

Probe: Post-Literacy Flips Into Digital Orality

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Probe: Post-Literacy Flips Into Digital Orality

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In a recent Facebook post, Andrey Mir wrote:

Orality dictated immersion, while literacy entailed detachment. The shift from orality to literacy signified the move from magic to faith, from superstition to religion, from myth to logos, from polytheism to monotheism, from moral relativism to moral absolute, from practical and negotiated truths to absolute truth, from natural and supernatural physics to metaphysics, from “cycle of life” to destiny, from communal struggle for survival to individual tragedy of (not-)becoming. Digital orality reversed detachment and retrieved immersion. What was the “repetitive continuance of living” (Jaspers) in “primary orality” (Ong) has become the repetitive continuance of scrolling in digital

orality. (https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid02NjnDE23mXuny42G9JQw7XtQm3R24y48Cxotn9Hh5aZiRtmjQVZ6XqRSg7399Yb8FI&id=100001279269374)

We wish to point out in this probe that this original observation by one of us (AM) has the structure of McLuhan’s Laws of Media or tetrad of enhancement, obsolescence, retrieval, and flip or reversal in the following sense:

Digital orality:

enhances access;

obsolesces literacy; detachment; religion; moral absolutes; absolute truths;

retrieves orality; immersion; magic; moral relativism; practical and negotiated truths;

flips into fascism; attacks on democracy; anarchy; Trumpism; outrageous lying; calumny; cyberbullying; addiction.

We wish to point out that when we are using the term of obsolescence in the above tetrad, we are using McLuhan's definition of obsolescence which is that obsolescence of something does not mean it's total elimination but rather that it no longer dominates as the following observations indicate.

1. Religion is still very much a part of contemporary society but it no longer plays the dominant role it played before the electrification of communication.
2. Moral absolutes are a thing of the past. Consider how the so-called religious right embraces Donald Trump whose morality in no way reflects the so-called values of their religious philosophy. How they embrace such a morally corrupt individual defies logic.
3. Absolute truth and truth itself, is constantly under attack on social media. Perhaps the most egregious of these are the many politicians who have no compunction of trading in lies that are so obviously false that it defies logic that they can utter such obvious falsehoods. The "big lie" of Donald Trump that the 2020 presidential election was stolen from him is perhaps the most outrageous example of this but it is by no means restricted to him alone. Other examples are deniers of the holocaust by the Nazis or deniers of the murder of the Sandy Hook school children.
4. The obsolescence of literacy is another example of a relative rather than an absolute obsolescence. Yes, people still read books, journals and they still compose messages with the written word but the level of involvement with the written word has declined. One of us (RKL) while walking on the University of Toronto campus overheard one

student saying to another “I actually read a whole book last week,” as though that were something extraordinary as the use of the word “actually” indicates.

5. The obsolescence of detachment manifest itself in the addiction to the use of social media and in some unfortunate incidents to cyberbullying.