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The Fourth Technologisation of the Word: Social Media as the New Vista in Literary Expression

Aghogho Agbamu

Abstract

Literary expression has undergone a slow but steady and exciting evolution through millennia, significantly conditioned by the technological capacity of succeeding civilisations. More or less, literature, both as a creative enterprise and cultural artefact, has been influenced by its modes of transmission – extinct and extant. Consequently, form and genre, as well as readers and audiences, have been affected by the changing ways generations have preferred to transmit and express the literary. In formal or generic feature and their reception, literature continues to invoke radical epochal portraitures and expectations, largely due to the flux of its medium as corroborated by McLuhan's (1964) now-canonical phrase – "the medium is the message". Consequently, the exploration of the veracity of literature's conditioning, more by the medium than by form and content, can help organise the principles of the rapport between *the word* and *technology*. Social media as the newest vista in the mediation of literary consciousness from creator to the receiver has indexed a radical cultural episteme, rife with repercussions for the conventional interfacing of authorship, readership, textuality and the mutual universe that binds them. The present study pursues a critique of literary expression through the agency of the internet, as a sequel-discourse to Ong's ethnographic analysis of civilisation and epoch, technologising literary practices from preliterate to literate. The objective here is to index the advent of social media as the latest attempt to technologise the literary and its culture, and account for how this advent has birthed new departures in literary form and genre.

Keywords: social media, Ong, literary expression, McLuhan, technologisation of the word.

Introduction: The first three technologies

As a transcript-centric exercise, the history and 'civilisation' of literature have been a three-step capital investment in what Walter Ong (1982) describes as "the technologisation of the word". Preliterate societies that memorialised their cultural institutions with oral repertoires of indigenous knowledge systems have had to consider the necessity for evolution. The ensuing documentation of cultural heritage has been a shift from the ephemeral but dynamic to the fixity and stasis of written matter (Goody, 2000, pp. 26-46). Ong avers that every civilisation has initiated this shift by technologising 'the word' through chirography or manuscripts. The African continent debuted this fixity of oral culture in the Pyramid Texts (ca. 2400-2300 BC) and the "Egyptian Book of the Dead" (ca. 2300-2100 BC) – esoteric corpora of funerary incantations and spells placed in or carved into tombs, to guide the dead in the afterlife. The beginning of Western literature is credited to the ancient Mesopotamian epic, *Gilgamesh* (ca. 2000 BC). In the Indian subcontinent, there was the *Vedas*, the essential dogma of Hinduism versed in Sanskrit (ca. 1500-1200 BC); and the Chinese literary tradition debuting with the *Shujing*, a collection of history, possibly stretching to the early Western Zhou period (ca. 1046-771 BC) (*The New York Times*, 2011).

Ong's second step of a civilisation's attempt to technologise its culture and literary expression is print. Johannes Gutenberg and Aldo Manuzio are famed for their mass printing revolutions in Mainz (1450) and Venice (1494) respectively. Their press helped revolutionise personal reading, by making paper prints inexpensive to satisfy the demands of an increasingly literate population in Renaissance Europe. The Renaissance owed its ignition to print technology as it enabled humanists to take advantage of the sharp increase in literacy to circulate ideas; breaking the monopoly of the literate elite on education and learning, and bolstering the emerging middle class. Gutenberg's and Manuzio's print revolutions also certainly enabled the Reformation and Age of Enlightenment, as well as the scientific revolution, by materialising the basis for a modern knowledge-based economy (Eisenstein, 1980; Febvre & Martin, 1984; Fletcher III, 1988; Grant, 2017; Man, 2002; McLuhan, 1962). The influence of energetic, indigenous, print literary expression in Southern Nigeria, including the 1875 translation of the Yoruba Bible and early 1900s serialised fiction in local language newspapers, on culture, religion, literacy and literature, is well documented. The mercantile enthusiasm of the Onitsha market tradition from the 1940s to 1967 has also been admitted as a significant enabler of the shift of literary energies from the oral and folk, to the fixity of the page (Nwoga, 2002; Obiechina, 1973; Onoriose, 2007; Maledo & Emama, 2020).

The third step Ong figures in the attempt at technologising literary culture, after handwriting and print, is the digitisation of both chirography and physical print into the intangibility of discs and bytes, aided especially by electronic media and its proliferation. As computerised and media-enabled devices like the television, disc player, laptop and smartphone find increasing use and importance in our cultural construction and consumption of information, the literary agency has changed a great deal. By converting hundreds of print pages into 'soft copies', transferrable by hard discs, electronic mail and Bluetooth technology, culture itself, especially literary expression, has increasingly migrated from material to immaterial. Surely, materiality resides even in 'soft copies' and their bytes; but their 'immateriality' set them apart during transference, either by transmission or download. In the case of hard print, such transference would be physical exertion. Such post-typographic transmission Ong (1962, pp. 133-34) posits, extends both oral and post-oral culture (chirography and print), and further intensifies the deployment of the word from oral knowledge into tangible space and virtually immediate electronic motion. With this, 'secondary orality' has become the new consciousness in the electronic technologisation of the word. Electronic technology has come to depend on a self-conscious meta-application of orality, chirography and print for its manufacture and operation. Electronic technology is a 'secondary orality' because it refixes oral culture digitally, and extends the cultural possibilities of penmanship and the press, especially by its capacity to fix the ephemerality of orality through transcription.

But in 1982, even Ong would not have presaged the recent turn that social and literary culture has taken to technologise 'the word'. As if digital encroachment on print capitalism has not been enough to threaten a displacement of book fetishism, the "technologisation of the word" has come to adopt a highly restless interpersonal system of yoking by satellite. In this system, human authorship is mediated by avatars, adopted online identities or 'usernames', and the limited but trademarked protocols of messaging and microblogging platforms. This praxis has altered the cultural values and aesthetic intentions that usually condition the conception, production and reception of literary expression. It has also shaped how author and reader (now 'audience') perform identity and cultural knowledge upon texts that are now more 'textual' (if not 'intertextual') than transcribed. Ong may not have envisaged the idea of social media, as a bookmark for the fourth "technologisation of the word", that provides the means to merge calligraphy, print capitalism and digitised infinity, with an intense interactional praxis.

Social media: The influence on literary culture and expression

Perhaps Ong (1962) did foresee something, or at least, got a whiff of what could arrive, in the evolution of the word, and the technologisation thereof. Secondary orality is analysed ominously: as in print culture where readers are turned in on themselves; electronic agencies turn audiences in on themselves, programming therefrom a strong sense of group where self-referentiality and interaction form the praxis. In this regard, electronic culture first turns audiences inward (self-referentiality) in such an intense cultural experience, that they have to turn themselves outward (interaction) (p. 134). The interaction and sense of group, relative to primary orality, is however usually more expansive and acute, such that it nests comfortably in McLuhan's (1964) now famed idiom – "global village".

Social media is a holdall of internet websites, networking platforms and technological practices that enable collaborative information construction. These new media technologies enable a wide array of electronic and virtual creative expressiveness, working eminently with resources for blogging, photo, audio, video and text. Such is the growing clout of social media, and its usage has surged globally in recent years, with a platform like YouTube amassing over three billion views daily (Bryer & Zavatarro, 2011; Chen & Bryer, 2012; Emama, 2017). Recent estimates put the number of global social network users at about 3.6 billion, anticipating a rise to 4.41 billion in 2025. Currently, Facebook is the market leader in the industry with over 2.7 billion monthly active users, as of the computed second quarter of 2020 (de Castro et al., 2022).

As new websites and mobile applications are relentlessly introduced, the definition of what constitutes social media has become increasingly fluid. Extant definitions are thus comprehensive, accounting for a plethora of mediums, even including video games. In its encompassment, social media features technology that facilitates the production, dissemination and interaction of information, (either as public or user-generated content) across the internet. Such content can be communicated on platforms for casual socialisation and photo/video sharing like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Vine and Snapchat; specialised blogging platforms like Blogger, Tumblr and WordPress; sourced-information discussion platforms like Pinterest and Reddit; or more professional networks like LinkedIn, Academia and ResearchGate (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Robbins & Singer, 2014). van Dijck

(2013) orders social media into four types while accepting that the distinction between them is not fixed. There are social networking sites based on establishing and maintaining contact between people, but weak in actual social ties. Then there are user-generated content platforms that permit sharing from multiple devices like YouTube and Flickr; trading sites, like Amazon, eBay, Konga and Jumia; and game sites like Farmville. A large 'union' under which social media falls is 'Web 2.0', which describes how both software developers and users utilise the internet to consume, share, and remix data from multiple sources, peer and non-peer. Web 2.0 foregrounds collaborative and innovative production, where expertise and knowledge are dispersed and improved upon (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; O'Reilly, 2007; Emama, 2020). Wikipedia is a popular example of Web 2.0.

Several social networking websites debuted in the 1990s after the development of the World Wide Web. The creation and popularisation of the internet and the 'www' catalysed the connection among the latter computer technology. The relationship between web-enabled devices intensified from 2000 onwards, clearly impacted by globalisation, the vogueing of the internet, the rise of the middle class in developing countries, and the consequent accretion of individual dynamism worldwide. This created a demand for new technology to better facilitate social interaction. In 2000, social media channels started to appear with new interaction tools and possibilities for personalisation (de Castro et al., 2022). In literary print capitalism where the Aristotelian exclusivity and separability of authorial spirits (tragic or comic), Barthes' (1967) figural execution of the author, and Eliot's (1920) authorial isolation of 'tradition' versus 'individual talent' are core concepts. But the social media space is essentially a marketplace too loud for the aforesaid. On social media, web-based or mobile application services empower individuals to devise public or semi-public profiles within a determinate network, establish other users with whom they share a connection, and traverse pages of mutual connections within the system (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). The author and audience are thus in constant interaction and counteraction.

Jenkins (2006) terms this praxis "convergence culture", where assorted multimedia creations overlap and parody each other in a complex participatory culture and collective authorship of consciousness. This culture alters the rapport between extant media, industries, genres and audiences, and the logic upon which traditional media services the processing of consumer information. This convergence culture, however, is not an end-point, but a process in perpetuity as social media networks continue to engineer technical updates and interfaces with one another (as Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp have been merged into Meta). Social media fosters relationships between users of varied orientations and backgrounds, constituting therefrom, a cohesive social structure (Stewart, 2016). Extant new media technology (smartphones, smart televisions, smartwatches, computers), is tuned to enable innovation, communication, community and convergence. They collaborate seamlessly with a social media demand for online participation, constituting a two-way range of interaction and engagement (Khajeheian & Ebrahimi, 2021).

Such collaborative and polydispersed praxis is a hyperreader-response construct that harks back to Tolstoy's 'complex hypnotism' in his 1898 article, "What is Art?". Tolstoy, approaching art for its emotional infectiousness, renders that the best art warps the receiver or audience into a special liaison with both the producer of the art, and other receivers or audiences who experienced the artistry, whether simultaneously, previously, or afterwards. In Tolstoy's characterisation of art as consciousness and a medium of communication and empathy, the intercourse of author and audience unites the emotions of someone in the audience to the author, and then with other persons in the audience, towards a meta-cathartic mesmerism. This is what social media is doing to literary culture and expression: using user engagement to transmit information and index the ensuing participation, such that the audience can reclaim the clout of textual origination and reshape the infrastructure of the information, through how they choose to collectively receive it. Comment sections, repost capabilities and parody culture are reshaping the dimensions and traffic of literary creation, diffusion and reception; making it increasingly imperative to realise that the text is fluid.

Without funnelling into technological determinism, it would be interesting to see how literary expression in social media varies from platform to platform, and challenges prevailing assumptions about the social and the idea of the self, in relation to authorship and audience-ship. Notions such as the networked self, where self-identity in public and private life may traverse yet remain distinct, have consequences for individuals and online socialism, as represented in social media literary expression. Social networking sites facilitate complex and antithetical ways of curating and authoring selfhood. Writers have always struggled with these complex negotiations of the self, the public and the private, the individual and society; but in the social media age, these liminal agencies are embedded into mundane life in ways that offer new opportunities as well as new tensions

(Paparachissi, 2013). Literary culture has not only been influenced by social media but has today become popular culture, as the encounter with literature as text (oral and written), has been usurped by the popular media's relatively more scrutable tastes (Collins, 2010).

Certain characteristics of social media interactions deeply influence narrative practices. The literary content on social media is usually not linear and continuous, but reactive and episodic, where specific incidents and events condition the sway of online traffic, as determined by users and their personalised page settings. The distinct attributes offered by each social media site affect the sort of content that can be fashioned, and how their ensuing interaction is managed (De Fina, 2016). Though social media services trivia and the ephemeral, and fertilises the individual ego, it is not exactly different from literature's reputation for insightful and revolutionary influence on the present human condition. The 'post-press' clout of social media has found a niche outside print capitalism and negotiated upon the confluence of literary and digital culture, and artistic and economic possibilities (Thomas, 2020).

Aside from foregrounding and privileging the first-person, 'post-press literature' is defeating book fetishism; and with the modern generation addicted to their smartphones, many hidden talents have been inspired to reach larger audiences without doing more than just posting. However, the majority of the posts are not constructed based on isolated subjective purity. Be they audiovisuals or photos, many of the authors refer to and tag relational elements, like the original owner of the featured song, the friend who took the picture, the other friend who appeared in it, the hilarious video being captioned but downloaded from another page, which could have itself been so downloaded (Amritha et al., 2019). The context of such praxis is metamodernist. This generation of social media art is increasingly abandoning postmodernist deconstruction, parataxis, and pastiche, for reconstruction, myth, and in-between-ness. New vistas in social media literary expression perform the complex role of individual/private versus social/public vis-à-vis offline-ness and online-ness, by existing beyond irony and sincerity, naïveté and knowingness, relativism and truth, and optimism and doubt, in pursuit of a plurality of selfness, yet an authenticity (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010). Many content makers and online artistes, by increasingly trying to blur the divide between reality and performance, only to manage to emphasise artifice and performativity instead.

Social media has influenced literary expression by the way multimodal texts cohere in cyberspace towards creating a pedagogy of multiliteracies that can augur social blueprints for a netizen culture organised upon digital globalisation. Increasingly innovative departures of literary expression from the new media have been appropriated for political propaganda, corrective burlesque, democratic consolidation, social mobilisation, and economic development. More so, even the human agency of intelligent creation is being crept into by the burgeoning capabilities of artificial intelligence to imitate extant rhetoric of new media socialisation, and perform them through bots, as if they were human.

Technologising the word, mediating the message

Through the use of apparatuses like the brush, pen, papyrus, scroll, ink and paper, writing sought a conversion of orality from the animated and dynamic, to fixity and quiescence. The writing was the first and most drastic technology upon the word, grounding the oral and aural tyrannically into a visual transcript, and without offering the possibility of responsiveness. Writing mediated between consciousness and expression, through the sedateness of representing specific words with specific pictograms, and obeisance to grammatical rules. The implications were rife: alone, spoken words could exist not just as soliloquies or monologues, but as disseminated information (Ong, 1982, pp. 12, 78, 80-81). The written medium changed forever not just the content, but the message itself. As 'the word' became adjusted to fit its chirographic technologisation, it had to shed some oral features. Even as writing tried to technologise orality to make it wider and more efficient in transmission, it created an upheaval of local cultures by foregrounding inevitable globalised values. The word changed when it was technologised, because it had to first be codified in an alien agency, and then re-presented by being represented: the medium is the message.

McLuhan (1964) had extensively theorised that, while scholarship had fallen for the lure of approaching the word's technologies for their consequence on content, the truth resided in how these technologies (or 'media', or 'mediums') mediate the word by founding new forms for that purpose. Every medium carries with it a distinct psychic and social implication so critical, that as it extends extant media, it converts the pre-existing into the content. McLuhan extends man and the word, by theorising that if the narcissistic hypnosis of media studies is taken out of the way, we will realise how much the characteristic of every medium is defined by content that is

a usurpation of a previous medium. Writing when engaged through reading, invokes orality. Print technology is operated by mechanising symbology and rendering written-ness in quantum – not just in volume but hyper-simulated re-productibility where all copies are so equivalent in quality that the prototype cannot be told apart from the copy. Baudrillard (1983) reckoned such homogeneous production, as emanating from the "simulacrum". Electronic technology coalesces oral, chirographic and print agency for content, as does social media, only adding the conference of devices with each other through their human users.

The intersection of literary theory and media studies implies that the meaning of literature cannot be properly understood outside the specific medium of its transmission and archival. Within this thought, the media through which literature is communicated is no longer considered secondary to literary content or form but deserves attention in its own right. Literary content and form can, and are often influenced, by the medium of their transmission, as well as the particular media prevalent or dominant at the time and place of their production. Like Ong's (1982) study of cultural transition from orality to digitisation, McLuhan (1962; 1964) analysed that all media, as extensions of human agency, transform social culture. The infinite possibilities of the digital age and the browsable, timeless, and spaceless world of electronic information have shaped how we perceive, posit and express ourselves as authors of culture. Authorship is now no longer the exclusive appendage of producers of written texts. It now accommodates the author as a cultural originator, facilitating therefrom in popular culture, the materiality of intellectual property, including claims to cultural authority like celebrities trademarking physical poses, signature performance, mannerisms and vocal features (Coombe, 1998).

McLuhan's idea is that the medium by which a society transmits its literature and culture ultimately influences the form of that art. Digital technology offers new ways to produce the literary and has conditioned writers to develop new communicative techniques and conventions between themselves and the public, and themselves and their works. The consequence has been the emergence of new literary forms that hitherto could not have existed. Every new medium has changed the art of writing and the text itself, from pencil and printing press to typewriter and computer – all, requiring authors to acclimatise and engage new genres and practices (Baron, 2009). This has come to birth what Barber (2007) labels a "commodification of culture", where through the agency of industry and capital, the olden and contemporary interface, and hitherto unruffled mores are stirred into a restless commercial benefit. Media of transmission also affect social culture, by creating incursions for new occupations that without social media may never have existed: social media influencer, skit maker, online vendor, crypto miner, freelance model, content creator, and vlogger. Furthermore, digital media has ignited an expansionist definition of 'literature' and 'text' to account for all forms of creative expression that manage to fulfil the minimum requisite coalescence of plot, though, characterisation and/or spectacle – or at least, lay them bare.

At the behest of digital technologies and new media, authors have been provided with instant readership and possibilities of fandom, or a coven of followers. And as these new audiences easily engage the author's work, it has become less necessary for authors to hustle readers for content available on such social media fora (Baron, 2009). The digital space is thus fertile for the germination of new virtual genres with distinct underlying structures, codes and conventions, as well as a network of users – blogs, webpages, network fiction, and interactive fiction that feature game elements and immersive three-dimensional fiction. And because they are code-dependent, some of the genres have become known by the software used to create them (Hayles, 2008). The ordinances of Abrams' & Harpham's (2005 [1957]) quadrant – author, reader, a shared world, and text – could now suffer fresh repercussions. This is the medium that transmits 'text' or literary expression from author to audience, and, influences where, how and why they are authored, has drastically changed. Medium and means, historically, have influenced form and content in literature, such that genres have been named almost always by the media that transmit them, or they were constructed under.

Bring forth the fourth: Social media as a new vista

Though the full scale of the relationship between the fourth technologisation and the word, between literary expression and the post-electronic is too vast a subject to do full justice here, some salient critical discourse can be established. The discourse shall address the orthographic and then the behavioural.

Memes are units for the transmission of cultural ideas, norms or symbols, especially as they implicate a particular familiar phenomenon, theme or occasion. Social media interaction is rife with their usage, transference, consumption, construction and mutation. Memes are usually images, words or pictowords usurped from freestanding scenarios, and re-ordered to fit into a jest, critique or banter, often with the addition of another picture, or a word to it. Memes evidence the intertextual merit of non-written matter as pockets of meaning that

can be expanded or tuned according to the intention of the author (Miltner, 2018). Memes may self-replicate, mutate, and react seamlessly to the 'natural selection' of universal employment or particular contexts, as they are adopted, refined and reshared to foreground mutual realities in the social media space. But unlike genes, memetic reproduction is dependent on imitation rather than the natural biology of the netizen space (Millikan, 2004, p. 16). Memes often go viral either because they are universal in their re-share-ability, or they are hilarious with their take on social issues of seriousness, or otherwise. The more engagement a meme can garner either by consumption, resharing or remixing, the more successfully it reproduces itself in the social media space. Memes are not always culture-specific but do well to codify mutual social understanding on any issue. Many content creators either try to lay claim to memes in the public domain by imprints of their usernames, or to their originally composed memes.

Stickers follow the interactional culture of memes but are not always static as pictures, words or pictowords. Stickers could need all of that, and feature short muted video loops of up to four seconds. Stickers afford more comprehensiveness than memes because they offer more variety in the capacity for their composition. However, they are only possible to use in certain messaging sites like WhatsApp, where users can send, receive and even save stickers in wait for future interaction that may necessitate their usage. Fitting sticker use at the right point of online conversations can prove the wit of an individual, and substitute cleanly for a passage of words. Memes and stickers have continued to prove that textuality is not the exclusive purview of letters and written-ness, and have remained an immensely popular means of quickfire literariness and meaning-making.

Emojis are closely related to this citation of word-substituting systems, where encoded characters like smileys, pictures, ideograms or logograms, effectively replace typography to imply meaning or are embedded in a written passage or online text to emphasise emotion and context (Hern, 2015). The various genres of emojis range from facial expressions, household objects, sports, common nouns, and weather. Many smartphones come installed with emojis and enable the encoding of certain characters. Like memes and stickers, emojis are extremely well used in daily conversations of not just peer groups, but formal situations. Despite the prejudice of cultural elitism against emojis as facilitating poorer communication, they have persisted because of their capacity to fill in as "emotional cues otherwise missing from typed conversations", instead of usurping language as a whole (Evans, 2017). This vista of literary expressiveness harks back to the Egyptian hieroglyphic system, where the figural reading of ancient drawings in papyrus or on pyramid walls prefigure ample information about the rites and history of the civilisation. Emoji users have been creative enough to apply plants or animal emojis for conversational contexts that have nothing actually to do with such, yet meaning-making has happened to be even more enforced when such usages are affected in the absence of befitting characters.

Landow (1992; 1997) had in different studies, critiqued the revolutionary effects of computer technologies that open new vistas in literary culture, and averred that these cyber-literary developments were converting into real-time, theoretical suggestions of deconstruction and poststructuralism. The poststructuralist idea that cyberliterature made practical is evident in hypertextual readings, where conclusive meaning seemed an eternal chase. As a software system, the hypertext enables extensive and instant cross-referencing between related sections of an online text, and associated material existing on another online page, either within the same network or not. In this system, digital texts are in-built with hyperlinks to other texts, as displayed on electronic devices for immediate access. The literary merit of this is the explicit signification of intertextuality and the exposure that online content is not independent of each other. Literary expression in this mould is a performance of perpetual referentiality, where sources or originators of a certain material used to compose content (audio, video or text) are either given credit within the text or via direct links to their art. Through the hypertext, intergeneric rapport becomes possible, as even though the software of every social networking site is designed to offer customised possibilities of socialisation, hyperlinks in one network can take the reader directly and out to another network, where s/he might now have to immediately adjust to the different socialisation software. Many 'authors encourage readers to locate such links in their 'bios' and 'stories', and readers could be diverted from networking sites like Instagram, Facebook or Twitter, to commercial websites like Apple Music, Spotify, YouTube, or even WordPress.

Online shopping, brand promotions, and actors promoting movies online have become common sights on social networks, as followership has become an intensely commercialised asset. Added to that, the visual culture that social media has birthed means shorter attention spans and higher tastes in attraction-worthy content. Consequently, brevity has become the new vogue, and as such, 100-200 word micro-fiction has

reclaimed its popularity especially following the emergence of Twitter, after debuting in America in the 1920s and '30s. With it has come to a cyberspace language that indexes a postmodern reading and writing borne more out of animated cultural necessity than relaxed natural impulse. This is as people flip through phones and gadgets to take in information online, as a diversion, while in bank or food counter queues, or on a bus. For this purpose, brevity has become both a vogue and a necessity to service the unique audience-ship (Amritha et al., 2019). Readers in the post-press social media literary reality have come to accept and partake in the dispersal of grammar and spelling traditions, even despite the repercussions on literary quality, by creating brevity-enabling

> orthographic abbreviations/contractions (e.g. pic for picture), initialisms, acronyms (e.g. cuz for because); combined letter/number homophones (e.g. cloud9); combined letters/words; immoderate use of punctuations; capitalization for expressing emphasis (e.g. huh???, WHAT….?); emotions reduced to emoticons and smileys (e.g. :-) for happy) rather than ornate wordings and typographic symbols (e.g.<3 for love) (p. 3104).

In the orthographic spirit of the age social media culture has produced a swathe of punctuations that hitherto did not exist, or were not really in general use by mainstream writing culture. Beyond the full stop, comma, colon and semicolon, parentheses, dash and hyphen, apostrophes, exclamation marks and quotation marks, post-press culture has energised punctuations that have emphasised the schism of expressiveness between high and popular culture. Non-mainstream punctuations like the hash-tag #, at sign @, underscore _, asterisk *, tilde ~, guillemet « », vertical bar |, and even emojis, represent a bustling field of expressiveness that codify relevant cultural intention in today's electronic culture. Despite their increasingly consequential usage, they have been limited and somewhat marginalised to popular consumption and experience, by high culture and the curriculum. The hashtag for example is a metadata tag used to search for a particular subject matter on social media and serves as a sort-of hypertext leading to several posts made using the same hashtag. It is used very much by popular flash fiction writers.

Hashtags categorise online information, such that users can search for posts by using hashtags and see all of the posts that share that particular hashtag. Users can then interact with each other and their posts in real-time, thus putting them in the positions of co-authors, or into a community of mutual authorship as they engage posts by each other, adding comments and hashtags of their own (Moje, 2009). This confederate authorship signals a participatory literary praxis, where user-generated categorisations can give some insight into how users view posts in relation to themselves (e.g. #adorable, #shippers, #saturdaysareforweddings) and to other posts (e.g., #mua, #bbnaija, #owambe) (Stornaiuolo et al., 2013). Because of such affordances, users can query each other, and make connections of ideas, as well as conjectures about ambiguity in their posts. This digital cosmopolitanism and communalism that funnels disparity into ideological similarity, has been used to move a motion or pass a collective message either of a political or moral nature (#EndSARS, #BringBackOurGirls). Such dynamic interaction fosters critical thinking in the netizen space, especially in relation to the literariness of content creation. It then puts into perspective how we perceive online space conventions, and reworks its infinite multimodal participatory affordances that knit together hitherto unfamiliar communities (Robbins & Springer, 2014).

As McLuhan (1962) posited, the medium a literary culture adopts in transmitting itself, defines the genres that effect such transmission; in fact, the medium births its forms and genres specifically to maximise its transmission. Prose fiction has undergone a recalibration since literary expression found its way into the social media space. New forms like fan fiction have bounced off the reputation of successful franchises to excite, and authors of web novels have secured social media pages to direct readers to novel-length content accessible for a small charge. And so have webcomics: offering snippets of the fuller narrative in crisp colour, and inviting readers to follow the link. Flash fiction has epitomised brevity, as 'micronarratives' that construct stories under the 300-word mark. Twitter debuted by offering a 140-character cap for users to follow each other and compose small messages (de Castro et al., 2022). 'Twitterature' thus evolved from this adherence to brevity, and the creative ways users build 'threads' to sequence longer intentions and circumvent the 140-character structure. WhatsApp also follows this design, conditioning letter and video length, even giving control over preferred picture quality and writing font. The 'drabble' and 'nano fiction' have also taken impetus from Twitterature to emerge, offering even shorter word counts, and satisfying the short attention spans of quick-scrolling consumers.

Fanfiction melds popular culture and literature in a symbiosis where professional originals and amateur parodies cohere respectfully, be it as written texts, comics, animation, movies or television serials. As such, fan fiction can come as pseudo-sequels to established originals, but their creativity remains within the ambit of the universe of characterisation, locale and plot of their originals. Fan fiction is usually borne of fascination with originals and the craving of fandom to usurp authorial clout and weave their versions from materials in the original, purely for entertainment amongst fans who share the same fascination with the original (Viires, 2005, pp. 162-63). As a result, fan fiction has put conventional authorship into a cultural criticism that: weakens the certitude of who the actual 'author' is between the author of the original and the rewriting; if 'co-authorship' is a viable citation; or if it amounts to plagiarism. The implications are also rife for the reader whose comments on the social media network hosting fan fiction content, interfere with the original creative process, such that they could shape the original work going forward. If the typical reader in print culture is interpretative, post-press culture enables the fan fiction reader to reach beyond the 'fourth wall' and threaten with a reconfiguration of hitherto exclusive authorial clout (pp. 166-67).

Drama as it were, has happened to be re-tuned from full-scale production to the democracy of briefer amateur performance, if not performativity. Content creation has energised short hilarious videos and attracted the interest of online audiences for their entertainment value. Such content has even evolved into a professionally driven and intentional organisation of performance, purposely to secure followership and supply entertainment. The growth of this dramatic style has been informed by the commercial possibilities that social networking sites offer content creators in this 'literary hustle'. As short hilarious videos go viral, users are attracted to follow the pages that produce them, having seen their customised watermarks on them. High followership on a page is now attracting brands and businesses who are aware that the mobile phone and data culture is replacing the static television and satellite dish and pay these content creators to perform hilarity themed to emphasise and advertise their goods and services. Another typical method of commercialising hilarity is posting snippets of the dramatic piece and indicating in the caption that users follow the link in the 'bio' of the page. Such links usually take users to already monetised YouTube pages for fuller versions, and to the merit of the content creators who cash out from remittances for views.

As a result of this industrial revolution, the film is losing clout as the central supplier of drama, and established actors in Nigeria for example, are beginning to contend with competition from skit makers like @brodashaggi, @mrmacaroni1, @iam_degeneral, @nons_miraj, @crazeclown, @mrfunny1_, etc. These skit makers have even created artistic signatures for themselves and trademarked their compositional territory in the minds of followers. By establishing consistent mannerisms, costumes, formula plots, distinct diction, and a repetitive theme, Nigerian social media skit-making has evolved into a 'comedy of character', funnelling their artistry into the performance of chosen characters in society. @brodashaggi for example is the typical always shirtless Lagos tout; @mrmacaroni1 is the brown agbada-wearing loser-philanderer; @crazeclown is the slap-happy African father; and @mrfunny1_ is the unemployed self-anointed 'investor'. Social media apps like TikTok have also birthed new vistas of performance because its app provides possibilities for audio extraction and amateur parody and burlesque. Through lipsynchs, body synchs and hashtagged dance/expression 'challenges', a peculiar performance stylistic has been encoded, revolutionising how drama can affect social relations, and changing the architecture of catharsis.

Conclusion: Indexing the fourth technology

The literary expression that has come from social media has reordered how the principles of reader and author interaction are organised and have relocated the Barthesian gravestone for the author the moment a work is published. Social media has offered the fora for readers to become authors, not independently, but upon the works of other authors, and the reactions of other readers. New vistas in social media literary expression have also kept the author unnervingly alive, post-publication, as readers can query, address and remix the text. The cybertext has thus diverted primacy from the conventional author-text-reader triad to a "cybernetic intercourse between the various part(icipant)s in the textual machine" (Aarseth, 1997, p. 22). As the formal perception of literature has been conditioned to shift almost fully from written-ness to cultural behaviours (and thus 'literariness', as different from 'literature'), 'text' as the recognisable unit of literature has come to inform a new multimodal anthropology of persons and publics. 'Meta-literature', it would appear, now defines some of the metamodern online space, where interference, referencing, digital cosmopolitanism and intertextuality inform the

sociality of social media's literary content and expression. The fourth technology of the word is machinating the word against itself in perpetual play via surrogates of medium, content and restless audiences.

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