

Media Technologies

COMM2112 Theories of Communication and Persuasion
Semester One, 2008
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Refresh

- Process theory
- Cultural theories
- Text
- Discourse



Media as technology

- Shape
 - How the medium is used
 - What it is used for
- Become part of the meaning of the communication
- Reshape personal and cultural consciousness

Harold Innis (1884-1952)

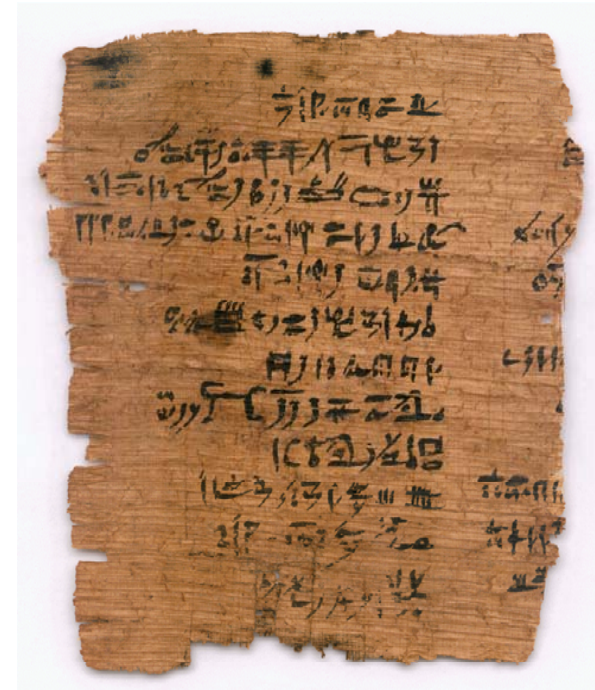
- Canadian economist
- Works
 - *Empire and communication* (1951)
 - *The bias of communication* (1952)
- Key idea:
 - Media understood in terms of time-bias or space-bias





- **Time-biased media**
- Physical characteristics:
 - Heavy
 - More durable
 - Not easily produced or reproduced
 - E.g. stone monuments, oral communication
- Build societies that emphasize
 - Durability of thought & social organisation
 - Across time
 - E.g. local tribes and communities

- **Space-biased media**
- Physical characteristics:
 - Lighter
 - More easily transported
 - More easily produced or reproduced
 - E.g. papyrus, printing, telecommunications
- Favor cultural values of
 - Space and distance
 - Ideas that change more across time
 - E.g. Empires



Marshall McLuhan



- Professor of English Literature, University of Toronto
- One of chief theorists of media in the 1960s and 1970s
 - In a world anxious about the electronic communications revolution,
 - McLuhan provided a way of understanding the cultural impact of those technologies on society.

- *The Gutenberg Galaxy*
- *Understanding media*
- *The medium is the message*
- *The mechanical bride*

McLuhanisms

- Global village
- The medium is the message
- Hot and cool media
- Retribalisation
- Sensory impact
- Media extend the senses

- His contribution
 - One of first in North America to refocus thinking about media away from the content of the communication to the nature of communication as cultural form
 - Gave a framework for thinking about media from a broad cultural perspective – media as technology underlies all aspects of human social and cultural experience.
- Key thought: The medium is the message

What does he mean - the medium is the message?

1. The medium of communication, not just the content, is the thing to study
 - Looking at the content of a communication misses the reality that the medium is what makes the difference
 - “For the content of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar 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 of print or of speech.” (Understanding media)
 - The medium is the ground, not the figure. It’s the ground that changes people.

What does he mean - the medium is the message?

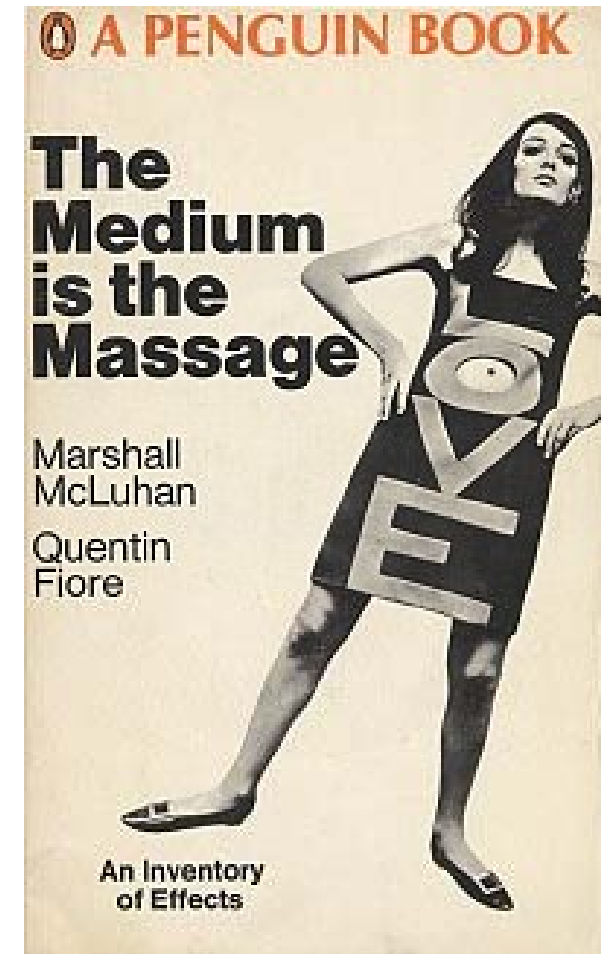
2. If you don't know the medium, you don't know the message

- The form of a communication affects the communication
 - By altering the content, and
 - By favouring particular kinds of messages
- All content has form and is affected by the dynamics of the form
- Therefore all communication must be seen as “content-in-form”

What does he mean - the medium is the message?

3. The medium is the message

- The form of the medium is not neutral – it alters the perceptual habits of its users.
- The influence is a subtle one – hence it massages change
- Different media cultures see the world through different “goggles”



What does he mean - the medium is the message?

4. The medium affects society as well as the individual
 - Major changes in media lay havoc to what came before
 - New technologies create new human environments, which modify previous environments and previous patterns of individual and social behaviour

McLuhan's four theses

1. Each culture develops its own balance of senses in response to the demands of its environment
 - The arrangement of media in every society will be different.
 - How we “see” reality is shaped by the culture we are in, the language spoken, the media we are exposed to
 - “The fish is not aware of the water in which it is swimming.”
 - E.g.
 - pre-literate people live in an all-at-once sense world using all senses
 - Literate people – alphabet-oriented, linear in their thinking, deduction and argument

2. The different media within a society address and extend particular senses and begin to interact with our senses. Changes of media therefore create a new balance of senses within a society.

- Media are best understood as extensions of the senses: tools for hand, wheel for foot, radio for voice, telephone for ear.
- New electronic technology extend our nerves and senses in a global embrace, creating a “global village.”

3. The extensions of our senses begin to interact with our senses.

- New technologies create a new balance among the senses – each technology diminishes the capacity to use the sense it extends, and hence change our senses
 - “We shape our tools, and thereafter they shape us.”
- New technologies diminishes our capacity to use the old
- E.g.
 - “Hot media” – those that complete and leave little room for response – eg radio and film
 - “Cool media” – those that invite participation and involvement – eg telephone and television

4. When the technology of communication change within a society, there is a corresponding change in that culture's way of perceiving and organising reality.

- "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. The serious artist is the only person able to encounter technology with impunity, just because he is an expert aware of the changes in sense perception." (Understanding media)

Examples of technology change....

- Pre-literate people live in an all-at-once senses world using all senses. This shapes their perception and engagement with their world
- Literate people live in a culture that is alphabet-oriented, segmented, and favors linear thought, deduction and argument.



- Mechanized print
 - Reinforced orientation toward uniform objective truth
 - Introduced a segmented cause-effect rational world
 - Prepared us for a mechanical industrial age
 - Suppressed mythic, multi-sensorial “organic experience
- Electronic media
 - have broken the monopoly of print and recreated a desire of getting all senses into the act again: aural, oral, tactile, kinetic.
 - Like cubism – seeing things simultaneously from multiple angles



Criticisms of McLuhan

- Technological determinism
- Media technology are their own animals
- Consider SCOT

Technology and culture

- Communication as the web of culture
- Liberties of action
- Knowledge storage & retrieval
- How communication positions people in relation to each other
- Institutions that develop in communication production and transfer
- Dominant senses and relationships that different media bring into play

Walter Ong: Four paradigms of communication cultures

- Oral cultures
- Manuscript cultures
- Print cultures
- Electronic cultures

In practice they are neither discreet nor absolute...

Oral communication

- The fundamental form of human communication
- The grounding of our cultural being
- Significant contemporary sub-cultures
 - Rural & working class communities
 - Street communities

Oral culture

- Significance
 - The fundamental form of human communication
 - The grounding of our cultural being
 - Significant contemporary sub-cultures
 - Recovery in electronic culture?

Oral culture

- Personal presence
- Multi-sensory involvement
- Impermanence of sound
- Reliance on human memory

The psychodynamics of orality

- Sound as power and action – build on the characteristics of sound
- Focus on the social
- Devices for structuring memory – repetition, redundancy, memorability
- Emphasis on conserving the past
- Focus on the concrete life-world
- Different concepts of time
- Importance of narrative

The impact of writing

- Writing's liberties of action
 - The making permanent of transient speech
 - The externalization of memory
 - The removal of the necessity of personal presence
 - Breaking constraints of space and time

Cultural consequences of writing

- The permanence of communication over distance
- Permanence of communication over time
- The accumulation of information over time
- The distancing of information from people
- Context-free discourse
- Individualizing communication
- The enhancement of abstract reasoning and the possibility of “objective” history
- The growth of linear logic and organization
- Changes in sensory balance

The social convergence of printing

- The right social conditions
 - The Renaissance
 - The telescope
 - The compass
 - Gunpowder
 - Rise of a bourgeoisie
- The technology and materials
 - 1221 Chinese invent movable wooden type
 - A reliable source of paper
- The means of distribution.
 - Roads and safety

The Gutenberg Bible

Gutenberg Bible
c.1450 – 1455

Also referred to as the 'forty-two-line Bible':

- first nine pages – 40 lines
- tenth page – 41 lines
- remainder – 42 lines

210 copies – 180 paper, 30 vellum

When Fust (Gutenberg's partner) took the Bibles to France to sell, he was suspected of witchcraft because of the number and uniformity of the volumes and had to reveal the method of production.



18th–19th centuries –literacy as a cultural phenomenon

- Improved literacy
- New economies of production
- Industrial revolution -> urbanisation, roads
- Concessions to newspapers, increased competition
- The surge of science
- Rise of the novel and literary journals

The rise of the author

- 55 million books published in the 18th century
- The rise of the author as author
- The author's name as a trade mark
- The author's ideas as marketable products
- The author as hero
 - "The prominent writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were not just literary phenomena, they were often seen as embodiments of national character and traditions; they could be hailed as moral exemplars and feted as social celebrities."

Johnson's dictionary 1755



- The standardisation of language
- The narrowing of language
 - “..a particular meaning of any word was legitimate only if it could reasonably be derived from a passage in a printed book. No matter how widespread, oral usage alone did not count as ‘real’ English.”
- The construction of “the common reader”
- The shift from wisdom to information – reading as skimming

1880 Birth of the modern newspaper

- Social context:
 - Immigration
 - Technological developments
 - Competition from radio & magazines
- 1896-1901 Era of sensationalism & yellow journalism
- Rise of journalism as an institution of power (start of the Late Modern Era?)

Social changes of literacy

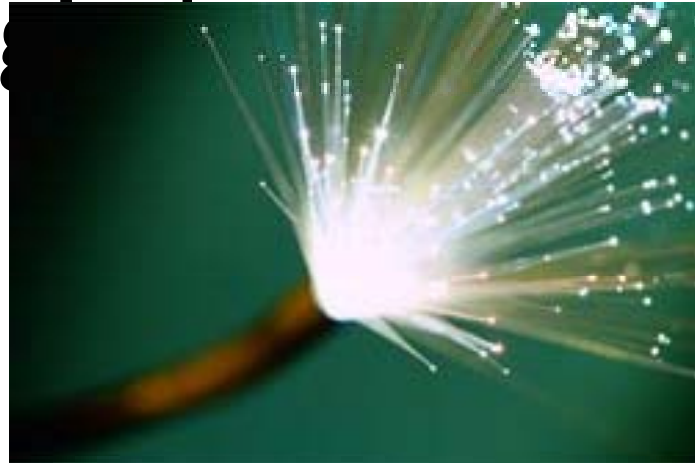
- The economics of writing
- Development of a consumer economy
- Shift in social power
- New principles for ordering information – the identification of “culture” and “literature”
- The development of print logic

A-V culture - 1820s onwards

- Cultural convergence
 - Technological/scientific experiment
 - An expanding view of the world
 - Growth in democratic institutions and thinking
 - The growth of consumer capitalism
 - Colonialism

The digital

- Digital language
 - Reductionism & atomisation
- Computers
 - Storage & reconfiguration
- Fibre optics
- Telecommunications



Electronic culture - 1

Increased speed of communication

- Changing the culture of time

Electronic culture - 2

Dissolving distance

- Changing the nature of space
- Changes in the concept and construction of community

“As electrically connected, the globe is no more than a village. Electric speed is bringing all social and political functions together in a sudden implosion...Time has ceased, ‘space’ has vanished. We now live in a global village...a simultaneous happening.... The electronic age has sealed “the entire human family into a single global tribe.” Marshall McLuhan

Electronic culture - 3

From one-way mediated communications
towards interactivity and participation

- Towards user-centered control
- From the producer to the consumer
- The dissolving of old producer and institutional boundaries

Electronic culture - 4

Changes in the nature of text

- Integration of the alphabet with the visual
- From singular to multiple meaning
- Changes in the sensory balance of communication

Electronic culture - 5

An expanded capacity for access, storage and transfer of information

- Shift in the structures for ordering and consuming information
- Breakdown in hierarchical authority structures
- Changes in structures of production & distribution

Useful reading

- Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding media*
- Ruth Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the technology of communication*
- Walter Ong: *Orality and literacy: The technologising of the word*
- Alfred Burns, *The power of the written word: The role of literacy in the history of western civilisation*
- Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The printing revolution in early modern Europe.*

Useful reading

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