

Foley, Frances
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What did McLuhan mean when he said “The Medium is the Message”? This statement is referred to as the “McLuhan Equation” by some academics. The meaning of these simple words have been debated and deciphered since his book *Understanding Media* was published in 1964. There are many interpretations of this famous text. My approach to McLuhan and his famous quote will be to first discover what McLuhan himself said in his book *Understanding Media*. The first chapter is *The Medium is the Message*. I will then examine what other theorists, academics and writers have to say about McLuhan. Throughout the paper I will provide my perspective of the topics I have culled from my research.

I began my research at the library. I wanted to find his book, *Understanding Media*. The librarian found it on a bottom shelf and handed it to me. As I looked at its physical appearance, I could see that it has been a popular book. The binding is torn, the pages are wrinkled and the important passages are marked with various writing implements. As I held this book, the physical object, it flashed a memory into my mind. I remembered what McLuhan said about the print medium. He attributed the revolutions in France and America to the impact of use of this medium. This simple printed object represented the medium that stirred nationalism. The distribution of printed materials created a consensus of thought for societies who took action and changed their worlds. You can touch the book and feel the energy from all the people who have tried to decipher McLuhan. I flipped through the pages and noticed various patterns of highlighted text. By connecting the highlighted text within chapter one you could guess the possible thesis statements people were formulating. It is as if their mental energy left thought

trails in the book for others to follow. Can I follow these thought trails and find the meaning of “The Medium is the Message”?

I found some insightful quotes from McLuhan in his *Understanding Media*. He states, ““The medium is the message” means in terms of the electronic age that a totally new environment has been created.”¹ I have discovered while reading this chapter that McLuhan tends to repeat concepts often. The next quote has text concerning change of scale and pace that is repeated throughout this chapter. “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.”² I found the following two statements helped to clarify what McLuhan meant by medium. “the content of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium.”³ “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.”⁴ Through my research I have found that there exists this pervasive confusion about “The medium is the message”. Many people believe it is the impact of the content or the information that the medium is disseminating that causes the changes in society. When Eric Norden interviewed McLuhan for *Playboy* magazine in 1969 he questioned him about content. He asked “Even if as you contend, the medium is the ultimate message, how can you entirely discount the importance of content?”⁵ McLuhan said “By stressing that the medium is the message rather than the content, I’m not suggesting that content plays no role—merely that it plays a distinctly subordinate role.”⁶ I thought McLuhan’s answer was unexpected in light of his focus on the medium in his work. After all my reading and research, I really believed that he completely ignored the impact of content on society.

In my search for the keys to unlock the meaning of McLuhan's equation, I examined many articles found on the internet about McLuhan. Marshall McLuhan has a few nicknames including the "Sage of Aquarius", "High Priest of Pop Cult" and the "Metaphysician of Media". These nicknames have something in common, a level of respect for the man and his work. Who would have thought that McLuhan was a pop icon in the 1970's? Other people were not so kind when they described his work. McLuhan was described by novelist George P. Elliott as "deliberately antilogical, circular, repetitions, unqualified, gnomic, outrageous" and even less charitably by critic Christopher Ricks as "a viscous fog through which loom stumbling metaphors".⁷ Alden Whitman wrote in his Obituary for McLuhan in 1981, "He had a penchant for aphorisms – as well as weakness for puns – and summed up his views on the effects of media in the maxim "the medium is the message. By this he meant that the way we acquire information affects us more than the information itself."⁸ Everyone has their critics. I assume they did not like his writing style because they said nothing about his theories. In my searching I came across The McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology web site. Mark Federman, the Chief Strategist, finds that the most common search of their site is for the meaning of "the medium is the message". Federman wrote an article entitled "What is the meaning of The Medium is the Message?" In his article he is trying to clarify McLuhan's theories. He states "Note that it is not the content or use of the innovation, but the change in the inter-personal dynamics that innovation brings with it."⁹ This statement has helped to clear the fog from around this subject. Electronic medium has changed everything about the way humans communicate with each other. The speed, distance and time are compressed so their impact is now minimal or negligent.

Wired Magazine is in the forefront of technology news and McLuhan is their Patron Saint. They published a famous article entitled Channeling McLuhan in 1996. Gary Wolf asked

McLuhan “Do you still believe that the medium is the message?” The channeled McLuhan responded “Yes the medium is the message because it creates the audience most suited to it. Electronic media create an audience whose shifting moods are as impersonal as the weather.”¹⁰

For the past few weeks I have read books and searched the internet for hours in my quest for the meaning of the famous McLuhan equation. I have found just a small fraction of the information available about the man and his media theories. During my synthesis of all this information I have come to these conclusions. I understand why most people misinterpret McLuhan’s equation. People tend to react and examine the here and now, the small picture right in front of them. McLuhan was talking about a much broader picture when he made his statement. The impacts of electronic medium are changes that are not seen until years later. He meant the changes in culture, society, communications and their relationship to humans that a historical analysis would provide. He is correct when he says that people’s minds are numbed by the medium and do not see these changes. The mental numbness is generated and centered on the incredibly fast pace of changes created by the medium. The self absorbed humans focusing on their newest technological toys are numb with joy. People never stop to think about what this new medium really means for a culture or society. They focus on what it can do for me today and right now.

There is a general misconception about electronic medium that conflicts with McLuhan. The conflict is based upon the belief that it is more important to look at how the medium is used. If the medium is used for bad or good, for war or peace, it does not change humans, their cultures and society in the long term. McLuhan refers to the people who think that the How of medium is the most important as “technological idiots”.¹¹

In my research about McLuhan I did find a statement that I disagreed with. McLuhan said “Involvement that goes with our instant technologies transforms the most ‘socially-conscious’ people into conservatives.”¹² I do not see this transformation into conservatives happening. I see no proof of this change in the world today. McLuhan makes it sound like we would all be assimilated into a conservative corporate-like whole. Internet technology and other electronic media have facilitated the communication between individuals worldwide. Technology has provided for the high speed transmission of information, news, and conversation. The world has become a much smaller place because of electronic medium. But the medium does not transform someone into a conservative. Whether or not an individual is a conservative is based upon many different social, cultural and economic factors, personal beliefs and life experiences. Many of the individuals who stir up the societal pot are considered to be left wing liberals, not conservatives. There are many individuals who are still fighting for the little guy, for equal rights, reproductive rights, fair taxation, and fair housing. People are not being pressed into a mold by the medium so that we conform to an all-encompassing conservative oneness of the mind. The individual is empowered by the medium but an individual still has free will. The medium has enabled an individual to create a blog and generate interest from people with common goals in an online international community. This community then can choose to mobilize and take actions to achieve their goals. The McLuhan equation for quote should be socially-conscious does not equal conservative.

In conclusion, I can easily state that I have not read all of McLuhan’s theories and books. From the literature I did read, I found his statements and theories to be quite perceptive yet difficult to understand. I discovered that his “global village” phrase is referred to extensively in the media and even law. It was interesting that he played himself in a Woody Allen movie,

Annie Hall (1977). At that time he was considered a cult hero by many people and Woody just had to have him in his movie. I guess Woody wanted to demonstrate that “The Medium is the Message”.

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