

Is the medium more important than the message?

Marshall McLuhan famously purported that within media and beyond, the most dominant, influential and pervasive facet is to be found not in what is generally understood as the content of a message (such the substance of a newspaper article), but in the technical medium of communication; the actual newspaper itself. For McLuhan, the 'medium is the message' and to semiotically concentrate on any medium's content would be to misconceive what is truly significant.

As McLuhan summaries: "the "content" of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind."¹ At odds with McLuhan is the humanist/social constructivist approach presented by Raymond Williams. Williams offered a wider theory on how democracy, social relations, power, economic structure, arts and culture have determined the medium. Following an exploration of opposing theories and models associated with both McLuhan and Williams, this essay will move the question forward through an analytical assessment of Kember and Zylinska's account of mediation.

Through the illustrative use of the electric light, McLuhan claims that the medium is always another medium. He states that "the electric light is pure information. It is a medium without a message, as it were, unless it is used to spell out some verbal ad or name."² Dispelling what is generally considered to be the popular conception that a medium is a vehicle through which we communicate cultural content, McLuhan elevates the Medium significantly beyond this inert status - a status he contends is both ignorant to the true power and place of the medium and misleading in that it detrimentally defers focus to that of the pejorative 'content', that offers "no dues to the magic of these media or to their subliminal charge."³

Joshua Meyrowitz furthers this argument through a disassembling of preconceived media models of message-focused analysis. In 'A Sense of Place' Meyrowitz states that media theories which are "based

¹ McLuhan, Marshall, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London, England: MIT Press, 1964) p.18.

² *ibid.*, p.9.

³ *ibid.*, p.14.

on the concept of a response to the stimulus – the message”⁴ are detrimental to the understanding of media and its effects, for they are “rarely focused on the particular characteristics of different media of communication.”⁵ For Meyrowitz and McLuhan, this is a critical misstep as they consider it to “overlook the particular natures of various media.”⁶

“Medium Theory” offers to expand on how a medium surpasses being mere “channels for conveying information” and instead has far-reaching consequences which stretch from the individual through to societal. Nick Stevenson summarises its effects using McLuhan’s example of light as follows:

The electric light I switch off in my office each morning carries no message, but transforms relations of space and time...it allows me to work late in the evening or early in the morning. This affects the way I structure my public and private life.⁷

Viewed through this tight dichotomy of relative potency and with the mediums rich definition, it is convincing (at least within these confines) to view the medium, as the dominant factor, for it infuses, influences and even dictates how, and the capacity in which, we behave.

Medium’s importance is pursued by McLuhan through equating the advent of new mediums to seismic cultural, civilizational advances throughout history. The emergence of the print in the 16th century, for example, is said to have “created individualism and nationalism”⁸, with typography providing “changes in human and social psychology”⁹. According to McLuhan, the advancement of these mediums and their specific relationship to the senses have had profound consequences on the behaviour and culture of the people, for each new medium has brought about fundamental changes to the “sensory

⁴ Meyrowitz, Joshua, *The Impact of Electronic Media On Social Behavior* (Oxford University Press, 1985) p.14.

⁵ *ibid.*, p.14.

⁶ *ibid.*, p.15.

⁷ Stevenson, Nick, *Transforming McLuhan. Cultural, Critical and Postmodern Perspectives* (New York; Oxford. :Peter Lang, 2010) p.18.

⁸ McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, p.14.

⁹ *ibid.*, p.20.

balance” whereby, “the effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance.”¹⁰

It is through this change of ‘sensory balance’ that McLuhan posits people emerged from oral societies who experience life through an ‘ear culture’; an existence marked by “high interdependence and lack of individuality” through to an ‘eye culture’ that allowed for “people to become more introspective, rational, and individualistic”¹¹; having broken the shackles of the inferior nature of oral culture, humankind is promoted towards “linear, cause-and-effect thinking, grid-like cities” and a “world that mimics the linear lines of writing and type”.¹²

McLuhan, therefore, places emergent new media at the centre of the argument and pivotal in the role of “space-time relations”, the foundation of which is borne out of Harold Adams Innis’ exploration of information monopolies in his 1951 book “Bias of Communication”. Innis’ concerns were directed at the socio-economic and political significance of media’s effects, augmenting existing research and theory that looked into cause and effect of social and political power by *including* how the “medium of communication has an important influence on the dissemination of knowledge”.¹³ This serves as a useful juncture to turn the question around and consider the medium’s determined, as opposed to determining nature.

In *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, Williams adopts the television as the illustrative medium to showcase its limited potency. William’s seeks to dismantle the argument of overriding technological importance or “the claim that technology causes or determines the structure of the rest of society and culture”¹⁴:

¹⁰ McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, p.18.

¹¹ Meyrowitz, *The Impact of Electronic Media On Social Behavior*, p.17.

¹² *ibid.*, p.17.

¹³ Innis, Harold, Toronto, *The Bias of Communication* (London : University of Toronto Press, 2008) p.32.

¹⁴ Dusek, Van, *Philosophy of Technology* (Malden, USA, Blackwell Publishing, 2006) p.32

“It is often said that television has altered our world. In the same way, people often speak of a new world, a new society, a new phase in history, being created – ‘brought about’ – by this or that new technology: the steam engine, the automobile, the atomic bomb.”¹⁵

Unlike McLuhan, Williams’ argued that in order to view the medium within its appropriate context, a change in emphasis is required. By this, Williams meant that it is only through placing a technologies position within the context of social history, that we are able to accurately observe the catalysts of societal/cultural change and development. Indeed, speaking of technologies relation within society, William’s argued to “restore intention to the process of research and development”¹⁶ where “purposes and practices would be seen as direct: as known social needs, purposes and practices to which the technology is not marginal but central.”¹⁷ Williams’ furthers his point by expanding on how the invention of television ‘was no single or series of events’ and instead its emergence “depended on a complex of inventions and developments in electricity, telegraphy, photography and motion pictures and radio”¹⁸. According to Williams, crucial to this process was how “each of these stages...depended for parts of its realisation on inventions made with other ends primarily in view.”¹⁹ Williams supports his assertion by expanding on how the preceding period was marked with seminal stages within various aspects of development, from “the cluster of inventions between 1800 to 1831...”²⁰ to “the development of industrial production”²¹ and how it is the convergence of these two distinct threads of advancement yielded the emergence of technological advancement.

Comparatively, unlike McLuhan who viewed the medium as the main catalyst of societal change, which seemingly operated in isolation, Williams argues the opposite; it is a plethora of potentially determining factors which, working in convergence, have directed the medium. Indeed, Williams

¹⁵ Williams, Raymond, *Television: Technology and cultural form* (Routledge; 3 edition, 21 Aug. 2003) p.1.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p.7.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p.7.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p.7.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p.7.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p.7.

²¹ *ibid.*, p.7.

summarises this when he states that this multifaceted set of factors and their intertwining “created new needs but also new possibilities and the communication systems, down to television, were their intrinsic outcome.”²² This position offers a structuralist, historical framework in establishing cause and effect. In contrast, McLuhan’s position places total emphasis on the medium and its determining nature, without reference to agency within a wider context; a context that Williams perceives as the critical driver affording to “social and cultural definition, according to the ends sought.”²³

William’s attention to the ‘ends sought’, agency, intention and practice deconstruct the McLuhanite notion of the medium being the message by exposing the abstracted position that McLuhan placed the medium. McLuhan’s focus on sense-ratios, for instance, is reduced to an “arbitrarily assigned psychic function” which in turn “has the effect of dissolving not only specific but general intentions...and with intentions goes content, whether apparent or real.”²⁴

From William’s perspective, it is only by viewing the McLuhan medium theory as a specific relationship between “a generalised human organism and its general physical environment” that the argument of medium supremacy can surface, though for Williams this is almost an illusion, for the very relationship or interaction is depicted, within a vacuum without any competing causes; “desocialised...simply physical events in an abstracted sensorium.”²⁵ It for this same reason that the medium theory arguably falters within the framework of this question, as it isolates the medium from the wider social context on which understanding it as well as the messages importance depends.

William’s deconstruction of McLuhan’s argument is delivered most effectively by his deductive reasoning that “if the effect of the apparent medium is the same, whoever controls or uses it, and whatever apparent content he may try to insert, then we can forget ordinary political and cultural

²² Williams, *Television: Technology and cultural form*, p.12.

²³ *ibid.*, p.137.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p.130.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p.130.

argument and let technology run itself.”²⁶ Unlike McLuhan, who attributed political hegemony to the medium (cool media being democratising for example), William’s transferred scrutiny to *who* controls communication institutions; an aspect set aside by Medium theory.

This perspective serves to refute the assertion that the medium is more important than the message, for it is supported by compelling studies that indicate that content and messages are operating with what Stuart Hall defines as a “complex structure in dominance”²⁷, sustained through the articulation of connected practices” – structures that medium theorists viewed as determined by the medium and practices that are not fleshed out (discarded even) by medium theory.

Hall’s encoding-decoding model is of significance in the context of the question at hand, for it imbues the entire lifecycle of the message with an importance that medium theory does not explore, which is that the practice of communicating via a medium (such as television) is to carry a meaning of a message. Indeed, as Hall states, “The ‘object’ of these practices is meanings and messages in the form of signvehicles”²⁸. Hall places a similar emphasis on the decoding phase, stating that:

“Once accomplished, the discourse must then be translated – transformed, again – into social practices if the circuit is to be both completed and effective. If no ‘meaning’ is taken, there can be no ‘consumption’. If the meaning is not articulated in practice, it has no effect.”²⁹

Hall’s model, therefore, highlights the relevance of the message and to the extent to which a ‘meaning’ is central to the encoding/decoding cycle of a message; without this cycle, there is no message and therefore the medium is just the means to an end or at most, a component of the encoding and decoding process.

²⁶ Williams, Raymond, *Television: Technology and cultural form*, p.131.

²⁷ Hall, Stuart, Encoding-Decoding, in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. S. (During. London: Routledge, 1993) p.508.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p.508.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p.508.

Hall's argument ultimately serves to complement William's notion that it is human culture and society that governs the traffic of communication while leaving technology almost out of the equation. It is Kember and Zylinska's theory of 'mediation' that carves out a space in which the medium and message are given concurrent importance through a framework of dynamic setting of forces and interactions.

Taking inspiration from Bolter and Grusin's theory of remediation, Kember and Zylinska utilise the concept of how media, old and new "co-exist, but one type of media does not necessary "swallow up" the other"³⁰, in conjunction with Bolter and Grusin's assertion that "No medium today, and certainly no single media event, seems to do its cultural work in isolation from other media, any more than it works in isolation from other social and economic forces."³¹ Kember and Zylinska move this notion of interconnectivity forward by emphasising the temporal nature of the techno-human relationship within media. This acknowledges the McLuhanite notion of an "media ecology" (that we inhabit a media environment) which they use to further their argument that "we are – physically and hence ontologically – part of that technological environment, and it makes no more sense to talk of *us* using *it* then it does of it using *us*"³². Kember and Zylinska thus infer that humankind and technology, medium and message are in actual fact, inextricably connected.

Kember and Zylinska pursue this point by mounting technology within a more philosophical framework. Citing German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, and his point that "in modern times technology has been reduced to the way for humans to enframe...bring it under their command"³³ alongside the original meaning of technology ("technê and poiesis -, bringing-forth and presencing"³⁴), Kember and Zylinska explore Heidegger's understanding of technology as "an inherently world-forming process, both on a biological and cultural level"³⁵. Kember and Zylinska further this idea of

³⁰ Kember, S. and Zylinska, J. *Life after new media: Mediation as a vital process*, (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012), p.8.

³¹ *ibid.*, p.8.

³² *ibid.*, p.13.

³³ *ibid.*, p.13.

³⁴ *ibid.*, p.14

³⁵ Kember, S. and Zylinska, J. *Life after new media: Mediation as a vital process*, p.14.

interconnectedness via the notion of “*originary technicity*, our way of being-with and emerging-with technology”³⁶ and synthesise this with Bernard Stiegler’s *Technics and Time, 1*, which sees Stiegler reimagine the myth of Prometheus as a tale of mankind’s relationship with technology, in which technology is depicted as the “force that brings man forth and is fully active in the process of hominization.”³⁷ This is significant, for it posits that technology is intrinsic to humans on a biological level, which in turns transcends technological determinist connotations by converging ourselves with the technology that is supposedly determining or being determined. Furthermore, Kember and Zylinska temper William’s dismissal of the medium by introducing human ethics into the equation of originary technicity; as they argue, being human means to “get outside of oneself and to be technical...to bring things forth, to create is perhaps also an ethical injunction to *create well*.”³⁸

Kember and Zylinska’s concept of mediation, therefore, marries the technological framework with that of the human creative spirit which culminates in the “being-in and becoming-with the technological world”³⁹ with the quality of “fixings”; potential technological, communicative or other forms of becoming. To illustrate this point, Kember and Zylinska cite social networking facets of the Internet going on to state that “the very process of media emergence involves creation, whereby human creative activity is accompanied (and often superseded or even contradicted) by the work of nonhuman forces.”⁴⁰

It is the emergence of these “fixings” that carry both human and non-human attributes and their stabilising influence on the media flow that forms this definition of mediation, or as Kember and Zylinska summarise: it is “the name for the dynamic essence of media...to denote the vitality or experience of “being-in and emerging with the world.”⁴¹

³⁶ *ibid.*, p.14.

³⁷ *ibid.*, p.15.

³⁸ *ibid.*, p.18.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p.xviii.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p.22.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.22.

In conclusion, it can be said that the importance of the medium, as well as the message, is most adequately positioned when viewed within a hybrid context, a context best exemplified by Kember and Zylinksa's mediation model. McLuhan's assertions are indeed compelling when viewed in isolation, but the medium's omnipotence can be said to rapidly withdraw when positioned within the social and historical context that Williams introduces, while Hall's encoding-decoding model revitalises message analysis dismissed by medium theory. Williams effectively refutes the notion that the medium was pivotal in advancing society and culture, though McLuhan's assertion that it can alter sense-ratios or serve as extensions of the human body arguably have substance. Indeed, this has been successfully carried over into the mediation model brought forward by Kember and Zylinska. Crucially, Kember and Zylinksa retain a compulsion to stress that it is precisely our human composition and its associated phenomenological relationship with technology; our ability to both determine and be determined that plays a vital role in the mediating process. This most effectively positions the medium and the message within a dynamic, living, mediascape of the 21st century, and by extension the context with which to view their importance.

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