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**Audiobooks:
The Past Meets the Future in a
Hybrid Medium**

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Audiobooks: The Past Meets the Future in a Hybrid Medium

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Abstract

Despite their increasing visibility and rising popularity, audiobooks are still seen as a diversion rather than a legitimate alternative to reading print. This perspective is not surprising given the many centuries during which printed texts became more important than oral texts. However, thanks to advances in modern technology, we may be entering a new age of orality, one that invites us to re-evaluate this equation of writing and language, and to ask if listening does not represent a new kind of literacy.

Audiobooks may be viewed as a hybrid medium in three different ways: First, they fall squarely into a category that Walter Ong calls *secondary orality*: a new kind of orality sustained by electronic devices but depending for its existence and functioning on writing and print; second, they demonstrate the ‘immediacy’ and ‘hypermediacy’ that comprise Bolter and Grusin’s concept of ‘remediation’; and third, they combine literary culture and technological culture in a way that transforms the act of reading.

Using audiobooks in an academic setting has certain advantages for students, including enhanced awareness of style, tone, and linguistic nuance, as well as exposure to variety in any given language. The author was given an opportunity to increase her understanding of how audiobooks can be used in an academic context when she taught a university-level course that focused on audiobooks and what orality can add to an understanding of literacy. Students responded well to the topic and provided useful feedback on how the class could be improved.

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Background

Despite their increasing visibility and rising popularity, audiobooks are still viewed as the lazy person's way of reading a book. This perspective is not surprising given the many centuries during which printed texts rose to a position of primacy while oral texts became less and less important. However, in his seminal work, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, Walter J. Ong (1982, 2006) insists that language is first and foremost an oral phenomenon. 'In a deep sense,' he says, 'articulated sound is paramount' and 'the natural habitat of language.'¹ When words appear on a page, they are, in fact, coded symbols for real words, real words being actual or imagined sound. 'Oral expression can exist and mostly has existed without any writing at all,' according to Ong, but 'writing never without orality.'²

In *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present*, Eric A. Havelock echoes Ong's observations when he says, 'The assumption has grown up that writing is identical to language—in fact, that writing is language, rather than merely a visual artifact designed to trigger the memory of a series of linguistic noises by symbolic association.'³ Thanks to advances in modern communication technologies, however, we may be entering a new age of orality, one that invites us to re-evaluate this equation of writing with language, and to ask if the act of listening is not, in fact, reasserting itself as a legitimate form of literacy. If so, what does this new kind of literacy demand of listeners and can it offer something that print texts cannot?

Audiobooks have become increasingly popular in recent years for several reasons. Advances in communication technologies have made it possible to listen to a book almost anywhere. Portable media players, like the iPod, make it possible to carry an entire small library in a purse or a pocket. In addition, many listeners find audiobooks convenient, especially when the time-consuming obligations of modern life make it difficult to sit quietly and enjoy a print book as often as they would like. Audiobook fans can listen to a book while driving long distances, taking a walk, or doing routine work. Also, in recent years, the quality of audiobook narration has improved. Although a relatively small percentage of print books are released in audio format, fiction and nonfiction best-sellers and classic literature are popular candidates for audio production. Publishers have learned to take the audio version of a book as seriously as the print version. Narrators are chosen with care for their ability to interpret a text and to embody in sound its essential features.

Thus, the tangible qualities of portability, convenience, and quality contribute to the growing popularity of audiobooks. And perhaps a less tangible quality as well, what Havelock calls 'the potential of the oral spell.'⁴ Maybe we simply like to listen, to engage in an activity reminiscent of childhood and of a time in human history long past, when storytellers figuratively cast a spell over listeners with tales of heroism, treachery, love, and adventure. Havelock speculates that this activity is reasserting itself 'after a long sleep.'⁵ Audiobooks, of course, contribute to this reassertion by fusing print technology with sound technology, creating a hybrid medium that, Janus-

¹ Ong, pp. 7 & 8

² Ong, p.8

³ Havelock, p. 112

⁴ Havelock, p. 31

⁵ Havelock, p. 31

like, looks to the past and the future simultaneously and invites us to reconsider the definition of literacy.

Audiobooks as a Hybrid Medium

Audiobooks may be viewed as a hybrid medium in three different ways: First, they fall squarely into a category that Ong calls *secondary orality*; second, as defined by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (2000), they ‘remediate’ written texts; and third, they represent the coming together of literary culture and technological culture.

In *Orality and Literacy*, and specifically in the chapter called ‘Some Psychodynamics of Orality,’ Walter Ong distinguishes between *primary orality*, ‘the orality of a culture totally untouched by any knowledge of writing or print,’ and *secondary orality*, ‘a new orality...sustained by...electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print.’¹ Although Ong refers primarily to radio and television when he speaks of secondary orality, audiobooks clearly belong in this category because they do ‘depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print.’ He points out that although words on a page are grounded in oral speech, ‘writing tyrannically locks them into a visual field forever.’² Writing reduces ‘dynamic sound to quiescent space’ and separates ‘the word from the living present, where alone spoken words can exist.’³ Thus, once a text is written down and removed from the immediacy of the moment, ‘its rigid visual fixity’ makes it available to ‘a potentially infinite number of readers.’⁴ The text’s endurance is made possible by its fixity in print. No such endurance is possible for a text produced in a primary oral culture, where each time a text is spoken, it is different from the time before. However, modern technology makes fixity and endurance possible for spoken texts because now they can be recorded and preserved. Audiobooks are permanent in the sense that they exist as things—a collection of compact discs, which can be stored on a shelf alongside print books; or a downloaded audio file, which can be stored on an MP3 player. In either case, a particular audio version of a text has been captured and preserved, and will be the same every time it is played.

Furthermore, listeners experience the text as disembodied sound—aurally, not visually. Ong observes, ‘All sensation takes place in time, but sound has a special relationship to time.... Sound exists only when it is going out of existence. It is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent, and it is sensed as evanescent.’⁵ This shift from existence in space to existence in time means that we process an audiobook differently than we do a written book. We must shift from ‘quiescent space’ to ‘dynamic sound,’ a change that requires us to resurrect skills that our ancestors were more conversant with—chief among them the ability to listen skillfully and to maintain attention. It is important to note that our experience of a spoken text is different from our experience of a written one. An audiobook is not simply the oralization of a written text. It is, as Ong suggests, more immediate and more participatory. Listening to a book is more immediate and participatory than reading one because we don’t control the pace of the reading; someone else does. We must

¹ Ong, p. 11

² Ong, p. 12

³ Ong, p. 81

⁴ Ong, p. 80

⁵ Ong, pp. 31-32

focus on the sound of a text more closely than we focus on its appearance on a page, or be forced to rewind, sometimes repeatedly, in order to pick up on something we missed. Flipping through the pages of a print book to accomplish the same goal is easier. Listening to a book requires an active involvement in the moment; it requires us to be ‘word-attentive’ rather than ‘object-attentive.’¹ Because audiobooks demand that we be word-attentive, they engage us as readers, not more than a printed book, but in a different way.

In this fusion of two different ways of experiencing a text, audiobooks exhibit qualities associated with texts from primary oral cultures and from literate or print cultures. Readers process audiobooks by listening to them, but audiobooks would not exist without a printed source. Although a few audiobooks that have never been released in print are currently available, it is highly unlikely that the author is recalling or inventing the text as he or she speaks into a microphone. It is more reasonable to assume that the author, or a designated narrator, is using some sort of printed text to read from. Although they are spoken, audiobooks are also permanent, as indicated above, in the sense that they exist as tangible things—sound recordings that we can own a copy of just as we can own a copy of a print text. The performance of the text has been captured and will be the same every time it is played, unless the same text is recorded at different times by different readers, which commonly occurs with texts in the public domain. Nonetheless, the number of such variations is limited. The text is not being recreated by a reader every time we listen.

Ong points out that in a primary oral culture individuals experienced texts in a communal setting. Listening to a story was a shared experience, and the performer was part of the experience. Members of the audience could see facial expressions and gestures as well as hear the words of the story. The performer could assess his audience and tailor a performance to suit a particular group of people. When we listen to an audiobook, of course, we are not in the presence of the narrator. We can hear differences in tone and inflection, but we cannot see facial expressions or gestures. Nor can the narrator ‘read’ the audience and make adjustments accordingly. And although we *can* listen to a book out loud in the company of others, generally we listen in isolation just as we read print in isolation. Listening to a book is a private experience, just as reading one is.

The concept of *remediation* as defined by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (2000) in *Remediation: Understanding New Media* provides another useful lens through which to examine the audiobook as a hybrid medium. Bolter and Grusin contend that ‘all mediation is remediation,’² by which they mean that all media in some way refashion older media. They further explain that the interplay of ‘immediacy’ and ‘hypermediacy’ is key to an understanding of how remediation works. The ‘logic of immediacy dictates that the medium itself should disappear and leave us in the presence of the thing represented.’³ Hypermediacy, on the other hand, ‘leads us to become aware of the new medium as a medium.’⁴

The experience of listening to an audiobook demonstrates the process of remediation by being simultaneously transparent and visible. Listeners can become caught up in the content of the text, making the medium invisible; at the same time,

¹ Ong, p. 67

² Bolter & Grusin, p. 54

³ Bolter & Grusin, pp. 5-6

⁴ Bolter & Grusin, p. 9

they can be hyper-aware of the quality of the narration, since this dimension represents the new component. Thus, an audiobook remediates a written text, and in doing so it retains certain integral components of the older medium while adding essential components from the new. The words of the written text remain the same, but their mode of delivery is changed, and because their mode of delivery is changed, so is our experience of the words. When listening to an audiobook, we cannot return to a condition of primary orality; we cannot pretend that writing and print do not exist and that we do not know how to read. Although an accident or injury can affect this ability, no simple force of will can remove such knowledge from our minds once it becomes part of the brain's hardwiring.

The term remediation is an interesting choice because of its competing connotations. As Bolter and Grusin use it, it means a movement from one medium to another with an accompanying transformation, the prefix 're' meaning *again*, and 'mediation' referring to the channel through which content is delivered. However, remediation can also convey the idea of rehabilitation or restoration. When discussing audiobooks, we can take this connotation to mean that a spoken text represents a return to an older, perhaps more natural, state of affairs—a restoration, in other words, of what was previously the norm. Audiobooks rehabilitate texts that have been frozen on the page, bringing them back to life through dynamic sound.

Audiobooks embody yet another kind of hybridity in that they also represent the coming together of texts and modern technology, of literary culture and technological culture. In 'Talking Books: The Encounter of Literature and Technology in the Audio Book,' Deborah Philips (2007) observes, 'The audio book is a hybrid medium, bringing together the form of the novel...with new audio technologies.'¹ She adds that this coming together has implications for the future of literacy:

*The audio book raises important questions about the implications of the encounter between an old cultural form, the printed novel, and the new digital technology. The talking book is a relatively small, but neat, example of technology enabling one cultural experience, that of reading, to be projected into space and time in ways that authors and publishers could not have anticipated. The audio book raises questions about the reader experience which literary critics are only just beginning to address.*²

Texts have always been mediated by technology—from pen on parchment to print on paper to pixels on a screen. However, the transition from visual to oral, made possible by technologies that reproduce sound, and embodied in the audiobook, represents a significant shift in the way texts are packaged, delivered, and subsequently processed. It also raises a number of questions about the process of reading itself and what constitutes a text. It's interesting to note that, in our highly visual age, listening to a story is again becoming popular, just as it was when our ancestors listened to *The Odyssey* or *The Song of Roland*, or heard tribal elders recite oral history.

Underlying the many questions generated by a consideration of audiobooks and their impact on the reading experience is the very large question of whether technology is an expression of culture or a creator of culture. Drawing on the work of Manuel Castells, Deborah Philips says that 'new technologies can construct two

¹ Philips, p. 294

² Philips, pp. 293-294

different cultures: one in which new technologies are employed to reproduce traditional cultural forms, and another culture of innovation which uses them to develop new forms of culture.¹ The audiobook certainly uses technology to reproduce traditional cultural forms, both fictional and nonfictional. However, do audiobooks also qualify as a new expression of culture?

Do Audiobooks Offer Any Advantages?

Certainly, the crucial difference between reading a book and listening to one is the additional layer of interpretation provided by the narrator who reads the text aloud. It is important to note that the terms *narrator*, *reader*, and *performer* are all problematic in one way or another. *Narrator* can refer to the persona created by an author to tell a story; *reader* can be taken to mean the person listening to the text; and *performer* emphasizes performance over text, and more accurately describes the delivery of a text in a primary oral culture, where a written text does not exist and performance matters. When we read a book, we interact directly with the words on the page, interpreting for ourselves what those words convey. However, because an audiobook is read to us, the narrator to some extent interprets it for us. Over the centuries during which print texts slowly became the accepted form for all texts, we came to see reading as a solitary activity, at least for adults. As we mature, we quickly forget what pleasure we derived as children from hearing a story read out loud to us, often in the presence of other children. Listening to a story is still seen by many as a childish activity, although, paradoxically, watching a story on film or television is not seen in this light.

In *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*, Sven Birkerts (1994) says, 'Books, for me, have always been about covers and pages and grappling with the syntactical rigors of stationary prose.... With the audio book everything—pace, timbre, inflection—is determined for the captive listener. The collaborative component is gone; one simply receives.'² David Frum (2009) offers a similar criticism when he says, 'Reading is a supremely intimate dual relationship: writer and reader. Listening is a three-way: writer, performer, and listener.... The experience of reading—the most direct mind-to-mind experience one human being can have with another—is mediated, refracted, interpreted.'³ Their criticisms are not without substance, even though I would strongly argue that listening to a book is in no way a passive activity as Birkerts contends. In fact, a cogent case can be made for the opposite, as we saw earlier in the work of Walter Ong and Eric Havelock, who emphasize the dynamic power of spoken texts to engage those who listen. And although Birkerts and Frum criticize the validity of spoken books, each man also concedes that audiobooks can offer things that a print text cannot. In the chapter called 'Listening Closely,' Birkerts admits that when we listen to a book, we might very well hear something that we would otherwise have missed. 'Audio books remind us of the sound of literature,' he says. 'An evocative reading can capture the shifting tension that exists between sound and sense; it can unearth the overlooked sentence rhythm and whet the blade of irony.'⁴ Frum echoes Birkerts' admission when he says,

¹ Philips, p. 303

² Birkerts, p. 147

³ Frum, p. 95

⁴ Birkerts, p. 149

‘A fine reader can imbue a quite ordinary book with unsuspected depths.’¹ He recalls struggling through Thomas Hardy in high school and university, believing he would never return to ‘all those damn sheep-shearing scenes.’² He changed his mind years later after hearing Hardy read aloud: ‘Read aloud, the sheep shearing suddenly seemed almost exciting—and the books more than fulfilled the advertising of my professors, as moving descriptions of a way of life vanishing before the author’s eyes.’³

I am not suggesting that audiobooks can replace print books, especially not in an academic setting where students are expected to analyze a text and use excerpts from it as evidence in support of a thesis. However, I do believe that a skillfully read audiobook can offer much—not only to students’ enjoyment of a text, but also to their understanding of it. Having grown up in environments that accept technological advances with little critical questioning, many students are susceptible to manipulation by the very media they have embraced. Audiobooks are one way to make students more critically aware of the media that permeate their lives. At the very least students would need to confront Marshall McLuhan’s famous dictum, ‘The medium is the message,’ and consider its implications. One way to approach such a discussion is through the Tetrad of Media Effects. Summarized in *Laws of Media* (1992) and published after his death by McLuhan’s son and co-author, Eric, the tetrad can be applied to any medium. It poses four questions: What does the medium enhance? What does the medium make obsolete? What does the medium retrieve from what was previously deemed obsolete? What does the medium become when pushed to its limits?⁴ Such increased awareness of one medium might make students more sensitive to other media and their power to influence perceptions of reality.

In addition, I believe that enhancing students’ awareness of language itself is a worthwhile goal. Many students know little about the beauty or versatility of language, and they seem tone-deaf when it comes to irony, satire, nuance, or tone. In the Information Age, language is often seen as a means to convey information and not much more. Students do not comprehend the distinction between *efferent* and *aesthetic* reading made by Louise Rosenblatt (1978, 1994) in *The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*.⁵ For the most part, they read efferently, for what they will take away from the reading—and in many cases, this approach is perfectly logical and appropriate. But sometimes a text calls for an aesthetic reading, for being in the moment and experiencing the text, as one experiences a piece of music, with no thought for taking notes on its main points. Audiobooks can be used effectively to introduce students to aesthetic reading, a mode unfamiliar to many of them.

Finally, many students, although aware of them, are unfamiliar with varieties of their own language other than the one they speak. English is a perfect example because of its currency as a world language. Provided that the narrator is skilled, audiobooks are without equal for demonstrating how English differs from country to country where it is spoken as well as from region to region within a given country.

¹ Frum, p. 95

² Frum, p. 96

³ Frum, p. 96

⁴ ‘Old Messengers, New Media: The Legacy of Innis and McLuhan,’ *Library and Archives of Canada website*

⁵ Rosenblatt, pp. 22-47

Do Audiobooks Have a Place in the University Classroom?

I was given an opportunity to experiment with audiobooks in an academic setting when I taught an Advanced Special Topic Honors Seminar called *Audiobooks and the Reassertion of Orality* at James Madison University in the U.S. state of Virginia. Like many U.S. colleges and universities, James Madison has an honors program, whose students follow a more challenging course of study than do other students at the university. Nineteen honors students enrolled in the class from a surprising number of departments, including English, history, biology, anthropology, and music. Because the course focused on an unusual area of study, the design of the course was problematic in that I could not predict with accuracy how best to present material or what students would find most engaging and useful. The mix of majors was also problematic because I could not assume that all students in the class had the same background knowledge or skill sets. I ran the risk of boring some students and confusing others.

I decided to start with theoretical material that would provide students with a context for our discussions of the audiobooks they would listen to in the second half of the course. Therefore, I devoted the first eight weeks of the sixteen-week course to a discussion of Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy* as well as Porter Abbott's *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, a basic text that focuses on the essential elements of narrative. During these eight weeks my students also listened to several short audio selections. For the second half of the course, I chose three full-length books and several additional shorter pieces, each for a different reason. For example, I chose Frank McCourt's memoir *Angela's Ashes* in part because it is read by the author himself, a situation that raises questions about how much interpretation such a narrator provides. I chose Brian Selznick's *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, read by Jeff Woodman, because the print book is heavily dependent on illustration, and because Martin Scorsese's film of this book, called *Hugo*, was being released to theaters at that time. I wanted students to experience a single text in different media. And I chose several texts to illustrate the many varieties of English currently spoken in the United States and throughout the world, among them Alexander McCall Smith's *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, read by Lisette Lecat with the musicality that English as spoken in Africa often has; a short story called 'Bingo' by Davida Adedjouma, delivered in African-American vernacular, an excerpt from Craig Ferguson's memoir *American on Purpose*, delivered in a fine Scots brogue, and an excerpt from Aravind Ardinga's *The White Tiger*, set in India and delivered in a variety of English with an Indian lilt. Students also worked in small groups to record a modest text, such as a fairy-tale or short story, to experience what it's like to create an audio text. And all students submitted a term report grounded in our discussion of orality and literacy but on topic of special interest to them. These reports provided perspectives on orality that were truly fresh and inventive. For example, a pre-med student focused her report on narrative medicine, a specialized field of study currently offered by Columbia University at the Masters level; a psychology student investigated narrative therapy, an approach to counseling that employs storytelling; and a music student compared learning to read music to learning to read words, examining how our experience of music changes as a result of such literacy.

Overall, students responded well and enjoyed the class, although they did offer suggestions for change and improvement. Based on their suggestions, I would

redesign the class to incorporate three substantial changes. First, I would begin, not with theoretical material, but with listening to audiobooks, and I would ask students to discuss their listening experiences before reading any background material. Second, I would devote more time to discussion of the audiotexts themselves—content as well as quality of narration and appropriateness of narrator. Third, I would involve students more actively in the creation of audiotexts, an activity that would ‘give them a voice,’ not in the figurative sense of allowing them to express their opinions, but in the more literal sense of increasing their confidence in their ability to speak with skill and expression.

My course had several limitations. Nonetheless, I learned a great deal from the experience. Clearly, room for more experimentation exists, especially within the parameters of individual courses of study. For example, students in a literature class could critically examine how the addition of an audio narrator alters a text. Students in an anthropology class could investigate the place of storytelling in shaping culture. Students in media arts could explore how narrators are chosen or how audiobooks are produced. I believe it is time for oral literacy to attract the kind of study that visual literacy has attracted for years. The possibilities for exploring modern manifestations of oral literacy are quite exciting.

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