
Symposium

The Ruin of the Digital Town Square

Across the political spectrum, a consensus has arisen that Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and other digital platforms are laying ruin to public discourse. They trade on snarkiness, trolling, outrage, and conspiracy theories, and encourage tribalism, information bubbles, and social discord. How did we get here, and how can we get out?

*The essays in this symposium seek answers to the crisis of “digital discourse” beyond privacy policies, corporate exposés, and smarter algorithms. **L. M. Sacasas** argues that social media is a throwback, combining the worst parts of past eras of communication. **Naomi Schaefer Riley** explains why our society won’t be decent online unless we raise kids who know life offline. **Shoshana Weissmann** critiques privacy and bot laws that could do more harm than good. **Nolen Gertz** identifies four Facebooks and their vices: misinformation, manipulation, dependency, and distraction. **Ashley May** argues that making digital conversations humane will require defining our online relationships. **Micah Meadowcroft** shows why we act badly when we don’t speak face-to-face. **Andy Smarick** makes the case that order might emerge organically from Twitter’s present chaos. **James Poulos** contends that the disaster of social media is a product of the TV era. **Caitrin Keiper** offers unlikely stories of people who befriended their trolls.*

The Inescapable Town Square

L. M. Sacasas

Ten years ago this summer, Iranians took to the streets to protest the re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in what the press hailed as a “Twitter Revolution.” “Without Twitter, the people of Iran would not have felt empowered and confident to stand up for freedom and democracy,” wrote Mark Pfeifle, a national security advisor under George W. Bush, arguing that Twitter be considered for a Nobel Peace Prize. And when Barack Obama, the laureate of 2009, was re-elected in 2012 following a campaign widely noted for its deft use of social media and big data, *MIT Technology Review* declared on its cover that “Big Data Will Save Politics.” These were halcyon days for social media platforms. Heckled early on for

L. M. Sacasas is a fellow at the Greystone Theological Institute and the director of its Center for the Study of Ethics and Technology, and a teacher in Winter Park, Florida. He writes about technology at [The Frailest Thing](http://TheFrailestThing.com) (TheFrailestThing.com).

SPRING 2019 ~ 47

fostering trivial and banal content, Twitter and Facebook could now boast of shaping the course of global politics for the better.

A great deal has changed since then. If there is something on which our fractured society might broadly agree today, it is that social media platforms have had a corrupting influence on public discourse. Moreover, they are now widely viewed as agents of division and radicalization. Once heralded as the agents of democratic reform, today they are derided as abettors of authoritarian regimes. How did this great turnabout happen?

Many critics have focused on how social media platforms harvest user data, on how that data feeds into micro-targeted marketing, and on the underlying business model that makes these practices profitable. Others have drawn attention to how social media companies have designed their platforms to generate compulsive engagement, noxiously exploiting how users are drawn to engage more with emotionally loaded and provocative material. Another thread of criticism has targeted the scale of these platforms and their consequent inability to exercise editorial discretion over propaganda and misinformation, while some have noted that propaganda today works not by restricting information but by flooding the field with content, thus sowing confusion and generating epistemic apathy and despair.

Despite these important and now well-trod criticisms, we still have a poor understanding of what social media inherently is. When examined as part of the history of human communication, we may find that the posted word does not radically break with, but in fact revives and retrieves features of, both the spoken and the written word. In this way we may begin to make intelligible the chaos of our digital discourse—and find even firmer ground for pessimism.

In his 1982 book *Orality and Literacy*, Jesuit scholar Walter Ong set out to explore the profound psychic consequences when human societies transition from oral to written communication, drawing attention to how the medium affects not only the means by which we transmit information but also how we think and feel our way through the world.

Ong identified significant eras in the history of human communication, with thresholds between them corresponding to the advent of new technologies—alphabetic writing, the printing press, and electronic media. First, he contrasted “primary” orality—cultures with no knowledge of writing—with literacy. He then looked at the transition from literacy, and its massive expansion through print media, to what he called a “secondary” orality, the condition brought about by the advent of electronic

media, especially radio and television, when sound came to prominence once more alongside the written word. While Ong died in 2003, just as the contours of the digital age were beginning to emerge, his work nonetheless provides us with a set of useful frameworks and insights by which we might make sense of the challenges posed by digital media.

At the heart of Ong's analysis is the understanding that each major transition in media technology—that is, in the means of communication—transformed or restructured human consciousness and human society. “Technologies are not mere exterior aids,” Ong explains, “but also interior transformations of consciousness, and never more than when they affect the word.” Literate society was not simply the old society of primary orality with the added advantage of writing, but in many respects a new society. The advent of electronic media was similarly consequential, inaugurating what we think of as the age of mass media in the twentieth century. Now we find ourselves thrust into an era dominated by the effects of digital media. We can't yet know the full ramifications of this transition, but, taking a cue from some of Ong's insights, we can begin to make some pertinent observations, particularly with respect to the character of digital discourse.

Consider, for example, the attention Ong drew to the mnemonic consequences of new media. Among the most important features of writing was that it allowed for an unprecedented degree of memory offloading. Ong invites us to “try to imagine a culture where no one has ever ‘looked up’ anything.” In a culture without writing, “You know what you can recall.” Consequently, oral societies are inherently conservative, structured by rituals of remembrance intended to preserve their knowledge and their history. Individual identity, which to a large extent rests on memory, is subordinated to the more important work of keeping the memory of the community alive.

Writing relieves societies of this imperative to remember, and thereby also weakens the conservative impulse. Additionally, as writing and its tools become accessible to large parts of a society, individual identity flourishes, both because writing releases the individual from the strong focus on collective oral memory, and because reading and writing, especially after the invention of print, tend to be solitary and interiorizing activities.

Digital technology scrambles these earlier dynamics. On the one hand, digital media dramatically expand our capacity to document and store information. Externalized memory hypertrophies as we rely ever more on easily accessible and searchable archives. You carry ten thousand

images in your pocket and you can search them by date, place, or face. The library is in your pocket, too, and it is in many respects better stocked than any local library you were likely to visit in the pre-digital age.

On the other hand, the structure of our digital platforms also recalls a feature of oral culture: the evanescence of the word. In oral cultures, the spoken word is passing away just as it is coming into being; it cannot be locked down or frozen. As Ong notes, the spoken word is not a thing but an event; it is not static but acts on the world at the moment it is spoken. Literate individuals, by contrast, can barely help thinking of a word as anything other than its static alphabetic representation. Our digital media timelines, like oral communication, privilege the fleeting present; what we document—words, sounds, images, video—quickly recedes into the past. Indeed, even our digital images no longer primarily serve documentary purposes, but instead are a form of instant and transient communication. This is a reality that Evan Spiegel, co-creator of Snapchat, noted in 2016: “People wonder why their daughter is taking 10,000 photos a day. What they don’t realize is that she isn’t preserving images. She’s talking.”

Under these conditions, the function of externalized memory shifts. It is no longer for recording the past or preserving knowledge, but now for acting in the present. Memory loses its context and story. It neither integrates a society, as the rituals of collective remembering in oral societies did, nor does it sustain an individual’s experience of the self, as writing did in the age of print. Memory, much of it highly personal, is “there,” but without the person necessarily remembering. This allows memory to become weaponized. It exists in massive and accessible databases, ready to be resurfaced, without context and without warning, in a newly contentious field of public discourse.

The contentiousness of digital communication is in part the function of another phenomenon to which Ong paid close attention: the significance of personal presence. In oral cultures, communication happens almost exclusively in the presence of others. The speaker’s audience is always before the speaker; indeed, it is literally an *audience*, a gathering of those near enough to *hear*. This physical presence means, as Ong noted, that oral cultures were more agonistic than literate cultures. Mutual understanding and the search for knowledge are labors of face-to-face interaction, and labors that may arouse the passions. “By keeping knowledge embedded in the human lifeworld, orality situates knowledge within a context of struggle.”

Writing, on the other hand, “fosters abstractions that disengage knowledge from the arena where human beings struggle with one another.” Writing also abstracts the speaker from the audience, which therefore ceases to be literally an audience. The two are no longer present before one another. Communication tends to lose the heat of the moment. Consider President Truman writing out letters to express his frustration at critics and political opponents, and then never sending them. Distanced from the audience, written communication tends toward the cool and analytic. It requires also a heightened precision of expression in order to overcome the loss of all the non-verbal elements of communication that are present when we communicate face-to-face.

Another important contrast, Ong notes, is that “primary orality fosters personality structures that in certain ways are more communal and externalized, and less introspective than those common among literates.” That is because “oral communication unites people in groups,” whereas writing and reading “throw the psyche back on itself.”

Social media once again scrambles the situation. When we type out our statuses, link to articles, post memes or images, we do so as if we were members of literate but pre-digital societies, for we are not present before all those who will encounter our messages. Yet, given the immediacy with which the messages arrive, we are in an important way now much closer to one another. We might say that we have an “audience” whose immediate presence is constituted in time rather than space.

Through social media, people are responding to one another in public and in short order, more as they would in a face-to-face encounter than, say, in private letters exchanged over weeks or months, or even in emails exchanged over hours. Writing ordinarily affords us the time to be more thoughtful and precise in expressing our ideas. But the expectations of immediacy in digital communication deny us the chance to carefully consider our words.

The result is that we combine the weaknesses of each medium while losing their strengths. We are thrust once more into a live, immediate, and active communicative context—the moment regains its heat—but we remain without the non-verbal cues that sustain meaning-making in such contexts. We lose whatever moderating influence the full presence of another human being before us might cast on the passions the moment engendered. This not-altogether-present and not-altogether-absent audience encourages a kind of performative pugilism. The contrast of President Truman writing and not sending his letters with President Trump’s use of social media is stark and instructive.

Like the structures of oral society, social media tends to unite us in groups again. As Zeynep Tufekci has put it in an *MIT Technology Review* article,

...when we encounter opposing views in the age and context of social media, it's not like reading them in a newspaper while sitting alone. It's like hearing them from the opposing team while sitting with our fellow fans in a football stadium. Online, we're connected with our communities, and we seek approval from our like-minded peers. We bond with our team by yelling at the fans of the other one.

It is important, however, that we do not imagine the new group-mindedness as simply a return to the patterns of oral societies. Ong writes about the secondary orality of the age of electronic technology that "it is essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print." Moreover, "in our age of secondary orality, we are group-minded self-consciously and programmatically." Likewise, digital tools of communication do not simply or straightforwardly recover patterns of oral society. Those patterns are filtered through the accumulated psychic and social inheritance of literacy and electronic communication. As with the electronic technologies Ong had in mind, we are hardly returning to the smaller, more homogenous and geographically situated speech communities that were the norm in primary oral cultures.

Neither do we lose the self-consciousness that has been the product of literacy, and which the era of mass electronic media may seem to have tempered. Rather, we now appear before large, fluid, partially anonymous, and ever-present audiences, and we do so having lost, by and large, the organic communities that grounded the self, for better and for worse.

Our team-mindedness, recalling Tufekci's formulation, now unfolds within the larger context of our ongoing identity work, and is shot through with the attendant pathologies of irony. "Writing is indeed the seedbed of irony," Ong noted, "and the longer the writing (and print) tradition endures, the heavier the ironic growth becomes." In the age of digital media, the growth of irony is plain once more. Its return is evident not only in irony itself, but in the effort to counter irony—in strained earnestness and performatively reactionary poses.

The source of the irony is, of course, the inescapable realization that we are performing ourselves before the multiple audiences that constitute our digital communities. Members of primary oral cultures had their audiences as well, but they engaged them without having passed through

the consciousness-heightening experience of literacy. For us, going back is not an option. Hence, our public digital discourse is rife with insecurities and pathologies that arise when individuals become unavoidably self-conscious about the performative nature of their online communication.

There is no clear solution, no simple way forward—not when we understand that digital forms of organizing human communication are also reordering human consciousness and communities, that we are in the midst of a broad and profound social transformation. We are like *Angelus Novus*, in the 1920 artwork of that name by Swiss-German artist Paul Klee. Walter Benjamin famously described it in the essay “On the Concept of History,” in words befitting our angst at social media’s relentless, disordering effects. Like the angel, we perceive the chain of events as “one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet.”

The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm.

Walter Ong made much of print’s sense of finality, which places a crucial limit on its ability to capture our minds. “Writing moves words from the sound world to a world of visual space,” he wrote. “But print locks words into position in this space” and “encourages a sense of closure, a sense that what is found in a text has been finalized, has reached a state of completion.” Here too, digital media appears to return us to the flux of orality, but with a twist.

It is not an option, as many today counsel, simply to leave the agora or the assembly and retreat into our private spheres. The marketplace and the assembly hall now surround us, and spill out indefinitely into the future with no prospect of closure. Thanks to the ubiquity of the digital apparatus, we are no longer able fully to step out of the chaotic and contentious flux. Controversies, debates, and crises do not so much resolve as cascade indefinitely. Wherever we go, we cannot escape the storm.