Module 1

The Changing Landscape of Communication

Introduction

As we survey the changing landscape of communication, we are confronted by the differentiation between orality and literacy. However, this introductory exploration of the evolution of communication – its linguistic and cultural aspects, and technological ways and means (media) – advocates a dialogic approach to the dichotomies between various perspectives and practices in telling a story. In the disparities and variance of storytelling, there is an interconnectedness between medium(s) of communication (i.e. media convergence). Rather than pitting oral cultures against literate cultures, and traditional media against new media, we will consider the dialogic relationships between these variant cultures of communication and, in the process, discover that orality informs literacy (and vice versa) and that new media emerged from traditional media, which facilitates the convergence of traditional and new media resulting in the blurring of genres.

The importance of orality-literacy[1] studies in acquiring a critical perspective in communication (which in turn entails the understanding of human identity in relation to the environment and everyone in it) sets the stage for our venture into inquiring how media and communication work, and how they shape culture and society. We start with Walter Ong (2002), who articulates the dialogic relationship between orality and literacy thus:

> It is useful to approach orality and literacy synchronically[2], by comparing oral cultures and chirographic (i.e. writing) cultures that coexist at a given period of time. But it is absolutely essential to approach them also diachronically or historically, by comparing successive periods with one another. Human society first formed itself with the aid of oral speech, becoming literate very late in its history, and at first only in certain groups. Homo sapiens has been in existence for between 30,000 and 50,000 years. The earliest script dates from only 6,000 years ago. Diachronic study of orality and literacy and of the various stages in the evolution from one to the other sets up a frame of reference in which it is possible to understand better not only pristine oral culture and subsequent writing culture, but also the print culture that brings writing to a new peak and the electronic culture which builds on both writing and print. In this diachronic framework, past and present, Homer and television, can illuminate one another. (p. 2)

Humans developed oral communication first, and then written communication. Communication is generally understood as the process of creating shared meaning among two or more people (Baran, 2013), and every communication situation involves expression and interpretation (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001). Thus, we can say that, in a given communication situation, there is an interchanging of roles between communicators — the sender and the receiver

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[1] Primary oral culture is a culture with no knowledge whatsoever of writing or even of the possibility of writing (i.e. literacy) (Ong, 1980). The technologizing of the word began in writing but later applied to words rendered in various media (e.g. television, radio) as media can be considered as tools of inscription in the new literacies (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008).

[2] In linguistics, concerned with something as it exists at one point in time, as in synchronic language. Often contrasted with diachronic, concerned with the way in which something, as in diachronic language, has developed and evolved through time. (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2015)

— in the exchange of messages, and communication is an oscillating process of messaging between expresser and interpreter.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this module, you should be able to:

1. Trace the evolution of communication and media;

2. Discuss the role and power of communication in shaping culture and society; and

3. Apply a dialogic perspective on communication and media in your role as shapers of culture and influencers of society.

1.0   Orality and Literacy

Before we gained sophistication in organizing our knowledge about the world (and ourselves), our ancestors sought to understand the workings of their environment by story-telling. Lacking the knowledge (e.g. writing) and tools (e.g. pen and paper) of literacy, the practice of orality in storytelling was the only way to disseminate, and consume, information (Ong, 2002). At some point in history, humankind nonetheless began to draw and write, ushering in the age of literary storytelling. Eventually, "technologizing the word" became more and more sophisticated with the introduction of tools that aided in the demands of far more advanced thought-processing necessary to address economic needs and other societal complexities. From the monastic scriptoriums to Gutenberg's printing press, from the abacus to computers, audio recording, moving image solutions (e.g. TV, cinema), humankind has continually sought to better the practice of storytelling by inventing and reinventing (i.e. innovating) the ways and means of communication.

However, taking into account humankind's evolving nature of knowing and understanding, orality remained in some cultures and societies despite the emergence of literacy. This has resulted in polarities between what is thought of as traditional and old, and what is new and 'state of the art'. Given the disparities between cultures of storytelling (i.e. oral vs. literary), some questions arise: Is literacy better than orality? Is a primarily oral culture inferior to a literate culture? Is orality out and literacy is in?

Activity 1

A. Gain a historical background on the evolution of information production, dissemination, and consumption, as well as a critical perspective on the role of orality in media and communication by reading the following excerpts from Walter Ong's book *Orality and literacy: the technologizing of the word*:

"Introduction" on pp. 1-5

"Orality, Writing, and Being Human" on p. 170

B. To supplement your understanding of the difference between orality and literacy, read the following online texts:

"Ong on the Differences Between Orality and Literacy", available at http://newlearningonline.com/literacies/chapter-1/ong-on-the-differences-between-orality-and-literacy

"Orality and Literacy — In what ways are oral and literate cultures similar?", available at https://blogs.ubc.ca/etec540sept12/2012/09/30/1150/

C. Answer the following questions based on what you understood from the readings:

1. What are the differences between primary oral cultures and literary cultures? How are they related with each other?

2. What does Walter Ong mean by the intersubjectivity of communication? How does this differentiate communication from media?

3. How does the 'media' model of communication show chirographic (i.e. writing) conditioning?

Write your answers in essay form and include photos if necessary, and then post this on your blog. *NOTE: For this course your should set up a blogging account where you can formulate and post your answers to study questions and outputs from the learning activities. Or you can opt to make vlogs or podcasts. The idea is to familiarize you with the nature of communication in the age of convergent technologies.*

2.0 Traditional Media, Mass Media, New Media

We pick up from the early developments of communication where storytelling progressed from oral cultures towards literacy when words became technologized. We learned that the tools of inscription (e.g. pen/paper, movable printers, video camera) revolutionized storytelling, enabling storytellers to disseminate their story to a larger audience across vast distances. Thus, media (i.e. tools for communication) play an important role in the permanence and mobility of culture among individuals, groups, and communities.

Culture, as learned behavior of members of a particular social group, can be contested. As such, it can unite or divide a community. Culture is underpinned by language as an instrument for the collection of knowledge and its distribution (Baran, 2013). Culture and language aid us in classifying our experiences. In the process, it scaffolds our understanding about the world around us. Culture cannot exist in the absence of communication, and communication is language. As such, power can shift from those who can share their stories to a larger group through the use of mass media technologies, whether traditional or new. In other words, our stories help define our culture, but the goal for the civilized society is to shape culture professionally and ethically.

The ethical dimension in the creation of culture is very important. That is because the power to influence communities and societies can shift from those who could show others their special talent to those who could write and read them. It also means that the power to disseminate information is afforded by the development of modern writing which can help in constructing a uniform meaning and language, enabling communication spread over greater distances and long periods of time. The power shifts in disseminating information and cultures are fueled by accessibility to the mediated means of communication (e.g. television, radio, print, Internet).

Activity 2

A. Read the following chapters from Baran's *Introduction to mass communication: media literacy and culture* to learn about the evolution of mass communication and the relationships between traditional media, mass media, and new media:

Chapter Two: The Evolving Mass Communication Process

Chapter Eight: Television, Cable, and Mobile Video

B. To supplement your understanding of how mass media impacts culture and society, view the following video:

Mass Media: Society and Culture, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5R-RyX9mI5Lw

C. Answer the following questions based on what you understood from the readings. Write your answers as an entry in your blog, or articulate your answer in the form of a vlog or podcast.

1. What are the industrial or economic factors in the evolution of media from print to radio to television?
2. What does the digitization of videos mean for information producers and consumers?
3. What are the pros and cons of media accessibility?

3.0   Media Convergence and Blurring of Genres

The previous discussion suggests that media convergence is not new. Among traditional media, there was a kind of media convergence that emerged when newspapers shared content and channels with radio news and vice versa. In the age of MTV, radio and TV would synchronize broadcasts to promote newly released albums or singles. However, the convergence of media at this time was limited only to having the same message content. It is digital technology that has made possible the merging of text, audio, and video in ways that blur the

conventional boundaries between media. Indeed, media convergence is technically defined as the coming together of telecommunications, computing, and broadcasting into a single digital bit-stream (Collins, 1998) (Gate, 2000) such as multimedia content accessed through mobile digital systems (e.g. smartphone, tablets).

Activity 3

A. Study the following texts to learn about the origin of media convergence and it impact on on mass communication:

    Baran, S.J. (2013), "Chapter Ten: The Internet and the World Wide Web" in *Introduction to mass communication: media literacy and culture.* New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

    "Media Convergence", available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7lcUKjGKiEw

    "What is convergence?", available at https://mconvergence.wordpress.com/about/

B. Answer the following questions based on what you understood from the texts listed above. Write your answers as an entry in your blog, or articulate your answer in the form of a vlog or podcast.

1. What constitutes a convergent media? How is it differentiated from traditional media? Would you consider convergent media under the categories of new media? Explain your answer.

2. How does convergent media empower individuals to assert themselves in the bigger society? Think of the metaphor of David and Goliath.

3. Compare and contrast the the evolution of communication from orality to literacy and the evolution of media from traditional media to convergent media. Reflecting on how these developments came about, what could be assumed (or predicted) for the future of media production and consumption and/or mass communication?

The Dialogism of Convergent Media

We started this module by investigating the dichotomy between the oral and literary practice of storytelling, how cultures are shaped by such communicative practices, and the media or inscriptive technologies that emerged from such practices. We explored how storytelling, which underpins the processing of knowledge and dissemination of cultures, progressed into several modes and media of communication and how these tools of information production and consumption have the potential to inform each other despite their disparities. And we discovered that societies and cultures are built on both the old and the new, the past and the present, and the crude and the highly developed.

There is a dialogic relationship among media in their convergent form (i.e. multimedia, new media). According to Bakhtin (1981), past cultural works (e.g. literature) are continually informed by the present versions of the same cultural work (and vice versa), not as a matter of influence but as a continuous dialogue that oscillates both ways. As Spicheva (2014) puts it, "All the manifestations of culture are combined in this digital Universe which merges the past, the present, and future manifestations of the communicative thought in a gigantic historical supertext" (p. 82).

Summative Activity

1. Create a time timeline of the evolution of mass communication: from the era of oral cultures to the present convergent (new) media. You may choose any medium of presentation: video (animation), drawing, diagram, a three-dimensional media, infographics, etc.

2. Highlight five points of change and/or technological development in your timeline (e.g. newspaper to radio, the emergence of virtual reality) and elaborate on it according to the following guide questions:
   a) What could have caused this change from one media to another or the emergence of such technology?

    b) What dialogic relationship can you establish between the new and the old media? What do these media have in common in terms of features, power, and accessibility

    c) How did the change impact society and culture (e.g. politics, economics, individual lifestyles)?

3. *(Bonus points)* Predict what communication and media would be like 50 years from now based on past and current trends in communication.

Conclusion

In this module, we traced the evolution of communication from oral to written form, and the development of media from traditional to new and convergent media. We learned about oral storytelling as an early form of communication. As technology advanced, new tools of inscription (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008) and dissemination (e.g. mass media) were introduced, which increased the influence of our stories from our immediate communities to larger societies and cultures, with far-reaching effects. Whoever wields control over mass media has the power to dominate, raising ethical issues in the practice of communication. However, the advent of digital media (i.e. multimedia, new media), through the introduction of the Internet, has made it possible for ordinary individuals to disseminate their own stories, thus creating counter-cultures and altering to some extent the power relations in communication and media practice and in society as a whole. Communication practice today is multifaceted and complex, and we are called upon to develop a more critical understanding of the role of communication in addressing various challenges confronting society and in building a better world for all.

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