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The Medium is the Message

The development of technology has greatly influenced society and has the ability to control all aspects of life. Media is a form of communication capable of influencing perspectives as well as human interactions and behaviors. In 1964, Marshall McLuhan proposed the theory of media ecology, which focuses on these ideas of social change as a result of communication technologies. It is apparent that technology has altered the way people connect with one another, but it is important to look at the environment in which the media is being presented. In order to explain his philosophy of media ecology, McLuhan explores the effects of different time periods in communication, the spectrum of involvement of the audience, and the significance of media studies in certain areas of the world.

According to McLuhan, there are three inventions that have altered the world from a media perspective. The alphabet, the printing press, and the telegraph have brought humans from one era to the next. Therefore, humans have experienced four separate periods of life based on these new inventions and modes of communication. The Tribal Age is considered the first period because it was a time when humans relied more on sounds, touch, taste and smell than visualization. The ability to listen was incredibly important for survival and created a sense of unity amongst individuals. Being present and having a spontaneous instinct was essential to the development of believing in on another and immediate communication.

The Literary Age allowed for the eyes to be the leading sense organ. The environment was changed drastically when the ability to change words into images was possible. Words had lost their immediacy because they could be read over and over again. When people learned to read, they became independent thinkers and no longer needed one another to obtain information. The Print Age allowed for the production of mass amounts of products because of the printing press. The effect of making numerous copies of the same text allowed humans to read in privacy and live in isolation. People could escape their surroundings and have instant freedom from each other.

The Electronic Age is the last era, in which people could finally combine their senses of sound and touch. The invention of the telegraph eventually led to the production of the telephone, the cell phone, the television, and the Internet. Today we are able to communicate with one another constantly and know everything about everyone. The Internet has now become the “global village” providing people all around the world with shared information. Marshall McLuhan used the phrase global village to explain that, “humans can no longer live in isolation, but rather will always be connected by continuous and instantaneous connected media.” We have now reached a new age that has allowed the speed of communication to travel so quickly that it is inescapable.

Media would not be as successful and useful as it is today without the audience who not only uses it, but creates it. McLuhan believes there is a difference between hot and cold media. Hot media is the type of communication that involves a small amount of contribution from the audience, and requires little or no interpretation because all of the information is given. The radio, books and even lectures are all examples of hot media because only one sensory organ is being used at a time. Cold media demands an active audience that is capable of processing the information by mentally engaging themselves. Watching television, attending seminars, or reading cartoons are all examples of using multi-sensory participation.

Marshall McLuhan sees the developments of media as a base or platform for humans and controls the way individuals and groups of people live their lives. Ultimately, the media becomes the environment in which we place ourselves and within these surroundings we have the ability to grow and learn from one another. Humans are constantly sending messages to one another through different media sources. From a phenomenological perspective people tend to communicate and relate to one another through dialogue or the experience of otherness. There is actually no difference between what we feel on the inside and on the outside because what we think is our conscious is actually based upon what we have experienced.

Relating to a person, place, or thing is our way of communicating with the environment. A person cannot experience another person’s experiences, but one is capable of assuming they have familiarized themselves with a similar situation. Connecting McLuhan’s ideas of media shaping evolution with communication inside and around us, he brings an interesting idea that the medium is the message. This means that the medium itself is what should be the focus, not the content that is being carried. The characteristics of the medium often have more of an impact on a society than the message being delivered. McLuhan considered anything to be a medium whether it is a light bulb, car, or newspaper these were all seen as extensions of us. In McLuhan’s book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, he brings attention to the electric light in the chapter “The Medium is the Message.” He explains that the “content” of the light is what the light is being used for in a material sense such as a baseball game or brain surgery. These examples could not exist without the use of the light, therefore, “it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action” (McLuhan, 9). The theory that the medium, being the environment, controls human behavior leads to the tradition of social psychology.

The sociopsychological tradition examines the process of communication through social interactions. These ways of communicating are often infused with social influences creating two branches, a psychological approach as well as a sociological approach. The psychological standpoint sees the world from the outside and has a more symbolic method of interaction. The sociological side pays greater attention to the individualistic attitude toward communication, and looks deeper into influencing each other’s emotions, understandings, and actions. The media has an important role when choosing how humans decide to interact with one another. The book was the original method of communication, but now we choose to use a more immediate and effective way of interacting. Mass mediated messages are what have brought us to the study of sociopsychological ideas.

As I step back and look at the way media has impacted me on a personal level, I can say that I was born in a generation where mass media has been the focus of my knowledge of communication. Whether it is through the television, the radio, and especially the Internet I am constantly being exposed to ideas and other people’s experiences. However, I do agree with McLuhan in most of the theories he has proposed to the world. The type of medium chosen to relay certain information is significant to the meaning that is eventually delivered. As for the Internet, I have continuously been taught a new way to communicate with friends and family through an electronic form.

As a Communications major, I am interested in how humans behave and interact on a social and cultural level. The Internet is a very powerful form of media and we are able to search for almost anything in the world. However, looking at something on the Internet is not the same as experiencing it. In the future I would love to have a career where I could travel and learn through experience. I want to be able to come face to face with people living all over the world, hearing their individual views and then shaping a broader perspective for those who are unfamiliar.

The critical tradition is used to question why people think and act the way they do. Critical theory reveals hidden social ideologies and then supports these ideas with efforts to challenge the power of these appliances. We are forever changing and evolving as humans, therefore experimenting and confronting tasks each and every day testing our abilities. Applying this to my life, I enjoy the practice of yoga. It is a way for my body to process the consistency of change and coming to terms with my surroundings and myself. Allowing my body to feel balance and experience movement and change has opened my mind to new ways of thinking and developing a sense of peace. To me, yoga is one of the most influential practices of communication, not only with you but also towards other people.

When it comes down to how we relate to one another because of specific modes of communication, where does this leave us in the future? Since the beginning of the Electronic Era, humans have become unable to just sit back and observe. We tend to talk over one another or think about what we will do or say next in the best interest of ourselves. It is time that we listen to each other and grow from the knowledge that is constantly being spread not only through social media, but also through actions and emotions. The resolution to this problem may be our desire to reprogram ourselves back to a time and place when we decided that being in the immediate present and learning from one another was an effective way of education and communication.

Works Cited

McLuhan, Marshall. "The Medium is the Message." *Understanding media: the extensions of man*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994. 9. Print.