So let me see if I can summarize. We seem to be saying that the important characterizations of literacy we've identified are the storage capabilities that writing systems supply, and their ability to provide decontextualized information. And that those characteristics brought about some profound cultural shifts, probably working in concert with other factors. Whether those changes occurred primarily on the individual level or the social level still bears some exploration. Now what about the electronic media? Lance, that's where you began, right?
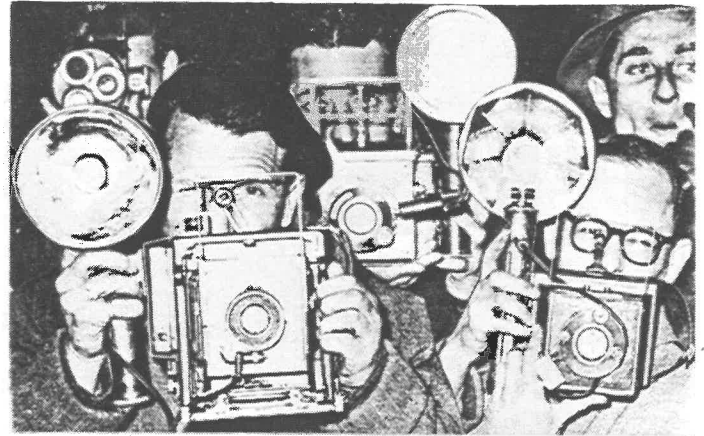
Strate: I think there are some ways in which we are returning to orality or certainly moving away from literacy, but in other ways the electronic media carry on and extend the effects of literacy. For example, typography gave us a greater number of heroes, more information about them, and therefore more realistic, humanized heroes. Electronics takes us even further: We get even greater numbers of heroes, even more information about each one, and therefore they're humanized to the point that they're hardly different from anyone else; so that's an extension of print.

"We've never had so much detailed information about a hero's appearance."

On the other hand, electronics brings us away from a linear narrative about a hero. Typography tended to put the story of someone's life or career in chronological order. Electronic culture gives us interviews where things pop back and forth. You never get a complete story, and this is actually more like the oral hero than it is the typographic one. And then in some ways, you get things that are completely new. For instance, we've never had so much detailed information about a hero's appearance, and that's because of the electronic media's ability to reproduce looks, personality, voice.

So there are those three strains: In some ways electronics brings back orality; in other ways, it extends typography; and in still other ways, it gives us something new.

Breslow: I found that same kind of confusion when thinking about the concept of the self in the electronic age. On the one hand, the electronic media bring us so much information that the possibilities for constructing individual selves are enormous. On the other hand, there seems to be an increasing conformity in the culture — as evidenced by Madonna wannabies and yuppies, for example — as the electronic media spread the same information over greater and greater distances to an increasing number of people.

Lippert: This is something that I think Ong is very clear about: Successive stages of media are not replicative but additive and interactive. In a way, we'll always be oral as long as we talk, and that means we'll be part of an oral culture.

Ashcroft: I do think there's a difference in the electronic age of what we mean by decontextualization. I think electronics changes the definition of context. When you move from orality to literacy, it's fairly easy to see what is meant by context. You know you have a small geographic area where people can hear you, and you're part of that. With writing, you can remove communication from the context. But what is the context when I'm talking on the phone to someone in California? What is the context of watching live reports from Saudi Arabia? Decontextualization now becomes much more complicated.

Breslow: Paul, how about the last word?

Lippert: Well, I was thinking of the word "irony."

Breslow: Why?

Lippert: It seems to me what you all have just described is an example of irony, and I would think that we're going to experience tremendous irony in relation to the orality-literacy question in the electronic age. Here we have been having a conversation, and one of the things that was necessary in order for the conversation to flow was a certain degree of spontaneity. Yet at the same time, in the back of our minds we knew a composition would come out of this conversation. So here we are trying to spontaneously compose something, whereas the person who is going to edit it — a highly literate endeavor — is going to do so in order to restore or recreate a certain degree of spontaneity.

Ashcroft: Yes, editing is a function of literacy. In orality, there isn't much editing; we just keep talking.

Breslow: Except when we finally have to stop, which is the case now. Thank you all for participating.

(This forum was organized and edited by the highly literate Lori Breslow.)