

By Lucia Tonelli & Giorgia Giacomini

We're MA students in Communication and Graphic Design at ISIA Urbino, Italy and we're researching the act of publishing for Jonathan Pierini's Graphic Production Techniques class. The task is to provocatively ignore the boundaries of established publishing practices and broaden our field of investigation. Giorgia read [*I Read Where I Am, Exploring New Information Cultures*](#) (Valiz, Amsterdam, 2011) and we decided to consider this book that Geert Lovink co-edited together with Mieke Gerritzen and Minke Kampman as a topic because it deals with issues fundamental to our profession.

We felt that the book was wrong, predicting the end of paper publishing. Today, printing still exists, but what kind of readers have we become? We have been involved in the needs of an innovative society, speeding up and reducing formats from paperback to digital to ensure that we can read more easily. Today we are not so much fast as we are tired readers. We are overwhelmed by the amount of information, constantly receiving new articles, new messages and newsletter notifications. Everyone involuntarily or unconsciously never stops reading. Everywhere. As soon as we wake up, just before going to sleep, during work, on lunch breaks. Do we still feel like reading?

These thoughts emerged after reading *I Read Where I Am*. Not only did your book attempt to answer the question of what the future of publishing will be, but it also highlighted a shift in the reading experience given the availability of both print and digital media. In 2021, readers' needs have changed: publishing is adapting to the needs of a different audience by re-introducing itself to the market with audiobooks and podcasts. Almost a decade after the book's publication, we were interested in knowing your opinion on the subject by proposing an interview. The questions come from the reading of *Orality and Literacy, the Technologizing of the Word* by anthropologist Walter J. Ong, who analyses the origins of oral-written communication in his book.



LT & GG: The written word does not know how to respond if questioned “majestically silent” it does not enter the dialectical exchange and always continues to mean the same thing. On the contrary, the spoken word, a sound event, is agonistic and emphatic, the fruit of a concrete situation of immediate interaction between human beings. It is the one that counts, is the word-action that changes the world. Word-action versus word-memory. Mutation versus stasis. Memory versus forgetfulness. How would you define the audiobook/podcast medium instead?

GL: You are right, in 2011 we may have overestimated the uptake of iPads and tablets but already then we believed in some sort of hybrid reading culture. Here, at the Institute of Network Cultures, we’re still doing the hands-on work to realize this open publishing mix of e-pub for smart phones, pdf for PCs and laptops and print on demand, with occasional titles available on paper. But what we really need is contemporary speculative theory and related experiments outside of the rigid Silicon Valley model of start-up. Where are today’s Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan? The 21st century cries for its own media theorists. The 20th century orality vs. literacy debate has been pushed aside by social media controversies, digitization debates, privacy violations, AI and big data and is forgotten, for the wrong reasons. McLuhan predicted an eternal return of orality, and I think he’s right. The technologizing of the word, as Ong called it is proceeding but is also more and more ‘disappearing’ into the machines. The written word, as part of the larger family of executable code, is the language of computers. We can talk to machines but these will still have to translate what we mean. We still need to master language, in the sense that we need to learn to read and write, but ‘intelligent machines’ are increasingly assisting us in these tasks, from spell

and grammar checking, search engines, real-time speech to text conversion software, built-in Wikipedia services to dictation software that helps us to write texts, live translation services (specially popular in Asia) and live subtitling. All these have been around for some time but were not ready to be used by billions of users. Now they are.



The point here is that these language/knowledge service themselves had to through a process of automation, before they were ready to be accepted and 'embodied' by large user groups. When we're talking about deep transformations through the digital we need to not just look at gadgets and the latest software gimmicks such as AI where we talk through audio interfaces such as Siri and Alexa to algorithms and databases. We're looking at the modalities of transcription. Soon it won't matter how and under which circumstances you produced a text as long as it's convincing, has a narrative and a unique, personal voice. This will increasingly be about the cultural techniques of language acquisition. I do not believe we can only enrich our vocabulary by solitary reading of 19th century style novels. It's encouraging that Hegel is a hype in memespace amongst Gen Z but let's see how many of them will actually read him. Good luck.

Language is a living social entity. The problem we see arising here one of the canonizing of language. Who will have the power to codify the language you speaking? Will the language policing finally give way to a diverse culture, like we're already watching in rap language (and with that I do not just mean an extended version of Urban Dictionary). Let's also insert the meme and emoji elements into this debate and look for the new frontiers where image and text are blurring.



LT & GG: Oral society tends towards extroversion (sound socializes), while written society tends towards introversion (individual fruition through reading isolates). Printing, on the other hand, is the factor that developed the concept of personal privacy that characterizes modern society. It produced books that were smaller and easier to carry, determining the size suitable for solitary reading in a quiet corner, for finally silent reading. There is a new sense of the private ownership of words. Printing encouraged humans to look to their inner consciousness and unconscious resources. How does audio content approach sociality? Does sound confine or connect?

GL: Let's not try to 'naturalize' the response to your question and invent quasi-universal answers and instead carefully study, in detail, what the changes have been over the past 10-20 years. The hardest assignment one can get is to examine the present. Technological sound is increasingly not ours, not in terms of hardware or software but even the standards we're using; files are stored in the cloud, the music we're listening to is 'borrowed' from Spotify, the spoken word exchanges we have happen on social media platforms. We are developing a sense of paranoia: can we go to a place where we're not seen, not recorded? There is no private ownership of our data anymore. This is why a few years some of us wrote the Data Prevention Manifesto. We need to fight against this compulsive default design mode that records every move, keystroke, location, response we make. Instead of data protection and more privacy we can better tackle the problem at the source and not gather so much data in the first place. This is also case for audio content. If only we store all these files offline, just for us to listen to. That's a romantic notion. It's a crazy administration to take everything offline and store it all on a mobile hard drive. Yes, I also love to have physical books, but

even these old school object, how non-digital are they? Did you buy them from Amazon?

Now, to answer your question, all these new material conditions of the digital impact a re-assessment of intro- and extroversion. With a majority of humankind now living in dense and busy urban areas, we need to see that introversion has become a luxury. We can train ourselves through mindfulness and yoga to be better able to focus on longer complex texts but all trends go in the opposite direction of structurally built-in distractions, which we then internalize. At the time of *I Read Where I Am* we were already aware of this but the idea was that multiple devices for different tasks could somehow resolve this: a PC or laptop for work, a smartphone for socials and oral conversations and an e-reader or tablet for e-books. This didn't work out because the inherent tendency in tech to converge hardware through platforms. We long for the ability of the user to disconnect and switch off apps in order to read and be left alone. In the 5G society this is a monumental task. All the motivation needs to come inside, and many are tired of the current apps that require constant input, from swiping and clicking to texting. When it comes to change... the mind is willing but the flesh is weak. The only way out seems to be the offline retreat, in bed, where we read a physical book. And this is the main reason why the market for physical copies has not as dramatically collapsed as predicted. This is where the podcast demand fits in: there's no need for input and response and we can be passive for a moment.

LT & GG: Literature starts with reading. The awareness of intertextuality has now penetrated fully into our culture. We know that every text derives its existence from and depends for its meaning on those that preceded it. Literature comes from literature. But we must also keep in mind that the historical origins of literature begin with oral verbalization. What has happened in this respect over the last decade? Are we returning to orality? What is orality today and how is it different from primordial orality?

GL: Here it's good place to discuss the role of podcasts and audiobooks. While we can all agree about the impressive uptake of both, they are have nowhere near replaced traditional reading culture. What it has done is the 'mobilization' of book consumption. The audio accompany us on long travels, daily commutes and during work. Some will find this entertaining, while for others all this might be too much. This varies. What doesn't is the built-in 'intertextuality' that you talk about. We can instantly look up everything while

being interrupted by notifications from elsewhere. All this does not point at a new orality. I am sorry about this, also myself. An oral renaissance for me is connected to this deeply felt drive to tell, and share stories. To talk to machines and instruct them orally does not impress anyone, it is sad. We can celebrate solitude while sharing alarming stories about the rise of loneliness. This may all be true. There is more truth out there than we can bear. My concern has always been to create networks, communities, conspiracies of like-minded weirdoes. Orality to me means endless meetings and debates (preferably in German), poets in our midst that rant into the electronic void, bringing tribes together, dancing and screaming. After more than a year in isolation because of Covid-19, this is a more than obvious desire. No need to further comment on our social destiny.



LT & GG: Without transcription, human consciousness cannot fully fructify its potentialities and cannot produce creations, which are also powerful and beautiful. In this aspect, orality needs to yield, is destined to yield, writing. Writing, as time will prove, is necessary to the development, not of science, but of history and philosophy, of a culture capable of explaining literature, the arts and language to itself. Writing shaped man's consciousness before and during technological development. How is our consciousness evolving? Are we still using writing as a tool to stimulate our consciousness?

GL: We have to regain the ability to shape our consciousness. At the moment it looks like we're mainly investing in outsourcing that capacity to algorithms and databases. The problem with the current information architectures is that we have not sufficiently separated the storage of information from a limited overview of theories, concepts, images and stories that we as single

individuals should not only know and understand but also remember. The current crisis in education is, partially, about this growing uncertainty what's essential. Should we merely gain conceptual skills and expect that will know less facts or should we still know the canon? The post-colonial and gender-focussed deconstruction of dominant Western narratives only makes the crisis more pertinent. I am not concerned about the decline of the knowledge of national history but I am about the decline in reading, writing and spelling as this also necessary in the digital age. In my experience, the rise of computers and smartphone is not directed related to the failed 'democratization' of education under a neo-liberal regime when, in the end, kids had to sort it all out themselves, resulting in more inequality and an overall lower level of literacy. At least here in NL the system did not figure out how literacy had to taught in a post-authoritarian way. We, from the media and IT side have not been able to resolve this, and, now are the ones to be blamed. Kids watch too much TV, play too many videogames, are too much on their phone, are addicted to social media... you know the riddle. My proposal here is that any solution requires substantial investments in public education, including 'repair' of the damage done (both from before and during Covid). It also requires a 'non-technical reset' as it going to be useless to blame digital technology for the current mental and literary poverty. The solution will need to come from somewhere entirely different, a place or discourse or mindset, a revolution that swipes away the entire managerial culture that dominates education today.

LT & GG: All sensations take place in time, but sound, in particular, has a special relationship with time, different from other areas of the human sensorium. Sound exists only at one particular moment after which it is dying... It is perishable and essentially evanescent and used to be perceived as such. In the early days, whatever diffused through writing did not gain the same trust as what was transmitted orally. Written documents were not trustworthy. In your opinion, are we back in the same situation?

GL: A starting point could be the recognition that voice, audio, sound and music are 'minor media' in comparison to the ever-growing hegemony of the (moving) image. There are not many investments happening in this area. We can endlessly complain about this but resentment might not be a productive starting point. The premise that sound is time-based can be a good design principle. Take the fact that's disappearing. We can regret this and try to record everything or use this to our advantage. The same can be said about trust of the oral agreement. In this crypto age of autonomous, automated

‘trustless’ decision, what’s the role of the voice in this respect? In NL a box was invented where people enter, close the door, and then scream. The instruments inside then measure if they have Covid-19, very different from the invasive techniques that enter your nose. I am not saying the sky is the limit but it is time to radically rethink and overcome the inertia. What counts is our ability to organize, play and take action. If we refuse to record our jam sessions, that’s fine. We should not even think to defend ourselves or build some anti-digital analogue offline cult around it.



LT & GG: Writing restructures thought, and, to some degree, is the most drastic of technologies. It initiated what printing and computers have since carried forward: the reproduction of sound in space, the separation of the word from the immediate and living present, in which only spoken words can exist. In fact, in contrast to natural and oral language, writing is entirely artificial: there is no way to write “naturally”. Audiobooks, more than podcasts, are the perfect combination of orality and writing. It is an oral transmission but at the same time artificial, just as the scripture has nothing “natural” about it. What does the written book give us more than the audiobook? Or vice versa?

GL: I am not in favour to fetishize or essentialize information carriers. Text books are there because we need to learn certain fields of knowledge or skills. You want to have them in front of you, write in them, take them to the park, to school or wherever. It would not make sense to have them only as audiobooks. Perhaps you can learn a foreign language only through listening, repeating and conversation... With novels it’s an entirely different story. Writers always read their work to an audience and did so on the radio from day one. What we need here are 21st century experiments that go away

from these essentializing statements about humans being such and such. The whole experience of audio and 'radio' is up for grabs. What we need are revolutionary media formats, made in Italy, developed by your generation. We need to say farewell to Silicon Valley and its venture capital driven models. A tragic example here is Clubhouse, which is the same old in terms of data extraction behind the back of its users. How would you design a public version of Clubhouse? How do you envision moderation, voting and decision making in such audio gatherings? What's the role of the Greek chorus in this? What are multi-vocal texts or films or social media? How do we deal with the real-existing multitude of voices? Two decades ago multimedia and 'multimodal' system had the promise to redesign information flows in complex systems. After the internet scaled up to 4-5 billion users all we're concerned with is censorship, filtering and silencing others. Platform capitalism is only making this poverty worse by amplifying 'influencers' that sell products and advertisement. It's time for an internet reset and the whole world is watching at Italy: it's your turn.