

# Eleven Kinds of Orality: A Probe

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## Eleven Kinds of Orality: A Probe

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**Abstract:** Ong's notion of secondary orality that emerged with the written word is expanded to include the way orality changed with the emergence of the alphabet, the printing press, telegraph, radio, television, computing, the Internet, social media and AI.

Orality is the communication of humans with each other through the spoken word. Before the emergence of the written word, it was the primary and only form of human verbal communication. As pointed out by Walter Ong with the emergence of the written word, the nature of orality began to change. In his 1977 book, *Interfaces of the Word*, he introduced the notion of secondary orality:

My works do not maintain that the evolution from primary orality through writing and print to an electronic culture, which produces secondary orality, causes or explains everything in human culture and consciousness. Rather, the thesis is relationist: major developments, and very likely even all major developments, in culture and consciousness, are related, often in unexpected intimacy, to the evolution of the word from primary orality to its present state. But the relationships are varied and complex, with cause and effect often difficult to distinguish (Ong 1977).

In an unpublished preprint in 2007 I expanded Ong's idea that the written word produced secondary orality to suggest that communication with digital technologies produced what I termed tertiary or digital orality. This digital orality is a new type of orality on those digital media which are actually not spoken but are written, i.e. a new kind of non-spoken written orality:

Walter Ong (1991, p. 11) in his study of orality made a distinction between primary and secondary orality: "I style the orality of a culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print, 'primary orality. It is 'primary' by contrast with 'secondary orality' of present-day high-technology culture." Based on the conversational nature of the Internet and text based communication I would like to suggest that there exists a third kind of orality, namely, tertiary or digital orality. Tertiary or digital orality is the orality of emails, blog posts, listservs, instant messages (IM) and SMS, which are mediated paradoxically by written text transmitted by the Internet (<https://www.physics.utoronto.ca/documents/202/secondaryperception2.pdf>).

I later developed the idea in my 2010 book *Understanding New Media: Extending Marshall McLuhan* (Logan 2010). The reasoning behind my suggestion of digital or tertiary orality was my experience with the use of digital listserv conversations which while conducted with the written word had the structure of oral conversations.

The medium of the listserv is actually an oral medium and is highly conversational in which the input of one participant can give rise to some random thought on the part of another participant, who because the listserv is conversation-like, can go off on a tangent. For those users who operate in this fashion the listserv is a vehicle for exploration rather than a medium for carrying out a polished logical argument. As a result of this incident and the discussion that ensued, I was led to an insight into the nature of Internet-mediated text-based communication. I concluded that listservs and email exchanges in general although they are written have the structure of oral discourse and hence represent a form of orality (ibid., 122).

## **9.2 Tertiary or Digital Orality**

I obtained an insight into the nature of Internet-mediated written communication from an exchange on an academic listserv on which I was an active participant. We were having a free reeling exchange on our media ecology listserv that lurched from one topic to another when one of the participants complained that the thread was getting hard to follow because the responders were not responding directly to what had been said before. In other words new posts were not following logically from the previous posts. I understood the frustration of the person who complained, which, I believe, can be explained in media ecology terms.

The listserv is used by academics whose language of discourse is literate even when they are speaking to each other. As a result because the content of the listserv is that of academics and their interest in their field of study there is an expectation on the part of some that the listserv discourse should follow suit with the usual literate discourse in which one response follows logically from another. However, the medium of the listserv is actually an oral medium that is verbal and is highly conversational in which the input of one participant can give rise to some random thought on the part of another participant, who because the listserv is conversation-like, can go off on a tangent. For those users who operate in this fashion the listserv is a vehicle for exploration rather than a medium for carrying out a polished logical argument. As a result of this incident and the discussion that ensued, I was led to an insight into the nature of Internet-mediated text-based communication. I concluded that listservs and email exchanges in general although they are written often have the structure of oral discourse and hence paradoxically represent a form of orality, digital orality.

Primary orality is spoken in which the semantics and syntax are characteristic of oral culture. Secondary orality is also spoken but the semantics and syntax are characteristic of literate culture. And finally, tertiary or digital orality is written in which the semantics and syntax are characteristic of digital culture. There are overlaps in the vocabulary and syntax of these different classes of orality but each new form of orality introduces new elements of vocabulary and new structures of syntax.

Given this hypothesis I have formulated that one can define a number (11) of different oralities based on the notion that the nature of oral expression changed with the emergence of each new form of written, electric or digital expression or communication.

1. Pure orality before writing emerged which I will call primary orality or pure orality.
2. Secondary orality with the emergence of non-alphabetic literacy and writing systems.
3. Tertiary orality with the emergence of alphabetic literacy and writing systems.

- 4 Fourth order orality with the emergence of the printing press and print literacy.
5. Fifth order orality with the emergence of the telegraph and telegraphic literacy .
6. Sixth order orality with the emergence of radio.
7. Seventh order orality with the emergence of the television.
8. Eighth order orality with the emergence of personal computers and computer-based literacy.
9. Ninth order orality with the emergence of the Internet, email, the Web and online based literacy.
10. Tenth order orality with the emergence of social media and social media-based literacy.
11. Eleventh order orality with the emergence of AI and chatbots and AI based literacy.

The 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> order oralities that arise with Internet and the Web include both written and oral communication.

I do not know how useful these eleven categories of orality will be, but if Ong was correct that orality and oral expression is influenced by other forms of verbal communication these 11 categories I have suggested are worth considering. But certainly primary pre-literate orality, secondary pre-digital literacy and tertiary digital literacy are certainly useful categories. The suggestion of the 11 orders or kinds of orality that are presented as a probe might prove useful to some. Feel free to share your thoughts by email if you think the idea of these 11 forms of orality could be potentially useful.

Let's have a digital conversation about the ideas I have presented here. Bob Logan  
(logan@physics.utoronto.ca).

**Acknowledgement:** This probe is the result of reading the excellent preliminary draft of Andrey Mir's latest book scheduled for publication in 2024: *Digital Future in the Rearview Mirror: Jaspers' Axial Age and Logan's Alphabet Effect*. This is an important book that I highly recommend. This probe will be circulated or published before Andrey's book is released so look for it. I also wish to thank Andrey for his comments and suggestions upon reading a first draft of this probe.

## References

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