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Rethinking the Importance of Message: A Critical Analysis of McLuhan's Theory, "Medium is the Message."

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Abstract:

Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) was a Canadian philosopher and professor who was best known as a communication theorist. In the first chapter of his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), he coins the famous term, "The medium is the message". His main claim throughout the text is that the medium through which communication happens is more important than the message it contains. His critics think of his ideas to be proactive as possible interpretations and not necessarily typical interpretations. The author believes that while his ideas and theories do generate thoughts and discussions and they hold value even in today's time in the majority of the scenarios, but the idea of separating content from the form is not as simple as it appears to be. This work aims to argue that while the medium is undeniably crucial in the way the message is perceived, but both share a synergic bond whereby the importance of content cannot be pulverized.

Keywords: medium, message, content, McLuhan.

INTRODUCTION

Originally, when the book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* was printed, due to a typing error the title was "The medium is the massage" but McLuhan liked it as it seemed like a pun. He thought that media massaged the brain in particular ways and hence chose against changing it. This claim revolves around how the medium influences what we receive and consequently the way we react

to it. According to him, it is the form and not the content that has the primary effect. He supports these claims with various examples and he applies this theory mainly in communication and media studies. However, even though the medium is indisputably important in how the message is received, but the content's value cannot be undermined as both share a symbiotic relationship.

MC LUHAN'S PHILOSOPHIC DETERMINATION

McLuhan studied at Cambridge and taught and researched for a few years in the United States but apart from that he never left his native place, Canada for an extended period of time. This is reflected in his ideas which seem to be connected to a very specific culture. His manifestations react from the doctrine of liberalism as he tries to provide the solution of liberal catechism, i.e., "one-world or anti-nationalism, universal brotherhood or racial obliteration, anti-war or pacifism, all readvertised in the terminology and iconography of instant primitivism (Aden)." Scholars have called his philosophic determination as historical or technological determination but his theory is sufficiently unscientific, thesis-ridden and often inconsistent and contradictory. Change of "message" into "massage" as a pun shows how he dealt with sensationalism or phenomenalism and that he was not writing history. His theory lacks empirical evidence or as Theodore Roszak, a critic, in "Summa Popologica" (New Politics) says that McLuhan "is no sort of specialist at all but only a sort of social

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critic or perhaps a dilettante conversationalist who doesn't prove his thesis but rather browbeats you with it." Dwight Macdonald, another critic of McLuhan's work finds his work to be ridden with "contradictions, non-sequiturs, facts that are distorted and facts that are not facts, exaggerations, and chronic rhetorical vagueness (Macdonald)." This is aided by the fact that his language is obscure and difficult to comprehend which leads to several misinterpretations as his target seems to be a postmodern reader who is "interested in the disconnected messages of the electronic media (Aden)."

FALLACIES IN HIS THEORY

The interpretation of McLuhan's aphorism "The medium is the message" is contingent and contextual. It can be interpreted in many ways which are at odds with each other. It is like a paradox with poetical elements to it. McLuhan's so-called "technical determinism" is rather, a form of materialism. Some scholars claim that his thinking aligns with that of Maxian thinking. But calling his method dialectical is dubious since he shows a lack of interest in empirical evidence or scrupulous consistency. He portrays a fallacy of hasty generalization by drawing out whatever elements catch his attention and then leaping directly to an account of the whole with overextended analogies and jumps in reasoning. Thus, his poetic and immaterialist dialectics are nothing like Marx's scientific and materialist dialectic (Stephens). Some of his generalizations are difficult to believe like the one claiming that people who complain about TV violence are simply "semiliterate book-oriented individuals" who are not competent in the grammar of newspaper, radio, etc but look disdainfully at all non-book media. McLuhan fails to consider that literacy may not be the only actor and that mentality provides another dimension. Another generalization is his claim that most TV stars are men because they can portray "cool characters" while most movie stars are women as they can be portrayed as "hot" characters (McLuhan). He fails to provide enough evidence to support this claim.

CONFUSION OF CAUSE AND EFFECT

McLuhan states that "the medium is the message because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action. The content or uses of such media are as diverse as they are ineffectual in shaping the form of human association (McLuhan)." However, McLuhan confuses cause and effect here and fails to recognize the reason why the medium is able to bring about a change. This is because the content spread through that medium and the way that medium was used was revolutionary. The presence of medium is necessary but not enough. It is the content, through the medium, that brings transformation. According to McLuhan, "the personal and social consequences of any medium - that is, of any extension of ourselves - result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology (McLuhan)." But this new scale has to be put to use by us, through the content to bring any impact. The introduction of the printing press, the medium, in 1450 would have not been able to generate any socio-cultural consequences had the materials published through it not been significant and engaging. The first book published through the printing press was the Bible and in a religiously motivated catholic society of Europe at that time, the spread of religious information to the general masses was significant as it led to awareness, literacy and consequent social changes. Had Johannes Gutenberg published material not so significant or religious text of any other religion, there is a possibility that it would not have attracted enough attention and the information would not have spread so rapidly. The invention then would not have created the impact it did. Thus, a medium that had the potential to bring about a change would not have been able to, had the content not been suitable for that time.

McLuhan, during an interview in 1960 said that "The world is now like a continually sounding tribal drum where everybody gets the message all of the time. A princess gets married in England and boom, boom, boom goes the drums. We all hear about it. An earthquake in North Africa, a

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Hollywood star gets drunk—away goes the drums again. But the content of the message isn't what matters; what matters is the medium, because it is the medium that modifies our senses when processing the received information (McLuhan, *The World is a Global Village*). "However, this is just one side of the story just like how technology has both pros and cons. While information of a Hollywood star getting drunk may not add much to the social transformation (it may if we look at it in a way of alcohol abuse in the elite circles of the society) but content like an earthquake in North Africa or live streaming of wars like the Israel-Palestine issue recently gives us the opportunity to help those in need even outside of countries. This leads to a global community with changes and more homogenized culture. McLuhan might claim this to be the impact of the medium, i.e., the television. However, the medium only provides us access to do things but the content gives us ideas. Had we humans decided not to use the medium of television in the given way and only in a regional manner, this global hybrid community and the large-scale socio-cultural and economic changes would not have taken place. Thus, again, it is the content that leads to actual transformation with the help of the medium.

IMPORTANCE OF CONTENT

If what Marshall McLuhan says about content not being as important as medium, or medium being more important is true, then a look at the role of the press in India's Independence struggle is crucial. Print media acted like the backbone of mass movements and supported the freedom struggle. Those who could read were encouraged and motivated to participate in the struggle by arousing a sense of nationalism in them. Print media, the medium, had been in presence even before the struggle started and was read by people of upper caste and classes but its role assumed importance for the nation as a whole only when the content it published was in alignment with the need of the time. Since the content was now a threat to the Britishers, they imposed several acts like the Vernacular Press Act, 1878 and the Indian Press

Act, 1910 to curb their spread. One may argue that majority of the Indian population at that time was illiterate and hence, the press achieved only partial success. That is when theatres and later movies stepped in to carry the message to the masses. Here, even though the medium assumed importance but it was again present even before the struggle started. Hence, it was the content that shaped and mobilized the peoples' sentiments. Had the content delivered through the medium not been salient and had it been ineffective in mobilizing the people, the impact of media in bringing about a major social change in the subcontinent would have been very limited or even null. Thus, here too, it is the content with the help of medium which led to transformation.

**THE MESSAGE WILL ALWAYS OUTLIVE
THE MEDIUM**

Another criticism of his aphorism is that the medium cannot be equated to the message as both are distinctly important and the message will always outlive the medium. McLuhan uses the example of electric light to demonstrate how a medium without a message exists. This is true but no interest in a medium would ever last long enough if it does not communicate a message. The medium changes and evolves over time, but the message remains constant. As opposed to the medium, the message is what specific information we communicate through it. And it is the message that provides us with the true description of any communication. For example, the printing press introduced the world to books that contain various themes and genres and then with evolution came the internet with online platforms to write and share. While McLuhan would argue that "the content of writing is speech" and the content of speech is the "actual process of thought which is nonverbal", even then it is finally the thought that gives us the message and this thought can be and has transferred from various mediums to another. In school, suppose one learns the medium of writing, in high school, one learns speaking and then in college one learns some other medium like blogging, yet the message that is brought about through all these mediums comes from the thoughts

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and ideas of the one person who learnt them. The message is something that is part of that person since childhood, although his/her/their awareness of it has certainly increased with time.

Another example to show the importance of message over various mediums is religious texts. The earliest writing samples of religious texts date back to 3,400 to 3,500 BC. Here, for the ease of explaining I mainly focus on religious texts of Hinduism but the same can be applied to any religious text. Vedas, large bodies of Hindu religious texts were written during the 2nd millennium BCE and the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita, another one of the main holy scriptures for Hinduism, dates to the first millennium BCE. These scriptures hold utmost value and importance even in the 21st century and they will continue doing so for many years to come. They were written even before any form of “modern” medium was invented. Yet, they still hold the same values and spread the same messages they intended for at that time may it be through any medium like oral communication, books, theatre, online platforms, etc. One may argue here that over time, to fit in a certain medium, they have been translated or modified and thus, the message is lost. This may be true but following McLuhan’s reasoning that “content of any medium is another medium”, even these texts (Vedas, Gita) are then mediums [which are spread through other major mediums (books, online websites)] which carry the message and this message is of the essence for the religion and remains the same over years.

For more contemporary examples we can look at the sonnets and plays of William Shakespeare. He wrote plays in the 16th and 17th centuries for a small theatre but are now read and performed in almost all parts of the world. From stage to books to screen, the medium has been diversified yet, the content of his plays remains the same. Yes, in films the producers often adapt the story to meet the demands of the modern public or publishers modify the language to make it comprehensible for today’s society, but this is our

choice and not the force of the medium. If one wishes, one can find the exact plays as written in the 16th-17th century in books or online. Again, following McLuhan’s line of reasoning, we should look at Shakespeare as a medium and his plays as the message, even then the message that these plays emanate is the same over different mediums, subjected to different interpretations in different societies due to different cultures (not mediums). For example, the story of *Macbeth* whereby “three witches tell the Scottish general Macbeth that he will be King of Scotland. Encouraged by his wife, Macbeth kills the king, becomes the new king, and kills more people out of paranoia. Civil war erupts to overthrow Macbeth, resulting in more death (Trustplace)” remains the same no matter which medium is used to tell it. Even if there are slight modifications due to regional differences, *Macbeth* gives the same message that being overly ambitious can bring ruins or how power corrupts a person. Hence, while the medium may evolve over time, the content is far more permanent.

Conclusion

So, what happens when we put the medium before the message? We define the value of the content in terms of the medium rather than the essence of the message thereby putting emptiness before fullness. What would the meaning of any medium be without its contents? Certain books become famous and some don’t, because of their content. YouTube works because people give upload content in form of videos. Twitter is in use because people use it by tweeting content. Certainly, the medium defines shapes and regulates the content it carries but all these mediums work because we chose to put content into them. If we stop, these mediums would stop being of any use. And even the converse is true. Where would be put the content if we don’t have any medium? Hence, both the medium and the message form an important part of any communication whereby the medium is composed of the messages within it. None can exist without the other.

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As Daniel Czitrom remarks, "If nothing else, McLuhan's efforts instilled an urgent awareness of the media environment as a basic force shaping the modern sensibility (Czitrom). McLuhan's insights are challenging and true to a major extent yet they are not devoid of criticisms. The message needs the right medium in the same way that the medium needs an important message to sustain. "The medium is the message" is an extremely perceptive aphorism since both the medium and the message have a symbiotic relationship with both being equally important. Not to say that the medium does not affect the message at all, but to say that it "is" the message is a bit short-sighted.

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