

Dear Marshall McLuhan:

Even your most faithful followers have a problem with the statement that made you famous. What does it mean that "The medium is the message" (or was it "massage")? In the global village of our age, people write less to each other but speak more on the telephone or send videomessages to relatives and friends. Probably a letter, as an embodiment of communication in the medium of writing, bears the message that there are still people who write. But that is an incidental message, a sign that literacy is still with us, but not a measure of how effective written communication is today. What matters is that one human being gets together with another by a means other than that of speaking, characteristic of co-presence. Talking into a telephone is something different.

Why do people want to get together? (Getting together is, as you know, the definition of communication, after all.) Well, for many possible reasons! But as different as they can be, the common denominator is pragmatic: People constitute their own identity through what they do. Yes, as I communicate with my readers, incidentally in this magazine through the medium of print, I constitute myself as an author who would like to share his ideas with others. This is my existence, as yours, dear Reader, is to make an effort to comprehend. In other situations, a professor constitutes himself or herself in the practical act of teaching, as students constitute their identity in the act of comprehending and eventually accepting or rejecting what they are taught. Workers constitute themselves through their activity. They communicate insofar as they bring together their abilities, expressed in what they make, with the people who need what they produce. This is what communication is all about. Based on this comprehension, and sometimes miscomprehension, communication continues. It arches over generations and is significant for the conflict between them as well as for what we perceive as historic continuity.

So, dear Marshall McLuhan, how can you state, and how can so many people who came after you repeat, that the medium is the message? Sure, I realize that you wanted to address communication aspects in the age of television. After remaining glued to the TV screen almost 50% of one's active life (some people even sleep with the TV on) and adding up what that person gained through televiewing, the sum is surprisingly small. Very little sticks; messages vanish in the feeling of telepresence. Everything becomes the instant. After all is said and done, what remains is the statement "I watched TV", along with the reality that in the meanwhile, we gave our precious limited time away to the goddess of the glass screen. Terminal culture, as the expression goes. O.J. Simpson's trial, a veritable orgy of images from Los Angeles, the battle for Grozny, the most recent celebration of Karl Lagerfeld, a new perfume, the earthquake in Kobe, a concert, all mixed together as they succeed each other or live in parallel on 20, 30, 40 or more channels. Up to 500, mind you. Still, the message is not the TV, since the television medium can be so powerful in conveying data in education and training, in political activism. There is no political movement today that does not look for the video camera. The stage is the world, either for candidates for the presidency, candidates for the electric chair, terrorists, and fighters for a better world. The message is the medium, pervasive, omnipresent, manipulative. As I write these lines to you, my computer keeps beeping to notify me that more messages are arriving from all over the world at my e-mail address. And I know that the computer is not the message. The opposite is true: the message becomes the computer as this collects in-coming e-mail messages or embodies information in images, sounds, or combinations thereof. The message is the multimedia.

Assuming that I am right—the message is the medium—what are the pragmatic consequences of such a predicament? Let me try to articulate my argument in a succession of theses:

1. The continuous multiplication of media corresponds to our need and, indeed, to our ability to individualize communication.

Some people read and write, some know how to draw, some understand images, some understand sounds better. The tactile element is important to many people, smell and taste to others. We are at a momentous juncture in human life in which instead of one dominant medium geared towards mass communication (one message for all), we have many still unfolding media geared towards individual, personalized communication. The change is of historic significance. It reconfirms the individualistic spirit of the times, as good or as bad as this can be. This multiplication of media also provides the possibility of better defining the goal of communication. Yesterday, in the village, everyone knew each other. In the age of mass media, we know of each other, but we know each other less and less. Do we need to know each other? The village instinct we carry with us makes us say Yes! But let's think about it. In the village, survival was a matter of cooperation. In the global village, the issue is not survival, but efficiency. In the information age, we know each other through what we exchange.

2. Shorter cycles of human activity result in patterns of fleeting communication. As we replace natural rhythms (of the succession of day and night, of seasons, of biological growth and degradation, etc.) with the artificial beats of chemical and biological synthesis or chip clocks, our natural desire for togetherness is replaced by the attraction towards faster change. Fashion, family commitments, political allegiances, and eating habits change as fast as scientific theories or the design of our watches and cars. The age of memoirs and letter writing is overtaken by the time of log-in records and filtered e-mail messages. We want from more people the little that each can give us, instead of from one or two or three the much they were supposed to offer. Communication in the fast lane changes church, school, community life, love, and even the relation between parents and children. But the result is our ability to handle change instead of opposing it. Faster and more

differentiated communication frees us from the control of censors. (Unfortunately it does not yet free us from superstition and prejudice, much of which is transmitted via the information highway.)

3. The dynamics of communication is expressed in the dynamics of new media. Scary, really scary, dear Marshall McLuhan, how inefficiently we communicate today. But not because of the means we use. Sometimes less than 1% of what is communicated makes it to the intended audience. We print enormous billboards, spend fortunes on TV advertisement, make a weekend newspaper weigh as much as the bread we eat in a whole week in order to achieve a laughable efficiency. How come? The overhead of our literacy-based communication is so big that it literally chokes the medium—be it print or video. Too bad you cannot join me in the many experiences of new media! The experience of a virtual reality application, let's say the docking of molecules, makes the message of the experience identical to the medium. It is here that knowledge turns into experience. The dynamics it reports about is the dynamics of the means through which the report comes together. No, I am not naive. I know, dear Marshall McLuhan, that such powerful communication tools can be terribly misused. Extremist forces are quite swift to adopt electronic billboards and the photonic information highways. The paradox is that progressive thinking people still debate how good or bad the new communication is, while neo-Nazis, for instance, make effective use of it. The military as innovative force. Think of this and realize how dangerous it could be if your formula, "The medium is the message", were true. I am sure you would feel relieved to find that this is not the case.

Well, more, much more can be said. More theses can be formulated. And more of what you so daringly anticipated as the new information age unfolded can be challenged. I would feel that I betrayed you and the spirit of your work if I were not to end by pointing out that my own thoughts could not have been possible without you. What you wrote was a major challenge to communication theories

originating from a practical context dominated by literacy-based values. What we can do is to adopt your attitude. Challenging your ideas is only the normal consequence. As communication literally becomes the dominant activity of our time, and the fastest growing business in the world, the message is the medium, actually the media, and more so multi-media. Never before has plurality been more celebrated...and abused!