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Article · December 2019

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**Marshall McLuhan's Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man
(An Analysis of How the Medium is the Message Challenges Conventional Thought
About Mans Relationships with Technology)**

Introduction:

Originally published in 1964, Marshall McLuhan's examination of the media and the implication of it for the future at best can be considered ahead of its time. The book, which examines how language, technology and speech shape human behaviour, demonstrated an accurate understanding of the emergent mass media and its potential. The tenements of the author's thesis continue to remain steadfast as the conventional forms of mass media have transformed in the more connected "New Media" that is outlined by authors like Richard Davis and Diana Owen (5). While a general understanding of the work can be facilitated by a cursory examination of the text, there is such a wealth of information present that critical thinking for analysis would necessitate breaking down the book into more thematic divisions.

As the first and perhaps most poignant dimension for understanding McLuhan, "The Medium is the Message" is a logical place to start. Understanding that the medium is, in fact, the message is not only a departure from the conventional understanding of innovation but the primary foundation on which all of the author's perspectives are established.

The Medium is the Message

According to Marshall McLuhan, technology only adds itself on to what we already are (11). “Any extension, whether of skin, hand, or foot, affects the whole psychic and social complex” (McLuhan 4). This is a differentiation from conventional thought because human beings like to live within the illusion that they are in greater control over their actions than they actually are. The conventional position of innovation and its interaction with humanity is summed up by McLuhan in the first chapter of the book in a quotation by General David Sarnoff, “We are too prone to make technological instruments the scapegoats for the sins of those who wield them. The products of modern science are not in themselves good or bad; it is the way they are used that determines their value” (11). While most people would agree with this statement, McLuhan believes that there is no level on which this argument holds weight.

The author begins to unravel this commonly held position by stating the following examples, "The smallpox virus is in itself neither good nor bad; it is the way it is used that determines its value" and "If the slugs [from firearms] reach the right people firearms are good" (11). As demonstrated, there is more to a relationship than what is acknowledged by the general. Though convenient and settling as it puts humans in a perceived position of more control, the medium is part if not all of the message in any innovation. Building on what we already are, however, is a phenomenon that necessitates consideration of what is human nature.

There is no consensus as to the nature of man. The more Biblical dimensions consider man innately evil and in need of redemption. The political anarchists see man as innately good and the governmental structures as the beacon of evil influences the population. Still, some others view man as being born unto no alignment and simply the product of his/her environment. Rather than arguing such a direction, which would have no end, it is best to examine man according to his/her historical record of behaviour.

This, however, does have implications on how the medium is the message is understood or how people may object to McLuhan's position. Historian John Keegan, in his *A History of Warfare* text designates war as being almost as old as man himself (3). He states, "Man is a thinking animal in whom the intellect directs the urge to hunt and the ability to kill" (3). Though perhaps an unpopular perspective, if technology were put into this paradigm, it would guide human beings and become the message of what is already present. It is important to note that McLuhan does not concern himself with definite proclamations of alignment but only logical examinations of cause and effect.

McLuhan explains why it is unsettling for human beings to accept that the medium is the message and not vice versa, "In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message" (7). This is the statement he uses to start his work. As a result, the importance of it should not be underestimated. To

examine the phenomenon of innovation of human experience, McLuhan divides innovation into the machine and automation. According to the author, the machine altered our relations to one another and to ourselves. It was fragmentary, centralist and superficial in its patterning of human relationships (8). Though not specifically stated, the machine in which McLuhan refers can best be articulated as the product of the industrial revolution. The industrial revolution moved human beings away from rural experience and artisanship in favour of more efficient assembly lines, working around the machine and being task-specific rather than project-specific.

The centralist function of this paradigm was the machine. The machine can run until it is broken down. As a result, human beings could work in shifts around the machine and rather than becoming the centralized aspect of creation, they are part of a larger hive type mechanisms where special skills are diminished. As a result, people became fragmented and relationships to the job became more superficial. On the other end of the spectrum, the means of production became more efficient and this brought down costs and made goods more widely available to humanity.

While this revolutionary component changed human history, the advent of automation is to work on society at large. McLuhan states that "New scale introductions change dimensions" (7). The industry machine technology changed human relationships to one another. For automation, the author suggests that there are also positive and negative consequences of this new form of technological innovation.

On the negative end of the spectrum, automation makes new patterns of human association and it eliminates old jobs (McLuhan 7). For example, large companies once used primarily human operators to answer customer calls. This meant that there were many positions open for operators to provide client service. Today, the spectrum of automation has made the basic unit of answering customer calls an automated affair. For example, if a person is calling the phone company, they can get their balance, find out about upgrades, pay their bill, submit an inquiry or find out about special offers or situations in their respective area without ever talking to a live human being.

In the event that the automated service cannot finish the necessary interaction, the client is then transferred to a human operator. There are far fewer jobs now available for human operators, however, the operational costs for the business are far lower due to automative efficiency. In regards to automation's positive attributes, the author concludes that "it creates roles for people, which is to say the depth of involvement in their work and human association that our preceding mechanical technology had destroyed" (8).

Automation versus the machine context is how McLuhan chooses to frame the medium is the message argument. On the most basic end of the is structure, he establishes that automation is by nature integral and decentralist (8). As stated previously, however, the machine is fragmentary, centralist and superficial (8). When examined within the context of how the machine altered our relations to one another and to ourselves, it did not matter whether it turned "out cornflakes or Cadillac's" (8). Technology and innovation are the

great vessel of human change. According to change management theorist, Ancona et al., the advent of telecommunications has changed the world by making it a smaller more increasingly global place (M1-15). The result has been a shift from the industrial age to the information age. The industrial age, which would be akin to McLuhan's machine designation, had operative dimensions that were favoured and that Ancona establishes as being the old organizational paradigm or classic organization model. The new age, however, requires a new perspective is the New Organizational paradigm (M1-15).

The old organizational paradigm favoured the individual as the basic unit, homogenous groupings, top-down communication, bureaucratic management, rigid workplace structures and local environment perspectives (Ancona et al. M1-15). The New Organizational paradigm, in contrast, favours 360-degree communication, the team as the basic unit, heterogeneous groupings, flattened levels of management, flexible workplace structures and global environmental perspectives (M1-15). In this example and paradigm shift, the medium, which is telecommunications (Internet/cellular/nanotechnology) was the message. The message in this scenario is that the world is a smaller place, the business environment is global and the way in which business was conducted in the 20th Century would put an organization at a disadvantage to those who have managed for change.

Despite the year in which McLuhan's text was penned, he demonstrates that he was cognizant of such changes or the implications of such changes. In order to demonstrate his

theory, he used the example of computer organization juggernaut, IBM. According to McLuhan, "When IBM discovered that it was not in the business of making office equipment or business machines, but that it was in the business of processing information, then it began to navigate with a clear vision" (9). Though he does not specifically state so, it is alluded that had IBM not made such a change in the way in which they understood their mission, they likely would not have had the success that they have had in the industry. Though it's easy to become focal on this situation as it relates to current automative technology, the principles outlined by the author hold true for any technology. To prove this, McLuhan uses William Shakespeare as an unlikely but strong example.

McLuhan states that *Troilus and Cressida* are a play where Shakespeare almost is completely devoted to both psychic and social study of communication (10). McLuhan established that "Shakespeare states his awareness that true social and political navigation depends upon anticipating the consequences of innovation" (10). The author uses the following quotation from the Shakespeare play to demonstrate this principle:

The providence that's in a watchful state
Knows almost every grain of Plutus' gold,
Find bottom in the uncomprehensive deeps,
Keeps place with thought, and almost like the gods
Do thoughts unveil in their dumb cradles (McLuhan 10)?

Much as it has been designated that those who have switched to the New Organizational paradigm based on the innovation changes are at an advantage, the same can be stated of reactions to any innovation. Innovation has to be examined within the context of its consequences. Though individuals like General David Sarnoff would suggest that the consequences of the innovation will be determined by how humans use it, this does not help manage for change.

What is necessary is understanding where man is and making logical anticipations about how that innovation is going to alter that state or location of humanity. The innovation does not change as a result of man's actions, the innovation drives man's actions and therefore itself is the catalyst for change. In many cases, how innovation will drive change in human relationships is quite predictable. Referring back to Keegan, there is strong evidence to suggest that man is an aggressive species with tendencies for war. There is little evidence to suggest that man is by nature a peaceful species. As a result, it can be anticipated that the development of new drone technology will be used to cause harm to another faction of humanity deemed the enemy by the person possessing the technology. The drone in this equation would be an example of technological innovation.

Conclusion

As a fundamental scope of the media being the message, the author frames media as extensions of our human senses (McLuhan 21). As a result, they charge our personal energies and they configure awareness and experience by each one of us (21). To demonstrate this principle, McLuhan uses an analogy written by famed psychologist C. G. Jung. Jung stated that every Roman was surrounded by slaves. As a result, "Because living constantly in the atmosphere of slaves, he became infected through the unconscious with their psychology" thereby making every roman unwittingly, a slave (21). It is this message that McLuhan leaves the reader to consider before moving into the next chapter of the larger work. By understanding that "The formative power in the media is the media themselves" the basic tenements of the media being the message can be established for the reader (21).

The medium is, in fact, the message. This is a statement that has worked its way into many facets of popular culture. Despite it being a commonly voiced phrase, it is not a commonly understood or even agreed-upon concept. In the forward to the book, Lewis H. Lapham suggests that his thesis actually made more sense in 1994 than it did in 1964 thereby demonstrating how far ahead of its time McLuhan's thesis was (McLuhan xi). In today's society, there are far more people who would subscribe to the oversimplified conditions of man's relationship to innovation as were expressed by General David Sarnoff. These ideas are more settling because it gives humans more of an illusion of control. In addition, it fits

into the cultural elements that McLuhan articulates as being accustomed to splitting and dividing to maintain illusions of control (7).

In reality, innovation or the medium, does alter the way in which humans relate to one another and by default, the very direction of human history. This challenges many basic assumptions about how we communicate, however, language, speech and technology shape human behaviour in mass communication. To understand the entirety of McLuhan's *Understanding the Media: The Extensions of Man*, this basic foundation has to be accepted and understood. At later intervals in the work, the author builds upon his message and demonstrates to the reader that mass media is not a designation as to audience size, but to the fact that everybody becomes involved in them at the same time (349). His point is, therefore, the interactive element making something "mass."

Without understanding the medium being the message, however, such intricacies revealed throughout the book could not be framed properly. As a result, this theme expressed in the book is a logical starting point for analysis because it provides the necessary framework for the concepts presented by the author. In doing so, an examination of the origin and development "of the individual extensions of man" can be accomplished in a critical sense (6). This would enable Western man to take back the more passive role in which he has occupied in recent years in regards to his relationship with previous innovations.

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