Iris Chan

Professor Miller

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Commentary #1: E-Word, E-Literacy

 “Biases of the Ear and the Eye” Daniel Chandler

*Introduction*

In “Biases of the Ear and the Eye”, Chandler’s discussion of the ‘Great Divide’ theories and the relevant influential attitudes of the 1960s magnify an important perspective of dividing cultures into the either/or fallacy when examining the notion of literacy. The ideas, issues and opinions of what is an oral or literate culture are gathered within his examination of a variety of different scholars including Jack Goody, Harvey Graff, David Olson and Angela Hildyard. The article creates a snapshot of educational attitudes towards the cognitive process behind orality and literacy.

In the recent trend of education where being ‘literate’ and compulsory schooling emphasize the importance of the written word, our sense of orality is still evermore present but is it changing? Is our society moving in a different direction? Rather than falling into the trap of dichotomies as Chandler echoes throughout his discussion and examine our society as simply one of being primarily literate, the cognitive possibilities of a digital society may be overlooked.

With the popularity of the World Wide Web and the advanced connectivity amidst our literate societies, how do we place in this controversial discussion? The ‘Great Divide’ “suggests radical, deep and basic differences between modes of thinking in non-literate and literate societies” (Chandler) while the ‘Continuity’ theory suggests otherwise. But how do those ideas apply to our digitalized society of today? Is Chandler’s discussion still relevant when some populations of our literate society are heading towards an e-literate society?

*E-Literate: The Spoken Word, The Written Word and the E-Word*

 Within Chandler’s discussion of oral and literate societies, he presents a chart to present the dichotomies of the ear and eye. With the spoken word, he attributes the ideas of “aural, impermanence, fluid, rhythmic, subjective, inaccurate, resonant, time, present, participatory and communal” while with the written word he attributes the ideas of “visual, permanence, fixed, ordered, objective, quantifying, abstract, space, timeless, detached and the individual” (Chandler).

With the gaining popularity of the digital word amidst a world connected by technology through the Internet, the division of these attributes become overlapping. With the help of hyper links, e-books, digital audio/video recording, the medium of the web and the growth of social networking technologies, the distinction between the spoken and written word is becoming much more complicated than before. Simultaneously, the idea of ‘impermanence’ and ‘inaccurate’ can be attributed to the spoken word; the e-word can also be given the same with the presence of wikis, blogs, and chats. The ‘Continuity’ theories become more applicable in a digitalized world where the written and the spoken are intertwined in the same space. It is not simply a world that is divided into two types of people (the eye and the ear) but rather of one that is less categorized but yet much more complicated.

 The e-literate society can be one of choice, at the same time the e-word can be ‘participatory’, the user can also choose to be ‘detached’ For instance, the efforts of a blog can be ‘communal’, the privacy settings can create an ‘individual’ experience. The flexibility of the e-word to be the spoken yet be the written, and the freedom of the written to be the spoken has changed the way in which citizens of an e-literate society play, learn, interact, mature, think, record and publish is yet to be explored and discussed as our world dances between a society and societies that share attributes of oral, literate and e-literate communities. The following chart below is informed by McLuhan, Ong and Postman as quoted in Chandler’s article, but rather than illustrating a division between the spoken and the written, the notion of the e-word is a culmination of both attributes of the ear and the eye. How will this change the cognitive processes? How will this change the discussion?

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| E-Word |
| aural, visual |
| impermanence, permanence |
| fluid, fixed |
| rhythmic, ordered |
| subjective, objective |
| Inaccurate, quantifying |
| time, space |
| present, timeless |
| participatory, detached |
| communal, individual |

Fig.1. Culminating Attributes of the E-Word

*Concluding Thoughts*

 While Chandler concludes, “those in non-literate societies do not necessarily think in fundamentally different ways than those in literate societies”, but will it be similar for those who enter in an e-literate society or those who are caught in between? As computer technology advances and the way text changes in presentation and distribution, is it simply a matter of medium? Social context plays a vital role as Chandler mentions in his ecology of mediation and this can not be overlooked. Although “our behaviour is not technologically determined”, but can it be? With the changes in technology, it is no longer simply a change from speech to print. As of this moment, Chandler argues technology cannot determine our actions, but will there be a point when it can and it does? The discussion of oral and literate societies are still valuable for us to consider, however, the way computer technology and the Internet are changing our mediums and methods of expression, the next step is to explore our next transition into e-literacy. In the same manner and motivation as the scholars Chandler refers to, the discussion needs to focus on the present moment. A moment experimenting with more than the eye and the ear but one that attempts to explore all aspects of our sensory experiences.

Works Cited

Chandler, Daniel (1994): 'Biases of the Ear and Eye: "Great Divide" Theories, Phonocentrism, Graphocentrism & Logocentrism' [WWW document] http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/litoral/ litoral.html [2 October 2010]