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The Medium May be the Message but some Supporting Arguments shouldn't Be

McLuhan's "the Medium is the Message" presents an interesting way of understanding how content is exhibited but unfortunately uses offensive terminology and at times inaccurate assumptions. In illustrating what McLuhan means by "the medium is the message" I will provide my definition and breakdown of the phrase. Then I will focus on his terminology and arguments which are meant to contribute to the larger idea but fall short of supporting 'the medium is the message' due to inaccurate portrayals of Indigenous peoples and terminology.

The title of McLuhan's book "The Medium is the Message" illustrates that the way the content is provided to the audience determines what the message really is. Furthermore the environment one creates becomes their medium which then shapes our society (or interconnects us closely through 'global village'). The content is the information or what is trying to be shared while the audience is whoever receives this. The way that the content is presented affects the message to such an extent that the message becomes or is the medium. The environment, created by people, at the very least partially shapes the medium, if not fully. The environment is how we, as humans, view the world and it shapes the medium and message based on if it is the dominant perspective in society or not. Therefore at least to some extent the medium affects and is the following:

You, as the reader, needed the internet and a computer (or similar device) to view this. You also likely needed a link from my twitter account.

Accessibility

Social Understanding

You, as the reader, must be able to read English and understand many of the terms that Western and Indigenous Studies scholars are familiar with to likely better comprehend this text.

You, as the reader, can either relate or not to an environment. The environment that I have as the creator of the medium (and therefore the message) is either the dominant environment or not which affects the medium and message.

Environment

Senses

Smell
taste
Touch
hearing
Sight

You, as the reader, are using sight and possibly hearing if this is being read out loud to comprehend this text. Touch is also being used differently for each reader whether they have a mouse, track pad and touch screen (among other ways to comprehend this text).

You, as the reader, have a past as does the writer. The past of the writer affects the medium with decisions of the content and media used as “we tend always to attach ourselves to the objects, the flavor of the most recent past” (McLuhan 74).

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Past | Present-a
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Though these are not necessarily the only factors that affect and are the medium these are points that I drew out of McLuhan’s book. The accessibility, social understanding, environment, senses and relationship to the past all affect the medium that is used and

therefor the information presented. For example above I used colour, different fonts, sizes and characters to present each point. This exhibits the medium I chose to exhibit my content but furthermore that the medium used is the message.

Though there seems to be a beneficial understanding in “the medium is the message” there are also some prominent issues in McLuhan’s argument. He uses a very Western and Darwinist approach which presents gaps in his “message.” By using offensive terminology and inaccurate ideas of Indigenous peoples McLuhan presents many issues that weaken his argument. Firstly McLuhan states that “in an electric information environment, minority groups can no longer be contained-ignored” (24). No matter how true McLuhan’s point is the way it is said seems to give off a sense of reluctance. That even though Western men (and likely women though he always uses “men”) might not want to pay attention to minority groups they are “...irrevocably involved” (McLuhan 24). The issue here is how McLuhan illustrates his point which has an undertone of reluctance and negativity.

Another issue that is evident in McLuhan’s book is on the topic of before and after writing was invented in western history. McLuhan states that “until writing was invented, men lived... boundless, directionless, horizonless, in the dark of the mind, in the world of emotion, by primordial intuition, by terror” (48). This is a statement which completely ignores the complex social systems and knowledge that Indigenous people in Canada have had for thousands of years and their ability to largely remember events and knowledge through oral storytelling. Aboriginal peoples did this all before writing (in the western sense) was ever introduced to their communities. These communities were not ‘directionless’ since social gatherings, ceremonies, and hunting among a plethora of other goals were planned and enacted. Aboriginal peoples were not ‘dark in the mind’ with ‘primordial intuition’ run ‘by terror.’ Many had thriving communities (and still do) where gatherings were held, relationships were made and different people were known to be

experts at different things. All of this was established before western literacy was introduced and continues today with Indigenous pedagogies and knowledge (stories that totem poles and readers possess for example). McLuhan stating that the goose quill along with literature brought about civilization and brought people into the light of the mind from the dark (48) is nonsense. Though one could excuse him for having written this in the sixties that would not uncover the exact issues that this book exhibits and therefore still projects to individuals from all walks of life (not just critical thinkers in Indigenous Studies). Each quote from the last two paragraphs were from the same page which makes that whole page completely inadmissible in supporting his larger argument.

In addition an issue arises with McLuhan's point of reaction versus action. He explains that "we have begun again to structure the primordial feeling, the tribal emotions from which a few centuries of literacy divorced us. We have to shift our stress of attention from action to reaction" (McLuhan 63). Assuming that McLuhan means white western people (mainly men) as the 'we' given his perspective on Indigenous and minority groups, it seems as though McLuhan wants western people to "go back" to these traits; That people are already starting to do this. The issue however is not only in the terminology of Indigenous peoples feelings being somehow separate from western people's feelings but also that this idea of connecting to and being like Indigenous people but only to the extent that it benefits the western person is very problematic. This seems all too familiar with "Indian" Halloween costumes and headdresses being worn at music festivals which exhibit cultural appropriation. Though McLuhan's quote is more of a perpetuation of the "Noble Savage" stereotype he also draws parts of Indigenous culture he wants to connect to and 'uplift' while condemning other areas such as 'pre-literacy.' McLuhan's points only benefit and uplift white western people while Indigenous people are being both applauded (even though incorrectly with terms like tribal emotions) and condemned.

Though McLuhan makes a very interesting argument he falls short on many of his supporting points. His reasoning is inaccurate in regards to Aboriginal peoples and is at best problematic if not clearly racist. His perspective on minority groups is harsh and reluctant. Aboriginal people are not 'dark of mind' and weren't even 400 years ago (or later). Social organizations, gatherings, and expert skills exhibit the intelligence and complex interactions between Indigenous peoples. 'The medium is the message' however does seem to present a lot of insight on how individuals understand information. The way it is presented is just as crucial, if not more crucial, than the content. Perhaps the next time I witness something I will be more aware of my accessibility, social understanding, senses, environment, and past to better understand the message and (read 'as') medium.

Works Cited

McLuhan, Marshall. *The Medium is the Massage*. Gingko Press. 1996.