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# Facing Up to the Media: Walter Ong and the Embrace of Technology

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# Facing Up To The Media: Walter Ong and the Embrace of Technology

*John J. Pauly*

Anyone searching the library catalogue will be confronted with the weight and scale of Walter Ong's intellectual legacy. Yet, for all that Ong wrote and others have written about him, the work of assessing his influence has barely begun. The availability of his papers at Saint Louis University has created a new moment in which scholars will be able not only to study in greater depth the literary scholar, philosopher, and theologian they already know, but also to encounter Ongs they did not suspect even existed. Current scholarship has done much to establish Ong's importance and to document his intellectual genealogy, and the warm remembrances of his colleagues have told us much about his fundamental decency, generosity, and spirit of friendship. But we know little or nothing about Ong as a social actor who inhabited a particular historical moment and cultural space. We have often treated him as an island, an intellectual figure standing apart from the currents of American thought that flowed all around him, and we have paid too little attention to his work as evidence of how he navigated those currents.

The task of explaining Ong's career as a career now falls to us. What should we make of such an intellect? In what terms should we grasp its significance? I come to this moment with my own questions and preoccupations, as someone who studies the history and sociology of media institutions and cultural practices and who thinks of our talk about "the media" as one of the most widely shared and characteristic forms of modern social discourse. Although we do not always think of him in this way, Ong tirelessly participated in that discourse, ambitiously shaping it

after his own fashion and encouraging others to share his understanding. The very fact that Ong, originally a Harvard-trained student of literature and rhetoric, became an internationally known theorist of media technology deserves more explanation than it has yet received. The existing scholarly literature tends to situate him in one of three contexts: as a theorist of literacy, as a proponent of media ecology, and as a humanist philosopher in the Jesuit, Catholic tradition. Before I discuss Ong's place in the debate over orality and literacy, let me comment briefly on media ecology and humanism. Within the ecological tradition, theorists such as Marshall McLuhan, Neil Postman, and Joshua Meyrowitz all take media technology as their point of entry into contemporary debates about the psychological, social, and cultural consequences of communication.<sup>1</sup> Within literary studies, a great deal of careful scholarship has established Ong's unabashedly humanist approach to nearly everything. Both media ecology and humanist commentaries have tended to accept Ong's self-description of his intellectual origins, mapping his relation to the work of Teilhard de Chardin, Martin Buber, Marshall McLuhan, literacy studies, and literary criticism.

My goal is to open Ong's work to other kinds of scrutiny by placing him in different company—not necessarily the company in which he would have imagined himself or chosen to stand, but in relation to a wider range of twentieth-century thinkers on mass media. One might reasonably begin that enterprise by noting Ong's famous and persistent refusal of disciplinary categories. Many commentators have confronted the practical difficulties of describing the intellectual origins of such a polymath, citing Ong's own refusal to be branded as one or another sort of disciplinary advocate. In that spirit, they have described Ong as a contemporary Renaissance man. Yet the refusal of a disciplinary position always amounts to a social as well as an intellectual strategy. As scholars, we distance ourselves from one another's work not only to emphasize key theoretical or methodological differences, but also to make our work noticeable and thus worthy of distinction. To be sure, Ong refused a single disciplinary identity because he thought the problems he was studying required a more robust form of imagination. The social meaning of that disciplinary refusal, however, remains open to interpretation.

One strong possibility is that Ong understood his approach as a strategy for restoring the intellectual primacy of a universal, Catholic (and catholic) worldview. Standing at a distance from the crash and furor of the disciplines, he could claim to have discovered a stillpoint at which he could construct his own account of human nature and evolution. This is likely one of the ways in which he endorsed the spirit if not the content of Teilhard de Chardin's work. Both men sought a broad perspective that embraced their historical moment, setting the terms by which they would understand that moment rather than filtering their in-

terpretations through the preoccupations of the warring schools. Seen in this context, Ong's periodic observations on agonism—in oral cultures, the academy, male styles of talk—can be understood as of a piece with his observations on dialogue, as an ongoing reflection upon two modes of human communication—dialogue and agonism—by which humans persistently connect and disconnect themselves from one another.

It would be easy to see Ong standing steadfastly on the side of dialogue in this debate, as he does so forthrightly in *Fighting for Life*, but the picture may in fact be more complicated. The dialogue/agonism debate may have echoed an argument he had with himself. By the end of the 1960s, Ong had established his reputation as a formidable public presence. Ong, the scholar and Catholic humanist, certainly identified strongly (and authentically) with the dialogic tradition. Ong, the social actor, could be surprisingly self-conscious about his own public reputation. The archive may help us understand the strategies he used to establish and promote his intellectual career.<sup>2</sup> For example, a letter displayed at the April 2005 conference describes Ong's efforts to make sure that Senator John Kennedy, a rising political star, had received a copy of his 1957 book *Frontiers of American Catholicism*. Those who knew Ong even slightly could recount any number of similar stories. The Jesuit intellectual tradition encourages its own forms of competition, of course, and Ong could frustrate his companions in the St. Louis residence with confident shows of his own learning. Former Saint Louis University President Paul Reinert once told me of hiking through the Rocky Mountains with Ong, listening to him lecture in detail on the ouzel, a bird that feeds at the edge of mountain streams, only to come across, minutes later, an ouzel feeding at the edge of a mountain stream. A student of mine who invited Ong to lunch—and he warmly welcomed anyone who did so—was encouraged to read *Orality and Literacy* first. I once sat with a group of priests and professors at Jesuit Hall, entertaining Tapio Varis, the noted Finnish media scholar. A great fan of Ong's work, Varis said he had heard the Jesuit speak in Finland about 1971 or so. As we all adjourned downstairs for dinner, Ong excused himself to go to his room for a sweater. When he rejoined us twenty minutes later, he presented our guest with a bibliography of his major works and cited the exact date and place of the lecture that Varis had attended in Finland.

An intellectual who keeps such a meticulous record of his public life can be suspected of being self-conscious about his reputation. To my mind, none of these examples diminishes Ong's reputation one bit, but they do suggest the existence of a complex social actor whose presence may not be immediately detectable in the surfaces of his texts. Such episodes may reveal the honest difficulties that a thinker of Ong's interdisciplinary predisposition faced in finding his place in the modern university. Or they may be the trace left by his struggle, as a priest and

Catholic intellectual in the 1950s, to carve a place for himself in the secular discourse of American public life. They may reflect the temptation to become a guru in the 1960s and 1970s, at a moment of great enthusiasm for technology (a temptation to which McLuhan and several others wholly succumbed). Or they may speak to the contradictions of being such an extraordinarily accomplished scholar in a religious order peculiarly committed both to the egalitarian virtues of community and to assertively masculine displays of intellectual excellence. One might well expect the life of a man in such circumstances to be inflected by moments of ambition as well as tender-heartedness.

In general, I would like to see our studies of Ong shift their focus from the somewhat narrow concerns of intellectual history toward a more sociologically rich account of the career that Ong's style of work secured for him. If this approach requires a theoretical pedigree, let us call it pragmatism. In any case, it is simply a way of insisting that we treat human actors, even intellectuals, as social creatures. I want to spend the rest of this essay suggesting some of the places where we might discover the materials from which to build such a reinterpretation.

Let me start by contextualizing my own experience of Ong. I first read his work thirty-two years ago in a graduate course on communication systems taught by James Carey at the University of Illinois. We read *The Presence of the Word*, a beautifully written and provocative work. Carey did not center the course on Ong or even propose him as a theorist whose work explained the essence of "the media." Ong was just one of the intellectual luminaries Carey put on parade in that course, a single figure in a long line stretching from Lewis Mumford to Eric Havelock, Frances Yates, Elizabeth Eisenstein, Harold Adams Innis, Marshall McLuhan, Norbert Weiner, Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, Jacques Ellul, and Ivan Illich. The organization of Carey's syllabus spoke to the ways in which media scholars at that moment understood Ong's work. For Carey, Ong was an important voice in a conversation that had recently engaged scholars from a variety of disciplines. What those thinkers shared was less a single theory of communication systems than an orientation. Each of them hoped to discover some vital principle of social and cultural order enacted in the system of mass media.

None of these thinkers represented the theoretical or methodological approaches then dominant in media studies (and this, of course, was the mark of Carey's own genius). None was much interested in the effects of media content on politics or beliefs, or in the work routines of media professionals, or in the legal traditions that protected free expression, or in the measurement of audience responses. What they shared, to steal a phrase from the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, was a conviction that the media were "good to think with," and an intuition that

what we think about, using "the media" as our vocabulary, is the nature of social order. Talking about the media was a way of figuring out how modern societies are symbolically constituted and sustained. Whatever their differences, these thinkers were seeking the signature of modernity.<sup>3</sup> The importance of the media lay not in their mere content, nor in their characteristic narrative forms, nor even in their effects on human behavior or attitudes. For thinkers such as McLuhan, Mumford, Innis, Williams, and Ellul, talk about the media offered itself as a shorthand summary of all the forces that had produced the twentieth century. The scale and scope of the system of newspapers, radio, movies, and television, they thought, constituted the real story of our times.

I have overdrawn this picture for purposes of comparison. Narrative form did matter to Ong, as it did to early British cultural studies scholars such as Williams and Hoggart, who both recognized class-bound "structures of feeling" in literature and popular culture, or to McLuhan, who turned from studies of James Joyce and William Faulkner to droll commentaries on advertising and the comics. I mean only to suggest that the thinkers that Carey had assembled turned to the study of mass media with larger cultural and political problems in view; to borrow a phrase from the sociologist Peter Berger, their media talk offered a strategy for facing up to modernity. Intellectuals at that moment (like their counterparts at nearly every moment in the past three centuries) treated communication media as a totem of social order. They spoke about the rise of television, the persistence of propaganda, the decline of the oral tradition, and the triumph of entertainment over information in order to fix the concept of society in the public imagination and thereby make it available for critique. By 1974, when I took Carey's course, such talk about the mass media, though still invigorating, was hardly new. It had borrowed many of its preoccupations from familiar traditions of European and American social thought. Leon Bramson's shrewd observation in *The Political Context of Sociology* still stands: when the European critique of mass society crossed the Atlantic in the early twentieth century, it left its most visible trace in Americans' concerns about the power of the mass media.<sup>4</sup> Subsequent scholars have noted the material conditions that made that intellectual crossing meaningful. Critical discourse about mass society proved compelling in the United States in the 1920s because communication media were coming to be seen as a system—no longer a hodgepodge of folk customs, oral traditions, fractional literacies, and publications, but a national network in which newspapers, magazines, radio, and movies were intertwined, financed by an emerging infrastructure of marketing and advertising and shielded from criticism by new practices of public relations and lobbying. That world of "Big Communication," in J. Michael Sproule's apt phrase, a world of integrated, large-scale systems of mediated communication, made Ameri-



cans' misgivings about modernity palpable.<sup>5</sup> Ong and others of his generation inherited a longstanding critical discourse, and one discovers in their work a more or less conscious attempt to position themselves within it, sometimes borrowing and extending its arguments, other times resisting or seeking to redirect its impulses.

If this is not the context in which we usually think about Ong or frame his intellectual origins, the fault may lie not so much with him as with our habit of trimming Ong's ideas to our own purposes. Given my own interests in the history of media and the sociology of our discourse about the mass media, I am particularly curious about how and why Ong came to be considered a scholar of media technologies and their cognitive and cultural impact. I suspect that part of the answer is that after a time Ong himself began to encourage and collaborate in the construction of that identity, although this is precisely the sort of theory that we need to test with archival evidence. By the time he wrote *Orality and Literacy*, his intellectual project was largely complete. That work remains the definitive summary of his best-known ideas about the history of communication technologies and their effect on human consciousness. Even if a summary was not entirely his goal, however, surely that has been the practical consequence, for the book has been translated into one language after another and continues to circle the globe. For better or worse, especially in media studies, *Orality and Literacy* now serves as the public face of Walter Ong.

The publication of that book also corresponds to the beginning of a significant shift in scholars' approaches to the study of literacy. By the end of the 1980s, Ong's approach to such problems had come to seem less plausible or, at a minimum, less compelling. In historical studies of literacy, for example, one of Ong's central arguments—that the dominant communication technologies of an age invariably inflect human consciousness—began to meet with strong criticism. Brian Street characterizes Ong as a prominent advocate of the theory of the "great divide," an argument that sees orality and literacy as encouraging starkly contrasting sensibilities: an oral world that is "'formulaic,' conservative, 'close to the human lifeworld,' 'agonistically toned,' empathic, homeostatic, situational," and a literate world that is "abstract, analytic, distancing, objective, and separative."<sup>6</sup> Street further argues that for many years Ong's account of the "great divide" powerfully influenced both the theory and practice of literacy studies, especially in the United States.

Although I cannot speak to the possible value of Ong's work for psychologists and psychoanalysts, I do know that many cultural historians and anthropologists no longer find Ong's ideas suitable for their purposes. Multicultural ethnographic approaches to the study of orality and literacy have displaced Ong's humanistic approach in history and the social sciences, to the point at which he is no longer cited as an au-

thoritative guide to the history of communication technology or the evolution of human consciousness.<sup>7</sup> Careful studies of particular societies, both historical and contemporary, have demonstrated the need for a different approach to the study of literacy. At the theoretical level, Street has critiqued Ong's reliance on stage models of evolution—an approach Street considers a recent variant of timeworn arguments about the primitive and the civilized (with the moral poles of that evaluation now reversed). At the methodological level, critics argue that Ong's deductive style of analysis slights social context, or actually situated human action, in favor of broad generalizations about the imputed behavior of "imagined subjects." In a similar vein, historians of the book such as David Hall have faulted Ong on empirical grounds.<sup>8</sup> They argue that Ong, Jack Goody, and other early scholars of literacy simply did not examine a wide enough range of evidence, and had they done so they would understand that, far from being separate moments in history and consciousness, orality and literacy have long been mutually implicated in societies of many sorts and not just in the West. Michael Warner has argued that Ong's approach to printing technology misrepresents the social meanings of literacy in the early American republic.<sup>9</sup> Literacy was never an invariant practice, Warner says, because reading, writing, and printing, as modes of communication, always retain their social and political inflection. Writing was hardly the same activity at all for John Adams, the Founding Father, and for Phyllis Wheatley, the African-American poet, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has reminded us.<sup>10</sup>

I am not arguing that the recent generation of historians, sociologists, and anthropologists has disproved Ong's ideas about orality and literacy, and that we should consign him to the dustbin. I am suggesting only that recent ethnographic approaches call attention to philosophical assumptions that Ong took as certain. When any theorist writes so much over so long a career, one begins to notice the silences as well the echoes in his or her work. For example, Noam Chomsky has for decades mercilessly parsed and critiqued thousands of news stories without ever seeming to find it necessary to talk to reporters about their work routines and narrative practices. He believes that he understands why news stories turn out the way they do and feels no need to address the people who write those stories. Whatever the justness of his particular analyses, Chomsky thinks that the intentions or habits or professional values of reporters count for much less than the discursive power embedded in the very structure of their language.

To state the case more generously, Ong framed his theories within a philosophical idiom that those trained in history and social science today find inadequate for their purposes. Although he was a remarkable and assiduous reader of literary and rhetorical texts (especially in his early work on Ramus), Ong himself never gathered much systematic ev-



idence of the actual social behaviors in which media technologies are embedded; he felt comfortable relying upon his reading of others' empirical work and upon his own experiences and observations. Nor did he study, as so many media scholars have, the complex material and institutional history of media technologies. The culturally and politically specific history of media technology—that centuries-long tale about how scarce physical resources (ink, paper, spectrum space), geography, copyright and patent law, regulatory regimes, and ideologies of public life have called forth, shaped, and constrained media technologies—never finds voice in Ong's work.<sup>11</sup> The absence of such historical, political, and sociological analysis in Ong's writing underscores what does remain. Ong constructs his theory of media in a style that we could characterize as humanist. He insists on keeping the person at the center of his analysis. Although he is interested in agonism, differences between oral and literate peoples, and the sources of linguistic conflict between men and women, he rarely seems deeply interested in the structural or historically contingent sources of actual social conflict. His style of analysis often comfortably assumes an "us," and he imagines that media technologies operate upon us without much reference to the specific social worlds that we inhabit. In short, he brought to the study of media the idioms and sensibilities of the literary scholar, philosopher, and theologian, and we might better think of his work not as an authoritative account of what the media really are (or were), but as an example of what we can or cannot learn when we bring those humanist intellectual traditions to bear upon the modern experience of media.

We can similarly mark the moment of Ong's encounter with media by noting a subtle variation in the form as well as the content of his early essays. The pieces collected in *Frontiers in American Catholicism* (1957) and *American Catholic Crossroads* (1959) address the audience in a somewhat different voice than the essays driven by his emerging research in literature, rhetoric, and technology. Using a more recent term, we might characterize those collections of essays as more the work of a public intellectual than of an academic specialist. Those essays are written in a beautiful, fluid, accessible, and intellectually muscular style. They constantly examine the social and political boundaries at which religious and secular life meet. Several of the essays speak to the situation of the Catholic intellectual or the dilemmas of Catholic higher education. They attach themselves to topics of general public debate rather than to scholarly discourse. Ong occasionally returns to this style in his later theological essays, such as his 1990 "Yeast: A Parable for Catholic Higher Education."<sup>12</sup> But for the most part, following the publication of his first books on Ramus and Talon, Ong's theories of communication technology, literacy, and consciousness increasingly set the intellectual frame within which he interprets nearly every phenomenon.

The regularity with which Ong returned to his theories of media over the next thirty years has encouraged us to interpret his thought as continuous and seamless.<sup>13</sup> Though commentators acknowledge key moments when intellectuals such as McLuhan, Perry Miller, or de Chardin may have influenced Ong's ideas, we are left with the impression that he began his career with a steady, independent intellectual vision. That conclusion, in turn, sustains a familiar myth of genius; we portray Ong as systematically developing a powerful theory of media and consciousness that he subsequently applied to a wide array of human phenomena. There is certainly some truth to that account (and Ong was admittedly a brilliant man). But if we focused for a moment upon the early variations in his style (rather than upon the consistency of his ideas about media), we would force ourselves to think more about Ong's career as consciously crafted and cultivated, in an intellectual environment in which he might plausibly have made other choices.

The archival record might help us confirm or refute this interpretation. My suspicion is that in the 1950s and early 1960s, Ong was deciding what role to assume within the drama of American intellectual life. Would he be the meticulous academic specialist who visited over a hundred archives to document the work of Peter Ramus? Would he be the Catholic intellectual, writing on topics of general interest for the readers of *Commonweal* and *America*? Would he boldly fight his way past the limitations of the American Catholic university (widely debated at that moment) in order to push himself into the mainstream of American public thought? I suspect that Ong discovered in his work on media technologies a fortuitous convergence of his scholarly interests and his public ambitions. Like the other intellectuals on Carey's reading list, Ong found the debate on the mass media congenial to his purposes. Theorizing about the mass media offered him an opportunity to project his studies of rhetoric and literature onto a larger stage, and to secure for his ideas a wider hearing.

If Ong's legacy depends upon the authority of his arguments in *Orality and Literacy*, then I fear that his reputation within the larger scholarly community may be destined to decline. The theoretical, methodological, and empirical critiques of the ethnographers are daunting. That is why I have proposed an alternative way to understand Ong and suggested that we consider the sociological trajectory of his career in order to open up new avenues of research and to reclaim his historical significance. For so learned a man as Walter Ong, for an intelligence so deep and perceptive, for so humane a person, for someone whose work so many of us have valued for so long, we owe this much. So here are a few guidelines to help us construct an alternative account of Ong's career.

Instead of so insistently reading Ong forward, trying to apply his ideas to each new technology, we might more plausibly read him back-

wards, as someone who turned the shopworn conventions of nineteenth-century social and evolutionary thought into an imaginative twentieth-century idiom. Instead of trying to validate Ong's work at the highest possible level of intellectual, metaphysical, and international generality, we could interpret it as one brilliant man's response to historically specific personal, social, and intellectual circumstances. Instead of emphasizing the triumph of his ideas, let us commemorate his life struggle, not so much to forget *Orality and Literacy* as a sign of his accomplishment, but in order to recover and interrogate that moment in the 1950s when Ong chose to turn and face the media. What did he think he was up to? That question, I believe, will help us understand the distinctively Catholic character of Ong's response. At a moment when American social critics were condemning the shallow triviality of industrial mass culture and expressing their fears, yet again, about the power of communication technology, Ong found a novel way to redeem the media. The very trait that bothers Ong's critics in literacy studies—his elision of the actual social contexts of reading, writing, and printing—can be understood as a distinctively Catholic strategy for participating in American society's discourse about "the media"—a way of drawing upon what David Tracy has called the analogical imagination of Catholicism in order to explore the moral implications of technological evolution.<sup>14</sup>

What we need, in the days ahead, may be Ong's spirit as much as his theories. Whatever the limits of Ong's work as an account of media history, he insisted on seeing communication as something more than an instrument of human domination. In their early twentieth-century encounters with "Big Communication," religious groups often feared that powerful mass media were undermining their moral and cultural authority.<sup>15</sup> Quite soon, however, those same religious groups took up those self-same media for their own persuasive purposes, as Quentin Schultze has demonstrated.<sup>16</sup> Today, the balance of moral power has to some extent been reversed, in news and entertainment if not in advertising. Angry God-talk now fills the mass media, marking the nation's slow devolution into a faith-based fascism. I cannot imagine that Walter Ong would have enjoyed this moment. But I do believe that he would have found a way to call us back to our better nature.

## NOTES

1. See Lance Strate's foreword in *An Ong Reader: Challenges for Further Inquiry*, ed. Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2002).

2. For the Ong archive at Saint Louis University, see this site: <http://libraries.slu.edu/sc/ong>.

3. Joli Jensen convincingly argues this point in *Redeeming Modernity: Contradictions in Media Criticism* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990).
4. Leon Bramson, *The Political Context of Sociology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).
5. J. Michael Sproule, *Propaganda and Democracy: The American Experience of Media and Mass Persuasion* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
6. Brian V. Street, *Social Literacies: Critical Approaches to Literacy Development, Ethnography, and Education* (London: Longman, 1995), 153.
7. See, for example, the studies in Brian Street, ed., *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
8. David D. Hall, *Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996).
9. Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).
10. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Race as a Trope of the World," in "Race," *Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 4-13.
11. For a fine example of this approach, see Paul Starr's *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
12. Walter J. Ong, "Yeast: A Parable for Catholic Higher Education," in *Faith and Contexts*, vol. 4, ed. Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 169-81.
13. This insistence on the coherence of Ong's intellectual approach is most evident in Thomas J. Farrell, *Walter Ong's Contributions to Cultural Studies: The Phenomenology of the Word and I-Thou Communication* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2000).
14. David Tracey, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).
15. John P. Ferré, "Sunday Newspapers and the Decline of Protestant Authority in the United States," *American Journalism* 10 (Winter-Spring 1993): 7-22.
16. Quentin J. Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture: The Business of Popular Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991).

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