The Extent of Orality[1]

Dr. Grant Lovejoy
Director of Orality Strategies
International Mission Board (SBC)

Introduction

The oral cultures of the world pose a particular challenge for conventional Christian ministry. Oral cultures are not print-oriented and do not respond well to forms of witnessing, discipling, teaching, and preaching that are based on print. So tracts, Bible distribution, fill-in-the-blanks workbooks, and bookstores are largely unappealing and ineffective within oral cultures. Even spoken communication can be so print-influenced that it has limited impact in oral cultures. Sermons built around outlines and lists of principles communicate poorly with people whose life is lived in oral cultures. Putting those same print-influenced sermons on audio cassettes does make them audible, which is a step in the right direction, but their print-based way of organizing thought is still an obstacle in communication.

Christian churches, mission organizations, and ministries have increasingly had to face the ways of communicating, relating, and thinking that characterize oral cultures. In the effort to take the gospel to all peoples, Christian workers have realized that they need to understand orality and to get a better grasp of just how extensive it is and how to respond to it. This article addresses the extent of orality; others will address how to respond to orality.

It is not a simple matter to determine the extent of orality worldwide. Anyone attempting to do it faces challenges. Chief among them is defining what orality is and determining how to measure it accurately. This article is an effort to address both matters in an introductory way, particularly with the needs of Christian ministers and missionaries in mind. Though there are multiple ways o try to estimate the extent of orality, this article addresses one of the most frequently-used and frequently-misunderstand measures, namely official literacy data. Before addressing the literacy data, however, it is first necessary to discuss what is orality.

Definition

Dictionaries define orality rather simply as "a reliance on spoken, rather than written, language for communication." Notice the phrase “reliance on.” It is significant. After all,

---

[1]This article was originally published in *Dharma Deepika*, a journal on theology and missions in India, and we express our appreciation to the journal for allowing us to share this article with an American audience.

the vast majority of people *use* spoken language extensively. But what sets orality apart is *reliance on* spoken language. To the extent that people rely on spoken communication instead of written communication, they are characterized by "orality." There are degrees of orality, depending on whether someone relies on spoken language totally or less than totally.

Note also that the definition is a positive statement. Historically those who have written about orality have typically approached it as the absence of literacy. Approaching orality as the absence of literacy focuses on what people cannot do rather than focusing on what they do. That approach takes literacy as the norm, resulting in a predictable, negative evaluation of orality.[2] Reducing the phenomenon of orality simply to "illiteracy" has often led people to conclude that orality is something to be minimized by literacy campaigns. Though literacy certainly has great value and should be encouraged, it is a mistake to take a one-dimensional and negative perspective on orality by simply equating it with illiteracy.[3]

Focusing on orality rather than illiteracy highlights the fact that people who live by orality are capable of using beautiful, sophisticated, and moving speech. They are responsible for some of the world's great verbal artistry, expressed in songs, stories, poetry, and proverbs. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey,* widely recognized as the greatest examples of epic poetry in western civilization, are oral compositions. Parts of the Bible were also composed orally before being written. So, orality should never be equated with backwardness, ignorance, or lack of intelligence.

When large numbers of people live by orality in community with one another over extended periods of time, it affects their whole culture. So a fuller description of orality takes into consideration the collection of characteristics (cognitive, communicational, and relational) that are typical of cultures that function orally. Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy* is a classic work that describes orality in considerable scholarly detail.[4] Ong distinguishes *primary orality* from *secondary orality*. Primary orality exists in communities that have no written language and little or no acquaintance with reading and writing. Primary orality is increasingly rare. *Secondary orality* depends on electronic media and the literate people who

---

[2]The English language lacks a familiar positive term for reliance on spoken communication. This shows how dominant the preference for literacy is within the English-speaking world. European friends tell me that other major languages of Europe have a similar gap.

[3]Entire mission strategies have been built on this perspective. These have had some laudable outcomes, to be sure. But they have fallen short in some obvious ways as well. The chief failing has been in making literacy a *de facto* prerequisite for full participation in the Christian faith. This happened despite the fact that the early church grew up, in fact thrived, in an environment dominated by orality. In the book of Acts the church used oral communication as its primary means of evangelism and discipleship. The possibility of returning to that vibrant, rapidly-spreading, faith-filled apostolic Christianity is a major incentive for taking orality seriously in contemporary mission strategies.

[4]Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1982).

operate it. Secondary orality uses television, radio, film, and the like to communicate the staples of oral communication: story, song, poetry, proverb, drama, and discussion.

Sociologist Tex Sample has added a third category of orality: *traditional orality*. He uses the term to refer to situations in which people are familiar with reading and writing and may themselves have learned to read and write in school, but they use oral communication for most of their daily living. Their reading and writing is largely confined to school, work, and official documents. Even in those cases they choose oral communication over print if they have the option. For example, they ask a friend or coworker to show them how to do a task instead of reading an instructional manual. They ask a supervisee to summarize a report to them orally so that they do not have to read it themselves. They see the movie instead of reading the book. They watch television news rather than reading a newspaper. Their identity, beliefs, values, and behaviors come via oral traditions learned from their family, friends, and community, not from their reading.[5]

To summarize, individuals and communities around the world rely on spoken, rather than written, communication in varying degrees. Primary oral communicators, who cannot read and write and have not been exposed to print, are oral by default. Print makes no impact on their lives. In addition, traditional oral communicators have been exposed to literacy and may be able to read and write, but they still live by orality. Their orality is often a matter of *preference* rather than absolute necessity. Finally, secondary oral communicators are the people who, regardless of educational attainment, are deeply influenced by electronically delivered forms of oral communication such as songs, stories, drama, and the like. They have a surprising amount in common with primary and traditional oral communicators. They can legitimately be considered when estimating the extent of orality in the world. Admittedly, these three categories overlap, so it is impossible to count precisely how many people are in each category. This description does, however, have the advantage of reflecting how people actually live. It serves as a reminder that any estimate of the extent of orality must take account of the varying degrees to which people are oral.

LITERACY SKILLS AND ORALITY

In principle researchers should be able to develop survey instruments to assess the degree to which individuals and cultures live by orality. But this kind of research has not been done on any widespread basis. Governments do not gather data on orality; they gather data on education and literacy. As a result, the most common way of estimating the extent of orality is to use literacy data. Where literacy rates are low, it can be inferred that orality is high by necessity. This approach has both promise and peril, as recent publications have shown.

To mark the International Literacy Day in the fall of 2003, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) put out a news release stating

---

[5]See chapter 1 of Tex Sample, *Ministry in an Oral Culture* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1994).

that almost 80% of adults worldwide are literate.[6] If the reality were as rosy as that, it would be a cause for rejoicing. But the UNESCO news release relies on easily misunderstood statistics reported by U. N. member countries. The little-known truth is that many governments use quite generous definitions of literacy, so the statistics make the situation sound much better than it really is. It is time more Christian leaders understood the actual situation, because people's level of *functional* literacy (as opposed to published data) determines how people learn, develop their values and beliefs, and pass along their culture. If, like Jesus, we plan on "speaking the word to them *as they [are] able to hear it*" (Mk. 4:33, emphasis added), we must know how people are best able to hear our message. When they are able to receive the message through a variety of means, we should seek to determine which is their *preferred* means. The stakes are too high for us to misunderstand our audience's capacities and preferences with respect to orality and literacy.

DEFINING LITERACY

Literacy experts raise three fundamental, interrelated concerns about the published figures on worldwide literacy. They question how nations define literacy, how they gather the literacy data, and how the nations and others report it. First of all, they say that categorizing people as being either "literate" or "illiterate" is simplistic and misleading. As the UNESCO Institute for Statistics puts it, "Measuring literacy is not just a matter of saying who can read and who cannot. Literacy skills are needed at many different levels, from writing one's name on a form, to understanding instructions on a medicine bottle, to the ability to learn from reading books."[7] If we regard people as being either literate or illiterate—no other options allowed—then we tend to count people as literate if they can merely sign their name or read a simple sentence about familiar things. After all, we reason, they *can* read, at least simple materials. (This is a bare-minimum definition of "read," by the way, which is itself part of the confusion.) If we call such people illiterate, they are likely to protest and attempt to prove that they can indeed "read," however haltingly. But signing their name or reading a poster is a far cry from reading a government document or the Bible *with understanding*. Just being able to sound out the words does not indicate that people can learn new concepts through reading. British educators Donna Thomson and Ruth Nixey discovered that many of their students tested well as readers on certain standardized tests, but in fact comprehended very little of what they read. Careful additional testing revealed "an extraordinary discrepancy between the children's ability to read and their overall comprehension. The evidence showed that many had very impressive decoding skills but alarmingly poor understanding of the text in comparison."[8] The ability to vocalize text also

---

[6]"Statistics Show Slow Progress toward Universal Literacy," http://www.uis.unesco.org/ev.php?ID=5063_201&ID2=DO_TOPIC.

[7]Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme of the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (LAMP). See http://www.uis.unesco.org/TEMPLATE/pdf/LAMP/LAMPLeafletEng.pdf.

[8]See Donna Thomson and Ruth Nixey, "Thinking to Read, Reading to Think: Bringing Meaning, Reasoning and Enjoyment to Reading," *Literacy Today* (September 2005). An edited version of their article is available at

does not prove that the readers will embrace new values through reading. Simplistic either/or distinctions about literacy continue to obscure this reality.

To correct this misunderstanding, leading literacy researchers have ceased referring to people as either "literate" or "illiterate" as though a person is simply one or the other. Instead, researchers distinguish four or five levels of skill with literacy.[9] Despite researchers' pleas, most countries still group people into just the two categories. For the reasons mentioned above, this makes it difficult to get accurate descriptions of the state of literacy (and thus the extent of orality). But what makes matters even worse for international statisticians is that each country is free to define "literate" for its own purposes. As a result, governments use widely different definitions of literacy. These definitions are crucial because they determine how many people will be counted as literate when the data-gathering takes place—often as part of a national census.

In March 2004 the UNESCO Institute for Statistics released a document telling how various nations define "literate." Note the wide range of definitions and how generous some of them are:

- Malaysia says anyone aged 10 years and over who has *ever* been to school is counted as literate.
- Burkina Faso says anyone who declares that he or she can read and write in either one national language or one foreign language is counted literate.
- In Ecuador and Bolivia census takers count people as illiterate if the people state that they cannot read or write.
- Belize considers persons who are 14+ years old and who have 7 or 8 years at primary level or from secondary level up to be literate.

---

http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/database/primary/thomsonnixey.html and is the source for this quotation. It was accessed Oct. 28, 2005.

[9]In the early 1980s UNESCO recommended its member bodies use four terms: illiterate, literate, functionally illiterate, and functionally literate. See *UNESCO's Standard-Setting Instruments*. Incorporating Supplement 1 (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1981-2), 4, quoted in Ursula Giere, *Functional Illiteracy in Industrialized Countries: An Analytical Bibliography*. UIE Studies on Post-Literacy and Continuing Education: Functional Illiteracy in Industrialized Countries, no. 3. (Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Education, 1987), 28. Major studies conducted in the 1990s identified five levels of skill, calling them simply Level 1, Level 2, etc. See Irwin S. Kirsch, Ann Jungeblut, Lynn Jenkins, and Andrew Kolstad, *Adult Literacy in America: A First Look at the Results of the National Adult Literacy Survey* (Washington, D. C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 1993) for descriptions of the NALS categories. The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) used the same categories and terminology. The most recent major U. S. study, one comparable to the NALS, used the terms "below basic," "basic," "intermediate," and "proficient" to characterize four ranges of literacy skill. See *National Assessment of Adult Literacy*: *A First Look at the Literacy of America's Adults in the 21st Century* (Washington, D. C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2005), 3.

- Pakistan says a person who can read a newspaper and write a simple letter in any language is treated as literate.[10]

By comparison, *UNESCO's Standard-Setting Instruments* describes as literate any person "who can with understanding both read and write a short simple statement on his everyday life."[11] With such varied definitions or measurements of literacy, it is unwise to compare the reported literacy rates in one country with reported literacy rates from another.[12] It is also unwise to lump this disparate group of measurements into a single worldwide literacy statistic.

GATHERING LITERACY DATA

These different approaches to estimating literacy reflect budget realities and other factors in developing countries.[13] Most developing countries lack the funds and expertise to test literacy skills directly. Instead, they try to estimate literacy levels through less demanding methods, such as simply asking people whether they are literate or illiterate, as is done in

---

[10]http://www.uis.unesco.org/TEMPLATE/html/Exceltables/education/View_Table_Literacy_04March04.xls.

[11]*UNESCO's Standard-Setting Instruments*, 4, cited in Giere, 28.

[12]There is a tendency to assume that someone counted "literate" in one country has the same skills that literates in other countries do. But this is not true, in part because the countries are not using the same definition of literacy. Nor is it safe to assume that ten years of schooling—even within a single country--produces an equivalent outcome at every school. Equal amounts of school attendance do not produce equal outcomes. Some students graduate from secondary school ready for elite universities; others, sad to say, graduate from secondary school barely able to read their diplomas. All are secondary school graduates, but their literacy skills differ dramatically.

[13]Economic and political factors may also influence definitions of literacy. When major international lenders such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank include literacy rates in their lending criteria, governments have an incentive to define "literate" in generous terms so that they can report higher rates of literacy. Additionally, government officials like to report improving literacy levels. India's human development resources minister, Murli Manohar Joshi, for example, was quick to protest in 2005 when UNESCO used 1991 data instead of figures from India's 2001 census. UNESCO projected a 57.2% literacy rate based on the 1991 data; Joshi said India's literacy rate was 65%. UNESCO officials explained that India had submitted their most recent data too late to be included in the report, but Moshi was insistent that UNESCO give India credit for its progress in literacy. Whether Joshi or UNESCO is right is not the issue. The point is that government officials are sensitive to public perceptions. It should come as no surprise that they gather and report literacy data in a way that puts them, their party, and their country in the best possible light. (See "Joshi Locks Literacy Horns with UNESCO," *The Telegraph*, Nov. 7, 2005; www.telegraphindia.com/1031108/asp/others/print.html, accessed March 21, 2006.)

Burkina Faso, Ecuador, and Bolivia. Other countries, such as Malaysia and Belize, estimate literacy based on school enrollment or the number of years of education. These methods of gathering literacy data inflate literacy statistics. They do not account for the poor quality of some schools, learning disabilities, spotty attendance, and social promotions. The *World Development Report 2004* included these sobering findings.

> While most teachers try conscientiously to do their jobs, one recent survey found a third of all teachers in Uttar Pradesh, India, absent. Cases of malfeasance by teachers are distressingly present in many settings: teachers show up drunk, are physically abusive, or simply do nothing. This is not "low-quality" teaching—this is not teaching at all.
>
> The 1994 Tanzania Primary School Leavers Examination suggested that the vast majority of students had learned almost *nothing* that was tested in their seven years of schooling—more than four-fifths scored less than 13 percent correct in language or mathematics.[14]

Simply attending a certain number of years of school does not guarantee that students have learned what they were expected to learn.

The above methods of estimating literacy also do not account for the likelihood of reversion. Students dropping out before completing eight years of good-quality education may revert to *functional illiteracy* if they do not keep reading regularly. "A person is *functionally illiterate* who cannot engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his group and community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his own and the community's development." Likewise, a person is "functionally literate" who can do all those activities.[15]

The phenomenon of reverting to functional illiteracy is well known among literacy workers. When India's Human Resources Development Ministry released its 2003-2004 report, it celebrated a 13.17% increase in literacy from 1991-2001, calling it the highest increase in any decade. Over 108 million people had acquired literacy, an extraordinary achievement. But a news article about the report said, "The report acknowledges that the basic literacy skills acquired by millions of neo-literates are at best fragile with a greater possibility of them regressing into partial or total illiteracy unless special efforts are continued to consolidate, sustain, and possibly enhance their literacy levels."[16] This phenomenon is not limited to India. Reversion occurs in many places.

Students may have been reading at their grade level when they left school, but if they do not keep reading regularly, their reading skills atrophy. They are not absolutely illiterate,

---

[14]*World Development Report 2004*, 112.

[15]*UNESCO's Standard-Setting Instruments*, 4, cited in Giere, 28.

[16]"India's Literacy Rate Is Now 65 Percent," *Indo-Asian News Service,* Sept. 4, 2004; online article at http://in.news.yahoo.com/040904/43/2fvlo.html, accessed March 21, 2006.

but they have lost the literacy skills to function as a literate in society. They learn via what they see, experience, and hear rather than what they read. Speech, not print, is their primary form of communication.

People who have attended school but have "below basic" skills may not be able to do literate tasks like completing a job application, reading the instructions on a medicine bottle, or learning a new task from an instruction manual or book. Despite this, their government almost certainly will count them as literates. This is the primary factor that makes the 80% adult literacy figure so misleading. Judging from the results of direct testing of literacy skills in many countries, a large percentage of those counted as literate in UNESCO statistics seem to be functionally illiterate by the UNESCO-recommended definition.

As previously noted, international literacy experts know these realities. UNESCO literacy experts themselves confess the inadequacy of the data with which they work:

> *Existing measures of literacy are inadequate.* Most data on adult literacy are not sufficiently reliable to serve the needs of national and international users. Generally, they rely either on individuals' self-declaration of their own literacy or on "proxy" indicators such as their educational levels. These are indirect measures, which have been shown not to reflect reality very accurately. Moreover, they are not always collected on a consistent basis, so can be difficult to compare, and there are many data gaps. More reliable measures require people's literacy ability to be assessed *directly*, in surveys that test their skills."[17]

Literacy scholars advocate direct testing of literacy skills because it is a much more accurate—although politically uncomfortable—measure of literacy.

Direct testing of literacy skills in the western industrialized countries has proven this point with embarrassing consistency. The National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) administered by the U. S. Department of Education in the early 1990s found that 48-51% of adults in the U. S. scored at the two lowest literacy levels (out of five levels).[18] When the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) tested adults in a 22-country project from 1994-98, similar results emerged in Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Portugal, Poland, New Zealand, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere.[19] Political

---

[17]Literacy Assessment and Monitoring Programme of the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (LAMP). See http://www.uis.unesco.org/TEMPLATE/pdf/LAMP/LAMPLeafletEng.pdf. Their emphasis.

[18]Irwin S. Kirsch, Ann Jungeblut, Lynn Jenkins, and Andrew Kolstad, *A First Look at the Findings of the National Adult Literacy Survey*, 3d ed. (Washington: U. S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 2002).

[19]See http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/facts/IALS.html. See also Albert Tuijnman, *Benchmarking Adult Literacy in America: An International Comparative Study* (Washington, DC: U.

and educational leaders discovered that 45-55% of their adult population actually had low levels of prose, document, and numerical literacy. These participants lacked the skills for handling complex reading material and lengthy documents, though few people were absolutely illiterate. Most of them could read to some degree, but not enough to do the full range of tasks it takes to function as a literate person in those societies. Approximately half of the adult populations in these countries proved to have inadequate literacy skills, yet many of these countries had been reporting literacy rates of 95% or more. Denmark, which claimed a literacy rate of 100%, recently discovered that "every second person has a problem with reading" and "every third person does not read anything significantly."[20] Governments often count people as "literate" because they complete a certain number of years of school. But actual testing of their literacy abilities reveals that many have inadequate literacy skills.

If this is true in affluent developed countries after generations of compulsory education, then it raises serious questions about literacy data from developing nations where the schools get meager funding and literacy is a relatively recent phenomenon. In light of the NALS, IALS, and NAAL results, one could reasonably project that at minimum half of the world's adults should be considered to have low literacy skills. Some who have studied the matter closely contend that approximately two-thirds of the adult population of the world is illiterate or functionally illiterate.[21] (More about this will be said below.) It is no wonder that scholars who have studied the issues conclude that the method of gathering national literacy data is woefully inadequate in many countries of the world.

REPORTING LITERACY STATISTICS

Researchers' third concern relates to the improper use of this flawed literacy data. Researcher David Archer of Actionaid UK points out that even when people know the limitations of literacy statistics, they still use them improperly:

> One of the biggest obstacles to change in literacy programmes is the way in which literacy statistics are used at an international level. Most international reports on literacy now start with a cautionary word about the accuracy of the figures used. The draft of the 2002 *Education for All Monitoring Report* is no exception in this, recognizing clearly that the present international data on literacy is unreliable. However, this report follows the pattern of many before it. *After a brief acknowledgement of the*

S. Department of Education, 2000); also available at http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/Benchmrk/2.htm.

[20]Viggo Sogaard, *Evangelizing Our World: Insights from Global Inquiry* (Pattaya, Thailand: 2004 Forum for World Evangelization, 2004), 11. Furthermore, in late 2005 the U. S. released findings from its *National Assessment of Adult Literacy*, conducted in 2003. NAAL discovered that in direct testing of literacy skills, approximately 43% of adults in the U. S. had "below basic" or "basic" skills in prose literacy. These figures are virtually unchanged from the 1992 NALS survey. In 2003, 44% scored at the "intermediate" level, and only 13% scored "proficient" in prose literacy, which involves reading and understanding text consisting of paragraphs, like newspaper articles and books.

[21]James B. Slack, J. O. Terry, et al., *Chronological Bible Storying* (forthcoming).

> *flimsiness of the statistics, any doubts are rapidly forgotten and precise figures routinely quoted—such that we forget their inaccuracy and create the illusion that we do know or understand the situation—when this is far from the truth.*[22]

Agencies like UNESCO report questionable statistics because that often is the best information that they have, even if it is far from accurate. *Their literacy experts know full-well the limitations of the data and write disclaimers about its limitations, but many people, especially non-specialists, ignore or soon forget the warnings.* Even today well-meaning Christian leaders are making strategic decisions based on statements like the one in the UNESCO news release about how almost 80% of adults worldwide are literate. The full story, which actually shows how misleading the 80% figure is, often lies buried in footnotes and appendices or is published in obscure documents read mainly by specialists.

ESTIMATING THE EXTENT OF ORALITY

By carefully studying the footnotes and specialist reports, by making some educated guesses and projections, it is possible to reach a very rough estimate of how many people in the world live by orality either by necessity or by preference. This procedure cannot produce anything approaching a precise number. The argument to this point has stressed the difficulties with the literacy data. But churches, Christian ministries, and mission organizations need at least some idea of the relative extent of orality. They are making strategic decisions every year and cannot wait until governments around the world provide scrupulously accurate data about literacy in their countries. Ministries need to know whether the UNESCO report claiming nearly 80% of adults worldwide as literate is true.

We begin our estimating with the direct testing of literacy skills done over the last fifteen years in twenty-two countries, most of them in Western Europe and North America. The NALS, IALS, and NAAL studies found that almost 50% of adults in the participating countries of Western Europe and North America have limited literacy skills. To use NAAL terminology, they function at the level of "below basic" or "basic" literacy.[23] It seems very likely that other regions of the world would do no better.[24] Many regions of the world

---

[22]David Archer, "Literacy as Freedom: Challenging Assumptions and Changing Practice," in *Literacy as Freedom: A UNESCO Round-table* (Paris: UNESCO, 2003), 42. Emphasis added.

[23]"'Below basic' indicates no more than the most simple and concrete literacy skills." People at this level can sign a form or search a short simple text to determine what a patient can drink before a test. "'Basic' indicates skills necessary to perform simple and everyday literacy activities" such using a television guide to determine what programs are on at a particular time. See *National Assessment of Adult Literacy*, 3.

[24]Some individual countries, such as Japan, might do better than the averages in Western Europe and North America, of course. The point here has to do with the larger picture, the extent of orality in whole regions or continents.

would score worse, given their less-developed educational systems and weaker traditions of literacy. Because the affluent countries of Western Europe and North America account for about a sixth of the world's population and less developed ones account for most of the remainder, it seems reasonable to suggest that considerably more than half, perhaps 65-70% of the world's adults have "below basic" or "basic" literacy skills. Because adults make up about 70% of the world population, we can estimate that approximately 3 billion adults live largely by orality by virtue of having no literacy or limited literacy skills.

To those 3 billion we must add the children under the age of fifteen who have no literacy or limited literacy skills.[25] According to 2002 figures, 29% of the world population was under age fifteen and comprised a higher percentage of the population in the developing countries of the world (32%) and the least developed countries of the world (43%).[26] For the purposes of our rough estimating, about half of the children are so young, ages birth to seven years, that they must be counted as oral. So we can add them to our total, about 900 million of them. As for those ages, eight to fifteen, the situation varies from country to country. Some may read better than the average adult in their country because their school experience is fresh and the adults had little education or have regressed in their literacy. Other children, suffering from the educational limitations in their community or simply because adults in their country have many years of education, may be less adept as readers than the adults in their society. Again, just for the sake of simplicity, suppose that approximately half of the children ages eight to fifteen have below basic or basic literacy. Assume that they do neither better nor worse than adults in Western Europe and North America. This approximation adds another 450 million or so to the total.

So if there are 3 billion adults, 900 million very young children, and 450 million children between the ages of eight and fifteen with basic or below basic literacy, then 4.35 billion people in the world are oral by virtue of their limited literacy. That is approximately 70% of the world's population. Even a rough estimate like this one, which makes no claim of precision, reveals how misleading the UNESCO report is. Even if the estimate being offered here is off by a billion people, it still serves notice that literacy skills are far more limited than one might conclude from reading headlines celebrating nearly 80% literacy among adults worldwide.

---

[25]Literacy data is frequently reported on ages 15-65 or 16-65, but as noted above, some countries include children as young as age ten when they count who is literate. The estimates being offered here do not allow for such discrepancies. Coming to precise worldwide figures is impossible, for reasons noted above. To reiterate, this is simply a rough estimate to get some idea of the magnitude of orality.

[26]*Human Development Report 2004* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2004), 155.

The estimating task, however, is not complete. The 4.35 billion estimate does not include people who have good literacy skills but who nonetheless live by secondary orality as a matter of preference. In the United States and Europe, recent studies have documented that people are doing less pleasure reading or leisure reading. Dana Gioia, chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, which sponsored the U. S. study of literary reading, summarized the findings:

> This comprehensive survey of American literary reading presents a detailed, but bleak assessment of the decline of reading's role in the nation's culture. For the first time in modern history, less than half of the adult population now reads literature, and these trends reflect a larger decline in other sorts of reading.[27]

This decline is most notable among younger Americans. "Literary reading in America is not only declining rapidly among all groups, but the rate of decline has accelerated, especially among the young."[28] The NAAL study found that in 1992, 40% of college graduates had "proficient" prose literacy skills; in 2003, only 31% of college graduates were at that level.[29] Similar trends have been emerging in Western Europe. British teenagers' pleasure reading, for instance, declined by about a third from 1991-1998.[30] It is difficult to quantify how these decreases in literacy skill affect orality, but neither should they be ignored. They hint at a growing secondary orality, even among the college educated. So the true extent of orality—primary, traditional, and secondary—includes people whose orality is not by necessity, but by preference. Identifying them is difficult, so estimating their numbers is difficult. But the fact that they are hard to count does not mean they can be ignored.

Christian groups who unwittingly accept governments' literacy statistics at face value are likely to perpetuate a tragic mistake. They will believe that the people to whom they minister are more literate than they actually are. They will continue to train their workers to use literate teaching and preaching approaches. Oral people will not grasp the literate teaching, but they will be reluctant to admit that there is a problem or tell what the problem is. Ministry leaders may conclude that people are spiritually unresponsive when the real culprit is the literate form of teaching that the teachers are using.

---

[27]*Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*, research division report no. 46 (Washington, D. C.: National Endowment for the Humanities, 2004), vii.

[28]Ibid. In the NEA research, "literary reading" includes reading materials such as romance novels. "Literary reading" was not limited to "literary classics" or "high culture" literature.

[29]*National Assessment of Adult Literacy*, 15.

[30]*Young People in 1998*, a report compiled from surveys of 18,221 pupils by the Schools Health Education Unit based at Exeter University. Available at http://www.sheu.org.uk/pubs/yp98.htm.

On the other hand, ministries who adjust their approach to the literacy level of their group, whatever that level may be, can expect improved communication, more learning, and more life-change among the hearers. Oral communicators find it easier to pass along their faith, too, if they have heard it in a way that fits their normal style of communication. That has already been the experience of a number of international ministries who have, as a result, come together to form the International Orality Network. The group exists to share insights and network with others committed to taking the message of the Bible to those who learn best orally. Such people are more likely to be transformed when the message of the Bible comes through their traditional communication forms such as stories, proverbs, songs, chants, ceremonies and rituals, dance, and the like.[31] Major missionary organizations and ministries such as Campus Crusade for Christ, the International Mission Board (SBC), TWR, Wycliffe Bible Translators, and Youth with a Mission (YWAM) have recently launched a significant initiative, the OneStory partnership, to reach out to the oral communicators of the world. They are using Chronological Bible Storying, one of several communications strategies developed with this need in mind.[32] 'Scriptures In Use' trains grass roots church planters to use oral methods in their work. Many other organizations have incorporated orality-friendly approaches into their work. They have collaborated in publishing *Making Disciples of Oral Learners*,[33] which includes many suggestions about improving effectiveness in working with people who live by orality.

We can do effective ministry with people whose preferred way of learning is oral rather than written. Jesus turned the world upside down with disciples who were derisively called "uneducated and untrained men" (Acts 4:13). But first we have to understand them and how they can best learn. To do that, we will need to get beneath the surface of the literacy statistics.

---

[31]See www.oralBible.com.

[32] See www.chronologicalbiblestorying.com.

[33] *Making Disciples of Oral Learners,* Lausanne Occasional Paper, no. 54 (Bangalore: Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization and International Orality Network, 2005).