

# The Oral Paradigm and Snapchat

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## Abstract

In this short essay, I argue that the ephemeral nature of emerging instant-messaging applications, such as Snapchat, applies an oral paradigm. While online discourse of computer-mediated communication shares many qualities with oral communication, the case of ephemeral applications is unique, as the oral features are already integrated in the application technology design and as orality is often implemented on highly visual products. Snapchat applies technology that fades visual contents as if they were spoken words fading in the air after utterance. Moreover, Snapchat's promise to delete all messages from its database after they are viewed echoes a key characteristic of primary oral culture: that is, the inability (and in our case, the obligation not) to store knowledge. In this, Snapchat demonstrates counter-logic to the contemporary grammar of new media, which is based on information aggregation.

## Keywords

orality, Snapchat, information aggregation

Orality is a significant theme in the field of communication studies. This concept was of specific interest to founding scholars of communication studies, specifically those who focused on the relationship between communication, technology, and society, such as Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, and Walter J. Ong. Studies on orality within the communication field tend to examine the impact of technological innovations—such as writing, print, and electronic broadcasting—on society. Related to this notion, recent studies have raised the concept of digital orality, referring to the osmosis between the textual and oral spheres in chats or texting (Soffer, 2010), as well as in distinguishing the hybrid nature of journalism in the digital era, in which “traditional” journalistic discourses are joined by primary-orality-style testimonies. This results in a blending of news facts with interpersonal stories and conversations about news (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 32).

In this short essay, I will use the framework of digital orality to examine the oxymoronic implementing of oral culture in the highly visual communication environment of volatile instant-messaging applications. The innovation of these applications lies in their promise that all contents sent through them are erased from the receiver's and sender's applications, as well as from the company's database, after they are viewed by the receiving user. I will focus here on Snapchat, a dominant application of this kind that is rapidly increasing in popularity. Snapchat was launched in 2011. According to a Pew Research Center report, Snapchat was the third most popular application among American teens (after Facebook and Instagram) in 2015. In all, 41% percent

of American teens use this application to send images and videos to others (Lenhart, 2015). Several other applications provide a similar concept of volatile messaging, among them Wickr, iDelete, and Slingshot.

With reference to Snapchat, I argue that the ephemeral characteristic of its technology applies an oral paradigm on highly visualized contents. Although online discourse of computer-mediated communication (CMC) shares many qualities with oral communication, the case of ephemeral applications is unique, as the oral features are already integrated in the application technology design and as orality is often implemented on highly visual products. Thus, it seems highly symbolic that one of Snapchat's most popular features—selfie face-detection technology that enables adding real-time graphic effects—concentrates on the mouth. The dog Snapchat lens, for example, is activated when the user opens his or her mouth while taking a selfie, at which point a dog's tongue comes out of the user's mouth and licks the screen. Other filters create images of fire or rainbows coming out of users' mouths. These graphical features thus emphasize the mouth as the face's central organ.

I will first briefly discuss the digital orality of CMC and then continue to examine the implementing of oral culture in

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the highly visual communication environment of ephemeral applications.

## Digital Orality in CMC

Online communication shares many of the characteristics of oral communication. It is a writing environment that integrates aspects of written discourse with an oral discursive style. Terms like “netlish,” “weblish,” “Internet language,” and “cyberspeak” attest to the perception of the hybrid nature of digital discourse, which is composed simultaneously of elements of writing and speech (Crystal, 2006). Similarly, in SMS communication, the speech rules of telephone communication are often diffused into written communication, giving it a conversation-like quality: as Rettie (2009) argues, “in SMS conversations short messages alternated rather like verbal dialogue” (p. 434).

The oral features and effects of digital texts are achieved through various techniques from earlier textual cultures. Lexical substitution, for example, is rooted in graffiti culture and resembles the deviant spelling techniques found in marginalized groups (Sebba, 2007, p. 14). In this type of digital oral writing, the phonetic sound that characterizes a single letter or digit may replace entire words; for example, b=“be.” The phonetic sound of a letter plus a digit can also replace syllables; for example, b4=“before.” Another textual strategy is to use onomatopoeic signs, which imitate the sounds that relate to the signified idea: for example, “ZZZZ” representing the inhalation and exhalation noises of sleeping. Rooted in the comic-book genre, this type of expression is characterized by multiple punctuation, eccentric spelling, and capital letters, and it illustrates the self-conscious or “playful” aspect of such oral-written texts. Yet another technique is the use of the initial letters of the words of the original phrase. Some of these initialisms, used mainly in the oral-written digital sphere, have come into common usage, such as LOL—“laugh out loud.”

There are several functional reasons for the adaptation of oral features into interpersonal digital communication. Among them is the need to cope with technical constraints, such as time constraints in synchronic forum chats, where reaction time is crucial (Danet, 2001, pp. 16-17; Walther, 2007), or spatial constraints, such as the need for an “economical” writing style that will fit a cell phone’s miniature keyboard and screen (Green, 2007, p. 126). Another is the adoption of creativity as part of “hyperpersonal affordances,” where the lack of nonverbal cues is a technical feature that actually helps users develop more positive and desirable relationships (Ramirez, Zhang, McGrew, & Lin, 2007, p. 493; Walther, 1996, pp. 7-8). Finally, written chat interaction takes place in a “chat room’s” spoken-word atmosphere, and the primary function of cell phones is that of talking. In addition, digital orality can be seen as a performance of linguistic anarchism adopted as a mark of a youth culture (Soffer, 2012). However, as I will show

below, the orality of Snapchat differs from previous genres of CMC in that it does not necessarily relate to the writing style of users, but rather to the technical features of the application.

## The Orality of Snapchat

As the name of the application indicates, Snapchat brings together the “snap” of visual culture, referring to capturing the moment through picture taking and the “chat” of orality. Taking the application name literally, it relates to a combination of two different cultures: that of the fixed nature of pictures (or typed text)—which catch the moment and objectify it—and the temporal, ephemeral culture of conversation. Imagine a Polaroid photo that, instead of becoming sharper, fades away after 10 s as if it were an uttered oral sentence. This example clearly demonstrates the cultural gap between the idea of ephemeral oral culture and visual culture. In typographic societies, written words and pictures are seen as fixed “things” on a flat visual surface. In a sense, text is seen as “a datum, separate from any utterer or hearer or reader” (Ong, 1992, p. 308). The fixed and static nature of the text is very different from the vivid occurrence of the spoken word. As Ong (1992) has suggested, “Recalling sounded words is like recalling a bar of music, a melody, a sequence in time” (pp. 294-295). Spoken words are one-time events: They fade away and disappear.

What Snapchat is attempting is to apply technology to visual products to create a fading-away effect—just as spoken words fade away in the air after utterance. Like spoken words, the “digital objects” sent through the application disappear. As Bayer, Ellison, Schoenebeck, and Falk (2016) argue, “Snapchat supports temporally limited sharing by (1) requiring the shared content to be created at (or close to) the time it is shared and (2) deleting the shared content from the Snapchat application for both sender and receiver” (p. 958). In other words, Snapchat aims to apply through technological means the temporal time-bound paradigm that characterizes oral cultures. The following citation from a Snapchat blog vividly captures how objectified pictures are dealt with in temporal speech act terms:

An image becomes a photograph, in part, by having borders. The frame makes the photo. Tellingly, a Snapchat usually exists unframed, full-screen, more moment than an art object. Less than sharing experience-trophies and hoping communication happens around them, an ephemeral network leaves the art objects to fade in favor of focusing on the moments, the experience, the communication; more social than media, more social than network. (Jurgenson, 2014)

“Conversation,” as declared on the Snapchat blog, “feels better when it’s visual” (Team Snapchat, 2014). Such visual culture—which is the legacy of the modern, highly visualized print culture—makes visual objects reproducible. This is an important characteristic of literate society, which, unlike

oral societies, enables documentation. The ability to easily copy visual products expropriates them from a concrete, one-time context. Following Walter Benjamin's (1973) claims, the technological ability to reproduce visual contents expropriates the unique aura of its existence. In the digital cut-and-paste culture, it is much easier to reproduce content than it was in the analogical era, and textual or visual content is frequently removed from its original moment in time and space. For example, intimate content—products of romantic relationships—is objectified and stored, in other words, expropriated from their creators and the intimate moment. If forwarded, their unique contexts are no longer relevant, as they become something else—that is, sexual content. As Benjamin observes, in the reproduction process, the original message acquires a different meaning. It is objectified or indexed, becoming data or information. In this spirit, the Snapchat blog states,

Perhaps the reason most of our dominate social media have been fixated on content, on media objects, is because content can be stored. Sociality is treated like information that can be indexed as search engines do to the Web. Photos and the rest are recorded, kept, organized into profiles to be measured and tracked and ranked . . . it is certainly time to rethink sociality based so fundamentally on media objects. (Jurgenson, 2014)

It is not by chance that the scholarship on Snapchat contains a study of sexting through the application (Poltash, 2013). The application is meant to undermine the side effects of mediated communication, that is, its documentation. Snapchat gives its users the feeling that it enforces a one-time aura on communication event. This brings us back to a main characteristic of primary oral cultures: the inability to store knowledge. Purely oral societies have no aids to reconstruct thoughts or preserve knowledge; knowledge must be repeated aloud or it will vanish. Oral cultures and traditions are transmitted via face-to-face communication (Goody & Watt, 1963, p. 344). While scholars point to this as a reason for the slow progress of knowledge and thinking patterns in oral societies, others, such as Innis, emphasize the strength of the equality between those using only speech and dialogue with no external technology to document or restore knowledge. This is further emphasized with the modernist fear of the monopoly of knowledge of the state or social elites (Gladney, 1991).

In the sense of information aggregation, the grammar, or logic, of new media is totally opposed to that of the oral society. "The major characteristic of digital media is memory. Its ontology is defined by memory, from content to purpose, from hardware to software" (Chun, 2008, p. 154). Our personal computers or smartphones can be seen as microarchives, where information is recorded and cataloged in alphabetical order (Ernst, 2013, p. 92). In the digital sphere, data are obsessively collected by commercial companies and governments. Snapchat, however, promises to implement a quasi-oral island of non-recorded communication:

Snapchat is not—and never has been—stockpiling your private Snaps or Chats. And because we continue to delete them from our servers as soon as they're read, we could not—and do not—share them with advertisers or business partners. (Snapchat Blog, 2015)

This deletion of data, along with Snapchat's privacy promise, is seemingly an act of rebelling, counter to digital media logic.

Another feature of Snapchat that is significant from an orality perspective is "My story." This feature enables users to post Snaps they have created. The story is exposed by default to the sender's friends, who can view it multiple times before it is deleted after 24 hr. The communal feeling that grows within the group listening to the same story is an important aspect of primary oral culture. The concept of "fireside talks" is a permanent symbol of this culture. The rise of the electronic media, with its emphasis on orality, is seen as fostering united group feeling: "One important strand within McLuhan's discussion of radio appears, therefore, to be a recognition of the strengths of the electronic 'fireside chat', as a conversational mode of communication" (Mitchell, 1999, p. 65). Secondary electronic orality, however, was seen to generate a group sense that was immeasurably larger than that of primary oral culture (Ong, 1982, p. 136). The group feeling in both cases—of primary and secondary orality—stems from the simultaneously tuned-in attention of listeners to the (fading-away) word, an act that turns individual listeners into a group. In the case of Snapchat, it is not the spoken words that enforce simultaneous group exposure, but the application design. The limited time for viewing the stories is meant to catch the attention of the sender's friends. In this case, the virtual "fireside talks" can be visualized. The communal relationships are applied to a relatively small group that is exposed to the sender's contents.

## Concluding Remarks

In his short story *Funes the Memorious*, Jorge Luis Borges (1962) refers to the destructive force of the infinite memory. In the story, Funes is a young man who, as the result of an accident, is physically disabled, but at the same time he is "blessed" with the extraordinary capability to remember everything. "My memory, sir, is like a garbage heap" (Borges, 1962, p. 152), says Funes, who is trapped by the endless details in his mind. As the narrator tells us, Funes' cognitive capabilities, occupied by his endless memories, are very limited: "To think is to forget differences, generalize, make abstract. In the teeming world of Funes, there were only details, almost immediate in their presence" (Borges, 1962, p. 154).

In our teeming world, information about all aspects of human behavior is endlessly gathered and indexed. To be forgotten is a right people fight for (Youm & Park, 2016). The suffocation Borges exposes through the infinite information surplus in Funes's mind might correspond with the

feelings of many Internet users, revealing their deep concern about the collection of personal information. In fact, as Andrejevic (2014) argues, people feel powerless about the commercial use of their data and strongly support the requirement that they be able to delete personal information and control the information gathered about them (p. 1683).

Snapchat integrates this need to forget in the counter-logic of new media information aggregation. It goes against the common social belief that sees digital media as a cultural memory (Chun, 2008, p. 169). This is done by adopting a time-bound oral-like atmosphere. Thus, orality has become inseparable not only from typed texts, and especially from online CMC discourse, but also from applications' features and designs. The hybridity of these two distinct cultures in the attempt to treat text as conversation may be seen as part of the tolerant liquid environment of late modernity, along with the unique affordances of digital technology.

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