

## Secondary Orality (or second orality)

Tommaso Venturini n". R.K. Nielsen et al (Eds.) *International Collaborative Dictionary of Communications*, url: <http://mediaresearchhub.ssrc.org/icdc-content-folder/second-oral>

The notion of *secondary orality* was introduced by Walter Ong to describe the communitarian effects that electronic media can induce. In his 1982 book, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, Ong claims that:

Telephone, radio, television and the various kind of sound tape, electronic technology has brought us into the age of 'secondary orality'. This new orality has striking resemblance to the old in its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment, and even its use of formulas. But it is essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print, which are essential for the manufacture and operation of the equipment and for its use as well.

Secondary orality is both remarkably like and remarkably unlike primary orality. Like primary orality, secondary orality has generated a strong group sense, for listening to spoken words forms hearers into a group, a true audience, just as reading written or printed texts turns individuals into themselves. But secondary orality generates a sense for groups immeasurably larger than those of primary oral culture – McLuhan's 'global village' (p. 133).

The notion of secondary orality is to be understood with reference to the literacy/orality distinction as developed by authors such as Jack Goody and Ian Watt (1968), Marshall McLuhan, (1962) and Ong himself. According to these authors, the advent of literacy has radically transformed the societies that have adopted it. Inscribed on a material support and separated from face-to-face encounters, written communication allows social interactions to span place and time (see Joshua Meyrowitz, 1985). Literacy and all the subsequent communication media extend the reach of sociability by allowing information to be exchanged and connections to be bound without the need for physical co-presence. Such possibility leads to larger and more diverse collectivities where social links are less personal and more abstract. In other words the advent of literacy is said to be one of the causes of the shift from communities to social systems (or from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* to say it with Ferdinand Tönnies, 1887, or from mechanical to organic solidarity to say it with Emile Durkheim, 1893).

What is most interesting about the theory of secondary orality is that it postulates that electronic media can invert the trend initiated by literacy and developed by print (Elisabeth Eisenstein, 1983) and foster a return to pre-modern forms of sociality. Allowing richer and more vivid interaction patterns, electronic media may arouse a sense of closeness and community. As communication takes place among people who are distant in space and time such communitarian sentiment is often virtual, yet its effects can be as real as those of face-to-face interactions. In highlighting the communitarian effects of electronic media, Ong's hypothesis draws explicitly on McLuhan's theory of 'global village':

A tribal and feudal hierarchy of traditional kind collapses quickly when it meets any hot medium of the mechanical, uniform, and repetitive kind. The medium of money or wheel or writing, or any other form of specialist speed up of exchange and information, will serve to fragment a tribal structure. Similarly, a very much greater speed-up, such as occurs with electricity, may serve to restore a tribal pattern of intense involvement such as took place with the introduction of radio in Europe, and is now tending to happen as a result of TV in America. Specialist technologies detribalize. The nonspecialist electric technology retribalizes. (McLuhan, 1964, p. 24).

Although originally introduced with reference to media such as radio and television, the theory of secondary orality has also been applied to computer-mediated communication. Authors such as Steven Harnad (1991), John December (1993), Robert Fowler (1994) and Howard Rheingold (1993), who both participated in and described the rise of Internet as a social space, have extensively used the notion of secondary orality to account for the communitarian climate of the first online groups (e.g. bulletin board system, multi-user dungeons, newsgroups, electronic forums and mailing lists). Such *virtual communities* (to use Rheingold's term) characterized the first phase of Internet development, when online communication was limited to the exchange of texts. Yet the encounters they supported were perceived by many participants to be as thick as direct oral interactions.

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