Chapter IX

Tyranny of the Eye?
The Resurgence of the Proto-Alphabetic Sensibility in Contemporary Electronic Modes of Media (PC/Mobile Telephony); and its Significance for the Status of Knowledge

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter the author offers an argument towards the resurgence of a proto-alphabetic imagination in electronic and mobile communications. It is suggested that contemporary trends in mobile telephony which encapsulate the earlier advances in PC development are shifting electronic media – not towards a mythic culture of the aural (McLuhan) but towards an admixture of the aural and visual, aslant the controlling trope of the alphabetical. It is argued that this separation of technologies resembles the predecessors of writing technologies of a “proto”-alphabetic nature. This infuses the literature of management with a metaphysical animism, which is redolent of the faded animism, which marked the initial confluence of the pre-alphabetical sensibilities of Eye and Voice in the pre-alphabetic emergence of mankind. This is suggested as a fresh Symbolic form towards which mankind is advancing. The confluence of ideological tensions preceding these developments is traced; including debates as to conflicts of Word and Sacred (Ricoeur); or Postmodern aversion towards contemporary ocular dominance. This debate leads towards an evaluation of the role and significance of kinds of knowledge which underpin our knowledge society and the knowledge which we take to constitute “knowledge management”.

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INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I examine a range of theories related to the adjustment of technologies and their effects on sensibilities — both ancient and new. The chapter therefore has a historiographic aspect. I especially look at the confluence of mobile telephony and the Internet. I consider the emergence of an alphabetical culture and the deviation from that suggested by both cyberspace and the new technological forms — specifically mobile telephony and the PC. I examine the role of confluences that are pre-alphabetic in nature and how they lead towards a proto-alphabetical sensibility (as I define it), which (I argue) is able to reemerge in contemporary forms of media (especially cyberspace and internet related prosthetic devices related to mobile telephony).

My aim is to examine the inter-relationship of sensibilities which show a bias towards aural or visual emphasis, and aspects of technology especially that are established by the use of the internet. This leads to a further evaluation of contemporary arguments related to the role of knowledge (alphabetic) primarily and the elements of visual and oral which are composed thereby. I address features of argument which dispose themselves towards particular views towards the pre-alphabetic and its revival (McLuhan and Shlain); theorists who argue for an element of vitality in what I define as proto-alphabetical animism (Davis and Jaynes); I also obtain an evaluation of the postmodern “fix” on the Eye or scopic; evaluating this critically relative to a historiographic sense of development of the conflicting traditions of Eye and Voice.

It has been suggested that a bias exists towards the visual as opposed to the aural, in modern sensibility and that the visual bias can be identified with features such as positivism, objectivism, and modern technologies associated with rationalism; that the post-enlightenment legacy was “to decarnalize the eye and foreground the perspectival scopic regime” (Burrell, 1998; following Jay, 1994). I aim to refine this thesis and show a more sophisticated narration of the inter-relationship of visual and aural modes of sensibility. Thereby, relative to organizational theories, this chapter moves to challenge the notion that a complete tyranny of the eye obtains in modern management research and that this underpins positivistic and empirical approaches towards management science. Knowledge management might be seen as an exemplar of management science in that respect, in that it adopts an approach which emphasizes the significance of control over the management of knowledge and the adoption of forms of knowledge which are amenable to storage and manipulation. By inference, my view is that knowledge management itself follows the shifts in sensibility which I describe in this chapter, and that those perceptual shifts underpin our treatment and conception of information which causally must be defined as originating in the mind, and hence a feature of the human psyche.

European Electronic commerce and, specifically commerce related towards the use of mobile telephony (in commercial terms: E and M Commerce) is marked by the confluence of visual and auditory technologies; this has resulted in massive investment into areas of telecommunications as phone company’s shift towards the inclusion of the Internet within the context of their services. Mobile telephony itself seems to present a variety of technological features: email; games; enhanced visual downloads such as colour photographs. These features have become realized to a significant extent with 3rd generation mobile telephony. By 2003, 2 or 2.5 Generation technologies were main sellers (Budden, FT, January 6, 2003). At that point multimedia made a significant inroad into the personal user market of mobile phones (Hunt, FT, May 15, 2003). A striking feature therefore as between the earliest mobile phones and the newer varieties is the increased sophistication of the service; incorporation of features such as the camera; and integration of Internet activity.