Many Shades of Orality and Literacy:
Media Theory and Cultural Difference

J.A. Loubser

Sometimes cultural difference is dramatically illustrated by historical events. In 1879, the Anglo-Zulu War began in South Africa when, at the so-called Ultimatum Tree on the banks of the Tugela River, the British authorities issued an ultimatum to the Zulu chiefs who were not familiar with the concept of a formal ultimatum. Consequently, the Zulus did not respond to the threat until it was too late. Such misunderstandings are bound to occur when people from differing cultures meet. It is a well-known phenomenon that delegates at the United Nations speak to one another from different cultural premises. Some of the language groups represented do not have indigenous words for concepts such as 'human rights' or 'democracy', which sometimes leads to misunderstandings.

Over the past centuries anthropologists have documented some intriguing instances of cultural difference. Lucien Levy-Bruhl, for example, reports a letter carrier from (the previous) Bechuanaland as saying, 'I will not carry letters any more. If this letter had talked to me on the way, I would have been so scared'. Other letter carriers are known to have speared the letters they were carrying for fear that the letters would suddenly speak up (Olson 1994:30f). A similar understanding (with a different approach) is reported of an American non-literate, Equiano, who says, 'I have often taken up a book, and have talked to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found it remained silent' (Peters 1998:44). In Buddhist monasteries of China and Tibet, prayer drums with written prayers are used. It is believed that the prayers continue to be prayed as long as the drums are being turned around. To Western literates, this practice seems perplexing. The same can be said of the icons of the saints in the Coptic churches of Egypt, which are believed to be alive and constantly praying for the faithful. Having been an object of study for a long time, cultural difference has recently entered the inter-disciplinary scene. One of the pertinent questions asked is 'How can one approach the issue of cultural difference without reverting to a colonialist discourse?'

In this regard, I wish to argue that unless we have an adequate theory for dealing with cultural difference we shall inevitably revert to a colonialist discourse. The contribution of this paper to such a theory is to explore the relationship between media and culture. For this we need a much wider definition of the concept 'medium' than merely taking it as referring to modern communication media, such as newspapers, television, telephone and radio. In this article, the term 'medium' refers to any type of material (airwaves, paper, laser beams, micro chips) that is used to encode ideas and concepts. Thus we can speak of an oral, manuscript, print or electronic medium when any one of these materials is used as the physical medium for encoding the signs of a semiotic system. To this definition we shall return shortly.

The study of cultural difference has received a dramatic new impetus of late. For many centuries, the academic world had been oblivious to the influence of communication media on culture. There was little or no awareness of how media were influencing the shape of culture. A sign of this new development was UNES-CO's expressed aim to eradicate illiteracy on the globe by the year 2000. Such an association of poverty and illiteracy is bound to be challenged, but it makes a powerful statement on the issue of media and culture. Recently, historians have documented the development of communication media—from oral communication to scribal me-dia, and from scribal media to different phases of manuscript culture, and from there through the printed media to the plethora of electronic media of today[1]. This new awareness of media did not necessarily involve an understanding of the properties of media or of the constructive role they play in the development of culture.

Over the past century or so, media-related issues have manifested themselves in various forms and under numerous headings. The earliest such investigation is found in the nineteenth century in the work of the brothers Wilhelm (1786-1859) and Jacob (1785-1863) Grimm on the German fairy tale This interest has generated a mighty stream of studies in folklore and oral narratives that have made an impact on many other disciplines. An example of how the new knowledge was assimilated in other fields is the publication in 1901 of a study by Herman Gunkel on the role of the folk tale in Genesis (see Gunkel 1964; Zipes 1988). The study of oral history, narrative ethics, narrative philosophy, etc. is evidence of this interest[2]. What

---

[1] Such a description of the progression of communication can easily support colonialist and racist arguments.

[2] The recently published anthology of Asante and Abarry (1996) gives an impression of how wide this field has become. Though focused on the African heritage, such a volume of 828 pages would have been unthinkable without the massive interest aroused in the manifestations of oral culture in the Western academy.

the brothers Grimm and the theorists who succeeded them failed to realise were the reasons why the oral texts[3] exhibited peculiar characteristics. In other words, *they did not specifically focus on the media aspect of their subject matter*.

Another discipline with an interest in media-related issues was Classical Studies. In the 1920s, Milman Parry and Albert Lord studied Slavic bards in an effort to understand Homer's epics. Ground-breaking theories concerning the extensive memory spans of oral performers as well as their 'rhapsodic' method of composition[4] prepared the way for further studies in orality in ancient Greece by Arnold van Gennep, Eric Havelock and others.

At the time of their studies there were already a number of scholars working on contemporary oral art forms, Vasilii Radlov, Friedrich Krauss and Marcel Jousse. The latter identified mnemo-technical devices—devices that are developed for memorising large bodies of information in oral cultures—and pointed to the profound difference between the 'literary' products of oral and literate cultures. His work is of special interest because he was the first to propose theories to explain the 'verbo-motor' lifestyle.

Jousse can with some justification be called the father of contemporary media studies[5].

One of the most active fields for media-related studies is theology. Many of the studies in folk tales and oral traditions were applied to a study of the world and culture of the Bible. Such studies have contributed to the understanding of cultural difference. The contemporary science of translation had its origin with Biblical

---

[3] The term 'text' is used in this article in a non-literary sense. Etymologically it is derived from the Latin 'texere', 'to weave'—an image that applies to the webs of meaning that are woven into messages in whichever medium they are expressed. As will be seen later, texts are not only written or printed. Under 'text' I understand a coherent set of ideas that have been encoded in any medium. It is therefore feasible to speak of oral texts.

[4] The 'rhapsodic' method involves a 'stitching together' ('raphis' is Greek for 'needle') of epics consisting of 20 000 lines out of stock formulae, stock characters and a loose plot line with variant subplots. The bards make up the epic as they proceed, modifying their materials to suit the interests of the live audience. The mass of variant material from one rendition to another is estimated as 40%.

[5] That Milman Parry studied with Jousse was brought to my attention by Prof. Edgar Sienaert of the Centre for Oral Studies at the University of Natal (Durban), who has undertaken the monumental task of translating Jousse's works from French into English (see Jousse 1990; 1997; see also my review of Sienaert's latest translation in Loubser 1999).

scholars[6]. The same can be said of the discipline of hermeneutics, of which the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) is generally acknowledged as the father. At present, scholars using social scientific, historical, rhetorical and socio-rhetorical methods to study the Bible are all contributing to our understanding of the cultural difference between the Near Eastern World of the first century CE and other cultures. A sub-discipline specifically directed at the medium of communication is that of textual criticism. This involves a study of all aspects of the production and transmission of the early Biblical manuscripts. Because the Jewish and Christian traditions span 3000 years and involve a great diversity of cultures, these traditions will remain some of the most important sources for scholars doing multi-cultural and media research. (According to the 1997 *Yearbook of the Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 34% of the population on earth identify with the Christian tradition.)

A last area where media issues came into focus is with the introduction of recent media technologies such as the modern printing press, radio and television. Neo-Marxists were the first to point to the role of social class in media ownership and the interpretation of texts (see Chandler 2001). This generated some research and served to emphasise the decisive role that media control played in the production and dissemination of information.

A breakthrough on the theoretical side came from a somewhat different direction with the work of the Canadian theorist Marshal McLuhan (1911-1980). McLuhan, whose seminal work is *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), drew on his studies of social change during the transition from manuscript to printing culture in Western Europe to suggest a sweeping media theory epitomised in the slogan, 'The medium is the message' (see also McLuhan 1967; 1994). While the slogan suggests a deterministic point of view, this is not the case with McLuhan. He pioneered an understanding of the dialectical way in which media and society influence each other. With the advent of television as a mass medium, the ground was cleared for widespread interest in the role of communication media in culture. The advent of the Internet and the dramatic changes brought about by satellite telecommunication have accelerated interest in this field. Departments of Communication Science have mushroomed at universities around the world, populated by students eager to exploit the new technologies. It is probable that students of computer-enhanced media are

---

[6] Presently, major parts of the Bible have been translated into about 1200 of the 2000+ languages spoken on the planet. The person who has contributed in this field more than anyone else I know is Eugene A Nida (1996; for a summary see his latest publication on the sociolinguistics of translation). For any scholar, an involvement in the complexities of Bible translation is a good introduction to multi-cultural understanding.

now conducting most of the creative thinking on media and culture. Many media studies come from students with interests in journalism, though many unfortunately restrict their scope to the practical and technical aspects of contemporary media without developing a broader theoretical perspective.

The scholar who cast oral theory into a popular form was a Jesuit priest and professor in humanities, Walter Ong. His book, *Orality and Literacy, the Technologizing of the Word* (1982), has been widely read, criticised and applied to a great variety of study fields. Ong's most basic insight is that 'writing restructures consciousness' (Ong 1982a:78)[7]. Though often criticised, along with Eric Havelock[8], for positing a 'great divide' between oral and literate cultures, he presented a clear and distinct typology with which scholars began to work. He also contributed toward restoring the dignity of orality and enabling people from predominantly oral cultures to recover some of their heritage. In this sense Ong's studies and those of the scholars coming after him contribute toward a post-colonial scholarship. Since Ong's first publications a number of scholars have produced seminal works. Jan Vansina, who brought his experience in Central Africa to bear on the subject, published a noteworthy book, *Oral Tradition*, in 1965 and thoroughly revised it in 1985. Rosalind Thomas (1992) and Susan Niditch (1996), reviewing the archaeological evidence in the light of the new theories, both published monographs on orality and literacy, respectively in ancient Greece and ancient Israel. Such studies have been going on for more than a century, but what is new is that these scholars are reviewing the archaeological evidence in the light of recent theories of orality and literacy. Ruth Finnegan, through numerous publications (see 1977; 1988; 1992), refined the procedures for studying oral culture.

The preceding discussion shows that a significant body of learning has been accumulated over the past century and especially during the last quarter of the twentieth century. These studies focus mainly on the roles of orality and literacy in

---

[7] This statement has been seriously challenged by Scribner and Cole. With the publication of their book, *The Psychology of Literacy* (1981), they reported that they found that the introduction of script into traditional society produced no general cognitive effects such as the ability to memorize, to classify, or to draw logical inferences (Olson 1994:20). Olson (1994) spends the major part of his book refuting this finding. My own critique of Scribner and Cole's finding is that the time span over which they conducted their research was too short. Shifts in consciousness patterns related to media usage usually occur over long periods of time.
[8] Havelock's publications of 1982 and 1986 propose that Greek literacy, advanced by the unique invention of a complete alphabet, enabled the scientific and philosophical revolution of the Classical Era.

the shaping of societies and the texts (see note 2) that we find in those societies. The studies are seldom presented under the heading of 'media' studies, and they are seldom integrated into a general theory of culture[9]. A consequent question that has to be asked is whether and to what extent studies on orality and literacy (or media studies) can enhance our understanding of cultural difference. Can one understand more about the differences between peoples and cultures by investigating the different media technologies in a given social context? What exactly are the relations between media and culture, and media and social reality? Is the time favourable for formulating a theory of media and culture? How significant would a theory of media be to specific modes of interpretation, such as postcolonial readings, deconstruction, structuralism, and feminist readings?

Such questions are being raised. What then are the consequences of the development in media technologies for multi-cultural understanding? Two examples illustrate the challenges posed to students of media. The first, brought to my attention by Dr L. Bregman, concerns the recently restored Globe Theatre in London, which has the object of presenting Shakespearean plays in their original setting (see Cramer 2001). In spite of the efforts made, it has been realised that any reconstruction can only be partial. The arrangement of space, light, sound and smell can be physically reproduced, but other conditions are more difficult to replicate. Elizabethan audiences were known to participate in a mode different from contemporary audiences. They would empathise with the characters on stage to a much larger extent than present audiences and would reply spontaneously to the 'rhetorical' questions of the characters, sometimes holding the actors personally responsible for the misdemeanours of their characters. Thus the nature of the theatre as medium has changed over time. This example illustrates just how difficult it is to reconstruct the way in which a text functioned when media properties have changed. A second example we can briefly examine is the e-mail message. Whereas the first e-mail messages resembled the form and shape of regular letters by mail, they soon developed their own rhythm. Because e-mail allows for a rapid exchange of information (press a button and it is delivered), writers are bound to compose cryptic and sharp notes. The author of this article has witnessed more than one misunderstanding where a recipient, still expecting the mode of communication promoted by letters, was offended by the abrupt and seemingly impolite style of e-mail exchanges. Thus we are presently privileged to witness the birth of a new genre,

---

[9] It is noteworthy that Werner Kelber (1983) is criticized for failing to 'ask what happens when the medium of communication becomes the bridge from the present to the past' (Byrskog, 2000:132). This remark clearly indicates the need for media theory.

the e-mail message, thanks to a change in media technology. Already this genre has subdivided into a spectrum of different types of message, for example, the chat-line, the memo, the commercial advertisement, birthday e-cards, the e-mail joke and many others. Murphy and Collins (2001) write illuminatingly on the form and protocol of on-line instructions on the Internet. All this raises a question: 'How much will the electronic media contribute to cultural divides between First and Third Worlds?'

These two examples concern differences in communication that arise when the media of communication change. In the above cases the changes are not as radical as, for example, a change from orality to a culture in which electronic media are used (as is the case for some people in Africa, Latin America and Asia today). When representatives from two extreme media cultures meet—for example, rural African people (orality) with 'Westernized' people (electronic media)—we are bound to witness tragic misunderstandings and conflicts of interest. A case in point is the manner in which global markets, with the help of electronic media, from time to time challenge Third World currencies. As translators have increasingly come to realise, it is not sufficient to translate propositional meanings from one language into another language if there is a large cultural divide. Paralinguistic features such a social organisation, cultural and media practices play a significant role. This was one of Walter Ong's main interests (as also of Goody & Watt 1963; 1977) for working on orality and literacy.

Let us then consider a brief sketch of Ong's typology. According to him, words in oral cultures are dynamic, charged with power. Curses and blessings are efficacious. Those who can speak the best (and the loudest) are promoted to leadership positions (usually adults and males). Orality induces a specific textual style. Concepts are arranged in additive rather than subordinate sequences. Oral communications employ redundancies to ensure the transmission of information. For the sake of clarity and definition, communications are often agonistically toned. Characters and situations are cast in terms of monumental stereotypes. Stories employ plots that are differently construed from the way they are in modern genres. Audiences are used to empathetic and participatory reception of oral materials. In oral societies memory is all-important for the preservation of information. This also has social and political consequences. The elders and shamans, who preserve the memory of the tribe, enjoy positions of power and privilege. Basic political units in primary oral societies are seldom larger that 50 persons. Oral societies are conservative and traditionalist (Ong 1982a:41). Ong's major thesis is that the features mentioned above are directly related to the inherent advantages and limitations of the oral-aural medium, rendering this medium of communication one of the most significant factors in the formation of culture.

In contrast to the above, post-oral cultures still depend heavily on the spoken word and retain many of the features of orality (fairy tales, for example, are read to children from printed books or watched as animations on television). This is often called a 're-constituted' orality. Subsequent media integrate orality into new post-oral media contexts where its effects can linger for many centuries. Oral conventions may even influence the highest products of literate culture. For example, James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* has been studied for its reflections on orality as well as literacy. Post-oral societies exhibit a tendency toward innovative thinking because of the enormous amount and diversity of information that can be processed due to better techniques for recording, storing, retrieving and disseminating data. Once this process has begun, more techniques follow. Two examples may suffice for demonstration. At its height of influence, the famous library in Alexandria (third century BCE), which became the prototype of all libraries in the Greco-Roman world, housed between 400 000 and 1 million written book rolls. This way of managing information became the foundation for the sophisticated civilisation of Antiquity. However, when duplicates and the length of the scrolls are taken into account, it turns out that the information stored did not exceed the size of a contemporary village library with 50 000 books, according to my own calculations. In another example, it is calculated that before the invention of the movable type printing press by Gutenberg (fifteenth century CE), there were only 40 000 manuscript titles in all the libraries of Europe. Within one century there were about 1.8 million. Together with an increasing ability for managing massive quantities of data, post-oral societies tend to develop different social structures, such as nuclear families and national states. Abstract notions of history, nature and of self are developed. An increased tendency for individual reflection leads to new levels of competition, capitalism, liberal democracy and the rule of law. Religions become based on sacred scripture. Above all, increased ability to handle information leads to massive technological innovation that influences all aspects of life.

Any study of cultural difference has to deal with the above typology. This model is, however, general and abstract and can barely serve as a basis for refined and detailed observation, analysis and description of cultural difference. Ong's sharp distinction between orality and literacy, if it has any use, would apply only to primal oral cultures in which writing is completely absent. (This is said *contra* Ong, since in my opinion the most serious criticism levelled against his work is that he does not distinguish sufficiently between the many different types of orality.) It would be a serious methodological mistake to use this description to identify a set of 'oral features' in a written document and then to assume that the documents are indicative of the conventions of a primary oral society. In the words of James Barr, used in a different context, this amounts to 'an illegitimate transfer of meaning'.

To what extent can Ong's orality-literacy typology further an understanding of cultural difference? Let us consider an example. Although traditional African culture is rapidly dissolving in South Africa due to urbanisation and universal schooling, all the 'oral' features discussed above can still be recognised among its 'indigenous' population. Here we think of aspects such as the extended family (primary oral group); traditionalism (necessary to preserve information for survival), a communal and inclusive tribal ethic ('ubuntu'); the tendency for politics to be relationship-driven instead of by the rule of law; a cyclical sense of history; emphasis on ritual, hereditary leadership and wisdom instead of an abstract view of history and nature; the experience of ancestral spirits and myths. Many of these features have been branded as 'typically African'[10] and can be ascribed to the oral-aural culture that has until recently dominated in Africa south of the Sahara (except Ethiopia).

To some extent, then, Ong's typology assists us in noticing typical oral features in African culture. By pointing out universal aspects, this approach defeats a narrow ethnocentrism that wishes to make these features unique to one race or continent. As already mentioned, it also fosters an awareness of oral culture and assists people to preserve their oral heritage. This is, however, where the usefulness of the typology ends. As any student of South African culture will know, there are hardly any communities left that participate in a 'pure' oral culture. On the oral-literate continuum, the mass of people is gravitating toward the literate and semi-literate middle classes. Thus, we can observe many different types of orality and literacy. One also has to deal with the fact that a simplistic distinction between 'oral' and 'literate' cultures often forms part of a colonialist discourse. Therefore, while scholars need to use abstract paradigms, we caution against this misuse. For the same reason we also have to emphasise (with Ong) that one culture is not superior or inferior to any other. People can live dignified and humane lives in any culture. This is especially important when we consider the contrast between a primary oral culture and cultures that have been shaped by post-oral media technologies (for example, Western or Chinese/Japanese cultures, using writing, printing and electronic media).

There are some urgent considerations before the scholar of cultural difference can proceed to move away from the usual generalisations. Let us therefore ask (again), 'To what extent is the use of specific media indicative of general

---

[10] Though often associated with Africa, these features can be observed among primary oral cultures all over the world. Today in Africa there are large sections of the indigenous population that are no longer living in a primary oral society—for example, the urban middle class in most cities, the Euro-African and Indian minorities, and the Arabic population north of the Sahara.

cultural trends?' There are good arguments for rejecting a deterministic position or, in other words, one that accepts media usage as the primary determining element of culture. Apart from media, factors such as climate, economic conditions, population density and natural resources all determine human culture. Remarkable, though, are the correspondences that can be noticed between similar cultures in different parts of the world. Let us briefly review some of these cultural types. In the most diverse climates and regions one finds small *hunter-gatherer societies* communicating with gesture and sound, using stone tools, ruled by family heads assisted by wise individuals. The San of Southern Africa, the Aborigines of Australia and Taiwan, and some tribes in the Amazon and Borneo are examples of these societies. One finds as well *nomadic clans* in different parts of the world. They use primitive recording techniques, manufacture ceramics and use animal transport, while they gather in larger federations and are ruled by patriarchs. Examples of these are the Khoi-Khoi peoples of South Africa as they were in the seventeenth century. Another type of culture is found among those living in *agricultural settlements*. These are experimenting with more sophisticated sign symbols, melting metals, transporting goods with horses and carts, and ruled by kings. The neolithic people in the Yellow River valley near Xi'an, China in 2000 BCE and the people living presently among the upper reaches of the Nile valley in Egypt belong to this category. Writing first developed more than five millennia ago in the *small urban settlements* of Mesopotamia, Egypt and China, where people developed irrigation systems, opened trade routes and were ruled by feudal kings. Since the eighth century CE we see the gradual development of a manuscript culture in the Ancient Near East, opening the way for the empires of antiquity with their improved communication systems and extensive governmental control. So one can multiply examples of trans-regional and trans-ethnic cultural types that are found independently from one another. Does this mean that cultural change is *always* driven by new media technologies? It seems that communication media are integrally related to the dominant cultural paradigms. Theorists like McLuhan and Ong point out that the rise of the *nation state* in Western Europe coincided with the invention of the printed media. At present the electronic media are enabling global communication to such an extent that national boundaries are no longer obstacles to stock markets. Trans-national institutions are flourishing, heralding the formation of new social and political units. These examples show how media usage corresponds with and depends on the other elements of a cultural system and cannot be isolated from those other elements.

    If we wish to conduct a detailed investigation of how media influence culture, we need a sustainable theory of culture. Among the multitude of definitions, there is the broad understanding that culture is a unique human product that appears when humans modify nature. This modification of nature is the result of the unique

human capacity for symbolisation, in other words, the capacity to represent information by means of symbolic systems. Of all the primates, only humans have the capacity for sophisticated symbolisation. Culture is therefore unique to the human race[11]. This definition can serve to clarify the role of media with regard to *culture as the symbolic representation of concepts by means of media*. This is the widest possible definition of culture that I can think of.

As an example of cultural production we can consider a 'table'. The idea of a 'table' as an 'article of furniture supported by one or more vertical legs and having a flat horizontal surface' cannot exist without being represented in a certain medium. When the idea is only an image in the mind, it is encoded in the neural network of the brain. This is then the primary medium. (The electro-chemical reactions in the brain serve the same purpose as ink and paper, to supply a material medium by means of which ideas are encoded.) The concept 'table' can also be encoded in the oral medium by being verbally described. Gestures can be used to enhance the oral description. It can further be represented as a drawing on paper. And, above all, it can be represented in wood or some other material. This is the medium in which it becomes useful, but the latter is only one possible representation. By this statement the distinction between a drawing of a table and a real table is suspended. I wish to contend that 'real' tables are also symbolic representations, in this case not of ideal tables in a Platonic 'realm of ideas', but of processes and objects perceived in reality. Thus, for example, the abstract idea of a level surface fixed horizontally at a certain level can be seen as representative of what someone has perceived in nature. What makes it a cultural product, a table, is the fact that it could be symbolically represented and rationalised before being produced in a certain medium. The use of media in such a series of multiple symbolisations applies not only to tables but to all cultural objects.

Since the medium, according to our definition, is an integral component in every process of symbolic representation, it follows that an analysis of media usage is profitable for the study of cultural difference. Usually the media are not the focus of attention in cultural activities, though there are specific occasions where they become that. This is when, in Roman Jakobson's terms, a certain aspect of a message

---

[11] Other primates are also known to make use of symbols, but the human capacity for symbolisation is qualitatively different from those of any other animal. In California, a gorilla, 'Koko', is reported to have learned 500 symbols of American sign language. It was found that she always understands words in the same way, regardless of their order. 'Words' always have only one meaning. The capacity for polysemy is lacking (according to programme on Discovery Channel on DSTV SA, November 21 1999).

is *over-determined*[12]. In the communication of messages, media over-determination occurs when the sender of a message explicitly focuses on the medium, for example, when the sender of an e-mail message includes some remark about the medium ('I hope you can open my attachments in your browser'). Usually, the interpreter has to rely on implicit data to examine the 'media texture' of a text ('Had I been present, I would have told her so myself'). Perhaps *Finnegan's Wake* (1939) is the best example of a text in which the medium is over-determined. In this work the phonetic quality of the text usurps the conventional linguistic aspect, breaking up the expected semantic patterns and creating multiple levels of meaning and quasi-meaning. It is a play of the oral-aural medium with the visible, typographic medium.

The media aspect, however, does not need to be over-determined to be the object of study. All texts exhibit a media texture. (Under media texture we understand *the network of signs in a text that relate to the management of the media used in the production of meaning.* This applies even to the most primitive of texts, namely, those that exist only as webs of concepts in the mind. In such cases, the 'neural' medium will determine features such as the durability of the text and the 'density' of information.) The 'poetics' of a text, or the totality of features influencing the style and composition, usually reflect properties specific to the media used. Thus we find an *oral* texture even in written texts when these reflect the style and conventions related to oral communication. Over the past decade I have compiled a list of the general properties of media that influence various aspects of the communication process (Loubser 1986; 1993; 1995; 1996). These can be used to analyse and describe the media texture of a text. As such the media texture also points to the other textures of a text[13].

---

[12] Media over-determination is not the same as any of the six functions described by Jakobson, although it is related to the phatic and the metalinguistic functions. In the case of literature, 'instances of the phatic function are to be found in the opening scene of Eugène Ionesco's Bald Soprano and in many scenes of Harold Pinter's early plays. The metalingual function is often the principal focus of stage directions, whose express purpose is to clarify the dialogue and the delivery intended by the dramatist' (Issacharoff 2001).

[13] For the concept of 'texture' I am indebted to Prof. Vernon Robbins (1996a:2-4 and 1996b:1-17). Robbins' socio-rhetorical analysis consists in plotting the different textures in texts (inner texture, and social, cultural, ideological and sacred textures) as they interact with the contexts of sender and receiver. This author wishes to suggest 'media texture' as a further element for consideration in socio-rhetorical analysis. For this purpose, however, both the terms 'media' and 'text' as used in socio-rhetorical analysis need to be expanded.

Let us first examine those media properties that regulate the *production* of messages. The production of texts depends on the manipulability of the medium. One may ask, 'How easily can a text be produced and changed?' In the oral-aural medium, texts are produced instantaneously once the sender has learned how to use language. In contrast, printed messages require sophisticated technology and cannot be produced or altered without an investment of time and effort. Another factor is the total volume of signs/symbols that can be carried by a certain medium. If a politician prepares to address an audience, the length of his or her message will be adapted to the medium, whether it be a live address, a radio address or a television interview. A live address may allow for about 40 minutes, a radio address less, and a television interview for even less. When using different media, for example, reading a book or watching television, the total volume of signs communicated will differ. This relates to the capacity of media to allow for 'infodensity': the amount of information that can be transmitted *within a given time*. The infodensity of oral-aural communication is relatively low in comparison to high-speed electronic data transmission. The last property related to the production of messages is mass—the physical mass of the medium required. In the transmission of oral messages, the physical mass of materials used is almost negligible, whereas stone tablets used for monumental inscriptions have a considerable mass. The more mass a medium requires, the more difficult it becomes to produce a text. Thus, oral-aural messages are rapidly produced with very little effort and appear to have no mass. During oral-aural communication, the volume of signs and information transmitted is relatively low in comparison with print and electronic media.

The *format* of messages also depends on media properties. Different media require the use of different codes that affect the format, its form and style as well as the demarcation of units. The oral-aural medium requires the use of mnemonic devices such as repetitive formulae and a paratactic style. Stylistic devices such as rhyme, rhythm and metre serve to optimise communication. The oral medium fosters the development of a range of genres, for example, the folk tale, sung epics, etc. Only with the advancement of writing could genres such as the historical essay and the modern detective story develop. Where oral-aural communication depends on the management of sound, writing depends on the arrangement of visual marks on a two dimensional surface. What sound and time are to orality, space is to writing. Another media property that influences the format of messages is the capacity of the medium for synchronising with other media, namely, its multi-media capacity. The spectrum of media that can be incorporated has a direct bearing on the length and style of the message. Oral-aural communications allow for the use of gesture and intonation. Printing, however, could only begin using photographic pictures after the development of the technology in the 1840s. The importance of this for the format of

the printed text can be observed in the contemporary glossy magazine, where much of the printed text serves to introduce and comment upon graphic images. Related to the multi-media aspect, but not the same, is the capacity of media for intertextuality: the incorporation of other texts using the same medium in a message. During oral-aural communication, intertextual reference can only come from memory. Because memory is in a permanent state of flux, such references are usually adapted to the present needs of the audience to such an extent that the original context becomes obscured. Exact verbal citations do occur in oral cultures, but they are far less usual than free re-contextualisations, reconfigurations, adaptations and echoes of the texts to which they refer. In the manuscript culture of the first century, many of these intertextual modes are preserved (see Robbins 1994:82; Byrskog 2000:13). Thus, we see that the format of messages is strongly determined by the medium employed.

A third aspect of messages that is influenced by media properties concerns the *distribution* of the messages. How far and wide messages are distributed depends on the durability, affordability, range of reception and copying and storage capacity allowed for by the medium, as well as the type of censorship that is possible. Let us consider the distribution of oral-aural communications in a pure oral society in comparison to the manuscript culture. During oral communication, only those within hearing range can participate. Although rhetoricians since Classical times have charged their students for instruction in eloquence, the spoken word has the advantage of being relatively inexpensive; however, it has the disadvantage of disappearing as soon as it has been uttered. This limits the range of messages to the immediate hearers and those among them who can remember and transmit the message. Social structures are developed to support the preservation of memory. This involves the institution of elders (who preserve the memories of the tribe), the ritualisation of myths, the development of a culture of bards and singers, etc. In predominantly oral societies, gifted individuals specialise in memory[14]. By way of generalisation, one can say that the copying and storage of information in an oral culture remains volatile and evanescent when compared to writing. This puts a serious limitation on the range over which oral texts can be distributed. The distribution of written documents is also limited by their cost. Ink, papyrus and parchment for producing manuscripts come at a price. It is calculated, for example,

---

[14] An example of these are the Tannaim in Rabbinic Judaism who served as 'memory banks' for the rabbis and were often the object of ridicule because they memorized without understanding (see Gerhardsson 1998). Such 'human memory banks' could verbally recite large parts of the Torah, Mishnah and Talmud—no small feat if at more than 19 000 modern printed pages. Youngsters are found in contemporary Islamic communities who have memorized the complete Qur'an.

that 350 sheep or goats were slaughtered to produce one of the 50 copies of the Bible that the Emperor Constantine ordered for the churches in Byzantium in the year 330 CE (Millard 2000:45). Parchment manuscripts, especially codices, could be used for centuries and were distributed as far as transport routes went. Though such documents could never be copied with photographic precision, they represent a huge advance over oral communication. This medium enabled the dissemination and standardisation of the scientific, religious and philosophical information of the Arabic and European cultures during the Middle Ages. A manuscript culture of a similar type was recently observed in Ethiopia by the author. These examples serve to show how media have a direct bearing on the distribution of messages; but messages can also be suppressed. In an oral culture use is made of taboos to prevent people from speaking about certain matters. To prevent information from spreading, it is often expedient to 'kill the messenger'. In manuscript and printing cultures the burning of books is the most efficient form of censorship.

A last series of media properties that influence messages are those that have a bearing on the *reception* of the messages. Here properties such as accessibility, aesthetic impact, opportunities for reflection and feedback, and the level of distortion play a role. When examining a message, the scholar has to ask: 'To how many people is this message accessible?' The medium used, whether the oral, written or electronic medium, will make a considerable difference. Another question must seek to determine the non-verbal (illocutionary) aspects of the message: 'What aspects of the message cannot be encoded in the medium?' In the first century, the reading (or rather, performance) of literary works was often accompanied by sound, music and gesture and it elicited empathetic responses from participating audiences[15]. Today, some of those manuscripts are extant, but the illocutionary force has been lost. When reading such manuscripts at contemporary academic institutions, scholars often fail to imagine such paralinguistic aspects (for example, speed, tone, etc.) as presupposed by the author of the written text[16]. (Ancient texts are treated as having

---

[15] In a personal research of about 250 pictorial representations of writing on vases and reliefs in the Greco-Roman world, only a few instances were found where people were depicted with manuscripts without also the depiction of musical instruments, singers or dancers.

[16] This is especially true for Western documents. The ideograms of Chinese and Japanese writing allow for the communication of a register of connotative meanings that is not found in alphabetic script. It was pointed out to me that the Japanese 'kanji', being a short poem written by means of ideograms, 'evokes multiple associations, making reading an adventure in nuances, connotations and memories' (Bregman, Temple University, Philadelphia).

been produced by 'disembodied brains', to adapt a remark at an SBL session by K.C. Hanson, with reference to the regular Pauline studies.) Another manner in which media influence the reception of messages is in the degree to which access and backtracking is allowed. The spoken word depends on linear, hierarchic, synchronous communication. No backtracking is possible except by breaking the live transmission of information. This fosters a sense of interiority, of emotional participation in a communicative event (Ong 1982a:71-74). Whereas oral texts encourage communal participation, printed texts lead to silent and individual introspection—the extent to which this actually happens depends on the type of society at hand. Audiences tuned to oral-aural texts tend to dance and celebrate; silent readers of printed texts tend to reflect and think. Books allow direct access to information. Manuscript scrolls do not provide such access—the literary scroll of the Hellenistic age (often 10 meters long) had to be perused from beginning to the end to find a specific reference. Books and codices (since 150 CE) can easily be paged through. The electronic word processor is only the latest technological advance in allowing direct access to the information contained in documents. The effect that such diverse media have on the receivers of messages can be observed in the time required to access information. Technical information takes much longer to be communicated orally. In printed form references can be made more easily. The media also determine the type of reaction required from the audience, whether it is immediate feedback (as in an oral dialogue), a response over a couple of weeks or months, as in the Hellenistic letter, or an immediate typed response, as per e-mail chat-line. (See the interesting article by Murphy and Collins 2001 on the protocols and conventions of instructional discussions on the Internet.) Lastly, we note the amount of distortion caused by the medium of communication. No medium allows for a perfect reproduction of signs. Speech is always heard somewhat differently from the way it is pronounced. There is always some 'noise' that can lead to misunderstanding. Over time, all media decay. In an ancient Near Eastern text there is an admonition to write the same text on both stone and on clay tablets. Should the world be destroyed by fire, the stone will crack but the clay will be baked hard. If the world is destroyed by water, the clay will dissolve, but the stone will endure. In China we find a remarkable instance of how the distortion of sacred texts was kept to a minimum. From the seventh century CE the Chinese developed the practice of making carbon rubbings on rice paper. This is still practised, as observed by the author in the city of Xi'an. The Buddhist texts, brought to China in the seventh century were translated and engraved on stelae. From these, carbon copies were made. In the West no technique for exact copying existed before the printing press. We find even today that libraries have a problem with microfilm that decays faster than paper. Moreover, scientists are worried about the medium and language to be

used for instructions at sites for nuclear waste, because in ten millennia the waste will still be radioactive and no human message has endured for so long (Kaku 1998:265-294).

In summary then, the media texture of a message can be examined by considering the media properties that influence the production, format, distribution and reception of the text. Studies that concentrate only on concepts (as do all ancient studies) or codes (as do structural and semiotic studies since De Saussure) are bound to miss this important aspect. Such studies tend to present a 'docetic' view of reality, treating texts (and culture) as if they consist merely of some abstract system of ideas. This is bound to produce a distorted view of cultural difference as well, and to lend itself to a colonialist discourse. It is therefore in the interest of multi-cultural communication that the media aspects receive their due attention.

In this paper I have argued that the integral and constructive role of media should be considered in a theory of culture. This has been illustrated by means of examples taken from a variety of cultures. It is now time to move forward from the simplistic categories of the past[17]. Studies over the past two decades have shown that we can no longer speak of a great divide between orality and literacy. Neither can we speak in a simplistic sense of 'African' or 'Western' culture. There are many different shades of orality and literacy and many manifestations of the same cultural type in different places on the globe. We therefore need a theory of culture that allows for more sophisticated typologies.

Through the contributions of many scholars during the past decades, the ground has now been prepared for media-critical studies in a variety of fields. We can only hope that scholars and students of literature, history, psychology, philosophy, theology, journalism and other disciplines will make use of this opportunity to engage in a recent and rewarding field of investigation. A rich harvest can be expected. The most important result of such studies will be, as we have argued, an enhanced understanding of multi-cultural issues.

Department of Bibliological Studies
University of Zululand

---

[17] Derrida's rejection of Levi-Strauss's lament over the introduction of writing among the Nambikwara comes to mind. Derrida derides the latter for denying that the Nambikwara had writing at their disposal. He points out that they were using a great variety of signs like 'dots and zigzags on their calabashes'. It is a serious question whether Derrida, in his zeal to defend the dignity of a primary tribe, has given due cognisance to the role of media in the formation of culture. For a report on the issue, see Peters (1998:27f).

References

Asante, Molefi Kete & Abu S Abarry (eds) 1996. *African Intellectual Heritage: A Book of Sources*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Byrskog, Samuel 2000. *Story as History—History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in The Context of Ancient Oral History* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament; 123). Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Chandler, Daniel 2001. Marxist Media Theory. Online at <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/marxism/marxism13.html>.

Cramer, Jean 2001. Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, Like it Oughta Be. Online at <http: //www.bergen.com/travel/globe199903286.htmon>.

Finnegan, Ruth 1988. *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Finnegan, Ruth 1977. *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance, and Cultural Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Finnegan, Ruth 1992. *Oral Traditions and the Verbal Arts: A Guide to Research Practices*. London: Routledge.

Gerhardsson, Birger [1961]1998. *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinical Judaism and Early Christianity, with Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Goody, J, & IP Watt 1963. The Consequences of Literacy. *Comparative Studies in History and Society* 5:304-345.

Goody, J 1977. *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gunkel, Hermann [1901]1964. *The Legends of Genesis, the Biblical Saga and History*. Carruth, H (trans). New York: Schocken.

Havelock, Eric 1982. *The Literate Revolution in Greece and its Cultural Consequences*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Havelock, Eric 1986. *The Muse Learns to Write*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Issacharoff, Michael 2001. Jakobson, Roman. Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism. Online at <http://www.press.jhu.edu/books/hopkins guide to literary theory/entries/roman jakobson.html>.

Jousse, Marcel 1990. *The Oral Style*. Sienaert, E, *et al* (trans). New York: Garland.

Jousse, Marcel 1997. The Anthropology of Geste and Rhythm. In Sienaert, Edgard (ed): *Studies in the Anthropological Laws of Human Expression and Their Application in The Galilean Oral Style Tradition*. Sienart, Edgard, & Joan Conolly (trans). Durban: Centre for Oral Studies.

Joyce, James [1939]1966. *Finnegan's Wake*. New York: Viking.

Kaku, Michio 1998. *Visions, How Science Will Revolutionize the 21st Century and Beyond*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kelber, Werner H 1983. *The Oral and the Written Gospel, the Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark Paul and Q.* Philadelphia: Fortress.

Lord, Albert Bates 1960. *The Singer of Tales.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Loubser, JA 1986. Die Belang van die Konteks in die Lees van 'n Teks. *NGTT* 27,2:154-157.

Loubser, JA 1993. Orality and Pauline Christology: Some Hermeneutical Implications. *Scriptura* 47:25-51.

Loubser, JA 1995. Orality and Literacy in the Pauline Corpus: Some New Hermeneutical Implications. *Neotestamentica* 29,1:61-74.

Loubser, JA 1996. Shembe Preaching: A Study in Oral Hermeneutics. Kitshoff, MC (ed): *African Independent Churches Today.* Lewiston: Edwin Mellen.

Loubser, JA 1999. Review of Jousse, Marcel, *The Anthropology of Geste and Rhythm. Voices: A Journal for Oral Studies* 2:205-212.

McLuhan, Marshall 1962. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

McLuhan, Marshall, & Quentin Fiore 1967. *The Medium is the Massage.* New York: Bantam Books

McLuhan, Marshall [1964]1994. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man.* Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

Millard, Alan 2000. *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus.* Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Murphy, Karen L & Mauri Collins 2001. Communication Conventions in Instructional Electronic Chats. *First Monday.* Online at <http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue2_11/murphy/ >.

Nida, Eugene A 1996. *The Sociolinguistics of Interlingual Communication.* Collection Traductologie. Brussels: Les Éditions du Hazard.

Niditch, Susan 1996. *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature.* Louisville: Westminster.

Olson, David R 1994. *The World on Paper: The Conceptual and Cognitive Implication of Writing and Reading.* Cambridge: CambridgeUniversity Press.

Ong, Walter J 1967. *The Presence of the Word.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Ong, Walter J 1977. *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Ong, Walter J 1982a. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word.* London: Methuen.

Ong, Walter J 1982b. *The Literate Revolution in Greece and its Cultural Consequences.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Parry, Milman 1971. *The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry.* Oxford: Clarendon.

Peters, Julie Stone 1988. Orality, Literacy, and Print Revisited. In Weeks, Dennis L & Jane Hoogestraat (eds): *Time, Memory and the Verbal Arts: Essays on the Thoughts of Walter Ong.* Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press.

Robbins, Vernon K 1994. Oral, Rhetorical, and Literary Cultures: A Response. *Semeia* 65,2:75-94.

Robbins, Vernon K 1996a. *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation.* Valley Forge: Trinity.

Robbins, Vernon K 1996b. *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse, Rhetoric, Society and Ideology.* London: Routledge.

Scribner, S & M Cole 1981. *The Psychology of Literacy.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Thomas, Rosalind 1992. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Vansina, Jan 1965. *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology.* Wright, H M (trans). London: Routledge.

Vansina, Jan 1985. *Oral Tradition as History.* Nairobi: Heinemann.

Weeks, Dennis L & Jane Hoogestraat (eds) 1998. *Time, Memory and the Verbal Arts: Essays on the Thoughts of Walter Ong.* Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press.

Zipes, Jack David 1988. *The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forest to the Modern World.* New York: Routledge.