COMM 12022 – TECHNOLOGY, COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE

WEEK 9

THE ABORIGINAL INVENTION OF TELEVISION

References


Other articles from this edition of Continuum are relevant.

Overview

Last week we examined the impact of western technology on colonised cultures; specifically, the technology of mechanisation, of industry, on those cultures. This week we examine the impact of information technology, media technology, on Aboriginal culture in the present. We will examine not only the impact, but also the way the Walpiri use one form of media technology—television—to pass on their culture to younger generations. We will examine this from both an optimistic and pessimistic viewpoint.

The framework for this lecture is:

• A definition of cultural technology.
• The questions: Is television really an oral medium? What is the difference between an oral and a print tradition?
The threat of television to the Walpiri.
Aboriginal responses to television.

Definition of cultural technology

O’Regan’s discussion on television as a cultural technology is worthwhile, if somewhat obscure. Carey sees all technology as cultural; that is, technology is ‘an expression of the very outlooks and aspirations we pretend it merely demonstrates.’ (Communication as Culture, 9). While O’Regan seems to struggle to make his point, it is a significant point. Television is a different technology in the culture of the west—in its most general form—compared with Aboriginal culture.

TV needs to be thought of in relation to other cultural technologies: the mass media of radio, the press, cinema, video or other technologies like the telephone, fax, mail, print. Similarly, other elements comprise the web of cultural technology, such as considerations of audience, even though audiences are not normally within the realm of technology. It is the way audiences interact with and use the technology that is important.

Is television based on oral or print principles?

McLuhan argues that television is essentially a return—or a progression—to a culture that is not dependent on print. In McLuhan’s legend, television is an essentially liberating medium because it allows for easy access. Television is easier to access than print, because the codes a person needs to learn in order to access print are much more complex, and require a longer time of learning, than television. Television is essentially an oral and graphic medium. An example might explain: a young child watches television and requires little specific preliminary learning to understand, or at least, to be fascinated, by the narrative and visual appeal of television. On the other hand, the same child has to undergo a period of learning to access the print codes that make up a book. That learning continues throughout much of the life of the person, as the codes can become quite complex.

We can apply this distinction between print and television to Aboriginal culture. Michaels argues that the orality of Aboriginal culture makes it quite distinct from cultures based on written codes, on writing. Therefore, European Australian and Warlpiri cultures are different in their informational systems, leading to a fundamental clash. Michaels sees television in a different way from McLuhan. To Michaels, the Walpiri traditionally possessed an oral culture, which could be infiltrated and destroyed by the print bias of the new communication technologies. The supposed resemblance between the newly formed (from print), electronically organised culture and a traditional oral culture like the Walpiri was superficial. How did Michaels arrive at this conclusion?

The difference lay in the different value placed on information and in the different ways knowledge was constructed in an oral culture compared with a television culture. Basically, in oral cultures, information was not broadly shared nor was that information accessible to all. In fact, knowledge was restricted and was accessible to
people on the basis of their group and status. As a juvenile grew, at various times he was initiated into higher levels in the hierarchy, and new secrets were orally passed on to that person, in the form of stories. Knowledge resides in individuals; if knowledge is power, then that power resides in individuals, by virtue of their understanding of the lore.

On the other hand, the printed word is detached from the author and is equally accessible by anyone who can read. In this way, print is essentially democratic, making knowledge accessible to those who have the learning and knowledge to access the codes. If I read, then I am in a position to access knowledge in a print culture. In contrast, the oral word cannot be removed from the author, the storyteller; thus the author is in a powerful position. Knowledge can be disseminated only when and if that person determines. He or she is in total control of the knowledge. The relationship between speaker and listener is one of power to an extent not possible with print. The speaker is able to choose the listener, thus ascribing the power to choose to remain silent. Hence the listener must in some way please the speaker in order for the speaker to share information, to share knowledge. As a result, speech information accrues a particularly high value; that is, it becomes capital that individuals can commute into social and economic advantage. Information becomes horded and guarded, and a hierarchy develops, based on oral knowledge.

One characteristic of a print culture is the ability to archive knowledge, and for anyone to retrieve it. In the electronic age, archiving, storing and readily accessible retrieval is intensifying through the electronic technologies, rather than disappearing. In this sense, television is an electronic resource, transmitting information and stories that were once only accessible in speech mode. The source of knowledge is not a person; the source of knowledge is a piece of tape on which digital signals are stored. In this sense, television is a technology of a print culture.

In conclusion, traditional oral cultures cannot serve as models for the supposed change that western cultures are undergoing. The global village might be based on speech, but it is not an oral culture; it does not organise knowledge in the same way that traditional oral cultures do, or did. The unit of analysis in cultural systems is not 'speech'—as opposed to 'writing on a page'—but information and the way it was formed, shaped, transmitted and negotiated.

### Knowledge authority in oral and print/electronic cultures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Television information is equally accessible through the society of viewers.</th>
<th>Aboriginal knowledge is highly restricted to identified classes of people.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Television information is widely dispersed geographically through satellites and cable.</td>
<td>Aboriginal knowledge is highly localised.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television creates an eternal, archival, impersonal authority.</td>
<td>Aboriginal knowledge is personal, with face-to-face communication, and is not subject to</td>
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The threat of television to the Walpiri

The discussion above crystallises the reasons television is a threat to the traditional life of the Walpiri:

1. Television usurps the prerogatives of senior people, of the elders. The elders are no longer the repositories of stories about the Walpiri people.

2. It destroys the way knowledge is organised in traditional Walpiri culture. The meanings—who we are, why we are, for example—of existence in traditional cultures exist within the stories of the culture. The knowledge that is required to continue that construction of the world is based on an oral tradition.

3. Television challenges the localism of knowledge that is the basis of autonomy. Television creates a global structure of knowledge, of stories about life. Programs are made in the US, the UK, and sometimes in Australia. The issues, mores, morals, understandings implicit and explicit in those programs become the accepted stories of our culture. Our language changes, our values change, our expectations change, and the global nature of the entertainment industry contributes to this. For a culture where meaning making is a local event; where the people who recycle the meanings from generation to generation, television is a destroyer, and it is a sudden and permanent destroyer.

4. Television challenges the authority of the dreaming. If the way a person views the world, and one’s place in it, comes from a tradition of oral story-telling that explains every object and life form, then when that tradition is questioned in such a powerful and non-comprising fashion, the impact on the authority of the dreaming is irreversible, sudden and cataclysmic.

5. Television violates mortuary rules that prohibit the recalling of names, images or property of the deceased. Any documentary film or video draws on past images, which may contain images of people who have passed away.

Oral cultures, when they come in contact with technologies like television, are altered and sometimes overwhelmed by the contact. The nature of television is such that it does not allow for a return to the village culture that is suggested by the phrase ‘global village’. Rather, the traditional authority residing in certain people in an oral culture is displaced on to a technology, a technology that creates a village in the sense of instantaneous communication and instantaneous gossip, but does not create the oral culture implicit in the term ‘village’.

The generalised threat of television

The bias of mass broadcasting is concentration and unification; the bias of Aboriginal culture is diversity and autonomy. Because of its oral nature, the dreamtime can change in its qualities and expression, as those who retell the story may change, inadvertently, certain elements of it. It is autonomous because the highest expression of the dreamtime does not exist in some remote location, but within each village or tribe. While Aboriginal culture is local and land based, electronic media are global in
nature; that is, the technology allows for a global organisation; material can be produced centrally and transmitted for a global audience. Only local cultures can express and maintain linguistic autonomy. The problem of language signals a more general problem of social diversity. Introduced and globalising media poses a problem for indigenous cultures everywhere: how to respond to the insistent pressure towards standardisation, and the homogenising tendencies of contemporary world culture. The problem is similar for Welsh culture as it is for Aboriginal culture. At the same time, the old men classified the Petersen film of the Walpiri fire ceremony as 'number one law'. This is ironic since it is the technology of mass culture that is responsible for the archiving and retrieval of the traditional culture, and therefore the destruction of that culture.

**Tangent: The cultural imperialism of television**

What kind of domination does television have over contemporary culture? How many hours of television did you watch last night? How many hours at the weekend? How many hours last week? How many murders did you see on television last week? How many teenagers did you see? What kinds of activities did they indulge in?

It is difficult to know just how much the ‘things’ we see on television dominate, or influence, our life. Certainly, it seems that we take part of that existence into ourselves, in some way. A few people seem to be seriously—and negatively—affected by images on screen.

The effects of the act of watching may be significant for us. First, the television itself is dominating, in that its light illuminates, perhaps marginally, the faces of the viewers. Second, the act of watching television involves sitting quietly and watching a two-dimensional picture. This practice may be alien to us. It is not a normal use of the eyes.

But these are effects of the media itself. What about the effects of the content? What is cultural imperialism? Consider these questions in your reading for this week, and in subsequent weeks.

**The cultural future**

What is the future for traditional and indigenous cultures? In some instance, people assume some privileged authority for traditional modes of cultural production. For a culture to survive, this privileging is essential. Television can be used in some way to archive and reproduce elements of traditional culture, and some, such as Michaels, argue that the political survival of indigenous people is dependent on their capacity to reproduce these forms. At the same time, video and television intrude in ways that literate interventions never managed to do.

Cultures will change when and if they adopt new technologies. In the case of the Petersen film, Michaels believes that the tape will be used in the future for cultural purposes. However, this can only occur after the mourning period has passed, so that the faces can be viewed again. (It is difficult to accept this argument.) Selected Walpiri—those who are themselves initiated—will then remake the ceremony. The film will become something of a model for all following ceremonies. How does this
change the organisation of knowledge? I'm less optimistic that Michaels. I suggest that this process undermines the authority of the oral tradition in Walpiri culture and ascribes the authority for the law to a tape, which is after all one of those mechanisms of the print culture used to archive. Definitely it replaces the oral with the visual.

The conclusion of Michael's argument suggests the pessimism that I have for his claim that TV will re-establish Walpiri culture. He tells of the unilateral decision on the part of Jupurrurla to turn off the signal at 10:30 so that the children would go to bed and not watch Rock Arena. But that is surely the point: the kids want to watch Rock Arena. The cultural imperialism of the US, and other cultures, is more powerful than that of the Walpiri, for at a future time those watching Rock Arena will be the old people. Their viewing of western television will have shaped their experience and the web of their lives to a degree that is impossible to quantify. Yet it requires no revolutionary position to suggest that the influence will be enough to radically impinge on the oral tradition and the authority of the oral tradition.

Who will have that authority? A bunch of toxic prima donnas from a make-believe US high school pretending cool, or an old man or woman attempting to initiate into a law that the very fabric of television is destroying?

**Other works**


**Questions and issues**

1. How is television a cultural technology?
2. What is multiculturalism? What are the difficulties for multiculturalism when a print-based culture comes into contact with one based on oral language?
3. What are the difficulties associated with the term ‘culture’?
4. What are the difficulties associated with the term ‘imperialism’?
5. Explain ‘cultural imperialism’?
6. Summarise any one of the readings from *Continuum*. 