The Medium Is the Message

Marshall McLuhan

It's nature like ours, long accustomed to splitting and doubling things as a means of control, is sometimes a bit off-kilter to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, 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. Thus, with automation, for example, the new patterns of human association tend to eliminate jobs, it is true. That is the negative result. Positively, automation creates roles for people, which is to say depth of involvement in their work and human association that our preceding mechanical technology had destroyed. Many people would have disposed to say that it was not the machine, but what one did with the machine, that was its meaning or message. In terms of the ways in which the machine altered our relations to one another and to nature, it mattered not so little how whether it turned out conservatives or Cadillacs.

The restructuring of human work and association was shaped by the technique of fragmentation that is the essence of machine technology. The essence of automation is the opposite. It is integral and dialectic in depth, just as the machine was fragmentary, centralist, and superficial in its patterning of human relationships.

The instance of the electric light may prove illuminating in this connection. 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. This fact, characteristic of all media, means that the "content" of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech; just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph. If it is asked, "What is the content of speech?" it is necessary to say, "It is an actual process of thought, which is in itself conversational." An abstract painting Sequences direct manifestation of creative thought processes in they might appear in computer designs. What we are considering here, however, are the psychic and social consequences of the designs or patterns as they amplify or accelerate existing processes. For the "message" of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs. The railway did not introduce movement or transportation or wheel or road into human society, but it accelerated and enlarged the scale of previous human functions, creating totally new kinds of cities and new kinds of work and leisure. This happened whether the railway functioned in a tropical or a northern environment, and is quite independent of the freight or content of the railway medium. The airplane, on the other hand, by accelerating the rate of transportation, tends to displace the railway form of city politics, and association, quite independently of what the airplane is used for.

Let us return to the electric light. Whether the light is being used for beam surgery or night baseball is a matter of indifference. It could be argued that these activities are in some way the "content" of the electric light, since they could not exist without the electric light. This fact merely underlines the point 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 inessential in shaping the form of human associations. Indeed, it is only too typical that the "content" of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium. It is only today that industries have become aware of the various kinds of business in which they are engaged. 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 cultivate with clear vision. The General Electric Company makes a considerable portion of its profits from electric-light bulbs and lighting systems. It has not yet discovered that, quite as much as A.T.&T., it is in the business of moving information.

The electric light escapes attention as a communications medium just because it has no content. And this makes it an irremovable instance of how people fail to study media at all. For it is not till the electric light is used to spell out some brand name that it is noticed as a medium. Then it is not the light but the "content" (or what is really another medium) that is noticed. The message of the electric light is like the message of electric power in industry, totally radical, pervasive, and decentralized. For electric light and power are
At Selby deals with the total environmental situation in his "stress" theory of disease, so the latest approach to media study considers not only the "content" but the medium and the cultural matrix within which particular mediums operates. The older awareness of the psychic and social effects of media can be illustrated from almost any of the conventional pronouncements.

In accepting an honorary degree from the University of Notre Dame a few years ago, General David Sarnoff made this statement: "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." That is the voice of the current sennettism.

Suppose we were to say, "Apple pie is in itself neither good nor bad; it is the way it is used that determines its value." Or, "The smallpox virus is in itself neither good nor bad; it is the way it is used that determines its value." Again, "Firearms are in themselves neither good nor bad; it is the way they are used that determines their value." That is, if the tools reach the right people, firearms are good. If the TV tube viewing the right ammunition at the right people it is good. I am not being perverse. There is simply nothing in the Sarnoff statement that will bear scrutiny for it ignores the nature of the medium: of any and all media, in the true Narcissus style of one hypnotized by the amputation and extension of his own being in a new technical form. General Sarnoff went on to explain his attitude to the technology of print, saying that it was true that print caused much trash to circulate, but it had also disseminated the Bible and the thoughts of Sene and philosophers. It has never occurred to General Sarnoff that any technology could do anything but add itself to what we already are.

Such economists as Robert Theobald, W. W. Rostow, and John Kenneth Galbraith have been explaining for years how it is that "classical economics" cannot explain change or growth. And the paradox of mechanism is that although it is itself the cause of maximal growth and change, the principle of mechanism excludes the very possibility of growth or the understanding of change. For mechanism achieved by fragmentation of any process and by putting the
fragments parts in a series. Yet, as David Hume showed in the eighteenth century, there is no principle of causality in a real sequence. That one thing follows another accounts for nothing. Nothing follows from except change. So the greatness of all reversals occurred with electricity, that real sequence by making things instanta. With instant speed the cause of things began to emerge to awareness again, as they had not been in things in sequence and in conservation, accordingly. Instead of taking which came first, the chicken or the egg, it suddenly seemed that a chicken was an egg's idea for getting more eggs. Just before an airplane breaks the sound barrier, sound waves become visible on the wings of the plane. The sudden visibility of sound just as sound ends is an apt instance of that great pattern of being that reveals now and opposite form just as the entire form reaches their peak performance. Mechanization was never so vividly fragmental or sequential as in the birth of the movies, the moment that translated us beyond meditation into the world of growth and organic interaction. The movie, by sheer speeding up the mechanical, carried us from the world of sequence and connections into the world of creative configuration.

The message of the moving medium is that of transition from linear connections to configuration. The image, that produced the raw image, correct observation: "It works, it is absolute." When electric speed further takes over from mechanical movie sequences, then the lines of time in structures and in media become blurred and clear. We return to the inclusive form of the icon.

To a highly literate and mechanized culture the movie appeared as a world of triumphant illusions and dreams that reality could be. It was at this moment of the movie that culture occurred, and it has been described by Fl. 31. Gombrich (Art and Illusion) as the "most radical attempt to stamp out ambiguity and to enforce one reading of the planes—that of a man-made construction. A colored canvas' liveliness substitutes all forms of an object simultaneously for a 'point of view' or facet of perspective illusion. Instead of the specialized illusion of the third dimension on canvas, illusion sets up an interplay of planes and contradiction in forms and qualities of patterns, lights, textures that 'drives home the message' by involvement. This is held by many to be an exercise in painting, not in illusion.

In other words, culture, by giving the inside and outside, the top, bottom, back, and front to the rest, in two dimensions, drops the illusion of perspective in favor of instant sensory awareness of the whole. Cubism, by setting on instant total awareness, suddenly announced that the medium is the message. It is not evident that the moment that sequence yields to the simultaneous, one is in the world of the structure and of configuration? Is that what has happened in physics as in painting, poetry, and in communication? Specialized segments of attention have shifted to total field, and we can now say: "The medium is the message" quite naturally. Before the electric speed and total field it was not obvious that the medium is the message. The medium, it seemed, was the 'content'. As people used to ask in what a painting was about. Yet they never thought to ask what a melody was about, nor what a house or a dress was about. In such matters, people retained some sense of the whole pattern, form and function as a unity. But in the electric age this integral idea of structure and configuration has become so prevalent that educational theory has taken up the medium instead of working with specialized 'problems' in arithmetic, the structural approach now follows the locus of force in the field of number and has small children mediating about number theory and "sets.

Cardinal Newman said of Napoleon, "He understood the grammar ofFrench words." Napoleon had paid some attention to other media as well, especially the semaphore telegraph that gave him a great advantage over his enemies. He is on record for saying that "Three footles newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand hussards." Alain de Tocqueville was the first to master the grammar of print and typography. He was thus able to read off the message of coming change in France and America as if he were reading aloud from a text that had been handed to him. In fact, the nineteenth century in France and in America was just such an open book to de Tocqueville because he had learned the grammar of print. So he, also, knew when that grammar did not apply. He was asked why he did not write a book on England, since he knew and admired England. He replied:

One would have to have an unusual degree of philosophical folly to believe oneself able to judge England in six months. A year always seemed too too short a time in which to appreciate the United States properly, and it is much easier to acquire clear and precise notions about the American Union than about Great Britain. In America all lines derive in a sense from..."
the same line of thought. The whole of society, as to speak, is bound up on a single face; everything springs from a single principle. One can imagine America to be a forest pierced by a multitude of straight roads all converging on the same point. One has only to find the center and everything is revealed at a glance. But in England the paths run criss-cross, and it is only by travelling down each one of them that one can build up a picture of the whole.

De Toqueville, in earlier work on the French Revolution, had explained how it was the printed word that, achieving cultural saturation in the eighteenth century, had homogenized the French nation. Frenchmen were the same kind of people from north to south. The typographic principles of uniformity, contiguity, and literacy had overlaid the complexities of ancient feudol and oral society. The Revolution was carried out by the new literati and lawyers. In England, however, such was the power of the ancient oral traditions of common law back by the medieval institution of Parliament, that no uniformity or contiguity of the new visual print culture could take complete hold. The result was that the most important event in English history has never taken place namely, the English Revolution on the lines of the French Revolution. The American Revolution had no medieval legal institutions to discard or to root out, apart from monarchy. And many have held that the American Presidenc with become very much more personal and monarch than any European monarch ever could be.

De Toqueville's contrast between England and America is clearly based on the fact of typography and of print culture creating uniformity and contiguity. England, he says, has rejected this principle and clung to the dynamic or oral commonlaw tradition. Hence the discontinuity and unpredictable quality of English culture. The grammar of print cannot help to construe the message of oral and nonwritten culture and institutions. The American aristocracy was properly classified as barbarian by Matthew Arnold because its power and status had nothing to do with literacy or with the cultural forms of typography. Said the Duke of Gloucester to Edward Gibbon upon the publication of his Decline and Fall, "Another damned fat book, eh, Mr. Gibbon? Scripture, scribble, scribble, eh, Mr. Gibbon?" De Toqueville was a highly literate aristocrat who was quite able to be detached from the values and assumptions of typography. That is why he alone understood the grammar of typography. And it is only on those terms, standing aside from any structure or medium, that its principles and laws of force can be discerned. For any medium has the power of imposing its own assumption on the unwary. Prediction and control consist in avoiding this subliminal state of Nietzschean trance. But the greatest aid to this end is simply in knowing that the spell can occur immediately upon contact, as in the first bars of a melody.

A Passage to India by E. M. Forster is a dramatic study of the inability of oral and intuitive oriental culture to meet with the rational, visual European patterns of experience. Rational, of course, has for the West long meant "uniform and continuous and sequential." In other words, we have confused reason with literacy and rationalism with a single technology. Thus in the electric age man seems to the conventional West to become irrational. In Forster's novel the moment of truth and dislocation from the typographic trance of the West comes in the Marabar Caves. Adela Quested's reasoning cannot cope with the total indicative field of reasons that is India. After the Caves she went on as usual, but had no consequences, that is to say, sounds did not echo nor thought develop. Everything seemed cut off at its root and therefore infected with illusion."

A Passage to India (the phrase is from Whitman, who saw America headed Eastward) is a parallel of Western man to the electric age, and is only incidentally related to Europe or the Orient. The ultimate conflict between sight and sound, between written and oral kinds of perception and organization of existence is upon us. Since understanding stops action, as Nietzsche observed, we can moderate the fierceness of this conflict by understanding the media that extend us and raise these barriers within and without us. Derrida's deconstruction by literacy and its traumatic effects on tribal man is the theme of a book by the psychiatrist J.C. Carothers, The African Mind In Health and Disease (World Health Organization, Geneva, 1955). Much of his material appeared in an article in Psychiatry magazine, November, 1959. "The Culture, Psychiatry, and the Written Word." Again, it is an electric speed that has revealed the lines of force operating from Western technology in the remotest areas of bush, savannah, and desert. One example is the bedouin with his battery radio on board the camel. Submerging natives with floods of concepts for which nothing has prepared them is the normal action of all of our technology. But with electric media Western man himself experiences exactly the same inquisition as the remote savage. We are no more
prepared to encounter radio and TV in our literate milieu that the native of Ghana is able to cope with the literacy that takes him out of his collective tribal world and befriends him in individual isolation. We are as numb in our new electronic world as the native involved in our literate and mechanical culture.

Electric speed mingles the cultures of prehistory with the days of industrial marketeers, the nonexistent with the reassuring and the purblind. Mental breakdown of working degrees is the very common result of uprooting and inundation with new information and endless new patterns of information. Wyndham Lewis made this a theme of his group of novels called The Human Age. The first of these, The Childless, is concerned precisely with accelerated media things as a kind of massacre in the innocents. In our own world we as become more aware of the effects of technology on psychographic formation and manifestation; we are being all afflicted in our sight to assign guilt. Ancient pedagogic sources regard violent crime as pathetic. The killer is regarded as we do a cancer victim. "How terrible it must be to feel like that," they say. J.M. Synge took up this idea very effectively in his Playboy of the Western World.

If the criminal appears as a nonconformist who is unable to meet the demand of technology that we behave in uniform and continuous patterns, literate man is quite inclined to see others who cannot conform as somewhat pathetic. Especially the child, the cripple, the woman, and the colored person appear in a world of visual and typographic technology as victims of insanity. On the other hand, in a culture that assigns roles instead of jobs to people—the dwarf, the slow, the child, the cripple, the woman—are not expected to fit into some uniform and respectable niche that is not their own anyway. Consider the phrase "It's a man's world." As a quantitative observation, endlessly repeated from within a homogenized culture, this phrase refers to the man in such a culture who have to be homogenized Dagwoods in order to belong at all. It is in our IQ testing that we have produced the greatest flood of misbegotten standards. Unaware of our typographic cultural bias, our foster mothers assure that uniform and continuous habits are a sign of intelligence thus eliminating the slow man and the nubile man.

E. P. Thompson, reviewing a book of A. L. Rowse (The New York Times Book Review, December 24, 1961) on Apagreement and the End to Munich, describes the top level of British brains and experience in the 1930s. "Their IQs were much higher than usual among political bosses. Why were they such a disaster?" The view of Rowse. Snow approaches. "They would not listen to warnings because they did not wish to hear." Being anti-Red made it impossible for them to read the message of Hitler. But their failure was as nothing compared to our present one. The American stake in literacy as a technology or uniformly applied to every level of education, government, industry, and social life is totally threatened by the electronic technology. The threat of Stalin or Hitler was external. The electronic technology is within the gate, and we are numb, dead, blind, and mute about its encounter with the Gutenberg technology, on and through which the American way of life was formed. It is, however, no time to suggest strategies when the threat has not even been acknowledged to exist. I am in the position of Louis Pasteur telling doctors that their greatest enemy was quite invisible, and quite unrecognized by them. Our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot. For the "content" of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat covered by the burlap to distract the watchdog of the mind. The effect of the medium is made strong and intense just because it is given another medium as "content." The content of a movie is a novel or a play or an opera. The effect of the movie form is not related to its program content. The "content" of writing or print is speech, but the reader is almost entirely unaware either of print or of speech.

Arnold Toynbee is innocent of any understanding of media as they have shaped history, but he is full of examples that the student of media can use. At one moment he can seriously suggest that adult education, such as the Workers Educational Association in Britain, is a useful counterforce to the popular press. Toynbee considers that although all of the oriental societies have in our time accepted the industrial technology and its political consequences, "On the cultural plane, however, there is no uniform corresponding tendency." (Somervell, I: 267) This is like the voice of the literate man, flowing in a milieu of ads, who boasts, "Personally, I pay no attention to ads." The spiritual and cultural reservations that the oriental peoples may have toward our technology will avail them not at all. The effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but after sense formation or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance. The serious artist is the only person able to
encounter technology with impertinence, but because he is an expert aware of the changes in sense perception. The operation of the money medium in seventeenth-century Japan had effects not unlike the operation of typography in the West. The penetration of the money economy wrote G. B. Sansom (in Japan Crucial Press, London, 1931) caused a slow but irresistible revolution, culminating in the breakdown of feudal government and the assumption of interference with foreign countries after more than two hundred years of seclusion. Money has reorganized the sense life of peoples just because it is an extension of our sense lives. This change does not depend upon appraisal or disagreement of those living in the society.

Arnold Ethony made one approach to the transforming power of media in his concept of "ethesization," which he holds to be the principle of progressive simplification and efficiency in any organization or technology. Typically, he is ignoring the effect of the challenge of these forces upon the response of our senses. He imagines that it is the response of our opinions that is relevant to the effect of media and technology in society a "point of view" that in plainly the results of the typographic spell. For the man in a linear and homogenized society it is sensitive to the diverse and differentiated life of forms. He acquires the illusions of the third dimension and the "private point of view" as part of his Narcissus fixation, and is (pun shot off from Blake's) awareness that of the Panjandrum, that we become what we behold.

Today when we want to get our bearings in every culture and have need to stand aside from the bias and pressures exerted by any technical form of human expression, we have only to visit a society where that particular form has not been felt, or a historical period in which it was unknown. Professor Wilbur Schramm made such a tactical move in studying television in the Lives of Our Children. He found areas where TV had not penetrated at all and ran some tests. Since he had made no study of the peculiar nature of the TV image, his tests were of "content" preference, viewing time, and vocabulary counts. In a word, his approach to the problem was a literary one about unconsciously so. Consequently, he had nothing to report. Had his methods been employed for 2,500 A.D. to discover the effects of the printed book, in the lives of children or adults, he could have found out nothing of the changes in human and social psychology resulting from typography. Print created individualism and nationalism in the sixteenth century. Program and "coax" analysis offer no clues to the magic of these media or to their subliminal charge.

Leonard Duhl, in his report Communication in Africa told of one African who took great pains to listen each evening to the BBC news, even though he could understand nothing of it. Just to be in the presence of those sounds at 7 P.M. each day was important for him. His attitude to speech was like that of a bee in a honeycomb: the resonant intrusion was meaningful enough. In the seventeenth century our ancestors still shared this natural attitude to the forms of media, as in plain in the following sentiments of the Frenchman Bernard Lonner expressed in The Art of Speaking (London, 1696).

"To an effect of the Wisdom of God, who created Man to be happy, that whatever is useful to his conversation (way of life) is especial to him... because all virtue that conduces to enjoyment is delightful, whereas other things that cannot be esteemed and be turned into our subsistence are irksome. A Divine cannot be pleasant to the human that is not visive to the Speaker; nor can it be truly pronounced unless it be heard with delight.

Here is an equilibrium theory of human diet and expression such as evinced now we are only striving to work one against media after centuries of fragmentation and specialization.

Pope Pius XIV was deeply concerned that there be some serious study of the media today. On February 17, 1590, he said: It is not an exaggeration to say that the future of modern society and the stability of its inner life depend in large part on the maintenance of an equilibrium between the strength of the techniques of communication and the capacity of the individual's own emotion.

Evaluating in this respect his quotes for centuries been typical and total for mankind. Subliminal and double acceptance of media impact has made them powerful without walls for their human users. As A. J. Liebling remarked in his book It's a Man is not free if he cannot see where he is going, even if he has a gun to help him get there. For each of the media it has a powerful weapon with which to dicker other media and other groups. The result is that the present age has been one of multiple civil wars that are not limited to the world art and entertainment. In Wars and Human Progress, Professor J. U. Nef declared:
The total wars of our time have been the result of a series of intellectual mistakes...
II. Collective Media, Personal Media

   The Medium Is the Message, 1964 (from Understanding Media)
   The Galaxy Reconfigured or the Flight of Man in an Individualist Society, 1969 (from The Gutenberg Galaxy)

14 [211] Four Selections by Experiments in Art and Technology
   From 'The Garden Party'
   Billy Klöver, 1967
   From 9 Ferrings
   E.A.T., 1966
   [Press Release]
   E.A.T., 1966
   The Farbism
   Billy Klöver, 1972

15 [227] Cyberart
   Nani, June Pak, 1966

16 [231] A Research Center for Augmenting Human Intellect
   Douglas Engelbart and William English, 1968

17 [247] From Software—Information Technology and New Meaning for Art
   Theodor H. Nelson, Nicholas Negroponte, and Lou Levine, 1970

19 [259] Constituents of a Theory of the Media
   Hans Magnus Enzensberger, 1970

19 [277] Required for the Media
   Jean Baudrillard, 1972

20 [285] The Technology and the Society
   Raymond Williams, 1974

21 [301] From Computer Art/Dream Machines

22 [339] From Theatre of the Oppressed
   Augusto Boal, 1974

23 [353] From Soft Architecture Machines
   Nicholas Negroponte, 1975

24 [367] From Computer Power and Human Reason
   Joseph Weizenbaum, 1976

25 [377] Responsive Environments
   Myron W. Krueger, 1977

26 [391] Personal Dynamic Media
   Alan Kay and Adele Goldberg, 1977

27 [405] From A Thousand Platinums
   Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, 1980