*Communication and (Educational) Media: Dewey as a Theorist* avant la lettre

*ABSTRACT: In addition to being an educational reformer and philosopher* nonpareil*, John Dewey also theorized media and communication. The inimitable Marshall McLuhan once characterized Dewey as "surf-boarding along on the new electronic wave [that] …has now rolled right over this age." Dewey himself repeatedly emphasized that "the radio, the railway, telephone, telegraph" had rendered "social life …almost completely changed." This paper undertakes a historical reconstruction of Dewey's theory of communication and media, particularly as it relates to education, scholarship and democracy. It then considers his later privileging of "communicative" aesthetics and the "winged words" of oral communication. It concludes that despite its periodic imprecision and ambivalence, Dewey's "theory" of media and communication in education remains both current and compelling.*

This paper presents Dewey as a scholar of communication and media, but admittedly only as a theorist *avant la lettre,* in retrospect, or through reconstruction. It is not surprising that Dewey did not see himself –and that *others* have not typically seen him-- as theorizing these matters. This is because media and mediation *per se* have been theorized only relatively recently –for example by the likes of Marshall McLuhan, Neil Postman, Régis Debray or Vilém Flusser (Margreiter 2006). However, this does not make Dewey's remarks on these matters any less significant. Rather, it renders them all the more remarkable, as McLuhan and others (e.g., Czitrom 1982; Peters 1999) have noted. Peters, for example, highlights Dewey as an exemplary theorist of media and communication, particularly as these are constitutive of *human sociality tout court*:

> Dewey is perhaps the best exemplar of a theorist of communication as partaking... Dewey thought the ability to place oneself "at the standpoint of a situation which two parties share" was the distinctive gift of humanity. Communication [for Dewey] meant taking part in a collective world, not sharing the secrets of consciousness. (1999, p. 18)

Throughout his career, Dewey portrays communication as a type of commerce, a matter of transaction, exchange, interchange and interaction. For example, at one point, he characterizes the school as bringing into circulation "the capital handed down from past generations." Elsewhere, he favorably compares the university scholar or "scholastic" to the financial "speculator" (1891). Dewey explains that

> Words are spoken of as coins and money… [because they bring] into being new transactions, forming new histories and affairs. Exchange is not an event that can be isolated. It marks the emergence of production and consumption into a new *medium* and context wherein they acquire new properties. (1925: 173-174; emphasis added)

However, this exchange and circulation is not limited to just educational or scholarly endeavours; it extends to absolutely *any* type of information and its audience. Indeed, as Dewey writes in *The Public and its Problems*, open and unrestricted communication is essential for a

free and democratic society: “Democracy,” Dewey asserts, “is a name for a life of free and enriching communion. […] It will have its consummation when free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and moving communication” (1927, p. 184). Also, such free and moving communication for Dewey is not limited to publication or broadcast forms, but extends to include any “mediator” of exchange, whether be epistolary, oral or even monetary.

Such an understanding of social, political and intellectual life as proliferating exchange and interchange underpins Dewey’s conceptualizations and judgements concerning the use of specific media in the classroom and in everyday life. This is evident, for example, in “The Primary Education Fetich [sic]” (1898), where Dewey argues that new media forms demand a frank reassessment of the earliest stages in reading and writing instruction: “Quick and cheap mails ... the telegraph and telephone... the universal diffusion of cheap reading-matter,” Dewey explains, have all changed the communication and circulation of knowledge, and have attenuated the importance of textual literacies:

> The significance attaching to reading and writing, as primary and fundamental instruments of culture, has shrunk proportionately as the immanent intellectual life of society has quickened and multiplied. The result is that these studies [to learn reading and writing] lose their motive and motor force. They have become mechanical and formal, and out of relation—when made dominant—to the rest of life. (1898, p. 257)

In more advanced educational contexts –ones already presupposing academic textual literacy– Dewey remains opposed to the text. In “Lectures vs. Recitations” (1891) Dewey dismisses the textbook as simply imposing dead weight on the circulation of knowledge; he also favourably compares the extemporized speaking characteristic of the lecture to rote, text-based recitation:

> It [the lecture] has, wherever introduced, destroyed, once for all, the superstition that the text-book is the sum and end of learning; it has helped dispel those vicious methods of *rote* study which that superstition fostered; it has compelled the instructor himself to broaden and freshen his knowledge... (1898, p. 257)

Dewey is of course no sworn enemy of the printed word, only of the limitations on its dissemination presented by its fetishization in recitation, and its confinement between inflexible codex covers. Dewey predicts that through innovations in media, ‘the set lecture will, upon the whole, be displaced … [with] the teacher guiding the study by questions, references, printed helps, etc.” The end result, he says would be “a cross between the seminary [or dialogical seminar] and the recitation methods” (1898, p. 257).

It seems, then, that Marshall McLuhan’s characterizations of Dewey –despite being rather extravagant and overstated– are in keeping with the thrust of Dewey’s approach:

> John Dewey worked to restore education to its primitive pre-print phase. He wanted to get the student out of the passive role of consumer of uniformly packaged learning. In

> fact, Dewey in reacting against passive print culture was surf-boarding along on the new electronic wave. …[He] was trying to explain the meaning of the electronic age to educators. (1962, p. 144)

However, Dewey's enthusiasm for new, electrical and electro-mechanical media forms –and his demand that their impact be taken into account in education— did not mean that he was uncritical in other contexts. In fact, he was particularly concerned about the public and political role of new media, particularly mass media, of his time:

> Telegraph, telephone, and now the radio, cheap and quick mails, the printing press, capable of swift reduplication of material at low cost, have attained a remarkable development. But when we ask what sort of material is recorded and how it is organized, when we ask about the intellectual form in which the material is presented, the tale to be told is very different. (1927, p. 179)

For example, in *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey bemoans the triviality of "news" as a flow of information without context: "Without coordination and consecutiveness," Dewey says, "events are not events, but mere occurrences, intrusions; they supply the element of shock which is the strictest meaning of sensation; they are the *new* par excellence" (p. 180; emphasis in original). Speaking of newspapers in particular, Dewey observes that one recent "effect of literacy under existing conditions has been to create in a large number of persons an appetite for the momentary 'thrills' caused by impacts that stimulate nerve endings but whose connections with cerebral functions are broken" (1939, p. 40). A literate audience, Dewey perceptively points out, does not necessarily mean a more reflective or cerebral one.

In *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey can be seen as outlining three principle ways to solve or at least ameliorate these difficulties. As already indicated, one of Dewey's solutions, perhaps predictably, is more active and open circulation. Improbably though, his second, central solution is principally *aesthetic* in nature. Dewey argues that it is the only artist who can make the products of technical social inquiry broadly palatable to the public: "A technical high-brow presentation would appeal only to those technically high-brow; it would not be news to the masses. Presentation is fundamentally important, and presentation is a question of *art*..." (p. 183). Dewey continues: "Artists have always been the real purveyors of news, for it is not the outward happening in itself which is new, but the kindling by it of emotion, perception and appreciation" (p. 184). In other words, attention must be paid to the *aesthetic quality* of the presentation of events in the broader informational economy. Only those transactions thus "treated" or "processed" can be effectively received by a broader public. A "subtle, delicate, vivid and responsive *art* of communication," as Dewey demands, "must take possession of the physical machinery of transmission and circulation and breathe life into it" (1927, p. 182)

Dewey's *third* general solution is again quite different from, even opposed to, the two that precede it. It has to do with a form of communication that is profoundly limited in its reach or circulation, and that also notably lacks in subtlety or delicacy. This is Dewey's final privileging of the unadorned banality of quotidian "dialog," of everyday "personal intercourse in the local community" (p. 218). "That and that only,' Dewey insists, "gives reality to public opinion" (p. 219). The reader is left to imagine what such a local community might look like in actuality. Perhaps it would be a group gathered in a community hall, a tavern, a church, or simply at the kitchen table or in front of the living room radio. However it might appear, such a local, face-to-face community is for Dewey *the* site where the democratic potential of myriad new technologies of circulation and dissemination is ultimately realized:

> Publication is partial and the public which results is partially informed and formed until the meanings it purveys pass from mouth to mouth... We lie, as Emerson said, in the lap of an immense intelligence. But that intelligence is dormant and its communications are broken, inarticulate and faint until it possesses the local community as its medium. (1927, p. 219)

Sadly, Dewey has to admit in *The Public and its Problems* that it is actually "outside the scope of our discussion to look at...the reconstruction of face to face communities." This admission, together with the brevity and imprecision of his treatment of aestheticized communication, are certainly regrettable. Further elaboration of either would give much-needed substance to Dewey's repeated indications that new media technologies–particularly those not dependent on text as "the sum and end of learning" might bring systematic change to education. For these sentiments –helpfully identified and amplified by McLuhan— truly *do* distinguish Dewey from so many other thinkers and critics of education and its media. The general tendency –from Plato to Postman– has *not* been to appreciate the new, but simply to attack it while defending the old: Writing is the poor "bastard child" of speech for Plato; Postman, for his part, valourizes writing an age of televisual trivia: "writing freezes speech and in so doing [allows us] …to see what it means, where it errs, and where it is leading" (1985, p. 12). Dewey's notably different approach shows him to be highly original and clearly before his time, as someone who is indeed "trying to explain the meaning of the electronic age to educators," and only as that age was truly dawning.

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