

## **Looking Is Not Enough: Reflections on Walter J. Ong and Media Ecology**

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Beginning with the influences that Walter J. Ong's works have had on media ecology, this essay examines five communication-related themes in Ong's thought: rhetoric, visualism, the persistence of the word, the media, and the digital world. Each of these themes suggests a direction for further media ecology research. In examining them, we see that Ong's typical approach to a topic involves careful observation and then the presentation and arrangement of evidence with a cultivated and well crafted persuasive voice—an emphasis on *method* rather than *system*. In Ong's use, method refers to a direction, a concrete way through a problem, whereas a system is an abstract, diagrammatical, visual presentation, removed from the data.

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SOME years ago I served as a member of a community advisory board to a software company that marketed an Internet filtering solution. The board, made up of parents, librarians, teachers, peace officers, clergy—the usual suspects—would review questions about policy or about what kinds of sites the software should block. I remember one discussion in response to an email from a concerned parent, urging the company to block various swimsuit sites so that adolescent boys could not, well . . . um . . . presumably, leer at the models. (The parent did not seem terribly concerned about adolescent girls; that story may come back again later.) As the group debated the issue, the argument that won the day went something like this: “It’s no more than they would see at the beach.” I wanted to respond (and probably did) that the situations are quite different. In the online sites, the models, unlike the women at the beach, cannot talk back to the boys staring at them.

Though he would not have used such an example, this difference, I propose, is pretty much what Walter Ong identified when he pointed out the contrast between visual and aural modes of thought. The way we think about thinking, he argued, manifests a bias towards the visual, towards seeing. All of those sight words—insight, intuition, theory, idea, evidence, species, speculation, explicate, analyze, discern, distinct, form, outline, plan, field of knowledge, object (Ong, 1977a, pp. 133-134)—evoke and somehow characterize ways of thinking that involve our visual senses. Depending on your perspective (another sight word!), such thinking reaches its peak in the printed words on a page or in the scientific method. To these sight words Ong contrasts aurally based terms, which still play a role, but a smaller one—category, predicate, judgment, response. These latter (often courtroom words) represent knowledge born from discussion and debate, the knowledge that comes from hearing and talking. Ong identifies visually based thought with Greek culture and its aurally based counterpart with Hebrew culture. While this initial identification seems independent of the oral or literate practices of those cultures, the later development of print-based literacy pushed Western culture more towards visualist thought.

This distinction between visual and oral thought patterns—one of many contrasts Ong drew over the 60 years of his writings—suggests one approach to his thought. However, there are many other ways to approach Ong. As Thomas Farrell (2000) reminds us, Ong never set out to, nor ever claimed to, create a grand theory, or any kind of theory for that matter. For all his intentions, though, he is identified by and perhaps best known to the Media Ecology Association for one key book, *Orality and Literacy*. In this book, Ong (1982a) presents a reading of his own and other scholars' work dating back almost 20 years to the early 1960s. As we know, he looks at the role of literacy (especially in the West) and draws heavily on the legacy of a happy confluence of publications from Eric Havelock, Jack Goody, Ian Watt, Marshall McLuhan, Milman Parry and Albert Lord in the early 1960s, and subsequent explorations of literacy (pp. 16-30).

Ong himself had begun exploring such things earlier, but under different rubrics. His insight into the aural and visual groundings of thought appeared first in his dissertation, later published as *Ramus: Method and the Decay of Dialogue* (Ong, 1958). The publication of the works of the other scholars devoted to the shift to literacy helped him understand this material more systematically.

In an attempt to see where Ong's works might lead for media ecology, this essay examines five communication-related themes in Ong's thought: rhetoric, visualism, the persistence of the word, the media, and the digital world (see Soukup, 2004). Each of these themes suggests a direction for those of us interested in media ecology. In playing with them, we will perhaps notice that Ong's typical approach to a topic involves careful observation and then the presentation and arrangement of evidence with a cultivated and well crafted persuasive voice. Or to return to my somewhat sexist image: the boys look at the girls, then chat them up.

### Rhetoric

ONG'S Ramus investigations drew him to examine rhetoric and the history of rhetoric. In the Greco-Roman culture that forms the basis of so much Western thought, rhetoric encompassed both oral expression and the analysis of issues in preparation for discussion or debate. Thus, rhetoric is more than a way of talking; it is also a tool of analysis in a culture that depends on oral expression for its public needs (political debate, judicial decisions, education). As such, rhetoric serves as a key technology in the West: it is, depending on which definition of technology one chooses, "the systematic knowledge of a particular art" (Morehead & Morehead, 1972), or—a broader concatenation that I prefer—a system, based on knowledge and manifest in physical or organizational forms to attain a specific goal. Because of its connection with the educational system, rhetoric is a perfect example of a technology that shapes the culture in which it exists.

Because of his investigation into Peter Ramus, Ong paid particular attention to the role of rhetoric in education. It simultaneously constituted both the most important means of education in the West and the subject of education. Entirely an oral form, its teaching gradually entered into writing, as the teachers of rhetoric produced books of analyses, handbooks of methods, and texts of examples. By the medieval period, the traditional five parts of rhetoric (invention, disposition, memory, expression, and delivery) were more and more treated separately, with invention moving into the camp of dialectic and logic.

All of this, Ong reminds us, takes place in the context of an educational system that existed more and more in the context of a foreign language (Latin) for adolescent boys.

By the time Ramus entered the historical picture in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, dialectic and logic had more or less supplanted key features of rhetoric. Ramus took advantage of the then new communication technology of the printing press to produce all manner of textbooks that presented his system of places—the old rhetorical *topoi* became visual spaces and places in his books. As writing took hold, rhetoric as a technology changed from a mental one to an external one grounded in printing.

Ong found that the evidence for all of these changes existed in rhetorical texts and books of pedagogical practices. It was as though he could see how rhetoric changed over the centuries and, at the same time, how other university courses changed in response to the transformation of rhetorical methods. These changes occurred in philosophy, theology, and science, but also appeared in literature. That is what Ong noticed. Then he crafted a rhetorical response, leading us, his readers, through his process of discovery to the point where we begin to see the same thing. A good example of this comes in his essay on the history of punctuation. Here, Ong (1944) follows the role of punctuation as it shifted from directions for oral performance (reading texts aloud) to directions for comprehending the grammatical structure and interpretation of written texts. By the time the transformation was complete, reading had supplanted hearing as the key means of transmitting knowledge.

### **Visualism**

**T**HE Ramist world became a world of the visual representation of knowledge. As such it fit nicely into the milieu of the printing press. As rhetoric had shaped the ways people thought, now the visual representation of knowledge began to do the same. Classical education (and that system lasted well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century) directed that boys learn by imitating rhetorical expression. But Ong (1962b) reminds us that even though these students and their teachers thought that they were imitating Cicero, they had adapted Cicero's categories to an increasingly visual world (p. 69). The growing emphasis on visual material in Renaissance culture—astronomy, mechanics, physics, art, architecture—paralleled the shift in education. Ong writes that this was a movement “from a pole where knowledge is conceived in terms of discourse and hearing and persons to one where it is conceived of in terms of observation and sight and objects” (p. 70).

Elizabeth Eisenstein's (1979) discussion of the “book of nature” illustrates this shift nicely (pp. 453-488). In a world where knowledge—even where represented by visual terms—still rests on oral argument, hearing, demonstration, and interaction play important roles and, in many ways, restrain the gaze or at least contextualize it. With the book, we approach the world differently. Learning to read gives power but also cultivates a sense that everything can be read. The Western attitudes towards nature have shifted from living in nature to decoding “the book of nature”: what can we read from the world around us? The human environment has changed from a living world of sound to a sight puzzle. All we need is a dictionary and a grammar book and we cannot only read nature but begin to write in its language.

But Ong notes that a growing emphasis on sight affects not only the habit of looking, but also the West's evaluation of what counts for knowledge. Systems and their abstraction take hold and replace an earlier emphasis on method. "Method," Ong (1962b) reminds us, involves direction, seeking "a way through" a problem (p. 82); a system rests on a diagrammatic approach, such as one finds on the geometry of the universe of Copernicus (p. 80) or the space of Newton (p. 83). Systems such as these also lend themselves to mathematical description, an even more abstract representation of the world. Ong concludes, "The rise of the notion of system as applied to the possessions of the mind is only one in a whole kaleidoscope of phenomena which mark the shift from the more vocal ancient world—truly an audile's world—to what has been called the silent, colorless, and depersonalized Newtonian universe" (p. 83).

The same move to the visual saw hearers replaced by readers (of texts), oral performance by literature, debate by the essay, communities by individuals. Ong stressed the habits of thought that accompany each: aural thinking and visual thinking. These are not mutually exclusive but they do involve trade offs. Looking only gets people so far.

Here we again should notice something interesting: communication technologies shape the pedagogical practice and begin to shape the ways of thinking of those educated with them.

### **The Persistence of the Word**

**J**UST as our teenaged boys will eventually chat up the girls, the culture, no matter how much it moves to visually oriented thought, will not completely turn away from sound. Much of Ong's writing calls attention to the voice and the word. Sound matters, not only as a signal of a living thing, but also for what it reveals. The key concept in this regard is interiority. For Ong, interiority represents what persons reveal to each other, an individual's self-consciousness, that which makes a claim on another. The sound of interiority is the voice and the voice expresses itself in words. "Language retains this interiority because it, and the concepts which are born with it, remain always the medium wherein persons discover and renew their discovery that they are persons, that is, discover and renew their own proper interiority and selves" (Ong, 1962a, p. 29). The voice implies and creates a hearer—and this leads to a different kind of knowledge than visualism or systems, a contrast Ong (1962c) finds between "belief that" and "belief in" (pp. 55-57). The former refers to our relationship to concepts and ideas; the latter, to our relationships with one another or with God.

Ong never hesitated to reevaluate his distinctions. Though he noticed how visually-based thought increased its relative position to aurally-based thought, he also noticed that one did not drive out the other. Oral cultures use visual terms and visual cultures, oral ones. In the 1967 Terry Lectures at Yale (a characteristically oral forum for Ong), he introduced the idea of "the sensorium": "By the sensorium we mean here the entire sensory apparatus as an operational complex" (Ong, 1967, p. 6). Ong read widely and here his reading in biology and psychology plays a role. He knew from various psychological research into perception that the senses work together, but people can pattern and coordinate the world of sense experience differently. Because humans attend selectively to sense experience, they must make choices. Ong argued that those choices are culturally informed: some cultures pay more attention to visual information, for example, and others to aural information—and they teach their children to do so. The

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educational system, pedagogical practices, and communication media all teach us how to use our senses. Sight and hearing are not separated, but balanced with the other senses.

Sound situates people in the world differently from vision. This has, as I briefly indicated, epistemological consequences (the rise of systems as against methods), but also psychological consequences. “Personality structure,” Ong (1967) writes, “varies in accordance with variations in communications media and consequent variations in the organization of the sensorium” (p. 131). A world of sound is less predictable than a world of sight, leaving us simultaneously more anxious and more connected to others. Sight requires distance; such separation allows us a greater measure of control. And that emphasis on control leads us to a world of things (the book of nature, again), rather than a world of presence.

Ong made bolder claims as well. In looking at the historical evidence of cultures adopting writing systems and the evidence of oral practices preserved in texts, Ong writes that cultures move through stages vis-à-vis their technologies, but never abandon older technologies. For example, he refers to “residual orality,” in printed works (Ong, 1967, p. 17) and later to “secondary orality” in electronic forms. But he also refers to theories of the development of consciousness and tries to map them to human technologies. While we cannot deny that our technologies influence us, the specification of how they influence remains vague. Ong (1977b) strongly asserts that communication technology influences us more than other technologies because it affects the word, which remains central to our self-identity and relational practices (p. 22). Or, in his words, “The ‘media’ are more significantly within the mind than outside it” (p. 47).

In other studies, Ong examines the pedagogical system in which all of these things have taken place. This system of Latin-based education, which lasted well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was limited to boys (and usually teenaged boys), taught habits of mind that so took root in the culture as to seem absolutely natural:

If writing initially helped thought to separate itself from the human life world so as to help establish and manipulate abstract constructs, Learned Latin would seemingly have helped at a crucial period with special efficiency, for its commitment to writing is in a way total, as has been seen: it does not merely use writing but is controlled by writing. Such a chirographically controlled language would appear to reduce to a new minimum connections with sound and thereby connections with the intimate human life world in its interiority and darkness. (Ong, 1977b, pp. 36-37)

Ong continually returns to what the word does, how it shapes our consciousness. But the word exists in two forms: spoken and written. And we have seen how humans have developed technologies for each.

### **Communication Media**

**O**NG’S work on communication media—especially his contrast between orality and literacy—may be better known than some of these other areas I have indicated. But we sometimes miss the balance he strove to describe. Consider this comment from an essay titled “Wired for Sound” in his book, *The Barbarian Within*:

In their whole trend, modern developments in communications, while they have not slighted the visual, have given more play to the oral-aural, which a purely typographical culture had reduced to a record minimum in human life. The sequence of development running from silent print through audiovisual telegraph to the completely aural radio is an obvious instance of increasing aural dominance. Even television belongs partially in this visual-to-aural series, being only equivocally a regression to visualism. For the visual element in television is severely limited. . . . Silent television is hardly an engaging prospect. (Ong, 1962d, p. 225)

Our modern culture manifests a paradox: its science and ways of knowing rest on “the use of diagrams and . . . the maneuvering of objects in space,” but it has developed communication forms that “specialize not in sight but in sound” (p. 224).

Ong’s concerns with communication media land here: describing what these media do to our thinking. Ong (1999b) tries to spell out what happens when writing distances the writer from the thoughts written out. He asks how the visualism of books relates to the visualism of television. He notices that older media do not go away, but reappear in newer ones: the oral traces in writing, the written scripts that enable radio or television, the habits of thought characteristic of how we communicate.

I get the sense that Ong would not be surprised by the currents of incivility in our contemporary U.S. political discourse, for this merely manifests the agonistic quality of oralism. Print allows for quiet reflection and dispassionate deliberation. Oral debate pushes to the extremes (Ong, 1982b). As renewed oral forms—not secondary orality but orality itself—(talk radio, television shouting matches) take root, the combative forms of these discourses will return. Not surprisingly, this seems to have caught print-based folks (like academics and newspaper columnists) completely off guard.

### **Digital Communication and Interpretation**

**A** final communication theme in Ong’s writings raises questions of how humans interact with their communication technologies: not in the epistemological, psychological, or pedagogical ways we have seen, but in how we return to the fundamental experience of the word. Can we find our way back to interiority? Can we, like those teenaged boys, stop objectifying the girls?

Ong argued that all technological mediation requires some level of interpretation. Where face-to-face interaction presented one interiority to another, the technologies of rhetoric added a distortion, so that people had to learn how to understand rhetorical products—at least according to Plato and Aristotle. Written texts demand more interpretation: what do these marks mean? This interpretation occurs both at the level of the code itself and at the level of the text. Printed texts include more helps to interpretation: type face, type style, page arrangement, the attention to visual patterns that influence thought, and so on. Products of secondary orality demand more, not less, interpretation since they involve a deception—the hiding of the text on which they depend. Digital materials, as being yet more abstract, require more interpretation. And so it goes. In Ong’s (1999a) titular phrase, “Hermeneutic Forever.”

This rapid look at Walter Ong’s thought highlights five communication themes: rhetoric, visualism, the persistence of the word, media, and the necessity of interpretation.

It has also highlighted part of Ong's characteristic method: to carefully observe and record what happens in communication, then enter into a kind of conversation with it. Not surprisingly for so rich a source of ideas, Ong left a legacy for a media ecology approach.

### **Directions for Media Ecology**

**W**ITH its interests in the broader view, media ecology can continue with some of Ong's ideas. His historical studies of rhetoric suggest that we pay attention to how communication forms change. As Ong discovered with rhetoric, the evidence remains locked in the documents of a culture. Though we use many more forms of communication than the medieval or renaissance periods did, we also have access to more materials in which to study the transformation of communication.

We should also never lose sight of the connection between communication and pedagogy. Our educational systems still depend on printed texts, as much as if not more so than the 16<sup>th</sup>-century schools depended on rhetoric even while the printing press took hold. How that new technology entered the educational system may help us understand how new technologies enter our own schools. Ong's work also encourages more attention to teens and young people. Communication systems shape their consciousness in profound ways. We seem to understand little of this.

Visualism demands more study as well. We could explore the ways in which visual thinking differs from aural thinking, or the ways in which we have developed a kind of hypervisualism in advertising (the focus of McLuhan's early work, *The Mechanical Bride*, of which Ong [1952] himself provided a review).

Ong's renewed attention to the word suggests that people related to the world in different ways, as I have suggested with my example of the teenaged boys looking at and talking with the teenaged girls. Here again is an interesting area for study: how do these different ways of knowing relate to each other? How do they relate to communication practices? To educational practices? There is ample room here for cross-cultural study, if we accept Ong's idea that the sensorium varies.

There is a feminist concern here as well. If sex-linked education and gendered language enshrined visualism, even at the roots of Western science, how has this affected what counts for knowledge in Western cultures? Are boys more vulnerable to objectifying others or have they just been taught to think in that way? How is it that girls, when they were admitted to the once-male schools, were forced to adopt such practices? How did they resist?

Ong's writings also suggest that we pay more attention to words and their use. Where does agonism come from? How has it staged such a powerful return?

Unlike many theorists of hermeneutics, Ong connected interpretation explicitly with the encoding required by our communication systems. But he never really developed that thought. Here, again, is something worth exploring.

In this brief essay I have tried to connect Walter Ong to the concerns of media ecology. I will close by making explicit something I have hinted at. Ong never claimed to develop a system; but he did follow a method. He resisted the visualism and abstraction of systems, but he welcomed the conversations associated with finding a way through a problem.

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