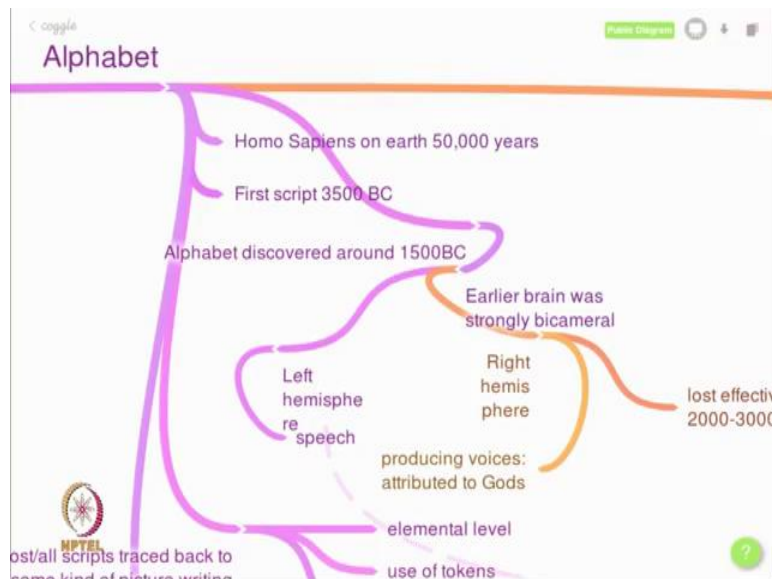


**Text, Textuality and Digital Media**  
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**Lecture # 4: Walter Ong: Orality and Literacy**  
**Part-3**

Welcome back. We are still with Walter Ong and his discussion of the movement from oral to manuscript universe to print. And I would once again like to encourage you to go and actually read the essays which are there, because whatever I am discussing here, is on the basis of the specific texts which are written by Ong.

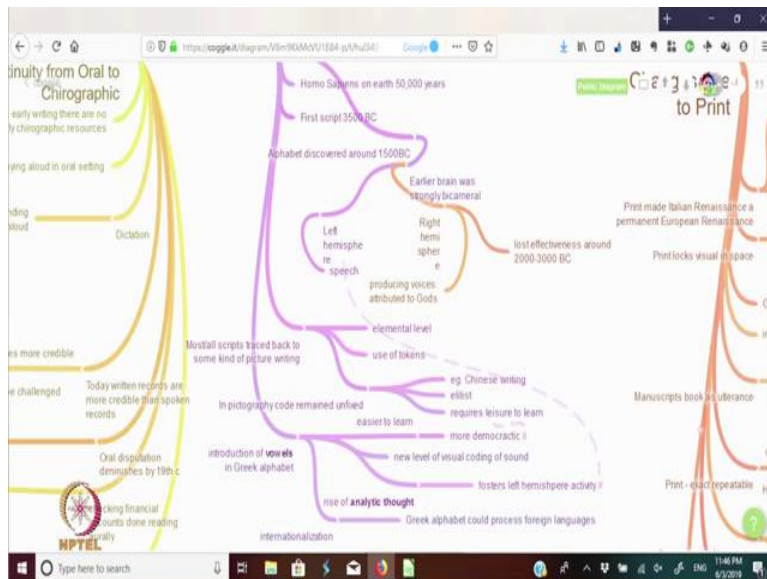
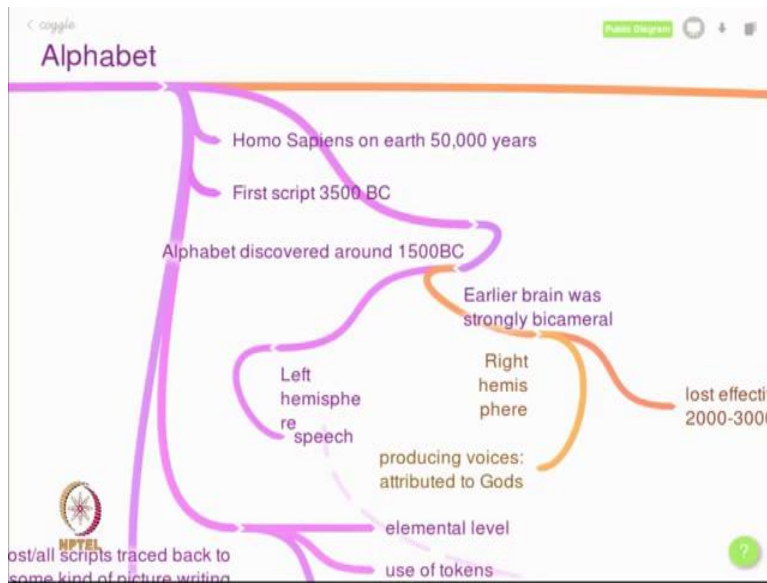
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And of course I bring other knowledge into it. But for your understanding, it is always better that you actually go back and read those texts which have been suggested in the reading list. If you have any questions, do raise them in the forum so that we are able to gain a much better nuanced understanding of these very important changes that have historically happened. And they will allow us to understand the change that is on hand, i.e. the movement from the print universe to the digital universe.

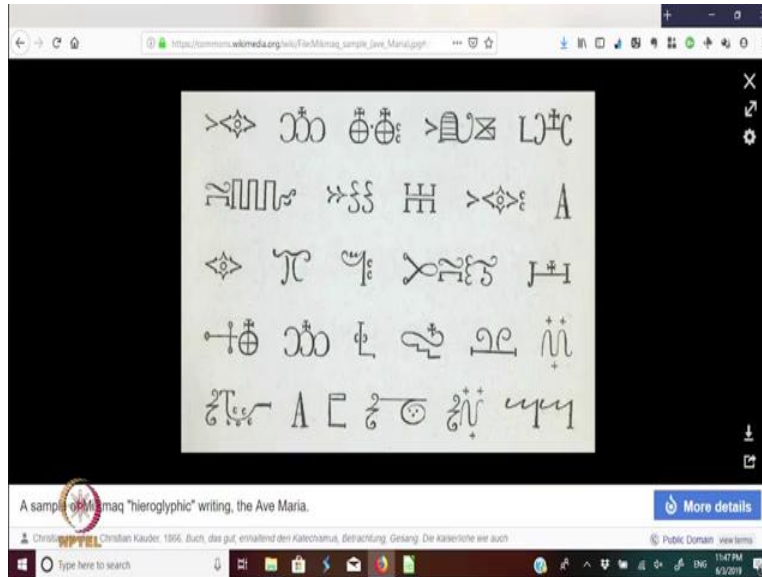
Our understanding of the present is always through an understanding and knowledge of what human life and society has been through in history. History is a very important tool, a very important method through which we are able to understand our present. Returning to Ong, Ong reminds us that the existence of language and writing is something that is very new.

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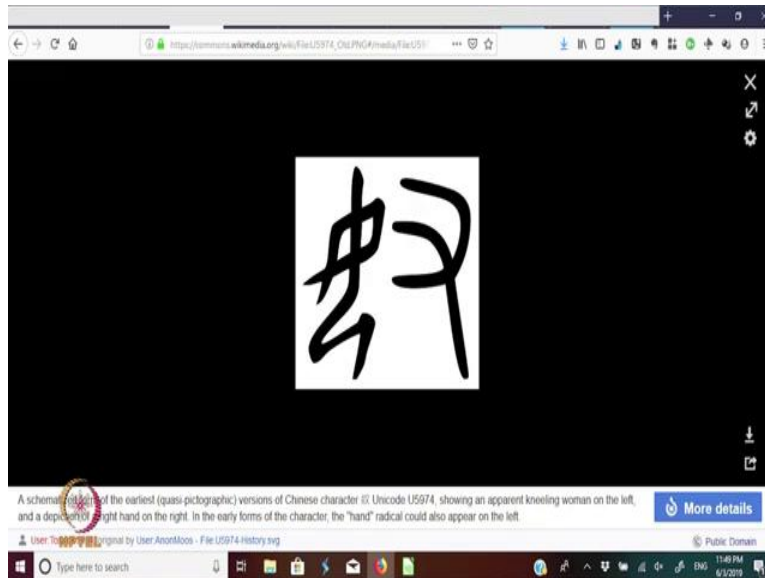
If we look at the entire range and history of human civilizations, Homo sapiens have been on earth for 50,000 years. The first identifiable script was found in 3500 BC, about 5500 years ago. The alphabet was discovered only in about 1500 BC.

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Before that, you had more pictographic forms of writing- symbols and cuneiforms and other forms of writing whereas, the alphabet brings in a very important innovation. Through the use of the alphabet, specific forms of writing can be used to recount and replicate a wide variety of sounds whereas earlier, in pictographic writing, one would have to create a specific symbol to convey a certain idea. Let us say, a tree would have a certain symbol, sun would have a certain symbol, or a house would have a certain symbol. Therefore, literacy was a lot more difficult.

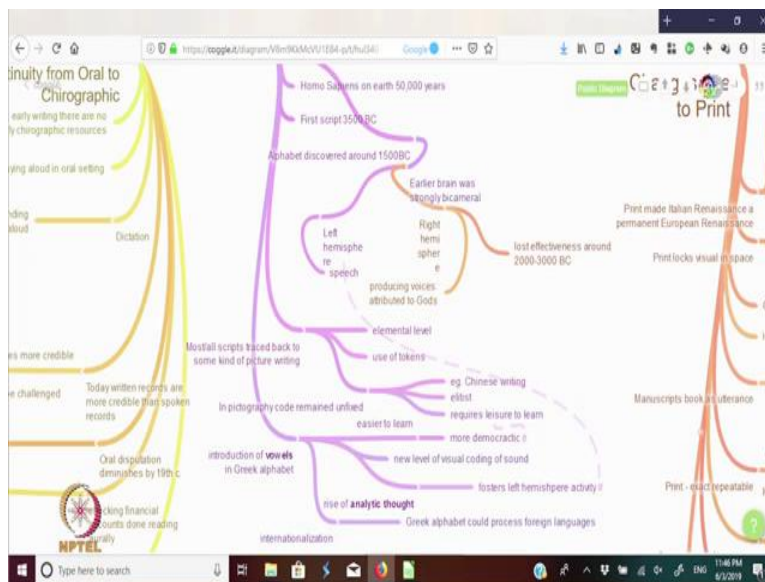
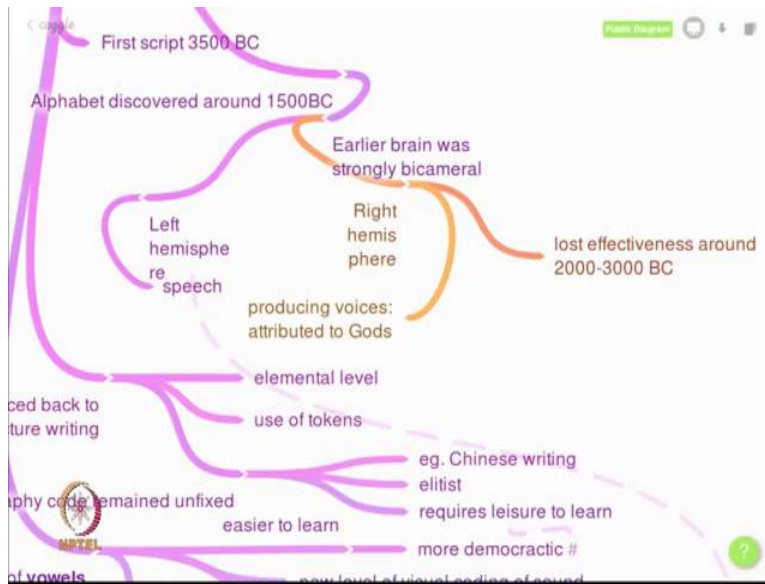
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If you look at the Chinese alphabet, for example, it is still too pictographic to a large extent. There are many characters, which makes it far more difficult. It is only when the Chinese script gets reduced in the number of characters used, that it becomes a little bit more possible for more and more people to gain literacy. Otherwise, the process through which that language is acquired, becomes so tedious that it is not possible for the largest number of people to actually gain literacy. So the discovery of alphabet becomes very useful. There is an abstract linkage between the sound patterns and the symbols that are being used. By putting together the alphabet, you create the symbol, which is the word which stands for the idea or the object.

So, the movement from the first script to the alphabet takes about two thousand years, which is a long span of time. But if you compare it to human existence on Earth, and also compare it with the coming into being of language as such, it is a much, much smaller span. And Ong discusses that the coming of writing actually brings about certain changes in the way the human brain is organized.

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Earlier, the brain was strongly bicameral. All of us know that there are two hemispheres within the brain- the left hemisphere and the right hemisphere. The right hemisphere was attributed more to gods and associated to knowledge that is inherent or been passed on. The left hemisphere is governed for speech. So when speech comes into being, and then writing comes into being, the right hemisphere loses its effectiveness in producing knowledge.

This also happens if one studies human anatomy. When more advanced scripts or the alphabet was getting discovered, the human brain underwent a certain kind of change. We see that there

are certain changes to the way the human mind works in the era of the print, and certainly also in the era of the digital, but more about that as we go along.

More scripts, he says, are traced back to some kind of picture writing at the very elemental level. The Early Stone Age Man would draw images of their hunting or other adventures onto the walls of the cave. And that kind of picture writing is actually a mechanism for communication.

So, as I said, the early forms of writing required a lot more leisure to learn because they were more pictographic. So they were more difficult to acquire. So the Chinese characters, being vast in number, require a great amount of leisure to learn in because the code was essentially unfixed. The code changed from each symbol to another. So there would be far more number of characters to be learned.

The introduction of vowels in the Greek alphabet made it much easier to learn and therefore let people acquire the knowledge of of a certain language or alphabet in a much shorter span of time. Thus, they could get along with the act of reading or writing. It takes too long to acquire knowledge.

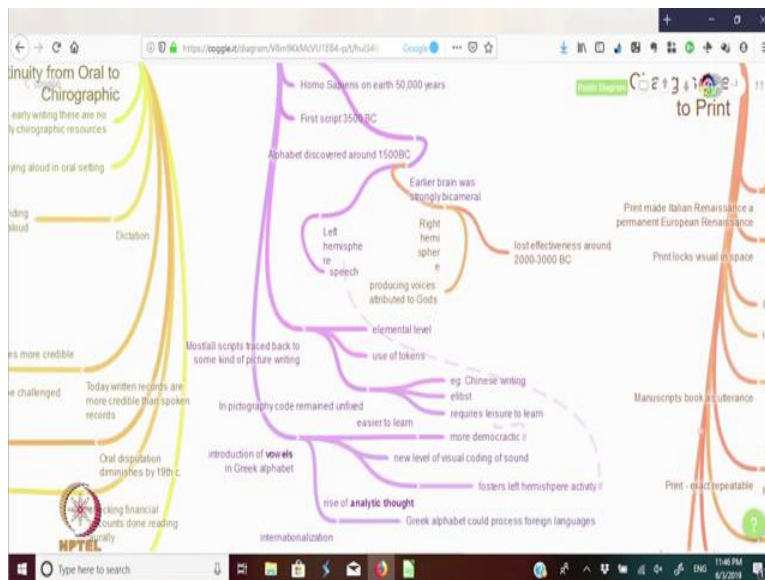
So he says that the creation of vowels makes language acquisition much more democratic. There is a new level of visual coding of sound. That is very important. We have moved on. This kind of writing of alphabet is different from pictography. Whereas in pictography, the picture of a tree reminds one of the tree in alphabet, the word Tree actually first refers back to the sound of the word tree, which then goes and refers back to the actual tree. So, when we are reading the word tree on the written page we articulate it. Even though we may not say it out loud, we are actually articulating the sound of that word in our minds.

And that sound then reminds us. The brain is interpreting the sound of the word tree as the object. So we visualize it. It is through a visual coding that the sound becomes the ultimate reference for the actual idea or object. It is rooted through the visual code. Thus, the way pictography works is very different from the way alphabet operates.

Writing enabled a human mind to find some space to engage in other activities because it no longer uses memory as much as would have been required in the oral form.

In the oral universe, a large part of human mental exercises would require the use of memory. Memory would occupy the human mind a whole lot more. Writing freezes the human mind and gives space for other things. In the early script, the presence of pictography required a lot of time to learn the characters. By the coming of the alphabet, that was removed and the mind was freed for other kinds of activity. Time is free, a whole lot more and he says that time actually gives rise to analytical thought.

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The mind is now much more occupied with analyzing various kinds of ideas, rather than focusing earlier on learning language or scripts or remembering texts. So this development has fostered activity in the left hemisphere a whole lot more. The right hemisphere has reduced in importance as far as human communication is concerned; human communication has become more of a left hemisphere activity than let's say five thousand years ago.

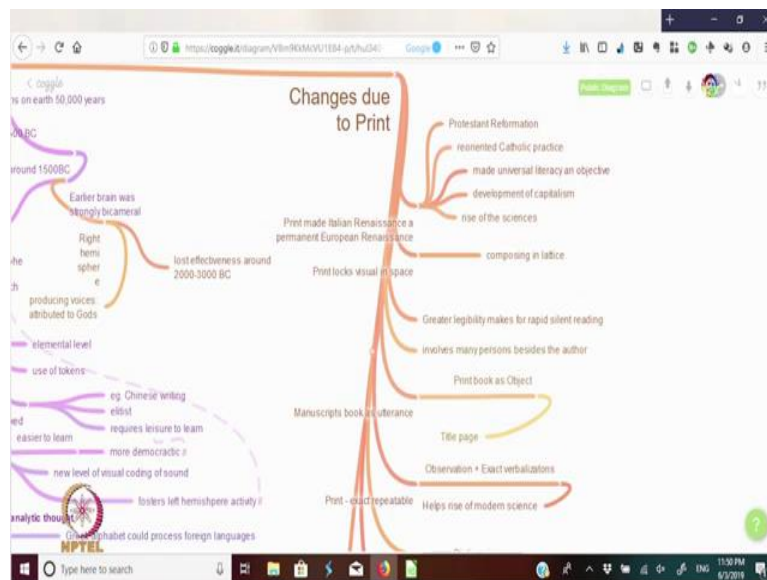
And that is the physical change that has happened. We had made a point in the previous class-writing makes analytical thought possible. This is because of two reasons. One, today it is possible to compare and contrast various thoughts through texts. You do not have to actually be in the presence of different scholars in order to dispute it because in the oral universe, disputation was primarily ruled through rhetoric and not through arguments or analysis.

Today, we can look at various written documents and compare and contrast them to presentation of acts in the form of charts and lists. This has been made possible through writing. So, another

important point is that the Greek alphabet, once it comes into being, is not restricted to a certain language.

The alphabet could now process foreign languages also. So it makes a whole lot more available to the reader. More knowledge is made available to the scholar today; although the scholar then will have to understand that language, but the access has been increased. A large number of texts have been brought forward to the scholar.

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He now moves to the issue of print. Now, once print comes into being, it brings about a specific kind of writing. The important change between manual writing, handwriting and print is that print is a technical process. It is a mechanical process. It is not a manual process. Someone does not have to sit and write down various things. But through a mechanical process, a plethora of texts could be created.

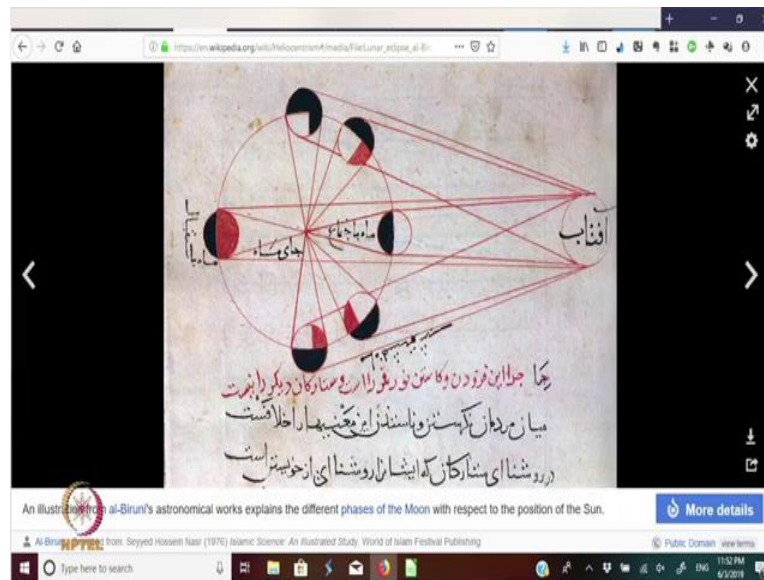
A very important point that we need to remember is that historically, prints come about. We know that various kinds of inventions which became possible in the modern world were results of a certain demand. When there was a greater demand for books, people from across Europe, looked for ways in which to produce, hasten and quicken the process of reproducing books.

We will study a little bit more about the discovery of print and the world in which the print was discovered later on in the course. But for the moment, you must understand that print came into



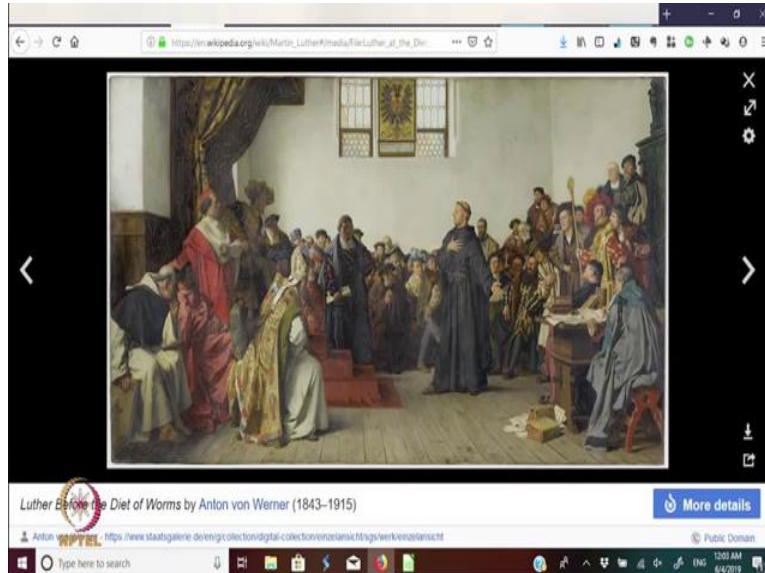
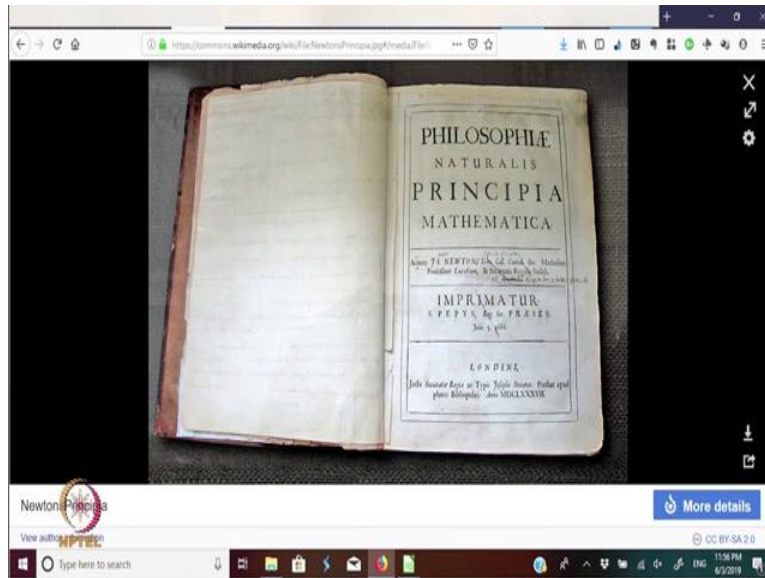
being because a lot more texts were getting developed. One point that I would like to also remind you, is that print was not developed in isolation. Print was getting developed even while many other changes were coming about in society. Many other forms of machines were getting developed, so within that larger universe, print also developed.

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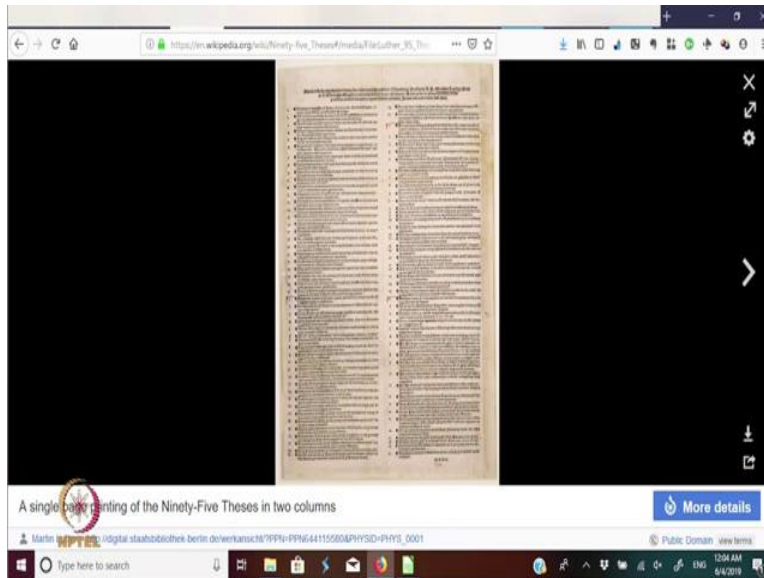
But on the other hand, it is also true that print actually makes the creation of other machines possible, because print actually makes scientific inquiry a lot more possible. That process begins with writing, because without analysis, there cannot be rational thought. There cannot be science because it is writing that makes analysis gainful, easier. It is only when you contrast your thoughts with different kinds of ideas that new knowledge can be created. If we exist within the same school of thought, we usually do not tend to create newer ideas.

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We tend to keep on circulating within the same school of ideas, and new ideas are not created. So, one of the things that Ong relates the rise of print to, is the Protestant Reformation. For those of you who understand, the Protestant Reformation is the questioning of the authority of the Roman Catholic Church- the judge from Rome- the authority of the Pope. It led to a movement within Europe and it was linked to the rise of alternative kind of power centers within Europe, which ultimately devolved into the various nation states within Europe.

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And one of the ways in which these changes were articulated was in the form of a challenge to the ecclesiastical authority- the way religion was practiced and by questioning the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. And that was through the Protestant Reformation. So, print brings about the increase in the number of texts. Remember, I had told you, that in the manuscript universe there would be very few numbers of manuscripts of a certain text, and they would primarily be locked up in certain ecclesiastical institutions- in church- the clergy and only a few people would have access to it. .

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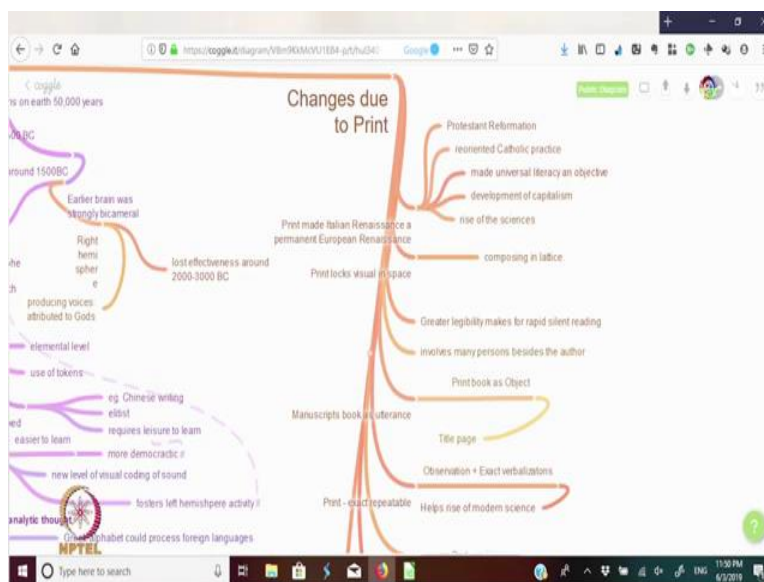
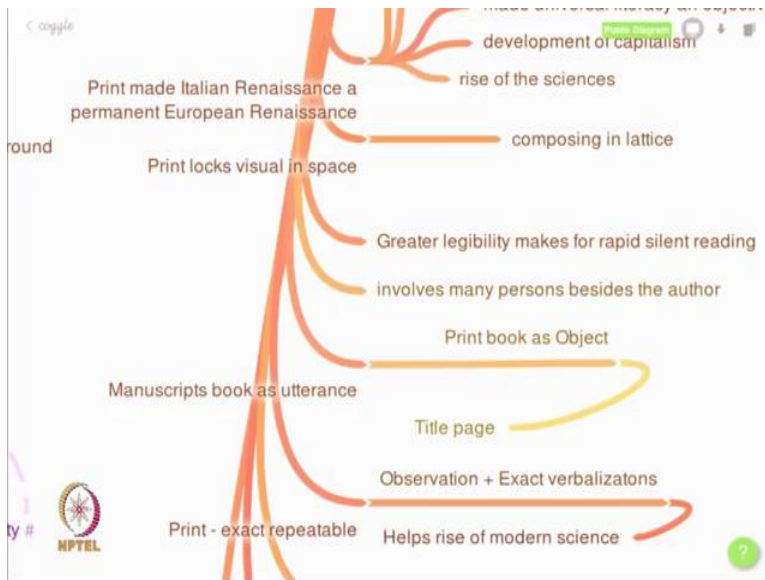
Whereas, print brings in a lot more. There is a greater print run- of several 100, of maybe a few 1,000, more than that. A certain text would be printed and would be carried on horseback or on carts and across and through boats, across distances and would be sold with various booksellers across Europe.

So, that kind of availability of texts made literacy more gainful. More people wanted to be literate because today they had a text to read and texts became a way in which they could move on with life. They could create themselves. They could define their own futures, so literacy became a very important objective. Till now, texts were not available, a large number of people did not feel the need to be literate and it worked vice versa. So, there were no processes through which large number of people could get literacy.

When I am talking about this, I am still talking about largely the elite, but the boundary of the elite has grown a little bit. Earlier, it would have been only ecclesiastical authorities and probably some aristocrats- the royal family and all. But now, you would have the rich capitalists also going after literacy- people of the newly developing middle classes or the trading classes, also trying to get literacy.

The 16th and 17th century in Europe is still an early phase. We are not talking about a universal literacy where every member of the society gets literate. No, we are still not talking about that, but it certainly becomes much more democratic than the earlier oral universe.

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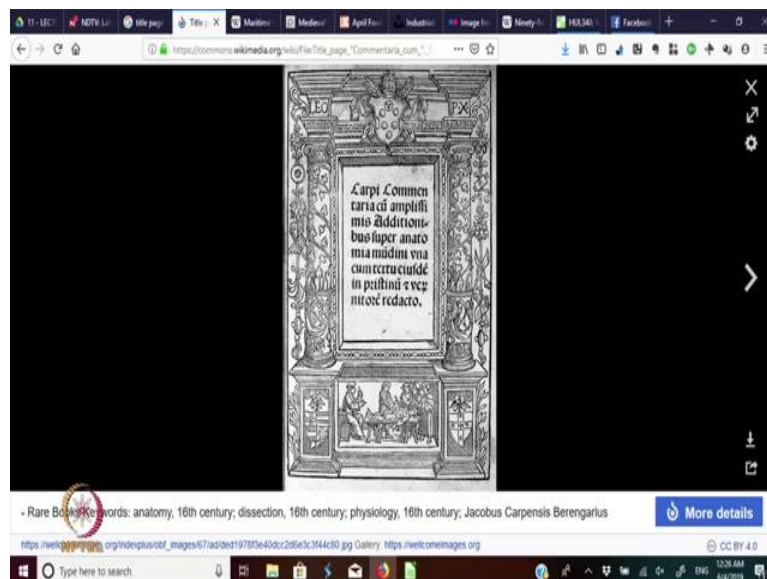
And also, as we looked at the way print was organized, we saw that writing brought about change in the way in which words actually operate- that writing visualizes the sound. What print does is lock that visual within a space. Because when there is a manuscript book, the margins could be set by the person who is writing. It would not be in different versions of the manuscript. The line lengths could be different. Whereas in print, it is composed in a lattice. There is a certain kind of frame within which the individual types are composed and it becomes a lattice across all versions of a particular book, All copies of a particular edition of a book would have that fixed visual shape.

Now, though early print tries to emulate the manuscript universe, the kind of calligraphic writing it uses becomes the model for the earliest moveable types. Slowly, what happens is that print becomes much more chiseled, much clearer and the printed page is much easier to read, and that makes way for silent reading. It is easier to read. You do not have to read aloud in order to read. You can read silent. But let me remind you, even in silent reading, we are slowly articulating the sound in our mind.

So there are many processes, almost imperceptible, which are involved in the process of reading. And the printed object as a book is very important. It is not merely the writer/the author who is important. Now, when we look at the oral universe, knowledge is embodied in the person of the speaker and has to emanate from the person of the speaker. So the knowledge emanates from the person of the speaker. However, in the manuscript universe, with the creation of craft literacy, a poet who does not know how to write, requires a scribe in order that the latter writes it down for him or her.

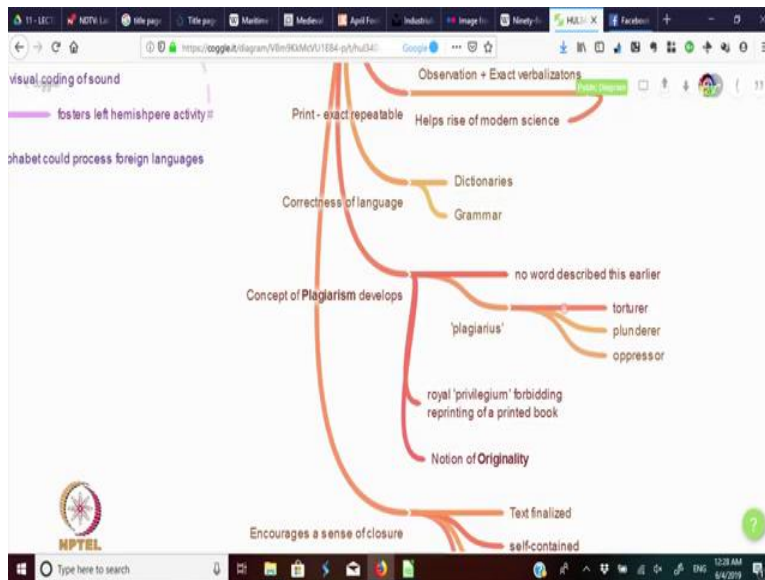
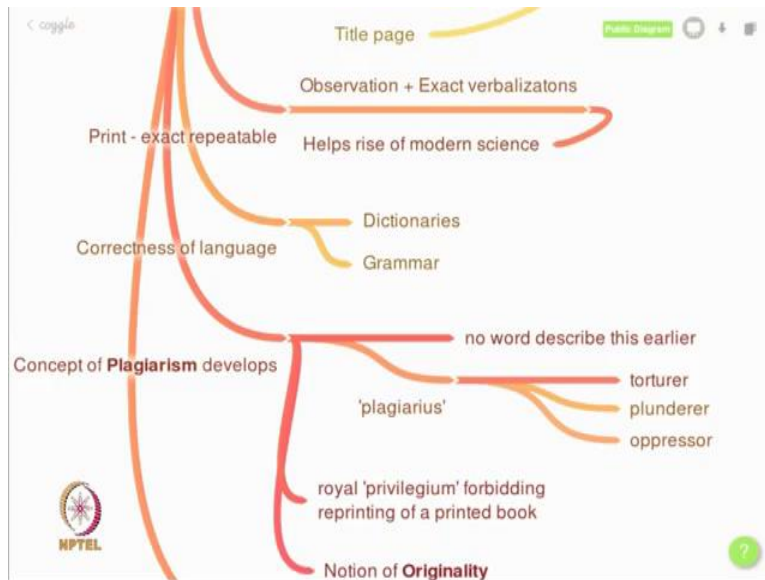
But print involves a whole lot of people- the person who is going to create the parchment, the person who has prepared the ink- the ink maker- and the person who has created the types- the typesetter- and the person who is operating the printing machine- the binder- then the illustrator and the bookseller. So, many people are involved in the process of the creation of the book, besides that of the author. The title page is also a very important aspect of printmaking.

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Because, a book becomes an article that is to be sold in the marketplace. So therefore, there is a certain label. The title page of the book becomes a kind of packaging of the book. In an oral universe, there is no concept of a title to attract the buyer or identify the object which is to be purchased.

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In print, a text can travel great distances across and the person is still not there. The author is not always there to explain, so questioning is not possible. So there is no space for any

miscommunication. There is a need for much greater exactness, much more correctness of language in this scenario. I need to know exactly how the other person is going to listen to it.

There is no question of cross communication. As there is no question of interactivity, so grammar becomes very important. Dictionaries become very important- a certain word can have a certain meaning. Before the coming of print or the coming of writing, certain words could be used in multiple senses. But now, even those multiple senses are specifically defined by dictionaries.

The way a sentence is constructed is fixed by grammar. There is something called poetic license in writing of poetry, you can defy the rules of grammar to a certain extent. This is nothing but a vestige of the oral form. In oral form, grammar is a misnomer; grammar does not say what you have is a rhetorical device. I as a speaker, am trying to communicate to you and whatever I say is fine as long as you understand it. It is through my rhetoric, and persuasion that I am able to convince you.

But in the written universe, I am physically not present. My only guarantee that I am able to communicate with you is that we follow a certain rule of language in which we know what the word meanings are, and we know what the sentence structure is and we communicate through it.

Another very important concept is plagiarism. In the oral universe, plagiarism is not an issue at all because, as I said, I can be a singer or a poet, I can be uttering someone else's idea or a certain song that I have picked up from somewhere. But at the end of the day, it becomes my own because it carries my impression with it in the rendering of it. So, a song could be written by Javed Akhter and sung by several singers, but, just because I am taking the song from some other singer and singing it, does not mean I am violating it. I am bringing my own voice and intonation into the singing of the song.

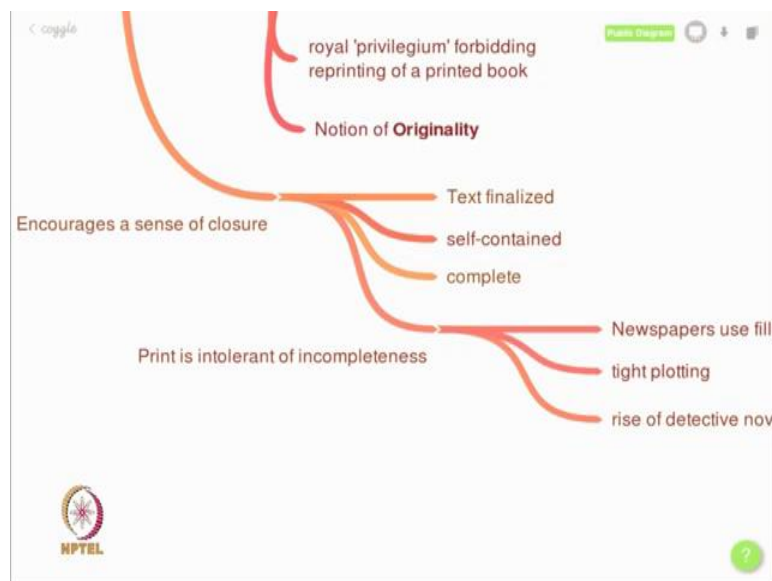
In today's world, if we talk about the present day, we will have to talk about copyright and plagiarism. All I am trying to explain to you is that something is not inherent in the oral form. Something has been borrowed because we live in a very different universe, which has been ordered and designed by print. In an oral universe, a concept of plagiarism would not exist. In fact, it would be a very important quality if one was passing knowledge from another source onto a certain audience.



So, this concept of taking somebody's ideas and passing it off as your own is not something that exists within the oral universe. But it is something that develops in the print universe. Because print is tied to the development of capitalism, and what happens is that the printer has to invest a whole lot more in the creation of a text. In the oral universe, the author/the speaker/the poet's presence is enough, whereas in the print universe, the printer has to get hold of paper, get hold of the machinery, get hold of labor, get hold of ink, the binder, everybody together and then print the volume. And once it is printed, if someone else goes and prints it, this person who initially brought that book into life will lose a lot of money.

So therefore, this idea that I have written a certain book, therefore I should gain from whatever proceeds that come from that particular book is very different, is something that develops only in the universe of print. In oral universe, you had different ways of paying for the creation of poetry, and creation of various stories; that is primarily through mechanisms of patronage. The king or the courtier would give a certain guaranteed income to the court poet, and that is how the court poet would live their lives. Whereas, in today's day and age, you have a situation where the author has money to make from the book and the printer also has money to make from the book. And that is a concept that these conditions actually give rise to- the concept of plagiarism. We look upon the taking away of ideas as plundering and stealing.

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So the notion of originality is something that develops only with the coming of print. We will talk about these issues of intellectual property a whole lot more, and so print brings about a great degree of change in the way knowledge is conceived and communicated. It is very important to know this change because we live in a largely print universe, and we take these ideas to be given and unquestioned.

But these are contextual and therefore, in order to understand that, we need to understand how writing and print actually changes the notion of communication, access to communication and relationship with communication since the era of the oral. Thank you.