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Literacy: The Medium and The Message

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Lister Sinclair
Good evening. I'm Lister Sinclair, and this is Ideas about reading, writing and talking.

Derrick De Kerckhove
Dialogue, human talking, is such a close interaction, close bind, between the listener and the speaker, that neither the listener nor the speaker are terribly separate, nor is the talk separate from the speaker or the listener. It is something that's happening between them. When you suddenly have an idea of language that can be separated from the person who is speaking, as well as from the person who is listening, and that you can work on it, then the language itself becomes a technology.

Lister Sinclair
And the technology is writing, something we tend to think of as the very hallmark of civilization. But it's as talkers, not writers, that we begin our lives, and it's as talkers, not writers, that we evolved. What influence then has writing had on us and on our societies? There is a story about the origins of writing in one of Plato's dialogues, the Phaedrus. It began, he says, in Egypt, where it was invented by the God Thoth. Thoth revealed his invention to the king of Egypt and told him that writing would make his people wiser and improve their memories. But to the god's surprise, the king declared that he thought it would have the opposite effect. If men learn this, he told Thoth, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls. They will cease to exercise memory because they will rely on what is written. Your invention, he concluded, will make men seem to know much, while for the most part, they know nothing. It will fill them not with wisdom, but with the conceit of wisdom.

David Olson
In Western cultures, we think of literacy as "the" miracle, and if only everybody else were literate, how great the world would be. If only all the people in prison could read, we wouldn't need prisons any more. Those assumptions are just fallacious. Literacy is the problem, literacy is not the solution to every other problem. It's the problem. Let's find out just what literacy is and what it does to us and what it's doing to others.

Lister Sinclair
What literacy does to individuals and societies is the subject of this new three-part series on Ideas. The series is written and presented by David Cayley and it's based on conversations recorded at a conference last June at the University of Toronto.

David Olson
Can I have your attention, please? Welcome to our conference on orality and literacy. We've gathered in this place, both as speakers and as auditors, a distinguished group of scholars who have devoted their work to advancing our understanding of oral language and written language, and the social and psychological implications of both of those. These topics were first pursued here at the University of Toronto by Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan...

David Cayley
When David Olson convened the Conference on Orality and Literacy at the University of Toronto, it marked a special occasion--because of the subject, because of the interesting and varied group of scholars who were there, and because of the place. It was in Toronto during the '30s and '40s that Eric Havelock, who would go on to write the influential Preface to Plato, first pondered the impact of literacy on ancient Greece; in Toronto, in 1950, that Harold Innis published his path breaking book, Empire and Communication, in which he described how societies have been shaped by their means of communication; in Toronto, in 1962, that Marshall McLuhan brought out the Gutenberg Galaxy, his seminal statement on the social and psychological consequences of literacy. And now, in 1987, scholars from several continents and a variety of academic disciplines were gathering in Toronto to compare notes and exchange sober second thoughts on the thesis that Havelock, Innis and McLuhan had first put forward, that writing changes the world. I was there to cover the conference for Ideas, but I was aware that conferences don't usually lend themselves to radio. Scholars read papers, sometimes badly, use technical language, and occasionally address their remarks to colleagues rather than a general audience. So instead of broadcasting entire lectures, I decided to improvise a studio in the basement and try to reproduce the conference proceedings in interview form. It's on these interviews that tonight's program is mostly based.

A final word about the conference before we begin. It was called Orality and Literacy, and I suspect that for people outside the field, the term "orality" may require some explanation. Part of the problem is that Freud and his followers got to the word first and gave it a strongly sexual connotation. So, for many, the word is more apt to conjure up an infant sucking at the breast than non-literate communication. But non-literate communication is what it meant to the scholars who gathered at the University of Toronto last summer, and they have good reasons, I think, for trying to adapt the word to their own purposes, mainly that they need a positive description for what they would otherwise have to call non-literacy or illiteracy, all negative terms which describe orality in terms of the absence of literacy. To call a people without writing "pre-literate" or their epics "oral literature" defines everything in relation to writing. As one wit said at the conference, it's like

calling a horse a "wheel-less automobile." The terms "orality" and "oralism" solve the problem by challenging the exclusive privileges of literacy in our world view. They give all modes of communication separate but equal status with written ones and they put literacy in perspective as one of many ways of apprehending the world.

The first to speak at the Orality and Literacy conference, the first by right of scholarly achievement, as well as years, was Eric Havelock.

Eric Havelock
Fellow scholars, and ladies and gentlemen, I apologize for my slightly decrepit condition, but an interview with a surgeon has left me no choice but to be careful. Going back twenty years, or even less, I do not think that the program of a colloquium such as this one would have carried the title "Orality and Literacy." To be sure...

David Cayley
Eric Havelock was a professor of classics at the University of Toronto between 1929 and 1947 -- Harold Innis had listened to him lecture on Homer in the very hall where he spoke last June- -and after that, he headed the classics departments at Harvard and then Yale. He was one of the first to break the spell of literacy and to recognize the unique achievements of oral societies, such as ancient Greece. His first clue that ancient Greece had to be understood as an oral as well as a literate society came when he read the work of Millman Parry. It was Parry who first realized what Rousseau had noticed in the 18th century, but everyone had since forgotten, that the most revered author of classical antiquity, Homer, was not an author at all. He was a singer of tales, orally composed and orally transmitted, and only later written down. What gave it away was what Parry called "epithets"--unvarying stock phrases like "the wine-dark sea," "the rosy-fingered dawn," or "the grey- eyed goddess."

Eric Havelock
Parry came to this conclusion purely by looking at the text and reading it in his study. He began with the epithets attached to heroes. "Son of so-and-so." Why keep on calling him "son of so- and-so"? Why do that? And he asked himself a psychological question, really, and answered, well, it's a filler. It helps the line, and if it helps the line, then that means he's not a writer, he's doing it in his head. That's how he started. And he wrote this thesis for his M.A. at Berkeley, and they passed it and then told him there was no future for him at Berkeley, because, of course, at that time, Homer was still regarded with great reverence in those terms in which you look at Dante or Milton, as a purely literate composer, or Virgil, for that matter.

David Cayley
Parry found empirical support for his theory that Homer was no writer in Yugoslavia. There, he and his assistant, Albert Lord, heard the songs of contemporary epic reciters, epics which had never been written, sung by men who couldn't write, and found in them many similarities to the Homeric songs. Eric Havelock was inspired by Parry and Lord's work and began to look for further support for the emerging picture of Homeric Greece as a purely oral culture.

Eric Havelock
My best source, I found, was in the relations of Captain Cook in Tahiti. I've used them in my written work to illustrate the point. He encountered a society, and naturally he had no conception of how to report it, and he exhibits all the prejudices of a literate person who thinks this is mild amusement. But he describes, in fact, guilds of singers, and both dramatists and epic reciters, who perform at regular intervals every week, perhaps, and the populace attend and they are exposed to this stuff continually.

David Cayley
Guilds of bardic singers existed not only in Tahiti, but in ancient Greece as well. In Greece, they were called the "sons of Homer", and they recited the epics at regular intervals. Their songs were inspired by the Muses, the nine sisters who were the daughters of Memory. "Sing in me, oh Muse," begins the Odyssey, "and through me, tell the story." But their recitations were very different than what we call poetry today.

Eric Havelock
Whereas with us, poetry has become entertainment and uplift, the role of poetry for an oral society is functional. Its role is to conserve the tradition, and it does so indirectly. It doesn't say what the tradition is, it tells you what it is all the time by the kind of stories that it narrates.

David Cayley
Can you give an example, say from the Iliad?

Eric Havelock
Well, yes, in the first book of the Iliad, you have a quarrel between two leaders. You have to settle it, so the whole process of coming together to discuss the problem and trying to settle it is described in the first book. It's sort of an essay in elementary law. The contestants refuse to accept the verdict, and the lesson of the Iliad is that if you do that, look what happens, if you refuse That's an example. Now, that is not taught directly, that's taught through the tale. You tell it through the tale, indirectly, and it's not inventive, it's not fiction as we understand it at all. It's not the creation of a free mind, it is a bard all the time

responding to and telling his tale according to what his people also want and expect to hear. The tale may entrance them, but they don't want people to act out of line without getting it. And they don't.

David Cayley
Eric Havelock describes the function of poetry in oral society as storage--the conservation of culture. The epics were a kind of oral encyclopedia. This requirement disappeared with writing. Around 700 B.C., the Greeks invented the precursor of our modern alphabet, a phonetic alphabet, which for the first time actually represented not whole words or syllables, but phonemes, the component parts of speech. Writing began to supplement mousike, the traditional oral recitation. Initially, it was used to support orality rather than transform it. Two hundred and fifty years later, the great Athenian statesman, Pericles, still probably couldn't read or write. But gradually, the practice of writing was changing Greece.

Eric Havelock
You're reducing the call on the memory, you're reducing the need to narrativize all experience, and you're reducing the need to make your subjects people all the time. They've got to be people under oralism, doing things, or not doing them, obeying or disobeying, and so forth and so on. And this makes possible the selection of new terms, new non-personal terms, to be subjects of sentences. Instead of saying that Agamemnon decreed so-and-so, you have the selection of a non-person, dikë. I don't know whether to call it justice, but I'll use that word-- "justice" does so-and-so. That is the great transition, when you start to have a poetry followed by a prose in which subjects like justice start to behave, on their own. And this develops slowly into a notion that since they're non-persons, they're not really doing anything. What are they doing? They're existing. And you get a notion of their existence and their truth, or their reality, or whatever, replacing the great portrait of Achilles or anyone else--doing. There he is, fighting, quarreling, loving, talking--a lot of the time, but he's not pronouncing ideas or principles, he's just himself, as we say. Instead of that, you get justice which cannot behave like that, it's ridiculous. So gradually, justice, or war or peace or whatever, start to become the abstract subjects of abstract statements.

David Cayley
The idea that "justice" really exists as a subject, a thing in itself, transforms morality, codes of behaviour. In oral society, according to Eric Havelock, morality is conventional, practical, actual and concrete. It consists in doing the "done thing". People act justly or unjustly, but there is no ideal justice to which their acts can be compared. Writing changes this. Because the pressure to memorize is gone, and because writing has an independent existence outside the writer, abstract ideas appear and morality becomes a formal system with a life of its own, and not just a code of practice. Eric Havelock thinks that the change is not entirely to the good, that the morality of orality, for example, is part of the genius of the Greek drama.

Eric Havelock
Books that have been written describing the moral principles of justice and so on, and drama, are, in my opinion, largely horse manure because they will not face the fact that you do not get statements defining justice in the Greek drama, you only get people behaving justly or unjustly, according to their lights. And in the Agamemnon, if you study the diction used, you'll find that at various times, all the characters claim they are just. All of them, within their lights. You don't get any systematic moralism, in short, in Greek drama, and that's one of the great secrets. That's why it has a powerful voice for today, because the tragedies of our century have undermined, powerfully, the old liberal belief that we were all progressing towards beauty, truth and goodness in an increasingly moral world. Obviously, we're not. We haven't. And Greek drama calls us back to the uncertainties and the moral problematics, rather than the assured formulas, and reminds us that we're insecure and the best thing is to be cautious rather than to aspire to the ultimate. There are no absolutes in Greek drama, and, of course, Plato created the absolute as a form of thought. The absolute--absolute goodness. And as I get older, I see this more. I used to be, when I was young, I was much more a Platonist than I am today. I begin to see a lot of this as a disaster, really.

David Cayley
For better, or for worse, Eric Havelock thinks that it's writing which leads eventually to the idea of the absolute. Our words must first exist outside us before we can begin to think of them as having an independent existence, as beauty, truth or justice, and he thinks that the idea of the self comes into existence by the same means.

Eric Havelock
As long as you are dealing with oral communication, oral thinking-as-you-speak, it is difficult to think or to visualize, think of, what you say as separate from yourself. You think it over, all right? But when it's down on papyrus, not only have you started to objectify knowledge visually, with the eye instead of with the ear, but you've put it down there, and although you've said it, it's not you. What are you? You yourself have become a maker of speech, which is there as an object, separate from you, and its separation creates your separation, so you become "you" in a sense in which you never were before.

David Cayley
The separation of the knower from the known creates a new psychological space. Mental existence begins to seem as real as physical existence. The transformation can be traced from Homer to Plato in the use of the word "psyche." In Homer, "psyche" refers to the ghosts, or shades of the dead, and they appear as gibbering, insubstantial shadows, in every way inferior to the living. Eric Havelock gives the example of a famous scene in book eleven of the Odyssey, in which Odysseus meets the Shades of the Dead and must allow them to drink warm blood before they can regain enough substance to speak with him. But by Plato's time, the psyche had become the self, that part of us which is more real than our bodily existence, just as Plato's archetypal forms or ideas are more real than their earthly shadows. This is not to say, of course, that writing completely banished oral culture from Greece. There was an accommodation. The Muse, as Havelock says, learned to write, but she also remained the Muse. And even though Plato became a writer, his dialogues are still oral forms, probably meant to be performed in his academy, the text continually brought back to life by the voice.

Jan Swearingen teaches at the University of Texas in Arlington and is a close student of the work of Eric Havelock. She is currently studying the balance between orality and literacy in the school curriculum of classical antiquity. She finds oralism still vital, right into the late Roman period.

Jan Swearingen
People learned pieces of so-called literature, but they learned them in an oral medium. They heard them and then they recited them back. Writing was used minimally, and only as an aid to this oral assimilation and production of both literary and rhetorical pieces that were delivered orally. And one of the reasons for that is that it was a manuscript culture at best. Studies of how many books, how many manuscripts were actually circulating in Cicero's century, in the 1st century B.C., for example, suggest that very, very few people read, but nearly everyone who was educated at all knew a lot of Greek and Latin literature, but they knew it not because they had read it. They knew it because they had heard it, they had heard it recited, they had had to recite it themselves in the schools. So we've got a very useful example of a non-text centred curriculum in this classical period that has not been sufficiently studied, I don't think, because we have assumed, until recently, that in Cicero's century, the 1st century B.C., people were sitting in schools, reading their little books, just like British schoolboys in the 1900s. And I think that in the 1900s, what the German and British and French archaeologists did when they looked at classical literature was to project their own situation back on to classical literature and to assume that this marvellous Homeric canon that Havelock talks about had been written and that proper British schoolboys were sitting there in the 700s B.C., reading Homer. If we could see that they produced what they produced in an almost exclusively oral culture without the aid of texts, then all sorts of possibilities open up for our own time. We can feel less tied to the texts or less dogmatic about shoving texts down the throats of little children at a very early age.

David Cayley
In the final program of this series, I'll come back to Jan Swearingen's views, and Eric Havelock's, on the proper balance between orality and literacy in our schools. For now, I'd just like to underline her point about the continuing vitality of oral forms in classical culture. Literacy doesn't destroy orality, it modifies and itself modified in turn. There's always an accommodation, a trade-off and a tension. Once writing exists, there are as many possible relationships between literacy and orality as there are cultures.

Eric Havelock was one of several people who generated what I'm going to call the literary hypothesis, the idea that literacy has distinct, identifiable and revolutionary effects on thinking. The next person I'm going to introduce adds another dimension to this view, the idea that literacy drastically alters our sensory experience. He is Derrick De Kerckhove, a student and colleague of the late Marshall McLuhan, and now, along with David Olson, the co-director of the McLuhan Program at the University of Toronto. He begins with a description of orality.

Derrick De Kerckhove
See, when you speak, the mind and the body themselves are not separate. You speak with your whole body. I mean, I'm a Frenchman and I always make movements with my hands and arms when I speak, so I suppose up to a point that could be projecting. But when people speak, they really use their whole body, and they use their whole face, they use space around them, and they actually are playing with space around them. The sensorial content of direct human dialogue is enormous. All the senses are involved. Of course, vision and hearing, but also touching In our very proper alphabetic cultures, we tend not to touch each other, but a lot of people in other cultures have to touch each other to make sense, and a lot of people have to do more than that. Arabs, for instance, are well known for having--and this is what Hall says for having to smell each other. Just the mere mention of this, you can hardly put this on, you know, public radio because people hate even the evocation of smell in our culture. They hide it as much as they can. But in order to understand somebody in certain circles in northern Africa, you actually have

to be less than 20 centimetres apart because then you can smell the person, and smelling is part of the communication. You can see how completely multisensorial and contextualized and concrete is the relationship of orality. Writing gets rid of a lot of the senses. Alphabetic writing gets rid of all of them.

David Cayley
This is the nub of De Kerckhove's argument, that writing, and particularly alphabetic writing, replaces the rich sensory content of speech with abstract, disembodied meanings. He emphasizes alphabetic, or phonetic writing, because of the way in which he thinks it works. The phonetic alphabet, which the Greeks invented around the 7th century B.C., breaks down speech into its basic units. All previous writing systems had used symbols to represent entire words or syllables. The letters of the alphabet were the atoms of speech, its ultimate particles. With other writing systems, the reader still had to supply context from the real world of speech in order to decode the writing. You cannot, for instance, read a word in Chinese without knowing what it means and what it sounds like. But the phonetic alphabet is a pure code rather than a way of representing memories of speech. It analyzes words into units that have no meaning in themselves--what's a "p" or a "b"--but which allow you to efficiently reconstruct the meaning. The alphabet, in other words, extracts the meaning from speech but obliterates the actual experience of speaking. It allows us to interiorize language. Some scholars have argued that the difference between the phonetic alphabet and other writing systems is trivial, compared to the difference between writing and not writing. De Kerckhove disagrees. He thinks it's the phonetic alphabet which makes the difference. For him, the alphabet is an analyzer of speech, a word processor, and it has produced a culture which is extraordinarily analytical, a culture whose genius it has been to take things apart. And De Kerckhove thinks that what ends with the splitting of the atom, or the cracking of the genetic code, begins with the alphabet.

Derrick De Kerckhove
Our commitment is to meaning, and is to meaning completely decontextualized. We are writing, in the West, with systems that enable us to yank the information out of its original context and not only displace it in terms of the next context in which we might want to use it, but even within itself. The information itself that we have taken out of a context can be broken down into little bits and reorganized within itself. I compare this to the recombination principle of the DNA. Why are we such technocentric people? It's because at the basis of the operation of working out new technologies and working out new inventions is this principle of abstracting the stuff of a situation or a context, working on that stuff or that information content of that context, and then redistributing it, recombining it. We have been doing recombinant DNA with our culture from the time that the Greeks invented the alphabet.

David Cayley
Derrick De Kerckhove sees the invention of the alphabet as a watershed, perhaps the watershed in human history. This is the essence of what I've called the literacy hypothesis, the idea that a great divide separates literate from oral society. Not everyone who attended the Literacy and Orality Conference agreed with this view. There were skeptics, as well. One of them was psychologist Jerome Bruner, a leader in what is sometimes called the cognitive revolution in psychology and now a professor at the New School for Social Research in New York. He doubts, for example, whether the invention of the phonetic alphabet can by itself explain anything.

Jerome Bruner
It's interesting, when somebody tells me that there was a technology there and that changed people's minds, I think about the fact that the digging stick in the East Africa of Australopithecus was there for about 10,000 years before it started being used in any significant way that made any difference for agriculture, and also bring up the fact that the Mayans who built those interesting pyramids, the very same Mayans who had all those calendrical inventions, and the rest of it, had also invented the wheel and the axle, which they used as a prayer wheel. What they did was not incorporate that into their technology for moving stones at all, which they pulled along on travois rather than using the wheel. So why didn't the wheel affect them then? It was there. I want to find out what it takes for somebody to use a particular technology, to incorporate a particular technology as an aid to thought. You need something of that order. It is not sufficient to talk just about alphabetization producing Plato.

David Cayley
"Carts don't give birth to horses" was Jerome Bruner's epigrammatic summary of his critique. I leave it as a question whether this actually refutes De Kerckhove and Havelock. It is certainly true that the phonetic alphabet by itself cannot produce classical Greece. But horses don't give birth to carts either, and whether classical Greece could have existed without the phonetic alphabet is another question. Another line of critique came from psychologist Carol Feldman, a colleague of Jerome Bruner's from New York. In her talk at the conference, she first defined what she called "the general claim", which is essentially what I've called "the literacy hypothesis", particularly the idea that literacy is a precondition for reflective, critical thinking--thinking

about thinking. Having identified this claim, she decided that the way to investigate it was through anthropology, with its many and diverse experiences of oral society. What she found were various reports which seemed to contradict the idea that oral peoples lack the means to think reflectively, particularly the reports of Renato and Michelle Rosaldo about the Ilongot people of the Philippines. Eventually, she concluded that the effects attributed to literacy by the general claim were actually the effects of something more universal, something which she called "genre". A genre is a form of discourse, a means of organizing our understanding and a way of drawing life into certain culturally sanctioned patterns.

Carol Feldman
My feeling is that it's the genre that accounts for the effects on thinking. It is the whole form of organization. The genre may be written, or it may be a talk genre, but it's a whole constellation of things, and you can't parse out of that constellation simply the mechanics or whether it's written or spoken, as a way of explaining its effects. So let me give an example of that. If in an oral culture you have a certain kind of talk, as in the Ilongot, whom I spoke about last night, which is used for negotiation--this work was done by the Rosaldos, and they describe in the Ilongot negotiatory talk which is called "purung", a special kind of intonation, a special vocabulary, a special grammatical pattern, and there are a lot of special markers. Ilongot purung is full of talk about the words themselves, about the talk itself, and it's full of mental language--what I think, what you believe, what you believe I believe, and so on. The Ilongot expressions in a purung matter in their actual wording, in the same way that the actual words of text matter when it's taken as text. The reply to an expression in purung by the next speaker is very often an interpretation of some metaphoric expression used by the prior speaker. Moreover, in the nature of purung, it is the case that some time later, people will in general discussion discuss the meanings of the actual words used. What I'm saying is that that genre scaffolds or makes possible, in Bruner's sense, a certain kind of thinking about thinking. It's not material to it whether it's written or oral. What's crucial is the organization. Now, it happens that for the Ilongot, that is an oral genre, so maybe for them, it's crucial that it's oral. And if we have a form of organization that facilitates thinking about thinking in that way, which we do in the scientific mode that interests David Olson so much, it's probably crucial to it that it's written. But it's the entire constellation of the thing, the form of organization, its mode of expression, whether written or oral, that scaffolds the kind of thinking that goes on, and not simply its being written or oral.

David Cayley
After Carol Feldman offered this subtle and interesting argument on the first evening of the Literacy and Orality Conference, David Olson, the conference organizer, took the platform. During Carol Feldman's talk, he said, he'd been asking himself, "Who invited this woman?" The answer, of course, was he had, and his good natured joke was a way of acknowledging that she really had posed a fundamental challenge to the literacy hypothesis. Part of this challenge was an implicit question about whether the literacy hypothesis is ethnocentric. Can it account for the Ilongot as well as the Greeks? It's not a question which I think can be answered yet. The conversation between anthropology and literacy and orality studies is really just beginning. So in what remains of tonight's program, I'm going to put the literacy hypothesis, the idea that literacy is a kind of historical Great Divide, through two further changes by examining it in relation to two more cultures.

The experience of India with literacy is interesting in several ways. Classical India was extraordinarily wary of writing and quite consciously restricted its use, but in the process, it developed an oral culture with many of the attributes of a literate one. Dr. R. Narasimhan of the Tata Institute of Bombay was one of two Indian scholars at the Orality and Literacy Conference, and he explained the attitude of classical India towards writing.

R. Narasimhan
The tradition has explicitly undervalued writing. In fact, there have been injunctions explicitly stated that those who write down the scriptural texts will go to hell, and there have been all kinds of prohibitions against writing. And writing has always been undervalued, and even when writing came into practice, it was used for very peripheral purposes.

David Cayley
Dr. Narasimhan thinks that this may have been because of the high value India gave to the voice. Sound has an important place in Indian cosmology, and the seed syllables of mantras, or prayer chants, have an important place in Indian religious practice. But though classical India deprecated writing, it was not an oral society in the sense that Homer's Greece was an oral society. It was closer to what we would call a literate society in the sense that it cultivated philosophy and transmitted a body of texts and interpretations of those texts from generation to generation. India, it seems, had a sort of literate orality, a hybrid which confounds Western categories.

R. Narasimhan
In this Western theory, or Western point of view, literacy is defined in a rather narrow way as the ability to read and write. It is equated with script literacy.

Now, that definitely clearly cannot be put to use if you want to look at the Indian tradition, where there seems to be a literate underpinning to oral practices. So it cannot be that orality was based on writing. So that requires literacy to be looked at from the point of view of more basic conceptualizations. So, in this paper that I presented in the symposium here, that was what I was trying to do. I was trying to formulate a view of what I call "literateness", which doesn't equate it with the use of script.

David Cayley
Dr. Narasimhan defines "literateness" not as the ability to read and write, but as the presence of mind which is necessary for critical thinking, and he thinks that India's experience shows that this type of thinking can exist without writing.

R. Narasimhan
What the Indians seem to have done is to formulate oral texts. So that instead of having, let's say, a written grammar of a language, supposing you encapsulate the whole of the grammar in the form of verses, so that it becomes a poem. Okay? Then it becomes available for memorizing. So instead of having books printed on pages, you carry the books in your head.

David Cayley
Could we find someone in India today who had, let us say, memorized the Vedas in a tradition where it had been continuously passed on orally without reference to texts?

R. Narasimhan
Yes. In fact, you'll find, I don't know, there may not be a whole lot of them, but I would tend to think you would find at least 100 people, something about that number. In the Indian term, these people will be called pandits, which means learned people, and most of them will be quite old people.

David Cayley
The preservation of the Vedas is just one of many examples of how India achieved a complex civilization with very little recourse to writing. All its arts and sciences were mapped on to memorable sequences of words or syllables and transmitted orally, from teacher to student, and from generation to generation. Even mathematics was preserved and transmitted in this way.

R. Narasimhan
If you have to refer to exact number sequences, then you map them on to some symbolic notion. Like, for example, there are four Vedas and there are seven stars and three something else, and eight directions, let us say. So you can map the number four into Vedas and the three into, I don't know, maybe you can say Trinity, and you can map eight into directions. So you will compose now four-three-eight as Vedas, Trinity, directions, things like that. So since you know the context, that in this context this ought to be reinterpreted as a number sequence, then you can interpret them as number sequence.

David Cayley
Preserving everything orally had its limits, of course. Mathematics, for example, could only develop so far without a written notation. But Indian orality was a remarkable achievement, and it sheds an interesting light on the literacy hypothesis, for example the idea that abstract ideas are a product of writing. Dr. Narasimhan's analysis of the Indian experience suggests that they may be a product of literateness, not writing as such, and if literateness can exist within oral modes, then perhaps our categeories themselves need to be modified.

Our final destination tonight is northern Canada. There, anthropologist Ann Bennett of Queen's University has been studying literacy in four Cree communities. Her findings also throw into question certain aspects of the literacy hypothesis. They show us a people who seem to have become literate virtually overnight, but who incorporated literacy into their way of life without identifiable effects. The Cree became literate in the 1840s, when a Methodist missionary stationed at Norway House invented a syllabic script for the Cree language. It proved to be a remarkable economical way of writing, and it spread very rapidly.

Ann Bennett
The Indians took the script and left Norway House with the knowledge in their heads, met other Indians, told each other. It spread by a process of person to person communication, basically. And, about ten years later, French missionaries, Oblate missionaries on the James Bay coast, which is a thousand miles distant from Norway House, reported that all the adult Cree in Fort Albany were able to read and write a kind of shorthand, as they called it. And well, even our own research, we've interviewed 440 people. Now, at least a third of them must be over the age of 40, and I think we've only found two individuals that couldn't read or write.

David Cayley
How do you explain the speed with which it spread?

Ann Bennett
Well, that's something that I've--I mean, this has been to me the real interest in the research. You hear so much about people not being able to learn to read. You hear so much about functional illiteracy. You hear so much about dyslexia and children in the classroom who can't

learn to read. And then all of a sudden, you discover people that, I mean, where the literacy spread through them like an epidemic. I think of it as a kind of cognitive rash, you know, whsst, right through. But similar reports also among the Cherokee that they learned to read and write. In 1820, the chief developed also a syllabic alphabet for them, and there are stories of Cherokees meeting each other. "Do you know how to read?" Two strangers meeting on the road. "No, I don't know how to read." "Oh, well, you've got to learn. We'll sit down here for an hour and I'll teach you." And that sort of thing. And the Cherokees also achieved nearly universal literacy and the U.S. government was so upset by this development, I mean, these primitives shouldn't be able to read and write, that they moved them on to North Dakota and smashed all their printing presses. Yes, they destroyed everything that they had to print with. They could still write, of course, but all the printing material that they had so laboriously developed for their newspapers. I think they had a weekly newspaper at one point, but they were destroyed on orders from Washington.

David Cayley
Does the way in which people taught each other have something to do with the rapid diffusion, too, do you think?

Ann Bennett
Well, I think that they ways they taught each other were very typically Cree. The Cree don't like to have--they're not comfortable with "oughts." Like you ought to do this and you ought to do that. It's almost anathema to them. And so when they taught themselves to read and write, they did it in a very typical way, which was that there was no standard way of learning how to read and write in Cree. Adults usually taught children in their own family, but sometimes children taught children, and adults sometimes taught adults. And, as I was saying earlier, also I've not heard of children teaching adults, but there's nothing with the Cree to think that it didn't happen that way. They wouldn't mind if somebody knows something and you don't know it, well, okay, go ahead, learn it from them. There weren't any institutional supports for this. There weren't any schools, there weren't any teachers, there wasn't any paper and there weren't any pens early on. So nobody had come along and said, well, this is how you teach somebody something. So I guess they taught as they've always taught, by showing and helping the other person to do it.

David Cayley
Did the ability to read and write change the society in specific ways?

Ann Bennett
I don't think it did. They didn't build up a kind of body of literate texts. I don't know if we could really expect that after 150 years. They did eventually have the Bible, and literacy with the Cree has always had a highly spritual element to it. But I don't think that the literacy itself changed the society very much. I think people found vacuums, there were gaps in the things that they were able to do, for various reasons, probably because they were spread out. There were other things I think they were unable to do because of certain kinds of etiquette in their own society which makes certain kinds of interactions very uncomfortable, and so they're easier to do by writing letters. And I think it made those things easier to do. There were things that they didn't have that then they were able to do, and they used to write letters on birchbark with charcoal and send them along with travellers, or they could leave them at the Hudson Bay trading post, or they could leave them at the church, or they could leave them in cabins on the trapline. There are quite a few cabins spread around, where if they knew that other members of their family passing in that general direction would always kind of stop in to say Hi to Uncle Fred or whoever was staying there, and then leave the message there for them, once they had literacy. But my feeling is it didn't profoundly change them.

David Cayley
What's happened to this form of writing?

Ann Bennett
Well, after World War II--now, I can only speak for the four communities we've been working in, which are all in Northern Ontario--in all four communities, full-time schooling came in after World War II. Up until the time of the introduction of the school, it appears that parents and families were still taking pains to teach their children to read and write syllabics. Once the school comes in, its avowed aim is to teach people to become literate. And so the parents seem to just have shed this chore of parenthood among the Cree and said okay, let's let the schools teach the kids to read and write. And the schools did that, but they taught them to read and write English. They didn't teach them to read and write Cree, and they wouldn't even allow them to speak Cree in the schools until about 1970, which I think must have been fairly traumatic, for a little six- year-old kid showing up in first grade, not knowing one word of English. But for the last ten years or so, they have been teaching Cree syllabics in the schools, so now you've got youngsters coming up who have been taught Cree in the school, but they just haven't picked it up as well as the old folks did from their parents. You get terrible situations where the young people are not really very fluent in English and they're not fluent in Cree, and so they don't have the tools to express certain abstract concepts. I mean, they must be so hampered. It's like being inarticulate.

David Cayley
Anthropologist Ann Bennett of Queen's University. Whether the Cree will be able to preserve their writing system remains tragically in doubt, but the history of Cree writing before English schooling is what Ann Bennett calls "one of the great success stories in the field of literacy". Cree literacy was remarkable for the speed with which it spread, the ease with which it was leared, and above all, the way in which it was adapted to purposes already given in the culture. This recalls Jerome Bruner's point, that a technology by itself can't transform a culture. It depends on how the culture sees fit to use it. India held the technology of writing almost completely at bay, but still achieved a civilization with many of the features usually attributed to literacy. So what does this say to Eric Havelock's views on the relations between writing and philosophy in classical Greece, or to Derrick De Kerckhove's sense that there is a straight line from the invention of the phonetic alphabet to the splitting of the atom or the cracking of the genetic code? I certainly don't think it invalidates their evocative ideas as applied to our own culture, but it does say, I think, that we need to be cautious about generalizing from the Greek experience, or any other. There are obviously many literacies, and many oralities, and their effects will vary according to the cultures in which they appear. So next week at this time, I'll turn to the history of our own literacy, from the manuscript culture of medieval Europe, to the printing press, and on to today.

Lister Sinclair
Tonight's program was written and presented by David Cayley.

PART II

Lister Sinclair
Good evening. I'm Lister Sinclair and this is Ideas on the history of reading.

Brian Stock
Reading gradually becomes a metaphor for thinking as culture becomes more readerly. We find an interpenetration of thinking about thinking and thinking about reading, the same metaphors, the same conceptualizations, and I find this fascinating because I think this is the birth of a new type of self-consciousness.

Lister Sinclair
Reading changes its character with time. If I were to show you a manuscript from the 10th century, you probably wouldn't be able to make head or tail of it. There would be no spaces between words, no titles, no capitals, no punctuation, no index or table of contents, just a solid wall of letters. If you tried to read it, you'd find yourself unable to just skim over the letters, extracting the meaning, as modern readers do. You'd have to laboriously piece out the text, so labouriously, in fact, that one historian of reading says that doctors in ancient times used to recommend reading to their patients as a form of exercise. The modern book, with its many conveniences for the reader, began to take shape only in the 12th century. From then on, the number of books and the number of readers steadily increased. The invention of the printing press in the 15th century accelerated the process, and reading, an ability once possessed only by monks, is now considered an essential tool for survival. Reading has a history, and tonight, in the second program in our series on Orality and Literacy, we're going to explore the early stages of that history. What effect did the growth of literacy have on thinking and on social organization? What do we gain and what do we lose by becoming readers? The series was recorded at a conference on orality and literacy held last June at the University of Toronto. It was jointly organized by the McLuhan Program and the Toronto Semiotic Circle, and it brought together many of the most noted scholars in the field. David Cayley covered the conference for Ideas and interviewed the participants. Tonight's program is based on those conversations.

David Cayley
The tools that we use are never just tools, they're always metaphors as well. They show us what we're like and what the world is like. Today, we're surrounded by the metaphorical resonance of the computer. We describe ourselves as "systems", our speech as "communication", and our behaviour as "programming". But for most of the history of our civilization, the commanding metaphor was the book. The theologians of the 12th century spoke of God as the writer of the book of nature. The scientists of the 17th century saw themselves as its readers. By the 18th century, politics was beginning to be decisively shaped by writing. Alexis de Tocqueville described the French revolution as essentially a product of writing. "The writers", he says, "furnished not merely their ideas to the people, but also their temperament and disposition. All Frenchmen, from reading their books, finally contracted the instincts, the turn of mind, the tastes and even the eccentricities natural to those who write, and when they finally had to act," de Tocqueville goes on, "they transported into politics all the habits of literature, the same attraction for general theories, the same contempt for existing facts, the same desire to rebuild the entire constitution according to the rules of logic." Writing and reading became models of how to understand the world and how to act in it. Our notions

of privacy, of individuality, of the importance of controlling ourselves and nature, all bear the mark of literacy.

Literacy is so much a part of our society now, that it seems natural and inevitable. It's become an invisible environment, one we tend to take for granted. But Western society wasn't always literate, and the story of how it became literate can tell us a lot about what literacy is and what it does to us. It can make the invisible environment visible. The first people in Europe to consider reading a centrally important activity were Benedictine monks. Reading to them was an ascetic activity, an integral part of the religious life, and they read very differently than we do.

Ivan Illich
Reading, between the period, let me say, from 500, 400, all the way up to the middle of the 12th century was most of the time a prayerful activity.

David Cayley
This is Ivan Illich, social critic, historian of the Middle Ages, and the co-author, with Barry Sanders, of a new book called ABC: The Alphabetization of the Western Mind.

Ivan Illich
As an ideal type, I can say monkish reading, lectio divina, was the main activity, which meant speaking to yourself, perceiving what is in the book because your mouth articulates it so that you can hear it, and very frequently, as least in the liturgy, you can incorporate it through gesture. It is still somewhat rooted in the old semitic reading, where you read weaving in order to incorporate actually, embody, the memories. The memories are not visual, but the memories which remain of the reading on your tongue, in the vibration of your ears, in what your body feels, and the book was written accordingly.

David Cayley
The type of reading which Ivan Illich describes was an intensely physical activity. Early medieval manuscripts followed the Greek and Roman practice of writing in continuous letters, with no breaks between words. Decoding this script was strenuous work. It required the reader to rely a good deal on his memory and to sound out the words as they were read. Contemporary readers, when confronted with this unseparated script in experimental situations find it necessary to do the same thing. And there is also the example of the Vai people of West Africa, who still use a script of this same type. Paul Saenger works on medieval manuscripts at Chicago's Newberry Library.

Paul Saenger
The Vai people in Liberia in Western Africa, through their early contact with the Portuguese in the 16th century, gleaned the idea of writing and developed a syllabary script, apparently indigenous, which has no spaces between words, no punctuation, no equivalent to our capitalization at the beginning of sentences, and therefore is a highly ambiguous kind of transcription. And in order to reconstruct this into intelligible language, they mumble when they read, and this was the way in which the church fathers read. You find references to this by Jerome, and it's the normal way of reading, and the only notable exception to that is St. Ambrose, whom St. Augustine describes in his Confessions--his amazement that St. Ambrose does not pronounce aloud. He had this peculiar habit of reading silently. An exceptional practice. It would be nice to talk to Ambrose and ask him why, but I think the important thing is that Augustine thought it was remarkable and that numerous other, a whole corpus of other citations in the church fathers, both Greek and Roman, suggests this oralization process being a normal part of reading, the buzzing of the private reader.

David Cayley
The difficulties of reading unseparated script were compounded in places like England and Ireland, where Latin was an unfamiliar language, and it was on these fringes of civilization that manuscripts with spaces between the words were first produced.

Paul Saenger
People tend to change their writing as little as possible in order to function, and the cause for this word separation in England and Ireland, and in Ireland specifically, which were outside of the Roman Empire, and for them, Latin was a foreign language which in no way related to their own vernacular. It had no correspondence, and they needed an artificial way of learning it, an artificial way of reading it. And it being difficult, they developed a series of innovations which would be almost impossible to discuss on radio, where you can't show slides and show what they are, of which the most dramatic, however, was the separation of words.

David Cayley
The most remarkable thing about this innovation was that it took the better part of four centuries to catch on in continental Europe. The works of Bede, for example, were written in separated script in England in the 8th century, but when they reached the Continent, they were copied without word breaks. It seems astonishing that people would have refused so obvious an improvement, but habit and tradition are hard to change, and it may also be that the monks saw no advantage in making reading easier or faster. Speed was not an issue in monkish reading. The point was to

"taste" the words on your tongue. "Let the reader seek for savour, not science", says a Cistercian monk of the time. So it was not until the 12th century that something like our modern book first came into existence. Between the beginning and the end of that century, the appearance of the book was transformed, and in the process, it became an entirely new kind of technical tool. Words were now separated throughout Europe, allowing for silent and therefore private reading. Chapters got titles and subtitles, quotations were marked, paragraphs, marginal glosses, tables of contents and alphabetical indices were all added. Books could now be consulted and used for reference as well as reading. Libraries with books set out on shelves came into existence and monasteries began to catalogue their holdings. Ivan Illich thinks that these changes, taken together, amounted to a revolution.

Ivan Illich
The sensibilities of somebody born in 1100 were shocked by somebody recommending to them to use an alphabetic index. Well, Albert the Great, a little bit later, in the early 13th century, makes a long and embarrassed excuse when, in a book on beasts, in a bestiary, the zoology of that time, he arranges animals in alphabetic order. He says quite clearly that this is an anti-intellectual procedure, but it has its usefulness. You see, he was embarrassed by using the new technical tool, which still was called "book", but was something else. As I am embarrassed when because I don't have a secretary on a given moment, I sit down at a text composer.

David Cayley
Why was it embarrassing for him?

Ivan Illich
Very simply, because it was absurd to put words which realistically are meant still to glue to the things which they represent into an order which has nothing to do with those things. Let me give you an example. If I asked your child--do you have a son or a daughter?

David Cayley
I have four.

Ivan Illich
One of them. I'd take that little boy and say to him, "Look here, in order to learn and to make it easier for you to know something about time, you have to learn the months of the year in alphabetic order, April, February, etc. You would tell me, Illich, you're crazy Months by their nature come in the order January, February, March, and not in alphabetic order. We all have it in our blood that it's this way, and anyway, what does it mean. In the very same way, Albert the Great says animals come according in the order that which they represent They are symbols, the created symbols, of certain virtues, the panther of sweetness and the lion of courage, and they should be ordered according to the virtues they represent, not according to the first letter with which they begin. Why should you do this? I can't understand it. By the end of that century, such ordering--today, we would speak of it as a random arrangement--had already become possible.

David Cayley
The 12th century book was more than just a new tool for the production of knowledge. It was also a new kind of metaphor, a new way to define the social and psychological space in which people lived. Ivan Illich calls this new space "literate mind", or "lay literacy", and he argues that it engulfed even those who couldn't read.

Ivan Illich
Let me illustrate that, if that's all right with you, with what happened during the late 12th and the beginning of the 13th century. The number of people in society who knew how to hold a writing instrument increased, but not very fast. The people who could decipher a sentence increased little. But the number of people who knew that by doing something bad, an entry was made in the Book of Life, and that by the end of their life they would have to face the Supreme Judge who would read out of a book, telling them what they had done. The number of people who by 1215 could be obligated by the church to go yearly to confession, reading their conscience and manifesting to the priest what was written in their inside vessel called conscience, increased tremendously. The inquisition started, torture, opening of the body and of the soul by force in order to allow the judge to read what is truly at the bottom of this man's heart, as distinct from what he says, under oath perhaps, became possible afterward. Now I am interested in how alphabetic assumptions, assumptions, concepts, which are based on writing techniques, are made into the axioms by which simple people, non-writing people, who in the Middle Ages are called lay people, perceived the world, socially construct their own reality. What are the generators, the new generators of the topology within which they live. And there, in the late 12th century, I have begun to study a variety of aspects of iconography, in sculpture, in painting, in miniatures, and I see that no peasant can go into a church any more, starting at the middle of the 12th century, without passing through a church door above which there is tympanum, you know the ark with the Lord in the Last Judgement sitting there with the Book of Life opened in front of him. The Devil changes appearance. There's a lovely story on the writing devil--acquires tablet and writing tool, sits on his tail, which becomes thicker for that purpose so that it can be used as a stool, and notes down people's sins. People learn that they can commit a sin not only by