

# Oral Tradition and the Internet: Navigating Pathways

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

## Lecture 5

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Two questions to begin....

### Plan for today's lecture

1. Background of lectures # 1-4
2. Differences between OT and IT
3. Media homology or similarity
4. From homology to opportunities

#### I. Background of lectures # 1-4

##### A. The four topics to date

1. "What is Oral Tradition?" (9.21)
  - historical and geographical variety; four-part system
2. "Epics from Oral Tradition" (9.22)
  - comparability, micro- and macrostructure, audiences, performance
3. "Non-epic Genres from Oral Tradition" (9.23)
  - in living and manuscript traditions; ecology of OTs
4. "Methods for Approaching Oral Traditions" (9.24)
  - review of approaches; focus on Performance theory, Ethnopoetics, and Immanent art

##### B. Overall perspective for all four lectures

- to sketch the enormous variety of OTs worldwide & through history
  - ++ much greater in content than written traditions
  - ++ much more diverse in content than written traditions
  - ++ much more diverse in social function than written traditions
- to distinguish OTs from written literature
  - ++ but not as an oral-versus-literate dichotomy
  - ++ allowing for the *interaction* of orality and literacy
- to offer a practical tool-kit of methods for approaching OTs
  - ++ again allowing for diversity in viewpoints

#### II. Differences between OT and Internet Technology (IT)

##### A. recall the "invention of media" calendar from Lecture # 1

- Internet appeared at 23:46, 12.31, of *homo sapiens'* species-year
- OT available as a communications technology long before writing
  - ++ first true writing systems about December 19<sup>th</sup>

##### B. commonly cited contrasts between OT and IT

<u>Oral tradition</u>	<u>Internet</u>
Person-to-person	Person-to-machine
Primitive technology	The newest technology
Ancient	Ultra-modern
Local	Global
Perishable talk	Ever-ready resource

C. How many of these are true differences?

### III. Media comparisons

#### A. Six correspondences between OT and IT

##### 1. **Processing along pathways**

- Homer, oral singers, and *oimai*
- Networked potentials on the web

##### 2. **Distinct from texts**

- Not warehousable items
- But dynamic, patterned possibilities
- OT and IT are *living* and *emergent*

##### 3. **Non-identical “performances”**

- Surfing the web/Surfing the tradition
- Options at every node in both media

##### 4. **Variation within limits**

- Rule-governed performance by individuals
- Rule-governed evolution & change in the system
- Powerful & durable **via** variation (not in spite of it)

##### 5. **Idiomatic code**

- “green fear” in Homer, for example
- [www.43things.com](http://www.43things.com), for example

##### 6. **OT and IT mime the way we think**

- Cognitive “scripts” for creation & performance
- as contrasted with the linear, sequential processing of book & page

#### B. Refining the comparison

	<u>OT</u>	<u>Books</u>	<u>IT</u>
<i>Perf./Comp.</i>	Singer(s)	Author/Reader	Designer/Surfer
<i>Routing</i>	Pathways	Fixed pages	Pathways + pages
<i>Mode</i>	Navigation	Linear scan	Navig. + l. s.
<i>Reception</i>	Audience	Reader	Surfer
<i>Circuit</i>	Singer-Aud.	Author-Reader	Designer-Surfer
<i>Source</i>	Tradition	Lit. tradition	“www tradition”

#### C. Parallels among sources

	<u>OT</u>	<u>Books</u>	<u>IT</u>
Source	Tradition	Lit. tradition	“www tradition”
<i>For OT:</i> special register, prior generations of singers			
<i>For books:</i> writing within a literary tradition			
<i>For IT:</i> special register, prior generations of designers/surfers + texts			

#### D. Summary of the theory

##### Similarities in dynamics between OT and IT

- navigating pathways
- distinct from texts
- non-identical performances

- variation within limits
- idiomatic code
- mime the way we think

#### Comparison to open-source software

- OT is an “open-source” phenomenon
- OT works like open-source software
  - expressive & communicative power results from *sharing*

#### Ideology of the text

- The well-entrenched *ideology of the book and page* has
- “rewritten history” by revising the reality of media usage
  - warped our understanding of present-day OTs
  - made modern texts always and everywhere the “default” medium
  - blinded us to the anachronism of imposing a textual frame of reference
  - blinded us to the cultural hegemony of doing the same for living OTs

#### Why the homology is important

- By using the OT-IT correspondence,
- we can better *understand* OT (as scholars and students)
  - we can better *represent* OT (as a more faithful audience)

\*\*Animation for textual technology

\*\*Animation for OT-IT technology

#### IV. From homology to opportunities

##### A. Applications of the homology

- *What are some practical ways in which we can use IT to better understand OT?*

##### B. Examples of applied OT-IT homology

- *Oral Tradition* migrates to the web
- eEdition
- eBibliography
- eBook
- Pathways Project

##### C. Taking the journal *Oral Tradition* online

- *Oral Tradition* migrates to the web
  - \*\* in response to an international field
  - Open-access and free of charge
  - Searchable and downloadable
  - Readership now: 169 countries & territories
  - 559,000 sessions logged over 3 years
  - Articles from a much more diverse group
  - eCompanions for multimedia
  - <http://journal.oraltradition.org>

#### D. eEdition

- Multimedia
- Hypertext
- All “parts” present “on the same page”
- Resynchronizing the performance
- <http://oraltradition.org/wedding/performance.html>

#### E. eBibliography

- Ready by the end of 2009
- Bibliography of all sources ever cited in the journal *Oral Tradition*
  - 20,000+ titles of books and articles in 100+ fields
  - Searchable
  - Open-access and free of charge

#### F. eVideoBook

- Ready in early 2010
- Video “book” on Paolo Zedda
  - both a Sardinian oral poet
  - and a Professor of Ethnomusicology
  - Double perspective on his OT
  - Covers poetics, performance, learning the tradition, etc.
  - Open-access and free of charge

#### G. The Pathways Project

Also known as OT and IT

- = Oral Tradition and Internet Technology
- A comparison or *homology*
- Not an identity

Twin purposes of the Project

1. to study the **similarities between oral tradition and the internet (OT & IT)**
2. to create a **multimedia network for publication of the ongoing results**

Pathways Project design

[www.pathwaysproject.org](http://www.pathwaysproject.org)

Two complementary aspects

1. Morphing book
2. Online wiki (with gatekeeping/monitoring)

Morphing book

*Pathways of the Mind: Oral Tradition and the Internet*

–Chapters introducing core concepts

- oWords vs. eWords
- oAgora vs. eAgora

–Contracted with U. of Illinois Press

–Rest of Project: Creative Commons License

**Can be read in many different ways**

### Online wiki

A system, not a thing

Also consists of chapters or “nodes”

- Most of them short
- Linked in a web with multiple options

**Also can be read in many different ways**

- The “reader” becomes a co-creator
- Power derives from potential, not fixity

Built-in updating

- RSS syndication & aggregation
  - Notification via subscription
  - Updates the investigator automatically
  - Post-copyright date developments
- These features are designed to avoid foreclosing on evolving knowledge, to *take account of the future*

Visiting the Pathways Project at <http://pathwaysproject.org>

### Pathways Project aims

1. Avoids understanding OT only through texts
2. Evolves a more faithful way of understanding OT, which is by nature
  - Variable
  - Multimedia
  - Highly coded & idiomatic
 .... and does so by juxtaposing IT, which is also by nature
  - Variable
  - Multimedia
  - Highly coded & idiomatic
3. Both analyzes and exemplifies
  - The OT/IT connection
  - As “bookends to the waning age of print”
4. Illustrates, via OT/IT, that – very much unlike texts –  
**These two media *mime the way we think*.**

\*\*\*\*\*

Homer has the last word, describing what it means to be a singer of oral tradition:

“For among all mortal men the singers have a share  
 In honor and reverence, since to them the Muse  
 Has taught the **pathways** [*oimai*], for she loves  
 the singers’ tribe.” (*Odyssey*, Book 8)

For Homer, making an oral poem is a journey

- fluently surfing through networked possibilities, through the OT web
- enacting as he goes, singing reality into being

**What better analogy could there be than surfing the pathways of the Internet?**

### Resources

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