

# Introduction

Since 1992, the Internet has become an increasingly important space of communication, providing a center for businesses and individuals to correspond with little concern for distance and to operate with a sense of time that differs from the temporal experience found in more traditional media like speech and writing. This paper will analyze online communications as an abnormal form of correspondence that does not fit into traditional modes of speech and writing. From observing the tendencies that cause online communications to break these traditional models, hidden processes of communication in general will emerge. These processes will include an archiving principle found in language; relative temporality or varying degrees of speed as the basis for the distinction between speech and writing rather than form; and an inherently fragmented means of interpreting language and communications that is not unique to – or even magnified through – digital communications.

## **§ Writing in Tongues The Division Between Speech and Writing**

The first section of this thesis will outline the debate about the primacy of speech or the primacy of writing and situate the debate within the context of Internet communications. Walter Ong's work on language, supplemented with works by Plato and Levi-Strauss will be used to elucidate the argument for speech as a more primary means of communication that was corrupted through the violent insertion of writing. Derrida's work on arche-writing will be used to show that all communication is "writing" and that there is no real divide between writing (in the traditional sense) and speech.

David Crystal's work on language and the Internet as a combination of writing

and speech that requires a new term, “Netspeak,” will provide an example of how the old divisions of writing and speech have been perpetuated online. Rather than collapse the two mediums, however, Crystal creates a new term to deal with the confusion resulting from online iterations of speech and writing. By contrasting Crystal's idea of Netspeak with Derrida's concept of arche-writing, this paper will show that language on the Internet can be better interpreted as arche-writing than as a wholly different “Netspeak.” Thus, the differences between speech and writing (in the traditional sense) become based less on form and more on other principles which will be elucidated later in the paper.

Examples for this section will show the strong resemblance most online communication mediums have with offline mediums, similarities that cause confusion about whether digital communications are speech, writing, or something entirely new. From these examples, this paper will show how the categories of speech and writing are called into question in both online and offline communications.

### **§ An Archive Complex** **The Archive as a Foundation in History and Contemporary Communications**

The second section of this thesis will take Derrida's assertion that a repeatable structure exists in language that allows it to be understood and position it as an “archive” rather than as an “iterable structure” for the purposes of comparing language's general structure with the structure of how online-specific communications take place. This section will explore the process of archiving through a brief history of the archive and an outline of the concept of the archive in contemporary thought.

The history of the Victorian archive, a precursor to contemporary ideas of the archive, will be traced, especially noting that this particular archive was not necessarily a single building, but a concept and an idea that sought to encompass all knowledge. The Victorian archive will be compared to the idea of a “world book” and the structure of the

library. This section will also bring up the uses of the archive as a knowledge base and as a socio-political power structure.

Following this discussion, the place of the archive in digital media structures will be investigated. Instances in which the actual term archive appears and denotes an act of archiving will be analyzed, including “archiving” in Gmail, archive.org, and “archive.zip” as the default name for packaged files. Structures of archiving online that do not explicitly use the term “archive” will also be explored. These examples will include: revision control, backups, browser history and caches, and analytics and tracking software. Lessig's commentary on RO versus RW culture will be used to show how the archive is accessed and re-formed in contemporary culture.

This section will conclude with an analysis of how each of the examples in the first section operate by accessing an archive. The speech/writing division will be shown to be a difference not of access to a particular archive (the archive of speech or the archive of writing), but a difference in terms of how an archive of communication is accessed by different mediums.

### § Q | u | i | c | k | I | y **Communication as Rate of Access to the Archive and an Inherently Fragmented Form**

The third section of this paper will deal with the archive's relation to the condition of picnolepsy as it is outlined by Paul Virilio and how this process affects interpretation. Digital communications will be shown to take fragmented forms, but only because the mediums have diversified and result in an uncovering of transmedia processes that form the basis for conversations and communications to take place. This fragmentation will be shown to occur in non-digital (“offline” or “real world” communications), but at a slower pace. Because this fragmentation is becoming spatialized through digital communication, we are now becoming aware of the archive complex within language.

Additionally, the last section of this paper will show that even though communications appear to speed up, there is no instantaneous communication; there is always a gap between the initialization of a communication and its reception. As a result, any sort of communication and archive access can only make sense through a stringing together of fragments, what Virilio terms “picnolepsy.” Using Virilio's notion of picnolepsy, this section will show that the fragmented way of interpreting language that is typically seen as a contemporary phenomenon has actually always been in place.

Moreover, this fragmentation has always existed over multiple mediums. “Speech” and “writing” are not only bound up as arche-writing; they also can carry a single conversation. Online communication has made this apparent as a single thread can (and is usually encouraged to) carry through multiple channels.

Through these three sections, this paper will conclude that the differences between speech and writing (and any other mediated communication) rest not on formal structures of the mediums, but on varying rates of access to the archive that they produce. This realization, in turn, argues against the supposition that contemporary experience is more fragmented than previous existences. Rather, we are able to access multiple different archives at a greater rate of speed. This does not, however, mean that our access is less complete or of any less duration.

# Writing in Tongues

## The Division Between Speech and Writing

... *E-mail is not like ordinary writing.*

—Philip Elmer-Dewitt, “Bards of the Internet”<sup>1</sup>

*The evolution of Netspeak illustrates a real tension which exists between the nature of the medium and the aims and expectations of its users. The heart of the matter seems to be its relationship to spoken and written language.*

—David Crystal, *Language and the Internet*<sup>2</sup>

Discussion of how to communicate online is an insertion into a pre-existing framework dividing speech and writing, reality and the screen. But, any digital<sup>3</sup> communicatory act is also an act of suturing whereby the medium causes language to be performed as what Crystal and others have designated as “written speech,”<sup>4</sup> an inherently contradictory term. Online technologies like email, bulletin boards, and instant messaging provide methods of interaction between people that appear to utilize a number of characteristics traditionally attributed both to writing and to speech. However, these characteristics point to the arbitrary nature of the writing/speech divide, a divide that appears as a result of digital media disrupting the astronomical<sup>5</sup> speed of previous communication technologies and modifying the perceptual speed of the message. Where conversations once occurred through letters that would take weeks to arrive at their destination (and still take days), immediate transmission from writer to receiver is possible through email or, more quickly, through instant messaging systems such as AIM, Meebo,

<sup>1</sup> Philip Elmer-Dewitt, “Bards of the Internet.”

<sup>2</sup> David Crystal, *Language and the Internet* 34.

<sup>3</sup> The terms “digital” and “online” will be more or less interchangeable, as online has always carried with it a digitalism and new digital products are increasingly pre-equipped with Internet capabilities, such as the iPhones, iPod Touches, Xboxes, etc.

<sup>4</sup> Crystal 35.

<sup>5</sup> By “astronomical time,” I mean time as it is measured as a quantifiable entity, such as minutes, seconds, hours, days, etc. rather than how long it seems for an event to occur.

and ICQ.

As Internet communications efface speech and writing, the phonologocentric ideal of speech as a primary, more natural form of language again comes into question. Walter Ong, continuing a line of thinking that can be traced back to Plato<sup>6</sup>, Rousseau<sup>7</sup>, and others, is one of the many proponents of the primacy of the spoken word and the secondary, derivative nature of writing. Indeed, according to Ong and his followers, “[w]ritten texts have to be related somehow, directly or indirectly, to the world of sound, the natural habitat of language to yield their meanings”<sup>8</sup> and “...since speech is the first social institution, it owes its form to natural causes alone.”<sup>9</sup> Speech, the first means of communication, then becomes intimately tied to a “natural” expression of meaning. Writing, a secondary medium, must point to speech, which can then be translated to confer the intended meaning upon the speaker. It is important to note that this model does not view writing as a picture of speech which is a picture of meaning, but views writing as a picture of speech that has a direct correlation with the meaning it attempts to impart.

In the phonologocentric idea of language, the secondary medium of writing comes as a violent insertion into speech/language, to the point that it not only provides a secondary means of expression, but attempts to displace speech as the dominant mode. Phonologocentrists have taken it upon themselves to uncover the operations of power in language that have served to displace orality:

Yet, despite the oral roots of all verbalization, the scientific and literary study of language and literature has for centuries, until quite recent years, shied away from orality. Texts have clamored for attention so peremptorily that oral creations have tended to be regarded generally as variants of

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<sup>6</sup> Plato, *The Phaedrus*.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Language*.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 8.

<sup>9</sup> Rousseau 240.

written productions or, if not this, as beneath serious scholarly attention.<sup>10</sup>

Part of the confusion over this topic has arisen because of the tripartite nature of the sign, where the meaning, the spoken word, and the written word are all bound up together. However, they all play vastly different roles within a linguistic hierarchy. As Saussure states:

The linguistic object is not both the written and the spoken forms of words; the spoken forms alone constitute the object. But the spoken word is so intimately bound to its written image that the latter manages to usurp the main role. People attach even more importance to the written image of a vocal sign than to the sign itself. A similar mistake would be in thinking that more can be learned about someone by looking at his photograph than by viewing him directly.<sup>11</sup>

The spoken word and the object are essentially the same, whereas writing comes from an altogether different realm to augment this relationship in a dangerous and violent way. Writing cuts into speech's expression of true meaning while taking steps to erase any evidence of wrongdoing. The latter violence arises out of writing's place as spatialized speech. Because writing is physically and visually present, whereas speech is fleeting and aural, writing carries with it a weight that grounds it and causes it to appear to have an authority above and beyond the spoken word. After language is expressed, speech is gone and only writing remains.

If not seen as a spatialized version of speech, writing is seen by the phonologocentrists as something altogether different from speaking that still affects language. Writing does not “in any way depend on [the art] of speaking” and instead “depends on needs of a different nature.”<sup>12</sup> Writing and language are also sometimes seen

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<sup>10</sup> Ong 8.

<sup>11</sup> Saussure 23-24.

<sup>12</sup> Rousseau 251.

as “two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first.”<sup>13</sup> Though acting outside of language and not part of the mystical bond between speech and meaning, writing still has an effect on speech. This effect, however, is detrimental and manipulative, seducing language away from its expression of meaning:

Writing, which might be expected to fix [or to stabilize] language, is precisely what alters it; it changes not its words but its genius; it substitutes precision for expressiveness. One conveys one's sentiments in speaking, and one's ideas in writing. In writing one is compelled to use every word in conformity with common usage; but a speaker alters meanings by his tone of voice, determining them as he wishes...<sup>14</sup>

Through its visible and immutable form, writing takes language and makes it more uniform, usurping from language the variety that allows it to function uniquely in different situations and convey diverse meanings. Concurrently, the division between the mutability of pronunciation and the immutability of an already-written word causes writing to cover over the changes that occur in language. Writing then becomes “not a guide for language but a disguise.”<sup>15</sup> This act – writing's operations through contexts that exceed and never include the originary context – is the very act that allows it to appear to dominate speech, but it is also the act that indicates speech's sacred and mystical tie to a reality. Through its transient nature, speech is inescapably tied to a time, a place, a context. The words are

meaningless unless they can be related – externally or in the imagination – to the sounds or, more precisely, the phonemes they encode, written words are isolated from the fuller context in which spoken words come into being. The word in its natural, oral habitat is a part of the real, existential

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<sup>13</sup> Saussure 23.

<sup>14</sup> Rousseau 253.

<sup>15</sup> Saussure 30.

present.<sup>16</sup>

For Ong, a large part of the unsettling nature of text is its removal from a context and from a particular point of origin when the utterance comes into being. Text transforms “the evanescent world of sound to the quiescent quasi-permanent world of space.”<sup>17</sup> It takes utterance and removes the evanescence and “becomes fixed, linear, reversible or retraceable, so that our beloved ‘re’ remains intact ages after we have crossed ‘fect’.”<sup>18</sup> Writing is a violent act that is “eruption of the outside within the inside, breaching into the interiority of the soul, the living self-presence of the soul within the true logos, the help that speech lends to itself.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, text can be moved from its original point of inscription through writing, displacing distances without carrying the context of the original writer in the original room, the original situation that necessitated the speaking; an important presence is ostensibly lost in the transportation of language through text.

Plato expresses similar discontent with writing, because it

involves a similar disadvantage to painting. The productions of painting look like living beings, but if you ask them a question they maintain a solemn silence. the same holds true of written words; you might suppose that they understand what they are saying, but if you ask them what they mean by anything they simply return the same answer over and over again.<sup>20</sup>

The comparison of writing with painting in Plato's remarks and with photography in Saussure's analysis emphasizes the visual, spatial nature of writing that allows it to fix language into an unchangeable form that can be transported into any context. This portability means that writing “is quite incapable of defending or helping itself”<sup>21</sup> or

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<sup>16</sup> Ong 100.

<sup>17</sup> Ong 90.

<sup>18</sup> Emevwo Biakolo “On the Theoretical Foundations of Orality and Literacy” 43-44.

<sup>19</sup> *Of Grammatology* 35

<sup>20</sup> Plato 97.

<sup>21</sup> Plato 97.

changing its form (the words, used, the intonation, added gestures) to ensure that a particular meaning is conveyed.

Making language concrete also removes it from time, according to Ong. He states that writing is a visible mark that is retained after the initial inscription and that “[w]ritten words are residue. Oral tradition has no such residue or deposit.”<sup>22</sup> Speech is intimately connected with time and dissipates as soon as it is uttered while written language exists visually and, therefore, can be “arrested in time.”<sup>23</sup> While Ong admits that there is some manner of duration inherent in all sensory experiences (the aural of sound/speech and the visual of writing/text), perceiving the duration in non-aural senses must occur through scientific investigation while sounds are heard immediately and vanish immediately, very obviously linked with time.<sup>24</sup>

Thinkers other than Ong have identified part of the desire for writing to a drive to “arrest” the fleeting moments of speech-based communication in something outside and individual's body. Claude Levi-Strauss has noted that cultures with the ability to write can amass a much larger body of knowledge than cultures who cannot write, as writing cultures have created a type of “artificial memory” for themselves.<sup>25</sup> While Levi-Strauss views this extension as a positive aspect and Ong reserves his moral assessment of writing in order to point out the differences between the types of cultures, Plato views writing as a debilitating, violent attack on the memory of individuals. He asserts:

Those who acquire [writing] will cease to exercise their memory and become forgetful; they will rely on writing to bring things to their remembrance by external signs instead of on their own internal resources. What you have discovered [in writing] is a receipt for recollection, not for memory. And as for wisdom, your pupils will have the reputation for it

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<sup>22</sup> Ong 11.

<sup>23</sup> Biakolo 43.

<sup>24</sup> Biakolo 43.

<sup>25</sup> Levi-Strauss *Tristes tropiques* 291.

without the reality.<sup>26</sup>

Writing for Plato, as an extension of the mind, serves to displace memory and make the mind weak, decreasing the ability to retain thoughts. Moreover, writing does not contain the “reality” of wisdom, just as it does not contain the “reality” of being imbued with pure meaning; the act of writing violently divides written image and linguistic object to create a second order (illusionary) representation about its object just as it also creates an external facade that masks true wisdom, which is contained only in speech.

From the constant experience of writing, the constant displacement of memory inside a spatialized form of language, Ong believes that people now situate themselves “every moment of their lives in abstract computer time.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, as we have continually had to spatialized time through codifying speech into writing, we have also tried to solidify time in the same manner, arresting it through minutes, hours, and days.

## II. In Defense of the Secondary

Ong’s presentation of the phonologocentric argument that had been advocated for centuries began to be called into question when Derrida put forth the primacy of writing, or, perhaps more accurately, the all-encompassing nature of the project of writing. For Derrida and his followers, all acts of communications were acts of writing and speech did not hold a mystical connection with absolute meaning:

What Derrida aims to show is that there never was nor could there be such an order of pure intelligibility, no logos or meaning that would be an ideal presence, a pre-existing and occult (that is, hidden) spiritual realm beyond what is denounced as (worldly) writing.<sup>28</sup>

This new concept of “writing” is not the physical act of writing but the second-order nature of writing, where the words placed on a page do not line up exactly with their

<sup>26</sup> Plato 96.

<sup>27</sup> Ong 90

<sup>28</sup> *Understanding Derrida* 7.

referents. There is always some meaning unaccounted for in the process. Likewise, in speech there is a series of words that are spoken, but they still do not bring the entirety of their referents with them. Words – spoken or written – will always fall short of that which they attempt to describe; they are all placeholders. The originary violence of writing is, in actuality, “the originary violence of a language which is always already a writing.”<sup>29</sup> The confusion comes because writing allows that violence to be spatialized and made visible whereas speech erases the violence through the evanescence of the spoken word.

This arche-writing, language in general, relies on a structure of writing that exists outside the individual speaker or recipient, an archive of language that can be reformed to facilitate the transmission of messages.<sup>30</sup> The famous axiom “there is nothing outside the text”<sup>31</sup> reflects the observation that it is the system of relationships found in the text that allows it to be understood. This point is reached through an analysis of the presence and absence inherent in communication. An individual, for example, writes a letter to an addressee that is not immediately present (absent) to the writer. However, the addressee is actually a distant presence for the writer. It is not that the eventual recipient does not or will never exist, but that the point of contact between writer and receiver spans distance and time beyond the immediate; absence, in this case, is really a modified presence. The question then becomes whether to look at this situation as communication between two individuals who are actually distantly present from each other or “rather, in terms of the structural possibility of the addressee’s radical or absolute absence; for example, the non-presence which is brought about by his or her death.”<sup>32</sup> These communications are positioned as a code, as an archive that is structured. The conclusion that is reached is that:

The possibility of repeating, and therefore of identifying, marks is implied

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<sup>29</sup> Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 106

<sup>30</sup> *Understanding Derrida* 6.

<sup>31</sup> *Of Grammatology* 158.

<sup>32</sup> *Understanding Derrida* 9.

in every code, making of it a communicable, transmittable, decipherable grid that is iterable for a third party, and thus for any possible user in general. All writing, therefore, in order to be what it is, must be able to function in the radical absence of every empirically determined addressee in general.<sup>33</sup>

Language, then, works because it has a particular structure that is repeatable upon initial inscription (the writing of the letter, the speaking of a word) as well as in the future in the absence of a particular addressee. Writing must “exist publicly, apart from the author.”<sup>34</sup>

If we are to take Derrida’s assertion that all language is writing and that it must function apart from the author through its ability to be reiterated, we see that the structure of language is one that constantly builds upon itself through these iterations, it constantly archives itself and expands the “communicable, transmittable, decipherable grid.” It would be possible to say that the act of writing is an act of archiving. The idea of the archive is one that has already been linked to writing. Plato designated writing as a construct that would place thoughts outside the individual and encourage people to “cease to exercise their memory and become forgetful.”<sup>35</sup> In a similar manner, it has been observed that “archives occur at the moment when there is a structural breakdown in memory.”<sup>36</sup> In order to grasp that which one forgets, writing and archiving are employed.

### III. At the Intersection

The debate about the operations of writing and speech and their relationship to language has hitherto taken place using the established structural division of speech as an utterance coming from a person who is present and writing as words set down on paper. Through relatively recent technologies, these structures have begun to dissolve.

<sup>33</sup> Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context” 316.

<sup>34</sup> *Understanding Derrida* 9.

<sup>35</sup> Plato 96.

<sup>36</sup> Herman Rapaport, *Archive Trauma* 69.

Phonographs allow speech to be recorded and played back, creating a medium with the aural characteristics of speech, but the immutability of writing. Radio takes the phonograph a step further and (specifically in live radio shows) ties the spoken word with an individual, but adds in a large audience spread out across vast distances that remove the important ability of speech to provide a context in which the speaker can defend his words. However, radio still keeps the fleeting nature of the spoken word.<sup>37</sup> Television, much like the phonograph, also records aural and visual communications for later playback, taking aural speech and arresting it in a form like writing. While these mediums have hinted at cracks in the legitimacy of the divide between speech and writing by arresting the aural characteristic formerly known only to speech, they can still be placed into the writing/speech schema without the need to reassemble the schema itself. The phonograph, radio, and TV are all a better approximation of writing than of speech, as these mediums arrest their messages outside of the body and do not allow the creators to immediately defend their words or modify their delivery to the context. Digital communications, specifically those that take place on the Internet, have called for a complete re-working of the division.

Linguists such as David Crystal have pointed out that communication online is something altogether new that can be neither speech nor writing. Crystal calls this communication “Netspeak,” which is “a type of language displaying features that are unique to the Internet, ... arising out of [the Internet's] character as a medium which is electronic, global, and interactive.”<sup>38</sup> While this type of communication is unique to the Internet and online interactions, Netspeak is something that bears a resemblance to both speech and writing, existing as a separate category only because it cannot completely fit

<sup>37</sup> There are, of course, exceptions in the fact that radio can be recorded on the receiver's end to be played back later or that studios record shows for replay later, but the default structure of radio does not require recording. As will be pointed out later, newer digital technologies create copies as a necessary step of consuming and using the media. For example, to listen to a radio show on iTunes, an MP3 copy must be downloaded to the user's computer before the show can be heard. Even some streaming media that appears to avoid creating a copy, like YouTube operates under this process as well.

<sup>38</sup> Crystal 20.

into either:

At one extreme is the Web, which in many of its functions (e.g. databasing, reference publishing, archiving, advertising) is no different from traditional situations which use writing... At the same time, some of the Web's functions (e.g. e-sales) do bring it much closer to the kind of interaction more typical of speech, with a consequential effect on the kind of language used, and many sites now have interactive facilities attached, in the form of e-mail and chatgroup facilities. Blog pages can also display many features typical of spoken language.<sup>39</sup>

Crystal points out that communication in email, chatgroups, virtual worlds, and instant messaging contains a temporal element that brings it close to speech.<sup>40</sup> Emails are sent and received in the manner of a drawn out conversation rather than as a series of letters that are archived and revisited; chatgroups are a constant stream of messages that are gone almost as soon as they are written; virtual worlds are interactions between players that are immediate and not recorded; and instant messages take the form of a written conversation between two immediately present individuals. On the other hand, communications on the Internet are spatialized and visually decontextualized, bringing them closer to writing. Webpages, blogs, email, chatgroups, virtual worlds, and instant messaging all use text as the basis for communication. Even when two people are present simultaneously, conversing through this text, they are not visually present to each other. The elimination of a visual context takes away much of the “fuller context” that occurs with speech, including gestures, intonation, and facial expressions.

Whereas Crystal presents Netspeak as an altogether new category in the

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<sup>39</sup> Crystal 31. It is important to note here that Crystal does not take Internet communications as a single entity, but analyzes the different linguistic qualities of the web, blogs, email, chatgroups, virtual worlds, and instant messaging. He does, however, use “Netspeak” as an overarching qualifier for all communication that takes place in these domains rather than identify a specific “Blogspeak” or “Emailspeak.”

<sup>40</sup> Crystal 45.

writing/speech schema, Netspeak – or Internet communication in general – is perhaps best understood as a suture, an observable record of the archewriting process. Online, speech becomes spatialized and writing becomes temporal, effacing the division between the mediums put forth by the phonologocentrists. Rather than a new series of operations, digital communications are a spatialization of how conversation flows throughout an archive that takes the form of speech and writing, but operates within the schema of archewriting. Communicating online is, like speech and traditional notions of writing, an act of building up the archive complex in line with an archival tradition.

# An Archive Complex

## The Archive as a Foundation in History and Contemporary Communications

In the act of collecting knowledge that constantly attempts to slip away, the archive is built, often times with the intention of creating a body of complete, total knowledge. One of the first societies to archive, Victorian England began a state-sponsored project that tried to amass the knowledge of the world in an archive:

The archive was not a building nor even a collection of texts but the collectively imagined junction of all that was known or knowable, a fantastic representation of an epistemological master pattern, a virtual focal point for the heterogeneous local knowledges of metropole and empire.<sup>41</sup>

There is in this archival idea a sense that there was a complete knowledge has been lost and can only be reconstructed through a constant inscribing of knowledges into a codified space. This idea of the archive was “less a specific institution than an entire epistemological complex for representing a comprehensive knowledge within the domain of empire.”<sup>42</sup> Like language, the archive sought to violently place information and knowledge in a transmittable structure (the “epistemological master pattern”) that could be read and understood, but proved unable to fully assimilate a totality of knowledge.

Nonetheless, the archive brings with it power and secrecy.<sup>43</sup> Derrida defines libraries (the quintessential archival complex) as:

Places devoted to keeping the secret but insofar as they give it away.  
Giving a secret away may mean telling it, revealing it, publishing it,  
divulging it, as well as keeping it so deeply in the crypt of a memory that

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Richards, “Archive and Utopia” 104.

<sup>42</sup> Richards 107.

<sup>43</sup> Rolena Adorna, “The Archive and the Internet” 2.

we forget it is there or even cease to understand and have access to it. In one sense a secret kept is always a secret lost. This is what happens in general in the places one calls library archives.<sup>44</sup>

There is in each archive the power of the secrets that they hold, the knowledge that the archive and the archival gatekeeper holds back and doles out with his discretion. The very notion of the archive is one that contains “an apparatus for controlling territory by producing, distributing, and consuming information about it.”<sup>45</sup> The secrets that the archive houses, moreover, are created by the archive itself. The notion of what to include, and what to exclude, make the archive a site of a sociopolitical construct based on the principles of inclusion and exclusion.<sup>46</sup> The archive presents itself as a totality of knowledge, but it does so falsely. There is always a “misunderstanding” and outlying knowledge that is not included.<sup>47</sup> A totality is presented and used as a sociopolitical construct, but with the unspoken and unacknowledged realization that it is incomplete.

The proliferation of the Internet has reenergized the project of the world book.<sup>48</sup> Up until recently, the limits of knowledge had physical boundaries: the shelves of a library, the walls of a museum, the edges of a piece of paper. As data is digitized, the artificial limitations of space play an increasingly smaller role. Libraries, art, and any spatialized form of knowledge can be condensed onto flash drives that fit on a keychain. With more space on which to write, the limits of the ability to record knowledge appear to disappear. Projects like Wikipedia provide a very direct example of this reenergization. Like an encyclopedia, Wikipedia attempts to create a reference that catalogues (archives) all existing knowledge. Unlike a traditional encyclopedia, however, Wikipedia reaches toward this goal with unprecedented speed and breadth of topics. It is “continually updated, with the creation or updating of articles within seconds, minutes, or hours, rather than months

<sup>44</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Geneses, Genealogies, and Genres* 20.

<sup>45</sup> Richards 108-109.

<sup>46</sup> Rapaport 70.

<sup>47</sup> Rapaport 68.

<sup>48</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine* 15.

or years for printed encyclopedias.”<sup>49</sup> Utilizing the nearly infinite space of digital storage and the knowledge of millions of users connected to the Internet, Wikipedia attempts to create a totalization of all knowledge. Though it is an “ongoing work,” Wikipedia is able to present itself as a complete, total resource because it can be immediately edited by its users.<sup>50</sup> If a section or article is not in its complete form it can be immediately edited, thereby becoming a totalized record of knowledge. Through revision, the promise of a future inclusion of all knowledge, Wikipedia becomes an illusionary comprehensive archive.

While Wikipedia may be the most apparent example of the tendency to collect a totality of knowledge, other sites exhibit similar characteristics. eHow.com is a site with instructions on “how to do just about everything.”<sup>51</sup> The site contains over 300,000 instructional articles that outline processes ranging from the complex “How to Adjust the Clutch in a Mitsubishi 3000GT”<sup>52</sup> to the bizarre “How to Avoid Eating Junk Food at Work.”<sup>53</sup> As a constantly updated resource, the site attempts to be a totalizing body of how-to knowledge. Like Wikipedia, there is the underlying promise that any information not included will soon be added. Though eHow is an incomplete archive of instructional articles, it has the drive to be a complete body of knowledge. While eHow is a professionally maintained site, the collaborative aspect of Wikipedia appears on other how-to sites like wikiHow<sup>54</sup> and Instructables.<sup>55</sup>

Beyond the re-awakening of a desire to collect all knowledge, the Internet allows the possibility of the archive to be traversed with a faster atmospheric speed. The information once collected in notes and writings can now be manipulated more quickly.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>49</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:About>

<sup>50</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:About>

<sup>51</sup> [http://www.ehow.com/about\\_us/about\\_us.aspx](http://www.ehow.com/about_us/about_us.aspx)

<sup>52</sup> [http://www.ehow.com/how\\_4484790\\_adjust-clutch-mitsubishi-3000gt.html](http://www.ehow.com/how_4484790_adjust-clutch-mitsubishi-3000gt.html)

<sup>53</sup> [http://www.ehow.com/how\\_2227395\\_avoid-junk-food-work.html](http://www.ehow.com/how_2227395_avoid-junk-food-work.html)

<sup>54</sup> <http://www.wikihow.com/>

<sup>55</sup> <http://www.instructables.com/>

<sup>56</sup> William Paulson, “Computers, Minds, and Texts” 295.

Search engines allow a user to traverse billions of webpages in a matter of seconds. Part of this newer, faster speed comes from the technological ability of search engine spiders to automatically index billions of webpages and sort them into appropriate categories and part of the speed comes from newer means of classification. Until recently, information was classified in a directory based system, much like a library card catalogue. As Clay Shirky points out, this system was put in place due to the physical limitations of being able to have information only in a single place.<sup>57</sup> A book could only be on one library shelf at a time, so a way to easily find that had to be devised, hence the Dewey decimal system. Digitized information, however, does not have to have a fixed location and can, therefore, be in multiple categories at the same time. The specific categories do not even have to be determined before they are needed. A search engine can return results for highly specified queries without the need for an organizational hierarchy. For example, a search for “archiving and cycling” actually returns about 65,000 results on Google, though it does not exist as a classification in the Dewey decimal system (or even in Yahoo!'s extensive digital directory structure). Moreover, articles in the “archiving and cycling” results could just as easily exist in a query for “PERL and cycling”<sup>58</sup>

The notion of “tagging” has also helped to speed up the rate at which the online archive is traversed and enhance the quality of the results. Services like del.icio.us<sup>59</sup> allow users to bookmark sites and then add keywords that describe the site. The user can then search her own bookmarks for results based on the tags previously used, as well as search other users' tags for relevant results outside the personal archive. Such a personalized labeling of online content speeds up the return of relevant results in a query while reflecting the archival complex to quantify existing knowledge. Using millions of individuals who classify information in an intuitive manner, del.icio.us and similar sites

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<sup>57</sup> Clay Shirky, “Ontology is Overrated.”

<sup>58</sup> This actually does happen, for example <http://forums.site5.com/showthread.php?t=10721>

<sup>59</sup> <http://del.icio.us>

like the ill-fated mag.nolia<sup>60</sup> hope to amass a complete, searchable catalogue of all the information available online in a more effective and usable way than the automated search engines.

The act of archiving is not just the way that users find information, it is the foundational act upon which digital communication functions, and the language reflects this tendency. The default terminology for past blog posts in blogging software like Wordpress and Blogger is the “archive”; Gmail has an “archive” button so that “you’ll never need to delete another message”<sup>61</sup>; and Archive.org allows users to “browse through 85 billion web pages archived from 1996 to a few months ago”<sup>62</sup> – essentially a copy of every site that has seen online time since 1996. The archiving function that occurs in these instances carries with it the implicit understanding that the information will not go away, that a future time may occur when the information will be useful and necessary, so it would be remiss to dispose of it. This is a function, a complex that comes from writing, to arrest information, data, and communication outside of time and to remove it from the momentary time in which we experience the communications.

The Internet archive represents a very current iteration of the tendency of archives to spread beyond brick and mortar walls, both because of the physical impossibility of holding everything that is possible for a totality of knowledge in an actual building and because of the “devious structure” of the archive that lends itself towards uses and abuses beyond the control of the archive’s trustees.<sup>63</sup> The museum, an archive of art, ceased to exist as a place with the advent of photographic reproduction, which created a border around the archive of art in the form of style, rather than physical walls.<sup>64</sup> Through computers, an archive can be accessed with little regard for distance and, as a result, less

<sup>60</sup> <http://ma.gnolia.com/>

<sup>61</sup> <http://gmail.com>

<sup>62</sup> <http://www.archive.org/web/web.php>

<sup>63</sup> *Geneses, Genealogies, and Genres* 11-12.

<sup>64</sup> Hal Foster, “Archive Without Museums” 115.

control can be exerted over who accesses certain physical archives and for what purposes.<sup>65</sup>

As the physicality of archives degrade over time, the inability to absolutely control the contents of the archive that has always existed becomes apparent. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida observes that the archive is not a construct that has absolute authority over what it includes because it is possible for works to insert themselves into the archive by calling upon the archive and critiquing it.<sup>66</sup> He brings up the example of Yosef Yerushalmi's critique of psychoanalysis and says that, through an imagined dialogue with Freud, Yerushalmi is able to "trick the dead Freud into signing for it, into, in effect, countersigning the historian's unverifiable, fanciful, if not literary, speculations."<sup>67</sup> With the ability of the Internet to enable individuals to publish content easier, it is also easier to "trick" the various archives by calling upon the dormant structure of the archive that exists publicly and add to it.

Each website is itself an addition to an already existing archive as well as an archive that can be potentially appropriated. By default, websites are public, meaning that any computer can access them and that they can be crawled by search engine spiders for inclusion in the malleable categorization of digital media. However, the owners of individual websites must do a certain amount of work to ensure that their site is included in the archive. Much has been made in recent years of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and the art of manipulating the standing of a site in search engine results. Though the exact algorithms of search engines are unknown outside of a few programmers who actually write the code<sup>68</sup>, an industry has arisen over changing various parts of sites so that the search engine spiders can read and more easily understand website content and

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<sup>65</sup> Morris, "Computers and the Subversion of British History" 510.

<sup>66</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever* 39-40.

<sup>67</sup> Rapaport 72.

<sup>68</sup> The highly secretive algorithms can be seen as a further evidence of an archival gatekeeper with the powers of inclusion and exclusion. Though the vast power of the gatekeeper is normally hidden by the fact that results are automated, there are examples of when search engine programmers have manually changed results for certain queries, such as when Google had to remove references to President Bush from the query "miserable failure" ([http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/29/technology/29google.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/29/technology/29google.html?_r=1)).

classify it accordingly. This process includes using standardized markup, identifying particular keywords to be used in specific areas of the site, use of clean URLs, cultivating cross-linking between sites, and direct submission of the site to search engines, among other tactics. While the last procedure, direct submission of a site, is a rather straightforward admission of the archival structure of the Internet, the cultivation of cross-linking is perhaps the most telling indication that sites must be part of the archive not only structurally, but conversationally. Google became the top search engine when it developed PageRank, the algorithm that assesses a website's importance and relevance to a particular query based on other sites that link to it and the text surrounding those links.<sup>69</sup> This process, much different from analyzing the content of a site and using the resulting keywords to classify the site, is essentially the analysis of an archive and the connections within it. A website, to perform well in the archive created by a search engine query, must use an existing archive and become a part of it, speaking to the archive and forcing the archive to speak back through reciprocal links. Some of these reciprocal links, such as the trackback links on blogs, are automated to enhance the creation of an archive.

The inclusion of a site within the Internet archive are a large undertaking that are supplemented by the smaller maneuvers by individuals on various sites. Users add to a number of different archives in a number of different ways. In social media applications, the underlying principle is that a large body of users adds small bits of content to create a larger archive of information. On social news sites like Digg, reddit, Newsvine, and Netscape, for example, the archive of news stories constituting the site's content is submitted entirely by users. Unlike traditional media outlets, there are no editors in charge of culling down stories and deciding what gets published. Instead, stories are submitted and then voted up by the users so that the most popular stories appear in a privileged position. The archive on these sites appears to be both created and managed by

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<sup>69</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PageRank>

visitors to the site. Like search engines, social news sites look to be transparent operations that allow for the possibility of including all content, a totality of news through the lack of a boundary preventing inclusion in the archive. Also like Wikipedia, these news sites contain gatekeepers that actually do wield abilities to manipulate the archive of news stories. For instance, Digg's algorithm that promotes stories to the front page involves more than just the number of votes a story gets. The user that submits the story, the rate at which people vote, the number of comments on the story, and the number of votes against the story are some of the many factors that affect whether or not a story is given a privileged position on the front page.<sup>70</sup> From these factors, a small number of users actually control the most prominent content, becoming effective gatekeepers of the Digg archive.<sup>71</sup>

Beyond being an archive itself, Digg presents an illustration of the online tendency to appropriate other archives for various uses and misuses. The content of Digg (and all social news networks) actually resides on other sites. Content is included in the Digg archive, but simultaneously included in the archive of the original site. Submitted articles are used for the purposes of the Digg community (to either alert other members to interesting information, to amuse users at the expense of the site, or any number of other motives) and change the structure of the Digg archive as well as the structure of the host site's archive. A site with a story that has been Dugg often crashes (known as the Digg Effect), temporarily destroying the archive, but once it is back up it also can gain new visitors and people who comment on the content. The Digg archive and the host site archive cross-pollinate, changing the archive through comments and new readers while also saving the re-iterations to be looked at later.

User-generated content is part of a larger tendency online that Lawrence Lessig designates “Read/Write culture” or “RW culture.” Based on an analogy coming from file

<sup>70</sup> Cristian Mezei, “The Digg Algorithm – Unofficial FAQ.”

<sup>71</sup> randfish, “Top 100 Digg Users Control 56% of Digg's Homepage Content.”

permissions that can be set, RW culture is a participatory culture where citizens “read” their culture and then add to it using the tools they are given naturally as well as the tools the professionals use to create cultural artifacts. “Read Only” or “RO culture” on the other hand is consumption-based. In RO culture, citizens do not contribute to the culture but merely digest it.<sup>72</sup> Lessig's culture is identical to a cultural archive, a collection of artifacts accessed by the citizens as the basis for communicating stories and having conversations. In RW culture, as evidenced by story submission on Digg or personal website creation, the means of adding to the archive is much easier and widespread. In RO culture, however, the archival additions are performed by “professionals,” the gatekeepers of what can and can't be added to the archive.

Lessig asserts that the idea of the remix is prevalent in RW culture, as digital technologies have provided easy access to the tools that allow content creation. Remixing is “collage; it comes from combining elements of RO culture; it succeeds by leveraging the meaning created by the reference to build something new.”<sup>73</sup> Remix (RW) culture is essentially a spatialized form of accessing the cultural archive. Creating a remix involves bringing up cultural artifacts and combining them into an accessible work, putting into a visual form the same processes that occur when, for example, someone speaks on a topic, gives their opinion, and then the ideas circulate amongst the listeners.

Online, each archival access creates a digital copy of the original content. Webpages are archived in a cache on the user's hard drive, songs are copied as new files before they can be played, and email clients copy and save emails. Thus, the act of accessing the archive complex is spatialized. The copies once held in our memories (a tune that gets “stuck in your head” or a memorized poem) are held in the physical storage space or a hard drive. As a result, old ways of limiting archival access do not apply, and are causing confusion. For example, Digital Rights Management (DRM) protection on

<sup>72</sup> Lawrence Lessig, *Remix Culture* 28-31.

<sup>73</sup> Lessig 76.

downloaded MP3s seek to make the non-unique, endlessly iterable MP3 files unique so that they can only be played on one computer. This action attempts to put the contemporary medium of computer files revert back to the processes of the previous phonograph, record, tape, or CD that could not be automatically copied. The gatekeepers that have inherited the archive are, as gatekeepers tend to do, attempting to limit access to the archive but with antiquated methods that do not take into account that the archive is being spatialized as it is being accessed, a physical re-archiving and access that was previously fleeting and ethereal.

The connections that the Internet makes visible reflect the structural connections inherent in the structure of arche-writing, where each access to an iterable grid changes the grid, re-archiving it to be re-accessed in the future. For example, accessing the archive of video games through a blog post that reviewed a new computer game would have a very physical manifestation online. The post would automatically be added to the archive of a search engine such as Google and, potentially, the archive of Digg, belinked to from other blogs on video games, perhaps sent in messages between friends discussing the game, and may be included in online directories. There would be no question that such a post is part of an archive. Offline, however, the process is much more subtle. A written review on video games would exist publicly and inscribe itself in the video game archive simply by addressing it, tricking the archive into assimilating it just as Yerushalmi tricked the psychoanalytic archive into including his review of Freud, but the link would not be physically manifested until the review got published or circulated among friends. Even more evanescent, a conversation about a video game would tap into the video game archive, referencing past reviews, other games, a host of different parts of the archive. Additionally, the conversation could possibly have weight on further reviews that the participants write or further conversations. There is no physical manifestation of the conversation's place in the archive and the change to the archive may be minute, but the

act of communication still inserts itself into the archive and becomes a part of the structural grid.

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## Communication as Rate of Access to the Archive and an Inherently Fragmented Form

Positioning communication as archiving reveals that there is a *structure of language* that allows it to exist and there is also a *structure of the conversation*, a structure of the archive that stands apart from any individual, any single medium, or any absolute totality of knowledge, but is still iterable and functional. During spoken conversation participants draw upon and mark a thread of conversation that has been archived, perhaps in many different mediums. The communicatory archive of a conversation is one that, like the Victorian archival project, is not an archive that exists in a specific location but a project that spans many mediums and brings them together. The inability to classify digital communications as speech or writing has provided a suture between writing and speech not just in the sense neither is a primary mode of access to a “order of pure intelligibility,” but that they are both an act of archiving that are separated by the rate in which they access the archive in atmospheric time.

This rate of access is so obviously different in the mediums of speech and writing, but does not provide a valid means of separation in online communications. Traditionally, speech accesses the archive in quick repetition through one individual talking and then another replying in quick succession. The gap between message and response is so short that it goes unnoticed. The individuals that contribute to the archive, adding to it, taking from it, and manipulating it provide the “context” that the phonologocentrists champion as speech's sublime connection with meaning. The quickness of access to the archive that occurs through speech happening between two individuals providing context covers over

the fact that the archive of language created by the speech is incomplete. Writing, however, is usually seen as a slow access. For example Freud will access the psychoanalytic archive to create it, decades later Yerushalmi will write a reply and even later Derrida will again access and modify the archive. This is a conversation that occurs, but it occurs slowly, so slowly that it makes apparent the incompleteness of the individual parts of the archive and the gaps between transmission.

Online, however, the rates of access to the archive of a conversation through speech or writing have been effaced. The primary example is that of the instant message, which allows two people to communicate through typed text at a rate similar (if not identical) to speech. Just like two people sitting at a bar having a conversation, two people can have AIM or Gchat open and communicate in quick succession. The quickness of speech is replicated, as is the ability of the message to speak for itself (unlike Plato's painting)<sup>74</sup>, but part of the context has been displaced as instant messaging does not contain the gestures, intonations, and face-to-face interaction of speech conversations. Instant messaging is part writing, but also part speech, a means of communication that does not fit into either category.

Text messages provide a similar disruption to the conception of writing as a slow process that involves letters traveling back and forth over the country through weeks and months or of discourse that is carried out over the course of years. Further disruption occurs when speech slows down online. Some digital mediums retain the immediacy of speech-based communication, such as VoIP and video chat. Other mediums such as YouTube, however, slow down speech to the speed of an email. A video blog posted on YouTube, for example, is a speech by an individual to the public, accessing any number of archives. Cycling blogger Opinionated Cyclist<sup>75</sup> is one example, as he regularly posts videos of his monologues, but the only way to respond requires a time gap that is larger than a

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<sup>74</sup> Plato 97.

<sup>75</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/user/OpinionatedCyclist>

typical speech-based conversation. Listeners can post response videos (making the conversation completely speech-based, but dragged out through any number of days or weeks), post comments (text-based response that accesses the Opinionated Cyclist archive, but can be more immediate than writing a letter), or through posts on other blogs. The Opinionated Cyclist has an on-going dialogue with another popular cycling blog, BikeSnobNYC<sup>76</sup>, who responds in text a day or so later. The multiplicity of communication techniques online, none of which fit into the traditional modes of speech or writing, holds the secret that the “written speech” of the Internet (if there could be such a thing as a totalized Internet) is actually arche-writing by a new designation.

If the act of interpretation occurs through a series of archival reperformances that can vary in context, speed, and medium, it would appear to fragment the nature of conversation, to present a view of communication that, through collapsing speech and writing, brings with it Ong’s critique of writing that “written words are isolated from the fuller context in which spoken words come into being.”<sup>77</sup> All acts of communication (arche-writing, the accessing of the archive) are then without the “fuller context” that goes beyond the immediate text itself and takes into account the environment surrounding the original creation. This line of thinking is true, but only atmospherically. Perceptually, when we access the archive, when we become the receiver of the letter from a writer that is (or was) a distant presence, the entirety – not the totality – of the archive comes with it, much like Virilio’s picnoleptic:

The lapse occurs frequently at breakfast and the cup dropped and overturned on the table is its well-known consequence. The absence lasts a few seconds; its beginning and its end are sudden. The senses function, but are nevertheless closed to external impressions. The return being just as sudden as the departure, the arrested word and action are picked up again

<sup>76</sup> <http://bikesnobnyc.blogspot.com>

<sup>77</sup> Ong 100.

where they have been interrupted. Conscious time comes together again automatically, forming a continuous time without apparent breaks.<sup>78</sup>

This picture of the child who must reconcile moments of lost atmospheric time with his own perceptual time is not relegated to only a few individuals, but for Virilio is a mass affliction. The answer to the question “who is picnoleptic?” could be “who isn't or hasn't been?”<sup>79</sup> Narrative consciousness, for all denizens of technological society, has holes that are patched together through the creation and invention of what happened during the lost time. As a result, consciousness “speeds to overtake and occupy what it cannot.”<sup>80</sup>

These picnoleptic experiences are mirrored in the way in which conversation and discourse occur. The narrative continuum of an archive is involved with a constant elision; it is possible to read Freud, Yerushalmi, and Derrida in succession, though the time between the writing of each was decades. Likewise, even the most apparently immediate conversation occurs with unnoticed stutters, pauses, breaths, and adjournments. Like picnolepsy, communication is a “paradoxical state of waking” where each new word changes the context and reawakens the conversation as something new. In each case a constant, totalized archive presents itself whenever it is accessed, only to be proven incomplete by the very fact that in calling up the archive it has changed.

Many online applications mirror this structure, email – Gmail in particular – being the most obvious example. In the early days of email, each email was a separate document, much like a letter and was not aesthetically tied to any other email in the thread, except for perhaps the title which would read “re:”. In the Gmail application, however, each email is linked visually with its responses in a conversation. Performing the archive and reawakening the conversation by reading a message in the thread automatically brings up the rest of the related emails (presented as a total archive of the particular conversation),

<sup>78</sup> Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* 9-10.

<sup>79</sup> Virilio 14.

<sup>80</sup> Susan Baldwin, “On Speed and Ecstasy” 142.

allowing the user to add to and change the archive. Reading the email proves to be a picnoleptic experience whereby the points of contact with the conversation's archive (all the previous emails and its extensions into other media such as chats or text messages) form the narrative, patched-up sequence and the moments in between contact with the archive fall away. The perception is a long continuous communication, but the appearance is of a constant jumping around from conversation to conversation. Each time the archive is accessed, it is with the assumption that this particular archive is a totalized body of knowledge and a knowable grid of communication, but it also carries the unmentionable and unforgettable secret that the archive is incomplete and that there are misunderstandings. Each time an archive is accessed – whether online through searching or in conversations via email or a Wikipedia entry – it is a desire to hold up that archive as a unified subject and an admission of its impossibility.

The tendency that emerges in this reawakening and reperformance is one that shows speech and writing to be archewriting, but also a tendency of archewriting to flow throughout different mediums fluidly. Speech and writing are not the two modes of communication that operate separately but on the same principles, but two of many modes of communication that are intertwined by their inclusion in an archive and rely on each other to communicate a message. This tendency is shown through not only the fragmented, yet perceptually complete, system of email, but also through what Henry Jenkins calls “convergence culture” and what Lawrence Lessig terms “remix culture” or “RW culture.”<sup>81</sup> These concepts are different from each other, but both operate in similar manners and draw from certain principles of contemporary digital communications that spread a conversation over multiple mediums.

Jenkins describes convergence as “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior

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<sup>81</sup> Lessig 28-31.

of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want.”<sup>82</sup> He warns against the idea that convergence is a purely technological innovation, instead positing that convergence comes from

within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others. Each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives.<sup>83</sup>

Here, Jenkins has described Virilio's picnoleptic in a much more positive light. The multiplicity of media forms provide a wealth of information that is accessed in fragments but rationally put together to create a coherent narrative. For Jenkins, as with Virilio, this assimilation of fragmentation is a simple fact that affects everyone involved with contemporary Western culture. The question is: who isn't or hasn't been a part of convergence culture?

As fragments that must be translated into meaning, the elements of a convergence or picnoleptic cultural archive are elements that coincide with the idea of an arche-writing. Meaning rests in an iterable structure outside an individual. Speech is not tied directly to meaning, but rather intertwined with writing; pre-recorded film, television, or audio; billboards; blogs; and other means of communication that provide an archive of arche-writing that can be accessed to create a “personal mythology” as well as provide the basis for communication, the continued access and modification of the archive.

Expanding beyond the personal narrative, this process also extends to commercially-produced stories through what Jenkins calls “transmedia storytelling”:

A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In

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<sup>82</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture 2*.

<sup>83</sup> Jenkins 4.

the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best—so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction. Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained so you don't need to have seen the film to enjoy the game, and vice versa.<sup>84</sup>

In this type of storytelling, an archive is created that does not rest in a single type of media, flowing throughout many different iterations of the story, each telling a different part of the story. The individual parts of a transmedia story mimic the fragments of a conversation. Individual letters, for example, are self-contained in that they make sense in and of themselves. To understand the full weight of the letter, however, a broader context or story must be brought in that can include anything from previous face-to-face conversations; telephone calls; other letters; perhaps even references to other cultural artifacts that have not been created through the communications of letter writer and recipient, but make up the culture in which both individuals reside.

The coherent fragmentation of transmedia storytelling present in older forms media is exaggerated online and goes beyond the processes Jenkins outlines. Google, for example, has a number of interconnected applications that work together to allow the self-contained fragments of conversation to flow across a variety of media. In Gmail, individual emails, all missives that make sense as a stand-alone message are archived along with their responses. However, responses to a particular email can be given from recipient to writer through the “reply” function (as is typical of all email clients) or through the “reply by chat” function that rests next to the reply button. Moreover, the “reply by chat” is not merely a text-based chat. Recent Gchat versions allow for audio, video, or SMS interaction. The actual medium then splits, the writer of the message can be using on

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<sup>84</sup> Jenkins 98.

medium (an Internet-connected computer connected to Gchat) and the recipient can be using a different medium (a cellphone). The purpose of replying by chat would be to speed up the interchange to the speed of speech so that the conversation can happen immediately. These chat and email interchanges are also archived as a conversation to be accessed later. The structure of these Google applications demonstrate that the writing (email) and speech (chat) both perform the same functions, but at two different speeds and across different mediums.

Jenkins uses the *Matrix* movies as a prime example of transmedia storytelling in a commercial setting. He describes the process of how the Wachowski brothers created the archive of the *Matrix*:

The Matrix is entertainment for the age of media convergence, integrating multiple texts to create a narrative so large that it cannot be contained within a single medium. The Wachowski brothers played the transmedia game very well, putting out the original film first to stimulate interest, offering up a few Web comics to sustain the hard-core fan's hunger for more information, launching the anime in anticipation of the second film, releading the computer game alongside it to surf the publicity, bringing the whole cycle to a conclusion with *The Matrix Revolutions*, and then turning the whole mythology over to the players of the massively multiplayer online game. Each step along the way built on what has come before, while offering new points of entry.<sup>85</sup>

This creation of a “world” surrounding the *Matrix* that could not be contained within just a movie or just a video game was the creation of an archive of fragments that presented itself as a totality. Each part had to be recognizable as part of the *Matrix* archive – whether through packaging design, inclusion of certain characters, or any number of other

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<sup>85</sup> Jenkins 97.

clues – but could not reproduce the entire archive within the fragment itself.<sup>86</sup> The story of the *Matrix* relies on the piecemeal experience to string together elements that are separated by time. Exposure to the second movie is picked up after a break from watching the first movie, perhaps also punctuated with an exposure to the webcomic or video game. In each case, a run-in with a fragment of the *Matrix* will reawaken the other elements of the story the individual has consumed. Characters in the movies gain a new significance when the individual remembers the characters' place within the video games, for example.<sup>87</sup> As with newer media, communication through transmedia storytelling appears fragmented and chaotic when compared to previous, apparently unified mediums such as speech or writing. As Jenkins points out, newer movies such as *The Matrix*, *Fight Club*, *The Blair Witch Project*, *Being John Malkovich*, *Run Lola Run*, *Go*, *American Beauty*, and *the Sixth Sense* that utilize disjointed plot narratives and transmedia storytelling “may seem more fragmented [by old criteria], but the fragments exist so that consumers can make the connections on their own time and in their own ways.”<sup>88</sup> The archive exists, in a variety of media, but calls on the consumer (the reader, the listener) to unearth the meaning that lies in the iterable grid.

While Jenkins identifies a purposeful, commercial archival creation, he notes that:

for all of its innovative and experimental qualities, transmedia storytelling is not entirely new. Take, for example, the story of Jesus in the Middle Ages. Unless you were literate, Jesus was not rooted in a book but was something you encountered at multiple levels in your culture. Each representation (a stained-glass window, a tapestry, a psalm, a sermon, a live performance) assumed that you already knew the character and his story from someplace else.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Jenkins 115-116.

<sup>87</sup> Jenkins 128-130.

<sup>88</sup> Jenkins 121.

<sup>89</sup> Jenkins 121.

The difference between the old transmedia storytelling and the new, then, is an *awareness* that the stories are created among different media forms brought by the increased speed at which the medium of message transmission changes. Storytelling (and its related, broader iteration as communication in general) now carries with it an awareness that it is “the art of world building, as artists create compelling environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or even a single medium.”<sup>90</sup> This is not necessarily trying to replicate and replace our world with another, but an analysis of the way in which the world is built and operates. By creating worlds ourselves – even if it is for advertising purposes – we understand that processes that have always been at work in the world and in communication techniques. In the end we see that there never was *the* world, but an archival complex full of fragments that are woven together to create stories, communications, and conversations. As technology changes the mediums we use to construct the archive, cracks open up in the idea that there are the distinct pillars of speech and writing, or even that any medium can be self-contained. Our mediums begin to reflect and spatialize the processes that go on underneath the surface of the archive: the picnoleptic stringing together of fragments that comprise an archive which we constantly access and modify as we use it as the basis for communication.

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<sup>90</sup> Jenkins 116.

# Conclusion

Through an analysis of forms of digital and online communications, this paper has shown the current state of the debate about the speech/writing divide and offered solutions for framing the debate in a new context that downplays the division of media forms in favor of a focus on the ways in which communication threads itself through different mediums that all affect the speed and content of the conversation. This method of observing how communication mediums operate has the potential to influence not only media theory, but also the industry that creates the media that theorists analyze.

As the first chapter has shown, a divide between speech and writing has been upheld by a number of different philosophers, including Plato, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Walter Ong. These thinkers give speech a primary standing and believe that it is the “natural” state of language tied to meaning itself.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, spoken language is tied to a “real, existential present” whereby the speaker can modify her speech so that it conveys its meaning.<sup>92</sup> Speech cannot be taken out of the context of the real, existential present because of the nature of its aural form where a word spoken disappears as quickly as it appears. For these thinkers, writing is secondary to speech, violently inserting itself into language as a spatialized version of speech prone to misuse, and must be related to the spoken word in order to be understood.<sup>93</sup>

Arguing against the phonologocentrists, Derrida has attempted to break down the idea that speech has a direct, primary connection with meaning. For Derrida, all communication is a “writing” in the sense that any use of language is a violent act that separates a meaning (which cannot be expressed directly and absolutely through

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<sup>91</sup> Ong 8.

<sup>92</sup> Ong 100.

<sup>93</sup> Ong 8.

language) from the language that purports to transmit the meaning.<sup>94</sup> In this line of thinking, the important point is not that writing is primary but that *speech and writing operate under the same constraints*. Writing does not point to speech which is tied to meaning (as the phonologocentrics believe); instead speech and writing both point towards (but never reach) meaning. In order for language to operate in the manner Derrida sets forth, it creates a “communicable, transmittable, decipherable grid” that is outside of any particular individual.<sup>95</sup> For the purposes of this paper, Derrida's grid has been termed an “archive.”

The debate about the speech/writing operations has come to a new turning point with the creation and widespread use of the Internet. Much of the form of online communications begins to blur the boundaries between speech and writing, creating a question as to whether this space of communication is speech or writing. David Crystal, thinking along the same lines as the phonologocentrists, presents one of the typical arguments of communication that occurs through contemporary media, claiming that communication online is neither speech nor writing but a new category that is a synthesis of both.<sup>96</sup>

By taking Derrida's idea of an iterable grid or an archive that exists outside of language, yet provides the foundation for communication to occur, the second chapter of this paper demonstrated that online communication is a spatialized version of this grid. As the Internet records (archives) most of the actions that occur, any performance of language is “written” as data that can be called up later. This spatialization of many of the processes of language is the issue that has been overlooked by analysts such as Crystal who attempt to portray Internet communications as an entirely new form of linguistic interaction.

<sup>94</sup> *Understanding Derrida* 7.

<sup>95</sup> “Signature, Event, Context” 316.

<sup>96</sup> Crystal 20.

As a spatialized archive of language maneuvers, the digital archive shows an additional tendency of language that Derrida hints at, but does not explicitly mention. Speech and writing are the same in process, but differ in form, the speed with which they access the archive. Moreover, speech and writing (in addition to any of the digital means of communicating that blend the two forms) work with each other in actual processes of communication to form a conversation. Individuals transmit messages through both spoken forms and written forms that can reference each other and build an archive that exists in a (“written”) grid that spans mediums. The design of digital communication interfaces have replicated and spatialized this operation, tailoring the mediums to the type of information that they are best suited to communicate.

While the Internet may spatialize this grid, it also exaggerates the operations of interpretation that occur as well. This has created the idea of digital communications as an essentially fragmented form that is a continuation of the schism of communication begun by electronic mediums such as television in the twentieth century. Though digital mediums and their twentieth century predecessors are indeed fragmented forms, they only present a spatialized and temporally augmented version of the fragmentation that has always occurred in communication, allowing the gaps to be more easily identified. However, with the realization that communication is fragmented, there is also the realization that the communication still forms an iterable grid and archive from which meaning can be created. Virilio outlines how this meaning is created, using the concept of the picnoleptic. For the picnoleptic, moments in time are inexplicably lost and he must piece together a coherent narrative from these constant re-awakenings.<sup>97</sup> This process is replicated in communication, where a linguistic transmission is made (perhaps via an email) and then a response comes after a delay (perhaps another email sent days later, or a phone call immediately after receiving the email). With each transmission, there is an

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<sup>97</sup> Virilio 9-10.

addition to the archive that allows communication to take place as well as a reawakening that brings with it the stitching together of the thread of communication into a coherent narrative. By combining the notion of the picnoleptic with the idea of an iterable archive, this paper has shown that communicatory processes take place over a number of different mediums, each of which access a conversational archive though they may do so through different forms and speed.

This observation has the potential to greatly affect the way in which new mediums are created and interact with each other. Segmenting media and dividing them into insular categories such as “speech” or “writing” perpetuates the formal divide between the mediums, but does not acknowledge the ways in which they interact. As a result, many online applications and software programs have been written as self-contained mechanisms. Early email programs, for example, were built to talk to each other (emails could be sent from Hotmail to AOL, for example), but retained the idea that text-based communications (writing in the traditional sense) only affected other writing. Newer email clients, however, put into practice the idea that email is a widely-used means of communication, but not the only way in which a conversation is continued. Gmail, for example, is integrated with text-based chat, video chat, calendars, to-do list applications, SMS, and mobile devices such as iPhones. Moreover, APIs exist so that Gmail can be integrated into any number of future projects and mediums of communication.<sup>98</sup>

Many other recent projects and mediums have been created that allow conversations to take any number of forms and move seamlessly through those forms. Meebo<sup>99</sup> can collapse a number of instant messaging clients into one interface, FriendFeed<sup>100</sup> automatically creates an update of actions on a number of different social networks, and browsers like Flock<sup>101</sup> integrate conversations over various social networks

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<sup>98</sup> There is no official Gmail API, but there are a number of third-party ones.

<sup>99</sup> <http://meebo.com>

<sup>100</sup> <http://friendfeed.com>

<sup>101</sup> <http://flock.com>

so that they can take place through the browser rather than through the individual sites.

More and more, conversation is taking place within an archive that does not exist within walls, but within a cloud. The individual medium is becoming less important as a stable structure, giving way to the ability to move data where it is needed to continue a thread of communication. While this has been happening all along, it is now more apparent, and as a result emerging technologies realizing this tendency and changing their form to reflect this tendency, resulting in the remixes and convergences of contemporary mediums that have begun to efface the divide between the operations of speech and writing while creating new forms.

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