E- Texts: The Orality and Literacy Issue Revisited

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Introduction

Research into computer-mediated communication (CMC) has begun to challenge much of the scholarship in the orality and literacy debate. My work in "virtual ethnography" is grounded in the ethnography of communication, and I have inevitably been faced with the need to theorize the nature of this new medium of communication. A virtual ethnography is one that treats the electronic personae and speech communities that develop through CMC exclusively or primarily as the determining factors of an ethnographic context. Consequently, a virtual ethnography is one that is conducted within the "consensual hallucination" of "Cyberspace" (Gibson 1984) rather than one that treats the keyboard, surrounding room, and "real world" environment of the stereotypical Internet communicator as the primary context (Mason 1996). However, in order to construct this ethnography, it is first necessary to describe the computer-mediated communication used on the Internet. This description in turn involves issues concerning the role of technology in communication and leads to debates that first emerged in Plato's writings.

Simply put, computer-mediated communication is communication between two or more people via computer. The medium of transmission thus becomes the network between the computers that allows messages to be passed from one to the other. Instances of messages passed along this medium form the communicative acts with which I am concerned. My primary methodology is derived from Hymes' articulation of ethnographies of communication (1962, 1972) and is called here an "ethnography of computer-mediated communication." Such an approach is the main tool I use in conducting a virtual ethnography and can be seen as parallel to other

variations on Hymes' concept.[1] For the purposes of this paper, then, I wish to examine the scholarship on oral and literate communication in relation to communications theory. My intent is to examine how computer-mediated communication displays both oral and literate characteristics, thus exploding the reductionist arguments sometimes posited in oral/literate dichotomies. Ultimately what is at stake here is an issue in mentalities: does the medium of communication "restructure thought" (e.g., Ong 1992) or do choices in communication lead to epiphenomenal poles on a continuum (e.g., Tannen 1982c)?

Writing as Technology

Writing in *Empire and Communications*, Harold Innis claimed that all "written works, including this one, have dangerous implications to the vitality of an oral tradition and to the health of a civilization, particularly if they thwart the interest of a people in culture and, following Aristotle, the cathartic-effects of culture" (1986:iv). In this respect he is following a train of thought that stretches back some two and one-half thousand years to Plato, who comments in his *Phaedrus* about the dangers of writing. In brief, Plato uses Socrates as a mouthpiece to claim, first, that writing is inhuman in that it pretends to a reality that exists only in the human mind; second, that it is unresponsive, which is to say that one cannot ask a question of a text; third, that writing destroys memory and, by implication, other reasoning faculties; and, finally, that a written text cannot participate in a debate with an audience.[2] The essential point here is that literacy is

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[1] See, for example, Keith Basso's programmatic essay "The Ethnography of Writing" (1986), John Szwed's "Ethnography of Literacy" (1981), or Deborah Tannen's call for ethnographies of silence (Tannen and Saville-Troike 1985). These works are starting to generate case studies such as Gerald Pocius' analysis of gravestone inscriptions (1991), René Galindo's study of an Amish newsletter (1994), and Mike Baynham's investigation of a literacy event (1987). I am not the fIrst to suggest applying Hymes' work to computer networks: Nancy Baym's studies of a computer newsgroup for fans of television soap operas take precisely this approach (e.g., 1993, 1994, 1995a, 1995b). However, it should be noted that there are counter-views such as that of John Dorst, who states that performance in such a space is "not readily susceptible to the conventional methods of performance analysis and ethnography of speaking" (1990:183).

[2] This argument has become fundamental to literature on the relationship between orality and literacy. For discussion of Plato's views on orality and literacy, see Havelock 1963. The best available summary, and the one on which I draw here, can be found in Ong 1992:297-98.

seen as a technology that allows new forms of communication. For Innis, literacy encouraged "monopolies of knowledge" that allowed for the development of militaristic empires and also functioned in opposition to oral tradition (1986:5). Regardless of whether one agrees with his thesis, it highlights the power of communicative media and the possibilities for social and cultural changes inherent in any new media technology.[3]

This argument is extended by McLuhan to encompass the rise of printing (1963). The invention of the Gutenberg printing press allowed for a new speed and convenience in the copying and dissemination of written texts. In many ways McLuhan follows Innis, his mentor, in devaluing this form and looking to new forms of oral communication, such as the telephone, radio, and so on, as offering a potential reinvigoration of the oral tradition and thus reintroducing a more egalitarian, human world (McLuhan 1964). Walter Ong also foregrounds the importance of new communications media and sets up a taxonomy of primary and secondary orality (1982). Common throughout these inquiries is the viewing of writing and print as technologies of communication. Consequently, many of Plato's arguments about the dangers of writing were rehashed with the advent of print (McLuhan 1963) and are now being reused to argue against new technologies such as the computer (Ong 1982:79-81; 1992:297). In this respect we can see that the emergence of computer networks as a communications medium functions to defamiliarize the written text. If, as Ong claims, writing has become so internalized that it no longer appears to be an external technology (1992:294), then the advent of these new media casts new light on the act of writing. Thus, it can be claimed that the investigation of orality and literacy threatens to deconstruct the text, a point Ong makes when he claims that "texts and anything considered by analogy

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[3] Consider, for example, the following comment by Jack Goody: "This attempt leads me to shift part of the emphasis put on the means and modes of production in explaining human history to the means and modes of communication" (1977:xi). Although scholars such as Raymond Williams (1968) have attempted to unify Marxist economic determinism with communications theory, most folklorists seem to be unaware of, or unconcerned about, the size of the issue at stake here. Ironically, although strictly deterministic models are somewhat passé in Marxist scholarship, pundits tend to quote McLuhan's deterministic "the medium is the message" (1964) somewhat glibly. Heath makes the point that "existing scholarship makes it easy to interpret a picture which depicts societies existing along a continuum of development from an oral tradition to a literate one" (1982:92), which is, in a sense, a rebirth of cultural evolutionism. Some folklorists, such as David Buchan with his description of a "verbal" culture that has recently acquired literacy (1972), attempt close investigations, but these efforts appear to be the exception rather than the rule.

as a text, can never be found to have total internal consistency. But this is not surprising if one notes that texts are not purely 'natural' products, such as exhaled breath or sweat or spittle, but are technologically constructed systems. . . . As systems they cannot be self-contained. They are built by something outside them."[4] Similarly, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett claims that "electronic communication broadly conceived marks the line between modern and postmodern communication" (1996:21).

For many, the advent of new communications technologies that re-emphasize orality are seen as re-democratizing communication. It is argued that if writing led to monopolies of communication, then the anarchic, egalitarian sprawl that is the Internet will lead to new forms of information equity and vastly extend participatory democracy. "[C]omputer-mediated communication . . . will do by way of electronic pathways what cement roads were unable to do, namely connect us rather than atomize us, put us at the controls of a 'vehicle' and yet not detach us from the rest of the world" (Jones 1995: 11). Furthermore, "with the development of the Internet, and with the increasing pervasiveness of communication between networked computers, we are in the middle of the most transforming technological event since the capture of fire" (Barlow et al. 1995:36).

Naturally there are counter-views such as those of Clifford Stoll (1995), who claims that computer-mediated communication is impersonal, disembodied, and lacking the warmth of face-to-face interaction, a point also made by writer Sven Bikerts: "In living my own life, what seems most important to me is focus, a lack of distraction—an environment that engenders a sustained and growing awareness of place, and face-to-face interaction with other people. . . . I see this whole breaking wave, this incursion of technology, as being in so many ways designed to pull me from that center of focus" (Barlow et al. 1995:37-38).

All of these arguments have in common a certain Manichean prophesying. When asking the questions "Can people find community on-line in the Internet?" and "Can relationships between people who never see, smell, or hear each other be supportive and intimate?" Milen Gulia and Barry Wellman note that "there have been few detailed ethnographic studies

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[4] 1995:9. Ong is discussing how postmodern deconstructionists are surprised by parallels to their work in orality and literacy studies. He is drawing on Gödel's famous theorem that no system can ever be self-contained. In as much as writing is a communication system, there are inevitably certain possibilities that are just not communicable in writing. Of course, the same is true for vocalizations. As Ong says, "articulated truth has no permanence. Full truth is deeper than articulation. We find it hard to recognize this obvious truth, so deeply has the fixity of the written word taken possession of our consciousness" (1992:295).

of virtual communities" (1998:170). This kind of study is precisely the focus of my research, and some general observations can be made here.

First, it is not necessarily the case that computer-mediated communication will be any more democratic than print. For example, Andrew Gillespie and Kevin Robins claim that "contrary to popular predictions of their decentralizing impact, digital communications contribute to new and more complex forms of corporate integration, reinforcing center-periphery problems on a global scale" (1989:7). To justify this statement, they draw on the work of Harold Innis and claim that computer-mediated communication is "inherently spatial" (9), a characteristic that therefore leads to a domination of regional areas by a core that controls the communication network. This assertion tends to be validated by research showing that women, ethnic minorities, and lower-income groups are vastly underrepresented on the Internet (Mele 1998). Yet it is undoubtedly the case that computer-mediated communication can lead to localized action and resistance, as Christopher Mele has shown in his description of the way in which a female African-American residence group used computer-mediated communication networks to resist the local government's attempt to tear down their houses and relocate them (1998). In another context, Leslie Regan Shade has described how community-based computer networks could be used to promote a distinctively Canadian identity as long as inequalities in access are overcome (1994). Certainly computer-mediated communication has a bias—as does any medium—and the frontier mentality that seems to pervade the Internet appears to lend credence to the spatial orientation of computer network communication.[5]

Orality versus Literacy

Inevitably, scholars have attempted to determine the differences between oral and literate cultures, especially through the study of language. This search has taken place at the macro level with Walter Ong and Jack Goody, and at the micro level with Deborah Tannen as well as Ron and Suzanne Scollon. To anticipate, the microanalyses have been used to test various hypotheses formed by macroanalysis and, generally, these

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[5] As an example of this mentality, Howard Rheingold's proselytizing book (1993) is subtitled *Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Similarly, Clifford Stoll's anti-Internet book, *Silicon Snake Oil* (1995), also draws on deliberately negative images from the American frontier. Both Stoll and Rheingold are long-time Internet users.

hypotheses have been found wanting. The primary hypothesis has been that written text is context-free whereas spoken utterances are context-dependent. Tannen summarizes the argument thus: "In oral tradition, it is not assumed that the expressions contain meaning in themselves, in a way that can be analyzed out. Rather words are a convenient tool to signal already shared social meaning" (1980:327). She points out that in an oral tradition the phrases "I could care less" and "I couldn't care less" are functionally identical and quotes Olson's dictum that in written texts "the meaning is in the text" whereas with spoken utterances the "meaning is in the context" (*idem*).

In addition, drawing on the work of Milman Parry (e.g., 1971) and Albert Lord (e.g., 1960), who determined the importance of formulae in oral composition, scholars such as Ong, Goody, and Havelock contended that the formula represented a different metalinguistic awareness that was peculiarly oral (cf. Tannen 1980:327). In fact, Ong appears to hold formulaic expressions as central in oral cultures: "Heavy patterning and communal fixed formulas in oral cultures serve some of the purposes of writing in chirographic cultures, but in doing so they of course determine the kind of thinking that can be eone, the way experience is intellectually organized" (1982:36). For Ong, the formula serves as a repository of wisdom that can be articulated in the appropriate context.

The situation appears, however, to be more complex than the simple oral versus literate culture dichotomy. For example, in his analysis of Yoruba ritual language, F. Niyi Akinnaso discovered that "the distinction between ordinary social communication and ritual language in nonliterate societies is as important as that between oral and written language in any discussion of language evolution, especially in accounting for lexical and syntactico-semantic complexities" (1982:27). Thus, he claims that particular registers of language evolve according to "situationally specialized topics or communicative activities" (25). Ron and Suzanne Scollon problematize the oral/literate dichotomy in a similar manner in their fieldwork with Athabaskans at Fort Chipewyan (1979). They contend that it is the degree of interaction between the participants that determines how much use is made of immediate context; therefore, one can think of the participants employing various communicative strategies that are situationally defined, some of which may appear "literate" and others "oral."

The preceding conclusion is precisely that taken by the sociolinguist Deborah Tannen. She has specialized in close linguistic analyses of spoken and written texts in an attempt to tease out the features of orality and literacy. Her opinion is that "many features that have been associated

exclusively with literacy are rhetorical strategies found in spoken discourse" (1982a:37). Furthermore, the emphasis placed on different strategies varies by culture. For example, she describes an experiment in which she asked a number of Americans and a number of Greeks to describe a series of pictures. Tannen discovered that the "Greeks told 'better stories'," whereas the Americans tended to include as many details as possible (1982c:4). Her interpretation is that the Americans treated the exercise as one of rote memorization, minimizing interpersonal involvement, whereas the Greeks treated it as an exercise in recreating a story. Essentially, the American subjects treated the pictures as a decontextualized text and used many "literate" strategies in description, whereas the Greeks attempted to do precisely the opposite and contextualize the pictures.

Drawing on other examples, Tannen notes that most studies of "oral" language usage have been among American Blacks and linked with poor results on literacy tests (1982c:13).[6] Also, where comparative studies of oral texts and spoken utterances have been conducted, the material chosen has often biased the results. In fact, in the research she has done she notes that "the speakers whose strategies are somehow more 'oral' are nonetheless highly literate people" (*idem*). Consequently, she proposes that we should replace the oral-literate divide with a continuum and states that "both oral and literate strategies can be seen in spoken discourse. Understanding this, let us not think of orality and literacy as an absolute split, and let us not fall into the trap of thinking of literacy, or written discourse, as decontextualized. Finally, the examples presented of conversational style make it clear that it is possible to be both highly oral and highly literate. Thus, let us not be lured into calling some folks oral and others literate" (1982a:47-48). Using this concept as a tool, Tannen is able to show how individual speakers can vary their communicative strategies for different effects and thereby show that "the difference between features of language which distinguish discourse types reflects not only—and not mainly—spoken vs. written mode, but rather genre and related register, growing out of communicative goals and content" (1982b:18). Such findings mirror Hymes' description of the relationships between speakers,

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[6] In fact, most work in this field has drawn on Basil Bernstein's notions of restricted and elaborated codes (1977). In essence, Bernstein noted that certain ethnic and class-based groups spoke in a "restricted" code that made abstract thought impossible, thus hindering these groups in social development. This observation inspired many to believe that teaching black children from inner-city ghettos "proper" English would facilitate their rise out of the ghetto. Although Bernstein's work has been soundly disproven many times (e.g., Postman 1973), it possesses remarkable powers of recuperation.

listeners, goals, and contexts (e.g., 1972) and implicitly challenge the deterministic relationship between communication and medium first proposed by McLuhan (1964) and then elaborated by Ong and others.

Consequently, it seems useful to apply ethnographic methodology to the study of communicative events and to treat variations in language use and choice of medium as rule-governed activities. Although Hymes' original intent was to study the ethnography of speech, he quickly opened his ideas up to the whole of the communicative act and its various possibilities (1972). Thus an ethnography of speaking can be seen as a communicative ethnography that focuses on speech, and one can then elaborate upon this concept to include ethnographies of writing, literacy, silence, and, in this present case, computer-mediated communication.[7] For the purposes of this essay I do not wish to venture much into the close linguistic analysis that an ethnography of CMC can provide; rather I am using it as an enabling step in order to ground my discussion of orality and literacy in respect to CMC.

There are other bodies of scholarship that critique orality and literacy dichotomies, such as the work done in the field of ethnopoetics by scholars such as Dennis Tedlock (1983) and Hymes (1981), who have investigated Native American narratives and discovered poetic structures within oral forms that appear remarkably literate. Also notable are John Miles Foley's attempts to unify Hymes' theories of the ethnography of communication with oral-formulaic theory (e.g., 1995). For example, Foley asserts that "the old model of Great Divide between orality and literacy has given way in most quarters. . . . One of the preconditions for this shift from a model of contrasts to one of spectra has been the exposure of writing and literacy as complex technologies" (79). His intent is to apply a version of Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological model of the reading process to both oral performances and written texts to create a unified field.

Computer-Mediated Communication

For the remainder of this paper I will investigate various communicative features of computer-mediated communication in order to demonstrate the ways in which this medium further problematizes simplistic oral and literate dichotomies. First, it needs to be stated that there are many types of computer-mediated communication available via the Internet. For example, hypertextual "web-browsers" such as *Netscape* and *Mosaic* allow

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[7] See note 1 above.

users to maintain public-access "home pages" containing full-color images, sounds, videos, and so on in a complex multimedia format. On the other hand, basic e-mail can transmit nothing but the characters found on a common typewriter keyboard. Thus it would be a mistake to treat all computer-mediated communication as homogeneous. For the purposes of this paper I plan to focus on "newsgroups" and e-mail mailing lists, which are versions of computer-mediated communication that allow nothing more complicated than basic e-mail. This is not to privilege or make any *a priori* assumptions about this form of computer-mediated communication, but is purely a contrivance to allow a more detailed examination of one particular form.

Perhaps the most important work concerning computer-mediated communication in the last fifteen years is a report by Kiesler, Siegal, and McGuire on the communicative features of the medium (1984). They concluded, essentially, that computer-mediated communication is deficient in paralinguistic features, and they presented five areas in which this was the case (1125-26). Such a shortfall was held to encourage certain forms of behavior. For example, they claimed that e-mail lacked social cues leading to more egalitarian communicative behavior, and that the computer screen lacked the ability to communicate emotion, leading to a perception that e-mail is more impersonal than other forms of communication. This slim report has engendered a huge field of research that has focused primarily on social-psychological analyses of behavior in computer-mediated communication within organizations. Although I believe that many of their findings are questionable and that they focus far too much on what computer-mediated communication supposedly lacks, they certainly articulated a commonly held metacommunicative belief about the medium, namely that it lacks "warmth" and is also conducive to misunderstandings, a belief well articulated by one of sociolinguist Denise Murray's informants: "All the personality and humanity that show up in letters disappear on computer screens. . . . [A]ll the warmth and wisdom are translated into those frigid, uniform, green characters" (1985:203).

To combat this perception, Internet users have evolved a form of communication known as "netiquette." Proper netiquette includes prescriptions such as ensuring that your message sticks to the topic of conversation, avoiding antagonism and the "flaming" of other users, and remaining aware that misunderstandings are easy and that humorous, sarcastic, or ironic content should therefore be flagged with "emoticons" such as "smileys" :-) or "bixies" <-_->. Some of these strategies are

illustrated in the following quote from Chuq Von Rospach of the Rand Corporation, which first started to codify netiquette (1990):[8]

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          A Primer on How to Work With the USENET Community
                         Chuq Von Rospach

                 Be Careful with Humor and Sarcasm

    Without the voice inflections and body language of personal
    communications, it is easy for a remark meant to be funny to be
    misinterpreted. Subtle humor tends to get lost, so take steps to
    make sure that people realize you are trying to be funny. The net
    has developed a symbol called the smiley face. It looks like
    ":-)" and points out sections of articles with humorous intent.
    No matter how broad the humor or satire, it is safer to remind
    people that you are being funny.

                   Surmary of Things to Remember

    Never forget that the person on the other side is human
    Be Careful What You Say About Others
    Be brief
    Your postings reflect upon you; be proud of them
    Use descriptive titles
    Think about your audience
    Be careful with humor and sarcasm
    Please rotate material with questionable content
    Mark or rotate answers or spoilers
    Spelling flames considered harmful
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It is also noteworthy that users are able to identify and comment upon paralinguistic features in e-mail. For example, the use of capitalization is generally held to indicate shouting. In the following reply to a message on the Middlesbrough supporters' list,[9] one of the readers comments on another's use of capitalization by shouting back:

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[8] I have attempted to render all e-mail examples as faithfully as possible by preserving the original spelling and formatting (as received by my computer, which has a basic 80-character-wide screen) and using a fixed-spaced font similar to ASCII. These measures are, however, essentially artful contrivances. Also, all possible identifying features have been removed from the e-mail.

[9] My research has focused on two e-mail lists. The Middlesbrough supporters' list is a forum for supporters of an English soccer team named Middlesbrough (often simply known as The Boro). The other e-mail list is a forum for discussion of a fantasy world by the name of "Glorantha." Many of the quotes used herein will be taken from the Boro list.

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From ***@university-college.oxford.ac.uk Thu, 23 Mar 1995 12:09:15

Subject: Re: ei ei eio (fwd)

> > > > I WAS AT THAT FA CUP MATCH AT HILLSBROUGH AS WELL AND I WAS ON TELLY 6 TIMES
> > > IN
> > > THE HIGHLIGHTS THAT NIGHT. ONE WAS A SUPERB SLOW MOTION CELEBRATION AS WILKO
> > > SCORED THE WINNER RIGHT IN FRONT OF ME. I DISAGREE WITH THAT ZDS OPINION
> > > THOUGH......THE ATMOSPHERE WAS ACE..CHELSEA FANS WERE WANKERS THOUGH.
> > >
> YEAH MATE I WAS AT THAT ONE AS WELL..CLASS PERFORMANCE, ESPECIALLY THE GOALS
> FROM WILLIE AND JOHNNIE!...WHEN THAT 95TH MINUTER WENT IN I THOUGHT SHIT CANT
> BELIEVE IT BUT TO SEE THE REF RULE IT OUT FOR NO REASON WAS GREAT. SUCH A GOOD
> DAY I DIDNT REALLY CARE THAT SHEFF UTD HAD WON TO SEND US DOWN.
>

HOW COME YOU ALWAYS WRITE IN CAPITALS? - IT'S LIKE YOU'RE ALWAYS SHOUTING
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An alternative way to approach the communicative features of computer-mediated communication is to examine what it contains rather than what it lacks. Seana Kozar (1995) has demonstrated how Chinese Internet users have taken advantage of the ability to mix keyboard art (i.e. pictures made from combinations of letters) with text in producing Christmas cards; Sandra Katzman (1994) has suggested that "smileys" form an instance of "quirky rebuses," thus highlighting the playful aspect of this communicative form; and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1996) has shown how users can play with e-mail programs to produce recursive messages. Indeed, this concept of playfulness seems to have become central with current researchers. Thus Danet et al. claim (44) that "four interrelated, basic features of computers and computer-mediated communications foster playfulness: ephemerality, speed, interactivity, and freedom from the tyranny of materials." Whereas earlier researchers were "concerned primarily with the instrumental, rather than affective or socio-emotional aspects of communication" (44), current work is focusing on the possibilities for play and performance via the Internet. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett puts it (1996:60), "sites of conviviality, fantasy, and play are revelatory of the nature of electronic communication more generally and they are being studied increasingly in social, psychological, and cultural terms—in the medium itself." It may well be the case that the standard explanation of communicative features in CMC as arising from a need to combat the lack of information is an insufficient conception and that a creative playfulness with language is just as important.

Danet and her colleagues also note that "linguistic features previously associated with oral communication are strikingly in evidence in this new

form of writing" (1998:47). For example, Denise Murray, who has studied the use of e-mail among office workers, noted that e-mail was generally informal, not structured into sentences, and often very context-dependent, thereby displaying features usually associated with written language (1991). Simeon Yates, in his linguistic analysis of a corpus of texts from a computer conferencing system (1994), noted that they contained an unpredictable mixture of "literate" and "oral" features. Taking such observations in stock, Danet et al. address the issue by focusing on the poetic function of computer-mediated communication (1998:47). Their comments are useful and point to a method by which it is possible to collapse the boundaries between oral utterances and written texts in general.

Applying Ong's Oral Psychodynamics to CMC

In *Orality and Literacy* (1982), Walter Ong gives a list of the psychodynamic features of orality and indicates how they differ from literate forms. Space prevents a consideration of all of the features he proposes, so here I shall investigate just a few of them in reference to forms of computer-mediated communication.

"Oral utterances are additive" (37). By this statement Ong claims that oral utterances tend to use the conjunction "and" rather than subordinating conjunctions to produce additive lists. Complementarily, we may observe that the nature of most e-mail is such that it proves very easy to add texts together with "cut and paste" functions. The work of Simeon Yates has tended to show, in addition, that simple conjunctions are more prevalent in e-mail than in writing, but possibly less so than in speech (1994). The following example demonstrates various "oral" compositional features, such as the use of simple conjunctions, dialect, and context-dependency, as well as various paralinguistic features, such as the liberal use of capitalization for shouting, repeated exclamation marks, and chanting:

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From pb27@leicester.ac.uk Thu, 4 May 1995 12:42:24
Subject: !!!!!!!!!!!!

I'm not gonna even try to represent how I feel now in text cos it is not
possible.

FANTASTIC...I'm still stunned.(and hungover)

Nightmare last night. Listened to the first half on the radio and then went to
the pub. Watched it on text until 89 minutes when the group I was with decided
we were moving on. Was a bag of nerves until midnight when I was put out of my
misery by a group of pissed Boro.

To all those people that I have banned from singing Going Up throughout the
season......Sing yer hearts out for the lads!


Middlesbrough F.C. Division 1 Champions 1994/95. We love you.

Happiness..........YYYYYYYEEEEEEEESSSSSSS!!!!!!!! EIOEIOEIOEIO!!!

Now tranmere.


Steve ......get back to me ..we'll meet at Notts Station and take it from
there. Will meet as many of you others at the ground at about 1/1.30...OK.
All you boys going in the Tranny end..try to meet us as well.

I wish this bloody hangover would go away. Right now it feels like Chris Eubank
and Nigel Benn are staging their latest rematch in my head.

Championi Championi AWAY AWAY AWAY!

It's beautiful to be Boro.


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"Oral utterances are aggregative" (38). If an oral culture must memorize its knowledge, then it makes sense to cluster various concepts together, leading to time-honored clichés such as "the sturdy oak" and "brave soldier." A literate culture, Ong argues, is able to deconstruct these aggregations analytically. Certainly, such formulaic language appears to be lacking in e-mail but, as of yet, I am unaware of research on this topic. The example below, however, shows a poster on the newsgroup

"rec.sport.cricket" using as many clichés as possible to describe a good performance by an English batsman:[10]

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From: dauphin@aztec.co.za (Bob Dubery)
Newsgroups: rec.sport.cricket
Subject: Re: Atherton what a player
Date: 4 Dec 1995 18:34:47 GMT

In article <49v3c5$sqh@oban.cc.ic.ac.uk>, Mr Shahryer Hussain <sh03@ic.ac.uk> says:
>
>I think whatever the results of the currentt est match, Mike Atherton has
>demonstrated clearly why he is the best opening bat in  the world today. 173
>not out so far says it all. Batting out 5 sessions to save a test match. Beats
>the performances of the current Aussie opening batsmen, and they are the only
>ones who could come close, at the moment, in comparison to Athers.
>

Absolutely!

He (Atheron) is a Ulysses, a Churchill.

His innings was the stuff of Kipling or Homer.

He "kept his head whilst all around him others were losing their's".

He rode into the valley of death and came out the other side...

I could go on (and I'm an SA supporter!).
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"Agonistically toned" (43). As has been noted previously, CMC has been characterized as lacking paralinguistic information, thus making it easier for misunderstandings to lead to angry exchanges. According to Ong, verbal dueling is an important part of an oral culture, and it certainly appears to be an important part of communication on the Internet, so much so that the emic term "flaming" has been coined to describe angry exchanges of e-mail. Perhaps, then, this prevalence of flaming is more a part of the way of life that has developed on the Internet than a result of the medium's limitations. For example, one popular activity among online soccer fans is to post insulting messages anonymously to a mailing list belonging to opposing fans: a kind of verbal assault. I have seen this practice occur several times when supporters of rival soccer teams have found the address for the Middlesbrough supporters' mailing list and posted various attacks. In the following example a Newcastle United supporter

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[10] In this example, unlike the others, I have preserved the original posting information so that the source can be checked; it was posted onto a news group rather than a private mailing list.

 "breaks into" the Middlesbrough list, abuses it, and then unsubscribes immediately so that s/he could not be e-mailed back. However, as can be seen, the mailing list is not without its own resources. First the administrator instructs people not to respond and then, after contacting the abuser's e-mail server, manages to force an apology:

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From ***@tees.ac.uk Wed, 08 Nov 95 19:17:17

Subject: SAD BUGGERS!

I have now unsucribed from this list, as you are all a pack of sad men,
who go around buggering each other. I support the toon army, who will win
the treble this year, and Middlesbrough will win sod all!
Middlesbrough Are Shite!
Middlesbrough Are Shite!
Middlesbrough Are Shite!

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From ***@hk.super.net Thu, 9 Nov 1995 09:34:42

Subject: Re: SAD BUGGERS!

>I have now unsucribed from this list, as you are all a pack of sad men,

>Chris

Ignore this individual...... I've Emailed his Postmaster....

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From ***@tees.ac.uk Thu, 16 Nov 1995 12:26:46

Subject: Apology - sad buggers

Dear Members Of The Boro Mailing List

I wish to apologise for the offensive and inflammatory message that I
posted to the boro mailing list, under someone elses e-mail address
(xxx).
There was no excuse for this, and I now totally regret what I have
done.

Your Sincerely,

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These are just three examples of how certain issues in orality and literacy are problematized by CMC. Just as relevant for this medium is Ong's concept of the evanescence of speech. Speech is carried by sound and, as Ong states (1982:32): "Sound exists only when it is going out of existence. It is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent and it is sensed as evanescent. When I pronounce the word 'permanence,' by the time I get to the '-ence,' the 'perma-' is gone, and has to be gone." CMC in contexts such as mailing lists and USENET is also evanescent and, I believe, sensed as evanescent by users. With newsgroups, most messages are only maintained for a week and then deleted. Although most programs allow the user to edit and check the spelling of a message before posting, a great many messages are clearly neither edited nor spellchecked, as the examples above illustrate. On the other hand, "home pages" on the Wodd Wide Web are as permanent as any written record, and many discussion groups are archived so that their conversations can, in theory, be reviewed. Unfortunately, the sheer weight of available information lends the Internet a peculiar ahistoricity, as anyone can attest who has seen the same arguments rehashed at regular intervals on newsgroups in which the participants either do not know or do not care that the current debate may have only happened a few weeks or months ago. It would seem that the Internet forgets as easily as any oral culture, a situation that leads to the emergence of self-appointed "net.cops" and "gurus" who make it their job to police their mailing lists and point out such repetition as well as to maintain FAQs.[11] The dynamics of memory and forgetting on the Internet seems parallel to that hypothesized for oral cultures by Goody and others.[12]

Synthesis

This article has briefly reviewed certain issues arising from an inquiry into the relationship between orality and literacy. I have argued that reductionist dichotomies do not withstand scrutiny and have used some brief examples from computer-mediated communication to further illustrate this point in reference to the work of Deborah Tannen and others. It is more appropriate to assert that users possess varying degrees of

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[11] An FAQ is a "Frequently Asked Questions" document that provides simple answers to the most commonly posed questions pertaining to its subject. Most newsgroups and e-mail lists have their own FAQs that can be e-mailed to new members.

[12] Goody 1977, 1986, 1987; Goody and Watt 1968.

communicative competence and that they make choices as to how to communicate (cf. Hymes 1962, 1972). Certain constellations of these choices tend to be associated with formal, "literate" communication and others with more informal, "oral" communication. For example, CMC can display a great degree of literacy when so required, as the example from the "Glorantha" mailing list below shows. This mailing list is sent out as a "digest" each time it accumulates over twenty kilobytes in messages or when one day elapses.

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From: ***@delphi.com
Date: Tue, 05 Dec 1995 11:01:23 -0500 (EST)
Subject: The Moral Equivalent of War

Martin Crim and David Dunham are touching upon one of the basic problems
of human interaction, best expressed by William James in that wonderful
phrase "the moral equivalent of war."  Liberal politicians are always trying to
invoke
that moral equivalent, because they imagine, at the least, that it would
bring the kind of solidarity and all-for-oneness that they are looking for.
The problem is that there is NO moral equivalent of war.
Now role-players, like liberals, are looking for something non-violent that
will engage their players as fully as the risk of life and limb.  My guess
is that the quest is equally futile.
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Each mailing list comes with posting rules at its beginning and is manifestly intended to emulate a series of written discussions.[13] Clearly, however, there is some sort of relationship between orality and literacy, and the medium of communication does have some effect on the message communicated and, by implication, the folklore transmitted (P. Smith 1987). The task of an ethnography of CMC is to begin exploration of this issue. My tentative proposal is simply that literacy stands in a hegemonic relationship with orality. Ong (1992:293) claims that "literacy is imperious. It tends to arrogate to itself supreme power by taking itself as

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[13] This topic is a very complex topic indeed. This particular mailing list focuses on a fantasy world that was designed by a mythologist and has a role-playing game attached to it. The posters to this list tend to be advocates of Joseph Campbell's mythological theories; several of them are qualified anthropologists and tend to engage in full-scale textual poaching from folklore, mythology, and anthropology texts. They will then use these texts to engage in debate and occasional storytelling, during which they will attempt to emulate oral techniques using computer-mediated communication in a literate frame. As an example of the complex interweaving between oral and literate communication, I know of nothing more complex. Ironically, one degree of status on this list is the ability to receive messages immediately, rather than in digest form, so that some digests may contain records of already completed debates between "star" posters.

normative for human expression and thought. . . . The term 'illiterate' itself suggests that persons belonging to the class it designates are deviants, defined by something they lack, namely literacy." This would seem to be a classic description of a successfully maintained hegemonic relationship. Marxist linguists such as Neil Postman have considered the ability of language codes to reproduce power relationships (1973). For example, William O'Barr has looked at the way in which Legal English is systematically used in courtrooms to reinforce the superiority of the judicial system and its practitioners, all of whom control this abstruse code of English over those unfortunate enough to get caught up in it (1982).

I believe it is possible to extend this argument to consider the status of written communication versus oral. In so doing, Innis' characterization of the imperialistic nature of writing becomes merged with hegemony theory, for writing is seen as a medium encouraging the centralization of power. Furthermore, the ability to write becomes crucial to one's status in a society—illiteracy becomes quickly identified with stupidity. Yet Bengt Holbek (1989:193) notes that "it would be a mistake to think of the illiterate in negative terms, as people who have not received certain kinds of training . . . . They should be thought of in positive terms instead, as those who interpret this technique [writing], which is familiar to us, in analogy to other techniques which are familiar to them." Where, however, scholars such as Ong and Innis have seen the domination of orality by literacy, hegemony theory demands that where there is power there is protest; in a sense the hegemonic voice or medium creates/needs the space or medium for an oppositional voice. I think it is possible to see the intermingling of oral and literate voices in narratives as examples of the dynamics of hegemonic relationships playing themselves out. CMC further illuminates this process.

Ultimately, communication such as e-mail is a text, but it appears to be one that is unabashedly oral. In a disembodied, depersonalized medium in which users change gender and virtual community at will, in which one has only a few typewriter characters with which to communicate, we see literacy being subverted. Punctuation marks become faces; capital letters are shouting; lines, sentences, and paragraphs become optional. With hypertextual links on the World Wide Web, the concept of a single, fixed text is exploded as readers "hot-link" themselves around the electronic world, bouncing from idea to idea. This is not to assert that CMC is somehow inherently counter-hegemonic, merely that it can be used in an oppositional way. Possibly, as some pundits say, computer network communication marks the death of print-literacy. Even if this is the case, print-literacy will not give up without a fight. Regardless, I think it is

crucial for academics to become involved in the discussion, and one tool that we can develop to do so is a systematic, rigorous methodology with which to conduct ethnographies of computer-mediated communication.

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