Chapter 22. Place-Based Podcasting: From Orality to Electracy in Norfolk, Virginia

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Introduction: Preface (to Plato)

Near the end of Plato's (1995) *Phaedrus*, there is an exchange between the two interlocutors—Socrates and Phaedrus—on the topic of writing. In this exchange, Socrates tells a story about the Egyptian god, Theuth, who, upon discovering writing, brings forth his art to Thamus, the king of Egypt, touting writing as something that, "once learned, will make Egyptians wiser and will improve their memory . . . a potion for memory and for wisdom" (§ 274e).[1] Thamus, skeptical, assesses writing to have the opposite effect, and indeed responds by stating confidently that writing

> will introduce forgetfulness into the soul of those who learn it: they will not practice using their memory because they will put their trust in writing, which is external and depends on signs that belong to others, instead of trying to remember from the inside, completely on their own. You have not discovered a potion for remembering, but for reminding; you provide your students with the appearance of wisdom, not with its reality. (Plato, 1995, § 275a)

It could be said that this fictional but damning assessment of the effects of writing reflect Plato's epistemology broadly: that the act of writing moves individuals away from the interpersonal ("soul to soul") dialogue that he found to be so foundational to philosophy and the work of the dialectician (Plato, 1995, § 276e), and that written text itself is but a shadow or imagistic representation of knowledge, unable to defend itself—ultimately impotent in the scene of dialogue. The title of this introduction is in fact a playful homage to the monograph of the same name by Eric Havelock (1963), which offered a reframing of the evolution of the Greek mind through investigating just why Plato felt "so committed to the passionate warfare upon the poetic experience" (p. 15) and, I might add, the

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1.   See Jacques Derrida's (1981) "Plato's Pharmacy," which delves deeper into writing as pharmakon—a remedy and a poison. Jasper P. Neel's (1988) *Plato, Derrida, and Writing* is a productive follow-up as well.

written word. Plato was concerned with the effects that the written word would have on our collective and individual memories. Since writing is itself a technology, Plato by way of ancient manuscripts gives us, then, one of the earliest visions of *technofear*.

Figure 22.1. Syllabus header image for Writing in Digital Spaces course. Photo credit: Raphael (1509), from Wikimedia Commons.

Classroom Framing

Situating the fear of new forms of writing as a consistent trope as ancient as Plato provided the necessary framing for students to conceptually understand the social reactions to newer, in our case, digital forms of writing. This is the framing—or, perhaps, argument—I brought to the process of designing a split fourth-year/master's course titled Writing in Digital Spaces. The course, according to our catalog, seeks to offer "composition practice in critical contemporary digital environments," and, as such, "students should expect to participate in, develop, and engage in critical discussions about a range of digital spaces, including websites, wikis, blogs, and various interactive media" (Old Dominion, n.d.). While this language oozes web 2.0-ness, I saw this course as an opportunity for students to produce new, aural/oral types of media through theoretical lenses that connect their compositions to larger popular debates about digital writing, namely the evidence-based and supposed technofear-driven effects digital writing practices have on memory (Wright, 2005), attention (Lanham, 2007), cultural identity (Schicke, 2011), and cognition (Carr, 2010). I wanted students to engage in deep synthesis between the media they consume and produce and the theories underlying them, as I've humorously symbolized in Figure 22.1 above.

To connect Plato more directly to digital writing, I turned to two main sources: Walter Ong and Gregory Ulmer. Ong's (1982) *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* dealt specifically with Plato's treatment of text and

positioned this treatment within the largely tectonic cultural shifts from orality to literacy, from the spoken word to the written. Ong's convincing contention that writing restructures consciousness provides a firm foundation upon which to then speculate about what comes after literacy, providing a safe space within which to grapple with Ulmer's (2009) notion of *electracy*, which is, in his own estimation, the third and subsequent "apparatus" in the line of orality and literacy—where, respectively, the practice is not religion or science but entertainment, and the institution is not the church or school but the internet. Students in this class were thus asked to ruminate on how digital technologies offer our world an opportunity to productively re-sequence the seemingly dissonant mode of orality with and through a fuller embrace of digital writing technologies.[2] This re-sequencing, the course argued, happens (potentially) through production. It happens through podcasting.

In consulting existing work on classroom-based podcasting (Bowie, 2012a, 2012b), I was then left with the question: About what do the students podcast? Insistent that projects stay local and inspired by the work of Jenny Edbauer (2005) in her challenging of stale visions of rhetorical situations, I decided that students would compose podcasts investigating an object, theme, idea, history, person, building, or other element relating to the city of Norfolk. As such, the podcasts would be episodic. Collectively, the podcasts students created would constitute a public standalone series titled *Of Norfolk*, aimed at addressing and overturning the reductive conceptualizations and descriptions of the city as merely a military town, or an unsafe place to live, by way of telling stories about interesting or under-appreciated aspects of Norfolk culture. The objectives of the assignment, which blended high-level theoretical thinking with praxis-based production work, were as follows:

- Have students conceive of podcasts as a storytelling mode that productively challenges the historical splits between orality and literacy, technology and memory.
- Have students get their hands dirty with production tools like Audacity to connect the practical decisions they make in editing to the conceptual ideas underlying digital storytelling.
- Have students harness the power of digital storytelling to enact a sense of agency in having a say about the perceptions and histories of our local communities.

Overall, students would realize that the popularity and production of podcasts are connected in meaningful but complicated ways to ancient allegiances to

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2. This contrasts, I think, productively with others who have used Plato as a theoretical touchstone for projects in podcasting, namely Lydia French and Emily Bloom's (2011) brilliant praxis-based work on auralacy as a theoretical space within which to think through connections between Plato, Ong, epistemology, podcasts, and writing.

orality, and perhaps represent a return, or re-visioning, of orality for our digitally mediated culture.

One important note about the podcasts I have listed below for required reading: If I had a deaf student in my class, and I assigned them to listen to my assigned podcast episodes, they would run into the problem of not having access to transcripts to all episodes. *This American Life*, for example, despite its popularity and place on public radio, insists that their work needs to be "heard" and thus does not provide any transcripts of their episodes. I might suggest for teachers that this might be a good opportunity for students to explore the different type of transcription software out there that transcribe audio files into text, or it might be a good opportunity as well as talk about whether or not these podcasts should even be included as "required" readings. I did not have any deaf students in the class, but if I had, this would present a serious problem.

Assignment and Sequencing

Assignment: Place-Based Podcast

Overview

Students will in groups of two or three create a podcast episode that investigates an object, theme, idea, history, person, building, or other element relating to Norfolk, with the specific intent of enlightening, challenging, or affirming the public perceptions of the city. Paying close attention to the narrative structures and elements outlined in Jack Hart's (2012) *Storycraft*, as well as our collective analyses of a variety of podcasts in class, students will craft a purely audio, placed-based nonfiction podcast that fits within the theme of the podcast series we are creating, *Of Norfolk*. You are encouraged to see the podcasts (or even, audio essays) as episodic, not in the sequential sense but in the thematic sense, connected in their concern to enlighten, challenge, or explore an underappreciated aspect of Norfolk culture. Students will use Audacity for audio editing and will be responsible for conducting whatever type of research is required to compose an engaging, informative narrative about an aspect or object of Norfolk culture. This research might be anything from ethnographic to observational to interview to archival.

Assessment

The criteria for assessment for this podcast assignment are divided into two separate but not entirely distinct sections: technical production and quality of storytelling. In terms of technical production, podcasts will need to include the following:

- musical overlays (open source music to facilitate introductions or transitions);
- multiple distinct voices (including each group member and a member of the public, if possible);

- three audio effects, used appropriately (these will vary, but might include insertions of white noise, echo effects, or noise reduction);
- non-original, non-musical recordings (these will vary, but might include innocuous background noises, such as traffic, birds chirping, etc.); and
- high-quality narration (all voices should be clear and crisp and of high quality).

Podcasts will be assessed not only by their technical quality but also for the effectiveness and rhetorical quality of the script—that is, the ability of the students to engage an audience and put forth a compelling story in a digital storytelling format. In terms of storytelling, podcasts will need to attend to the following:

- a type of story structure, as outlined by Hart's *Storycraft*;
- a question or hook to frame the episode;
- a cogent identification and explanation of a specific theme, object, or idea;
- interesting and engaging sources of research relevant for your specific topic; and
- an appropriate conclusion that presses the audience to consider further the topic of your choice and its overall importance.

As you will see, these categories are not always distinct, such as when an appropriate musical overlay facilitates an engaging hook, but for the purposes of assessment the podcasts will be divided as such.

Texts

To complete this assignment, you'll need access to the following texts:

- Dennis Baron's (1999) "From Pencils to Pixels: The Stages of Literacy Technology"
- Jenny Edbauer's (2005) "Unframing Models of Public Distribution: From Rhetorical Situation to Rhetorical Ecologies"
- Jack Hart's (2012) *Storycraft*
- Richard A. Lanham's (2007) *The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information*
- Walter J. Ong's (1982) *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*
- Plato's (1995) *Phaedrus*
- Gregory Ulmer's (2009) "Introduction: Electracy"

Podcasts

To complete this assignment, you'll need access to the following podcasts:

- "Blame Game." *Revisionist History* with Malcolm Gladwell (2016). Season 1, Episode 8.
- "Freud's Couch." *99% Invisible* with Roman Mars (2015a). Episode 169.
- "Harper High School: Part One." *This American Life* with Ira Glass (2013). Episode 487.

- "Nazi Summer Camp." *RadioLab* with Jad Abumrad (2015).
- "No Place Like Home." *This American Life* with Ira Glass (2014). Episode 520.
- "Penn Station Sucks." *99% Invisible* with Roman Mars (2015c). Episode 147.
- "The Gruen Effect." *99% Invisible* with Roman Mars (2015b). Episode 163.
- "Wild Ones Live." *99% Invisible* with Roman Mars (2013). Episode 91.

Students: You may notice that not all podcasts have transcripts available. Why do you think this is? What can be done about it? Let's discuss this in class together.

Weekly Schedule

Table 22.1. Weekly Schedule: Overview

Week and Topic	Readings	Due
1. Writing with/as/is Technology	Baron (1999)	Responses to Baron
2. What Is with the Honey-Tongues?	Plato (1995), *Phaedrus*	Analysis of passage
3. How Did We Tell Stories?	Ong (1982), Chapters 1, 2, 6	Responses to Ong
4. How Do We Tell Stories?	Ong (1982), Chapter 4	Critical listening exercise
5. It's an EmerAgency—What Now?	Ulmer (2009)	Responses to Ulmer
6. Is Norfolk Weird?	Edbauer (2005); Hart (2012), Chapters 6, 9	Topic worksheet
7. How to Get Our Stories Straight?	Hart (2012), Chapters 1–4	Narrative structure
8. How Do We Keep Your Attention?	Lanham (2007), Chapter 1	5-minute clip
9. Did We Keep Your Attention?	Lanham (2007), Chapter 2; Hart (2012), Chapters 11–13	Peer review
10. What's Next for Text?	Lanham (2007), Chapters 3–5	Podcast draft

Weekly Schedule: Sample Specification

Week 1. Writing with/as/is Technology

Before even beginning podcasting, you'll first need to consider the relationship between technology and writing. This week, you will be reading an essay from Dennis Baron, titled "From Pencils to Pixels: The Stages of Literacy Technology" (1999) and then answer the following questions in your notebook:

- Baron states that writing itself is a technology. What does he mean by this?

- How do writing technologies become "naturalized"?
- Why was Henry David Thoreau's distaste for the telegraph ironic in Baron's view?
- How does "accessibility" play into the development of writing technologies?
- Why should humanists (those in the arts and letters) embrace digital writing technologies?

Baron's reading will help provide a framework for next week's class, which will unpack Plato's *Phaedrus*, a foundational dialogue that contains several important passages on the nature of writing, memory, and mind. Plato's dialogues can be challenging, so for the sake of focus pay attention to the social context within which the dialogue was written, historically speaking; how rhetoric and philosophy are compared and contrasted; and how Plato uses dialogic structure to develop his arguments.

Week 2. What is with the Honey-Tongues?

Read Plato's (1995) *Phaedrus* and analyze passages in groups. Consider how Plato's insistence on orality anticipates Baron's work.

Week 3. How Did We Tell Stories?

Read Chapters 1, 2, and 6 of Walter J. Ong's (1982) *Orality and Literacy* and relate Ong's ideas about narrative structure to this video by Ira Glass (creator and narrator for *This American Life*) on storytelling (Neo, 2013).

Week 4. How Do We Tell Stories?

Listen to the two assigned podcasts, read chapter 4 of Ong, and think about the connections between Ong's question of how we rediscover the "tenaciousness of orality" (p. 115) and the thoughts of *RadioLab* creator and co-host Jad Abumrad (as communicated in this video on why he thinks radio will never die: PBS NewsHour, 2016).

Week 5. It's an EmerAgency—What Now?

Read Gregory Ulmer's (2009) "Introduction: Electracy" and consider the larger social trend of podcasts. During class students will find a song online, upload it to Audacity, and cut and add in an effect of their choice.

Week 6. Is Norfolk Weird?

Watch the video *Norfolk Reinvented* (Lanpher, 2016) and highlight any connections you see between this presentation and Jenny Edbauer's (2005) article, "Unframing Models of Public Distribution." Then, listen to the two podcasts that will help in thinking more about the connections between objects, materiality, and place.

Week 7. How to Get Our Stories Straight?

Read Chapters 1 through 4 of Hart's (2012) *Storycraft*, thinking about the narrative structure of your own podcast. Students will visualize in draft form on construction paper potential story structures for their podcast episode.

Week 8. How Do We Keep Your Attention?

Read Chapter 1 of Lanham's (2007) book *The Economics of Attention* and draw connections with Ulmer's notions of electracy. Students will then create sample clips of their podcast after reviewing *The Way You Sound Affects Your Mood* (Lund University, 2016) and the National Co-Ordinating Center for Public Engagement (2014) work on *Podcasting*.

Week 9. Did We Keep Your Attention?

Read Chapter 2 of Lanham and Chapters 11 and 12 of Hart and then listen to the podcast episode "The Living Room" (Abumrad & Krulwich, 2015). As you listen to the podcast, consider what you found to be different about it from the rest we've listened to thus far.

Week 10. What's Next for Text?

Read Chapters 3 and 5 of Lanham and draw out a matrix for style/substance modeled after Lanham's work (p. 158, Figure 5.1). Consider: How does style and substance play out in podcasts? And how can this matrix guide the review of your peers' work?

Sample Student Podcast Episodes

1. In "The Glass Age," Danielle Thornhill and Star LaBranche explore the understated arts culture in Norfolk, with specific attention to the Perry Glass Studio (https://chrysler.org/glass/) in the Chrysler Museum of Art. Does the nature of glass mimic the nature of Norfolk? Listen to find out.[3]

2. In the playfully-titled podcast episode, "Ceremonial Norfolk: The Amazing Mace," Kimberly Goode and Matthew Pawlowski focus in on one specific object that connects the city of Norfolk, the Commonwealth of Virginia, and the king of England, and symbolizes the complicated power relationships between all three: the Norfolk Mace (https://chrysler.emuseum.com/objects/29714/the-norfolk-mace). While many city maces exist, the Norfolk Mace is the only one to still reside in the city to which it was originally commissioned. This, as Kimberly and Matthew found out, is not by coincidence.

These sample podcast episodes (along with the others on the channel, available at https://soundcloud.com/dan-richards-10/sets/of-norfolk) aimed to contribute to a class series, titled *Of Norfolk*, in which each podcast delved into some aspect or object of the city culture. Each podcast, to varying extents, followed the guidelines of the assignment described above.

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3. Two student examples (audio files and descriptive transcripts) can be found on the book's companion website.

Reflection

[Opening music is hip, electronic instrumental music by Lee Rosevere (2017), a song titled "Ennui" from his album The Big Loop.*]*

Daniel P. Richards: Plato, podcasts, and place: These are a few of my favorite things.[4] As a professor with a Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition, the first usually generates polite nods, but my sympathies and fascination for Plato and his rhetorical facilities and epistemological sensibilities remain despite his relentless castigation of my field. (He loves us, but he'll never admit it.) As a man who is a part of many fan communities and who loves stories and stays updated on politics, the second is rather inevitable. This love does not generate polite nods but usually generative conversations at social gatherings about the specific podcast series and episodes that are *absolute must listens*. This remains constant across all three places I've lived: Windsor, Ontario, Canada (where I was born, raised, and got a master's degree), Tampa, Florida (where I did my Ph.D.), and now Norfolk, Virginia—where I am now, working as an assistant professor at Old Dominion University. Which takes me to my third love listed: place. Having lived, as many in my profession have, in multiple, entirely distinct places, I am fascinated at how municipalities create—or have created for them—specific identities. To borrow from Jenny Edbauer's (2005) thinking on rhetoric and place, how do we trace a given city's *affective ecologies*? How do city identities get created? And who gets to create them? And by which media or modalities do we learn about them? Perhaps this fascination stems from my experience being raised in Windsor, which many refer to as the armpit of Canada (not so affectionately), but I like to think of as the Twilight Zone of North America, where Canadians use Fahrenheit to measure temperature and where you cross over into the United States by heading North.

But that is neither here nor there.

What is here—here being Norfolk

[Radio scratch, person saying "downtown Nor-foke," radio scratch, person saying "This is Naw-fuk" Virginia, radio scratch, person saying "Nor-fik," radio scratch.]

—whoa . . . sorry. Um, did you hear that too? Was that just me? Seems every time I utter the word Norfolk

[Radio scratch, "person saying "Today I am in Norfolk, Virginia."]

[act disheveled] the other ways the city gets pronounced circulate in my mind. It is weird—not Austin weird, and definitely not Portland weird—but weird to live in a town where you might walk from your house to get a cup of coffee on the way to the university and hear your neighbor, the barista, and your students all

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4. The audio version of Daniel P. Richards's reflection can be found on the book's companion website.

pronounce the city in which we all live differently. And everyone is like kind of cool about it (although, the moment you utter the city name you "out" yourself as one who hails from one part of town, another part of town, or another part of town, or as an outsider who tried to get it close, or an outsider who just doesn't care and who opts for phonetic consistency).

Anyways *[clears throat]*, let's try that again.

What *is* here is the course I taught a few semesters back titled Writing in Digital Spaces. While I don't often get to teach a course that integrates three of my favorite things (I can't imagine a class, for example, that resides at the intersection of hockey, turn-of-the-century post-hardcore music, and whiskey—but maybe that's for a project at a later date), this class did, as students read Plato's (1995) *Phaedrus*, thought about place, and then podcasted about it. The course, naturally, had intentional design; it was not just a slapdash potpourri of my interests. While the practical production stream of the class focused on podcasts (more on that later), web writing, and Twitter, the theoretical framework was built around Walter Ong's (1982) book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, which provides a rather persuasive analytical account of how cultures that have transitioned from oral to literate modalities experience a transformation of consciousness as a result.

Literacy, the very technologizing of the "word," Ong argues, produces patterns of thought that become normalized and naturalized—these patterns of thought are distinct from those of oral cultures, with particular distinction noticed in the way we tell stories. So, when students were creating podcasts of the city, of an object, histories, person, or building within the city limits of Norfolk, they were thinking about the storytelling structures that help create a particular municipal *mythos*; they were synthesizing orality with what Gregory Ulmer (2009) coins the third apparatus: orality the first, literacy and the second, and electracy the third. Electracy is an apparatus where the practice is not religion or science but entertainment, and the institution is not the church or school but the internet. In drawing connections between Plato's reservations in the *Phaedrus* about written text and its potentially erosive effects on memory, Ong's in-depth analysis of the distinction between oral and literate cultures, and Ulmer's speculative space generated by the vision of electracy, students were thus asked to ruminate on how digital technologies offer our world—and our cities—an opportunity to productively re-sequence the seemingly dissonant mode of orality with and through a fuller embrace of digital writing technologies. This, the course argued, happens (potentially) through production. It happens through podcasting. The popularity and production of podcasts, students would hopefully realize, are connected in meaningful but complicated ways to ancient allegiances to orality, and perhaps represent a return, or re-visioning, of orality for our digitally mediated culture.

The podcasts students generated were impressive. Topics varied. One group sought to explain why the city symbol is a mermaid despite the dearth of beaches. Another explored a historical cemetery embedded within the city, divided by

a literal wall between the races of the dead. Another explored the glass studio extension of our local art museum. And another went in-depth on how and why people of the city pronounce its name differently. People were called. Linguists were consulted. Research was done. The ideas, the scripts, the attention to story structure—all were impressive. Especially given when asked on the first day of class who listened to podcasts: Two hesitant hands were raised.

As I sit here, in soundproof audio recording booth in our campus's technology and distance education building, I can't help but think that my biggest regret with the podcast series we produced and made available for public consumption on SoundCloud—search, if you wish, for the series *Of Norfolk*—is the lack of attention I paid to production. The class was quite immersed in theory, quite immersed in analyzing podcast story structures, and articulating carefully how students might structure their own, and why, but that attention to things such as high-quality microphones, recording spaces, ambient noises, and enunciation kind of took a back seat.

[in bad quality, with outdoor ambient noise] In 15 weeks it was challenging to attend to both storytelling and production quality—not that they are as divided as we might think—given how your listening experience has plummeted a little right now because I am using my iPhone, outside, in Norfolk.

Students certainly learned to appreciate the amount of time required to produce even a 15-minute podcast, which is good, and they learned about rhetorical theory and generated great discussion about orality, literacy, and electracy—also good, and not easy.

But with podcasts even I was surprised at how absolutely crucial sound quality is to the success of a podcast. Seems simple, right? Seems like I should have thought about that before, maybe? But when you have seven groups of two going around the city, as they were encouraged to do, equipment becomes an issue. Access becomes an issue. The very nature of the place-based podcasts took them out of the classroom, out of the quiet, and left them susceptible to technological considerations we didn't explicitly cover. Background noise. The proximity of microphones. We covered the use of Audacity, yes, as you can see in the write-up, but the actual on-site quality of recordings was lacking—as you yourself can attest if you choose to listen.

And when I reflect on this project, and that semester, I oscillate between two positions: on one hand, not *really* caring about the production quality of the podcasts because the key learning objectives were met and students engaged quite impressively with the readings, concepts, and projects as a whole. They bought in. And then on the other hand, *really* caring, since the very idea of the podcast project was to make a series for public consumption that might help reframe or challenge existing perceptions of the city. While production quality was not a major criterion for assessment in my evaluation of the podcasts, when they cross over into more public spheres—such as sharing the playlist on Facebook or Twitter or sending it to the people and places included in the episodes—there

was a tinge of hesitancy. What might people think of the project, of our school, of our program, if little attention was paid to the production of the podcasts? Other questions I asked myself: Should I even have ever done this project in the first place, knowing our department didn't have the means necessary for all students to produce high-quality, in terms of production, work? Should I have just spent the entire semester on the podcast project, letting go of the others to afford more time to figure out the technology? How important is the production quality in terms of public perception? How much of my teaching should be spent in Audacity, in researching technology? What role or restrictive capacity does the type of technology we have access to have in our teaching? In our decision to design projects and courses?

I cannot give you answers to these questions, but they sure make darn good discussion questions for the next time I teach this course and project.

[Outgoing song is hip, electronic instrumental music by Lee Rosevere (2007), a song titled "Ennui" from his album The Big Loop.*]*

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