Oral communication is having an extraordinary revival. What might this mean? Can the claim be sustained?

Those who would rightly point out that talk scarcely ceased with the rise of mass literacy, may want to dispute the terms of the statement. Meanwhile, those who (not without reason) lament the decline of literacy, might see in such a claim cause for further anxiety. Then there are those who, following their favourite philosopher, might wish to dispute what is meant by the ‘oral’ and the ‘aural’ as they would the ‘written’ and ‘the read.’

The oral communication I am talking about is not quite what it used to be. It is, in fact, mediated orality. Its growing prominence certainly has implications for our understanding of the ‘decline’ of literacy. Its momentum might also suggest that we need to rethink accepted ways of talking about the dynamics that have shaped the interplay between ‘orality’ and ‘literacy’ in a variety of cultures both ancient and contemporary. There is more to be said, in other words, about the complex relationship between the ‘spoken,’ the ‘heard,’ the ‘written’ and the ‘read’ than we have yet recognised. Current trends make this apparent, but without some clarification of their complexity, these trends will not themselves be adequately understood.

The speed and scope of the communications revolution means we are living on the cusp of something crucial in history. Perhaps we always are, but a case can be made for saying that we have reached a point — crossed a threshold — whose implications will prove all the more surprising to us because we have too easily convinced ourselves that we can already discern the key contours of the post-modern era.

The invention of writing (in the conventional sense of the term), and the invention of reading which was its corollary — together with the centuries-long dissemination of literacy (its appropriation and control being as integral to its spread as to its restriction) — is an
achievement still little understood — whether as a technological phenomenon or as a revolution in human relatedness.

It is a story whose effective end many thought we were witness to in the twentieth century, but developments in electronics have now shown us that this was not so. It would seem that there was always going to be a sequel to that great and enduring saga, 'The Rise of the Written,' and it is this that I am calling 'The Revenge of the Oral': the triumph of the telegraph and the telephone, radio, cinema and television, the tape recorder and video recorder, the phonograph, compact disc and laser disc, the computer and its progenies — e-mail, the internet, interactive entertainment, and, last but obviously not least, Voice Recognition programmes and systems (one of which I am using to assist me with the writing of this).

Now although the dominant trajectory of these developments would certainly seem to be linear, it would be wrong to see it as simply so. It loops a little, and there have been (and there always will be) more than a few kinks along the way. My point then, is not that history repeats itself, but that there is something paradoxical about the way causes call forth consequences and effects provoked replies from people that no one would have predicted.

The triumph of literacy and the classes in command of it did not marginalise the oral. Which is not to say that much that had been important to people wasn't marginalised, merely that orality itself remained the central and essential modality of communication — but that it was now answerable to a new dynamic. The process is thus better understood as one of subordination than peripheralisation. A new hegemony emerged. The oral remained indispensable to the reign of literacy, to the promotion and implementation of its achievements — whether in the classroom, the market place or the kitchen. Moreover, in certain spheres, in certain circumstances, amongst certain groups, orality remained pre-eminent and preserved its prestige. But orators everywhere (teachers, preachers, bush lawyers) ultimately deferred to the text, and even those who denigrated book learning were in awe of it. (More often than not, their prime concern has been to define its limits and to identify the stupidity of those exclusively dependent upon it, rather than to deny its importance.)

Of course, the translation of oral forms into their literate counterparts (rhyme and rhythm, ballad and song, memory and prayer, even
music, ceremony and dance) inevitably involved transformation of
them. Codification also. Processes of social reproduction were to
become an ever more complex interplay of — deliberate and inadvert-
ent — alterations to the communicative terms and conditions of social
life. Mutant mimesis, to coin a phrase, became the order of the day. Much
was lost and much extinguished, but even more was hybridised. His-
tory may still have involved the recapitulation of things that had already
been said, but this now, quite literally, meant the turning of the page,
the entering of something new into a ledger, sealing things with a sig-
nature. My argument is that contemporary developments have to be
understood in comparable terms. That is to say, a new relationship be-
tween speaking, writing and reading is becoming hegemonic — listen-
ing and watching also. The result: a novel discursive fusion that displaces
the text, turning it into a subaltern modality of communication.

On the face of it, this might appear a preposterous claim. Don’t and
won’t texts continue to underwrite any kind of electronic communica-
tion? Indeed, doesn’t cybernetic technology depend upon the formu-
lation of ever more sophisticated linguistic codes, encrypted scripts? Not
only is this undeniable, it is central to the point I am making. The emer-
gence of writing did not extinguish orality, it became its parasite — dis-
placing it without ever being able to dispense with it. In many respects
it was a benign parasitism — a spectacular creative symbiosis. Nor will
mediated orality ever eliminate textuality — but it is already exacting
its revenge, superseding and subordinating it, the so-called decline of
literacy being one symptom of the process. Textuality will remain pervas-
ive, but its most crucial manifestations will tend to become subter-
ranean. Encrypted textuality is effective because of its invisibility, not
in spite of it — and so the most influential languages will be those that
remain infrastructural: those written and read by a cast of cybernetic
scribes, mathematical mandarins, cyberclerks, whose work is only meant
to be accessed by the rest of us in translation — which is to say once it
has been turned into something spoken and performed, into an image
and an event.

In other words, if things are being written to be read nowadays, it is
more and more because they are being scripted to be said. The response
of most of us is not supposed to be to the text as text but to the message
as information or entertainment. The most dramatic and evident
example of this would have to be the evolution that has occurred in the delivery of news reports.

This is not the place to attempt a social history of the phenomenon of 'news' and the fostering of an audience for it, but it is surely uncontroversial to suggest that the emergence of newspapers as a mass market phenomenon played a crucial role in realigning people's experience of the significance of their own lives relative to those of others living elsewhere. This nascent 'globalisation' (or, more commonly, 'nationalisation') of one's own life narrative was associated with the spread of mass literacy. But then came radio, and news began to be broadcast. Newspaper copy was edited to the shape of a script. Meanwhile, with the invention of ever more sophisticated and portable recording devices, the script itself became beholden to the interview — that is to say, to unscripted moments of ostensible immediacy: to the voice of authenticity, as it were; or, to put it another way, to the scripting of context and the orchestration and the editing of that which could not be scripted, or not overtly. The return of orality was controlled: it did not (and does not) dictate its own terms, but nor could (or can) the script dispense with it; indeed, it has become (in virtually every respect) answerable to it.

From this perspective, as instructive as anything is the first broadcast of the Ashes from England. The commentators rehearsed and then presented a simulation of the actual game, mocking up a ball-by-ball description complete with appropriate sound-effects based upon the results coming in on ticker-tape. They might try, but I can't imagine anyone getting away with anything of the sort today. But the feigning shows that the pressure to perform was already there; it was no longer enough to read about the game afterwards, nor even be told the results: the event had to be reported in a manner that suggested it was happening here and now, or at least being reported as if it were. If an impression of presence could not be provided except by pretence, then so be it.

The violation of authenticity in the cause of authenticity became a staple of radio journalism, and nowhere more so than at peak moments of human endeavour or social crisis — for example, news reports prepared in combat zones. Of course, the same could not be said of print journalism, but it is important to recognise where the dynamic differs. The radio report seeks to go beyond the journalist's rendering; we are
ostensibly given access to the thing itself, the event. The phenomenon is accorded a life of its own; indeed, it comes to us live. Mediated it may be, but it possesses an air of immediacy, even spontaneity (however fabricated), that the printed word will always lack.

Now it goes without saying that the coming of television brought a whole new dimension to this development. Sound images entered into a dialogue with visual images, and there is no denying which of them attracts the most attention. And so the exhumation of orality comes to be obscured by the pre-eminence of the screen, television’s triumph over radio. In this connection, it is instructive to return to the emergence of cinema, which was itself a force to be reckoned with in the delivery of news before television deprived it of its claim to be the medium that gave us the most compelling access to dramatic events. As we all know, cinema began in silence. Yet it could not resist sound (despite the protests of intellectuals like Jean-Paul Sartre who was appalled by the prospect as he envisaged it). It was only once sound images were attached to visual images that the newsreel came into its own. Again, the honouring of authenticity was often spurious, but that is not what is at issue here. Rather, the point is this: texts as scripts were not devised to serve their own purposes but designed to promote the effectiveness of a synthesised image.

From this perspective, a script is quintessentially a prosthetic device. In the normal course of events it ought not draw attention to itself; rather its job is to allow an amalgam of sight and sound images to present themselves to the audience as effortlessly as possible. The news itself is not news; it’s what’s on the news that makes the news. This way of viewing things will, I hope, help us to better understand the phenomenon of the television journalist as celebrity — as news presenter rather than news reporter or news reader. S/he speaks the news. Its delivery has become a performance. It is a monologue not a dialogue, yet we experience the person’s presence as a person; we cannot engage with them directly, but it is an encounter of sorts even so. It is ‘live’ theatre, the most alive theater there is: ‘real’ television.

The comparison with theatre recalls the fact that, since ancient times, it is only because they were to be performed that scripts were written, this being their raison d’être. Moreover, as the fate of Shakespeare’s manuscripts illustrates, it was some time before the integrity of the script was thought worth guaranteeing. So the process I am describing, let me
reiterate, is by no means as simple and linear as might be supposed from an unduly cursory account of it. As I suggested earlier, it is full of strange loops, kinks and quirks. Literacy is in fact not being lost to us, but is in process of finding some new incarnation for itself. At least this much is already obvious: the script is becoming the dominant mode of textuality. If writing means nothing without reading, it is performance that increasingly calls forth much of its meaning. Things are written to be read because they must be said. The death of the author has certainly been exaggerated, but there is no denying that authorship is not what is once was. In key areas of communication, authorship can now claim to be little more than a subaltern vocation, the writer a ventriloquist. S/he loses his/her voice, passes it to, ghosts it through, the director, producer, presenter.

Ventriloquism, it bears remarking, is as much a visual as it is an oral/aural phenomenon. The illusion of voice projection has to do with the way we watch while we listen. Cinema and television have attuned us to the complexities of the interplay between what we see and what we hear — including the way that technological advances affecting the one inevitably impact upon the other. The ‘seen’ more and more comes to us mediated by the screen. Meanwhile, that which is ‘heard’ appears deficient unless it can be accompanied by its visual corollary, even if only a simulated version of the ‘real’ thing — a re-enactment, for example. The screen will continue to be used to display and deploy text, but that does not alter the fact that it is as much the reliance upon visual images as a preference for found images that is responsible for the supersession of text once we ‘screen’ it rather than print it. In any case, text that is projected on screen is frequently made to ‘speak’ (using voice-over narration, among other devices). Alternatively, it can also function as a kind of silent speech — a sort of ‘signing,’ shall we say. Its actual substantive content may well be of little consequence. When used illustratively in this way, text becomes tokenistic, little more than a gestural device. Its role is rather reminiscent of that performed by intertitles in silent movies, for such titles were themselves frequently quite unnecessary — the information they conveyed being rhetorical if not actually redundant. The comparison is instructive because it suggests that when text is only being employed because it alleviates anxiety — that is, as a placebo — it will soon enough lose even that function.
No less important, and equally paradoxical, is the part played by recording technology in the emergence of this new species of orality. Recording things not only retrieves them from oblivion, it imbues them with a significance that they may not otherwise have possessed. There is something peculiar and ironic about the fact that recording the present preserves the past, restoring it to us — and much of its tangibility also. It is now the case that the best test of whether or not an incident or event is worthy of lasting recognition is whether it is worth tapping (either to replay at some more convenient time or to preserve for posterity). As a consequence, electronic recording is displacing text as the prime repository of objectified (personal and collective) memory. It follows that the nature and meaning of documentation is also changing. The character of historical evidence alters as a result. Also altered is the way we interrogate it and those who present it to us. We orient ourselves anew to the past, the present, and the future. Events and/or their effects come to exist in and through the recording of them, with image substituting itself for actuality. We have all been witness to this at tourist sites, having come in contact with photographers who see nothing that the camera can't. But really that is the least of it. Whole lives are nowadays lived as if they are photo-shoots set up to provide the media with the appropriate snapshot/soundbite/image-scan. Often it is as if the thing that matters most is the exhibition of oneself, the exhibition of celebrity or infamy; success, ceremony or nostalgia — even one's most embarrassing misadventures. The everyday life version of the talking picture is now what appears on tabloid television, the home movie, amateur video, the recycled surveillance tape, not to mention one's personal computer.

It is part and parcel of my argument that the processes I am discussing are unevenly developed and distributed as a result of the interplay between technological innovation, communication dynamics, control mechanisms, and the reorganisation of local, national and global relationships. That is to say, as a result of the commodification of lifeworlds, the marketing of identities, the fetishisation and reification of options and alternatives, of choice and chance — of life in the home, at the supermarket, in the office, on the field, at the casino and on the screen. It is therefore difficult to predict how things will go from hereon. Who would have guessed that a generation that grew up taking the telephone for granted would turn its mobile version into a toy — an adult walkie-
talkie? In this case, the arrival of the invention came as no surprise; it was the behavioural patterns associated with its reception that were remarkable. One wonders whether the videophone will be taken up with the same alacrity, and what the etiquette associated with its use will be — in view of the intrusion upon privacy involved in turning conversations that are now ‘blind’ into public presentations of self. How will the threat to people’s ‘secret’ space be negotiated? Will we get to talk to the whole ‘naked’ person or will they still be able to control the ‘face’ they present to the world?

The direction in which the technology itself will go is, despite what many think, not easily predicted. Science fiction writers, commenting on their failure (among other things) to anticipate the invention of the microchip and the advent of the personal computer, acknowledge the difficulties associated with prophesying the direction of technological change, let alone its manifold ramifications. Pens and pencils didn’t stop tongues talking, but they did take over some of the most influential tasks, adding many more along the way. Printing presses, typewriters and photocopiers, each in their own way, complicated and skewed things further. Now the keyboard and the screen have entered into a symbiotic relationship whose effects are as peculiar as they are complex. E-mail correspondents and internet chatterers, to take but two interesting examples, have thoroughly subverted long established letter writing etiquette. Some commentators are inclined to describe these exchanges as themselves ‘oral’ forms of communication. This is overly simplistic and neglects the fact that what is going on here is not all that dissimilar to something that was familiar a century or so ago when mail was delivered several times a day in major metropolises and members of the literate classes would talk across town in much the same way that they now converse across cyberspace — virtually instantaneously (give or take a couple of hours).

Nothing is gained by trying to deny that textuality is integral to these exchanges, but there is a way in which those now occurring in cyberspace are the precursors of a new orality. Once the keyboard succumbs to obsolescence as it soon will (which is not to say that it is about to disappear anymore than pens and tongues have), once the mouse metamorphoses into something else again, once e-mail gives way to voicemail, once chat on the internet becomes fully audible (and eventually visible also), there will be no gainsaying the fact that we have definitely
entered a different era. What new behaviours will emerge, and how etiquette will be altered, remains to be seen. But clearly the keyboard and the mouse will go the way of Roneo and Gestetner duplicating machines, ticker-tape and telegrams, Morse-code and carrier pigeons. If pens and keyboards and plastic rodents can be regarded as prosthetic devices substituting for the tongue, the microphone perfectly symbolises the revenge of the oral — amplifying as it does, the power of the voice, its renewed command of communicative time and space.

Now that I am coming home to the conclusion of my argument I cannot help wondering how different it would be if I had already mastered an improved version of the voice-recognition software I am learning to use as I go. If I no longer had to mix and match what I’m trying to say as I switch from scribbling with a pen, to typing on a keyboard, to dictating into a microphone using discrete-speech, how would my sentences sound? Would they have a different size and shape, rhythm and resonance, would there be a modulation in meaning? What happens to writing when it becomes a species of speaking? Is dictating into a computer really any different from using a dictaphone (which itself differs from speaking directly to a stenographer)? Speaking for myself, I do experience it differently because it makes writing easier. I need to see the text so that I can read what I have said and revise it. But will it be different from those who learn to speakwrite as soon as they start school, whose experience of education and literacy is from the beginning ‘post-textual,’ who experience mediated orality as the way of the world, as something quite natural? Schools and universities no longer seriously defend literacy, accord it anything vaguely approaching ‘sacred’ status. Students resist reading and their teachers accommodate themselves to the fact. ‘Multi-media’ teaching methods are funded and valorised above and beyond mere book learning. Even in the bastions of literacy, then, it sometimes seems as if text is merely tolerated.

The screening of meaning causes us to cross a cultural threshold, takes us into a new interactive era, social space, world of worlds. What are we to make of it — and what will we? What kinds of communication will unite and divide the citizenry itself? Will people find themselves talking to their computer as often as they do their cat? Will their interactive, dialogic home-companion cause them to toss away the fish tank? Will interaction on the internet end up offering the same kind of spurious opportunity for participation in the affairs of the world as the
phony-democracy of talk-back radio? Will the impact be as far reaching as that of the telephone — which not only permits intimacy at a distance, but also licenses it and encourages it?

As I have already indicated, much of what will prove most important remains too difficult to predict. We were once told that cinema would do away with radio, that video-recorders would turn cinema-complexes into parking lots. It is so easy to be wrong. Why? Because however much they are controlled and conditioned, people’s needs and desires are so many and varied. And there is something incredibly creative, absurdly ingenious (silly also, of course), about what they discover they want to do with the communicative opportunities they are given for expressing them. This screen-centred brave new verbal world is not going to go away, and really it would be silly for us to want it to, because it has the potential to restore things to us we were close to losing, or some variant of them. It is capable of calling forth new possibilities, posing new questions for us to address, asking of us that we reply with answers that will encourage fresh emancipatory initiatives on pain of seeing them silenced. There is no denying the dangers. The powerful will exploit the promise, seek to muzzle it whenever it is contrary to their own interests. Public and private space will be ever more effectively colonised by virtual and sound images controlled by corporations and states (if not new conglomerates of one kind or another). Mediated orality will superimpose itself upon ordinary face-to-face interactions and intersubjectivity, refracting and distorting them, occluding our understanding of them.

So should we be championing this virtual-tower of screentalk, or should we be critiquing it? Should we be welcoming it, or posting warnings against it? Both at once, would be my advice. The world has known worse, but this new Babel could yet prove far more of a problem than we are now able to say. And it undoubtedly will if ever we cease to value what comes from speaking and listening directly to one another, relying instead upon some digitally synthesised simulation of ourselves.