



The Media and Our Understanding of World: From Toronto School to Situationism

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Abstract

This essay aims to explore the ways in which our understanding of the social world is shaped by the media with main references to the 'Toronto School' communication theorists and also Baudrillard, the influential French scholar who is known as 'Situationist'. Marshall McLuhan, the most well known Toronto School author, argues that the media function as the environment in affecting the patterns of people's perception and understanding. For McLuhan, the form of medium itself can be equated to the message, or arguably more important than its content, for it is the form of media, more precisely, the technology underneath the media, that decides the 'human sense ratio'. However, McLuhan's overlooking of the impact of the content conveyed by media, which makes the fatal handicap of his theory, has been supplemented by the works of other scholars. The message delivered by media could be never neutral, but rather subject to diverse factors. Baudrillard offers another version of media determinism by declaring the 'death of reality' and the overwhelming occupation of hyper-reality fabricated by media in social life.

Keywords: Media determinism, Toronto School, Situationism

Introduction

It is rare that a new medium or technology is designed with an ambition to cause a transition in the world. The invention of the phonograph was for recording the last words of dying people. Telephone was a contrivance of Bell to contact with his brother should he die first, and vice versa. At any rate, our understanding of the world is shaped and reshaped by these media, especially during the era called 'mass-age'. Most ideas cited in this essay are from the works of Marshall McLuhan, which are employed to illustrate the impact of technology and the form of media in our understanding of the world by shifting the human sense ratio. I turn to situationism to search for different voices concerning mass media and its function in capitalist society. The works of situationist authors support the main point throughout this essay, by stating that our understanding of the social world is not only influenced by the form of media, but by its contents as well.

Within the realm of media study, social-scientific analysis tends to cluster around two poles of analysis (Boyer, 2006). One identifies media as instruments of the human representational and epistemic capacities. The other set of voices claim the human's capacities to represent and understand which are profoundly subjected to the technology applied in media, or media itself. Communication theorists of the Toronto School of Communication are undoubtedly the heralds of the latter.

As stating the bias of communication has its effect on the regime of empires (Innis, 1951), Harold Innis's contribution to this theory was acknowledged by McLuhan. The reason why McLuhan pays so much attention to the forms of media is that, for him, the content of the media is merely a distraction from the important issue -- the technology underneath the media and its influence in changing the sense ratios of human beings (McLuhan, 1964, 18). The media function as the environment in affecting people's understanding, emotions, and values based on the alteration of the patterns of perception. In this respect, we are not merely looking 'at the present through a rear-view mirror' of past perspective (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967), instead, we are understanding the world in a media-made manner.

His periodisation of the four epochs of communication is based on their differences of dominant medium. Oral speech, phonetic alphabet and script text, printing press, and post-print electronic media, each of them focuses on extending certain human senses. It transcends the boundaries of experience reached by earlier media and contributes to further change' (McQuail, 2006). It therefore shapes the distinct corresponding culture and understanding of the world at its time. For example, visual sense, whose rise and decline, plays an essential role in the four-stage evolution McLuhan viewed the development of visuality and culture dominated by visual media to be the main source of the 'linear continuity, uniformity, abstraction and individualization'. Ong shared a similar viewpoint by his explanation wherein he

deems writing communication (corresponding to visual culture), makes personal disengagement in communication, and distances between the knower and known as well. This was done to 'set up conditions for "objectivity"', which is contrary to the communal reaction and homeostasis in the oral society (Ong, 2000, 46). The invention of the press can be perceived as another example. The Gutenberg's invention not only deified the printed Bible, but all the written words. The national language replaced the regional dialect or tongues. Thus, the homogenization started. As printing media is regarded as the typographic extension of man, it brought 'nationalism, industrialism and mass market, and universal literacy and education' (McLuhan, 1964) into a series. Consequently, a rising number of people gained education, and for McLuhan, became the 'natural suckers' of propaganda in the interim. When approaching the electronic era, linear logic was worthless due to various experiences, which reach us at once by our extended nervous system--the media. All senses work in equitable relationship with one another. Likewise, the disequilibrium and fragmentation of the senses has been placed by the 'wholeness' (McLuhan, 1970, 16). The human awareness can be optimized, therefore communication became inherently transparent, direct, full, and immediate (Horrocks, 2000, 41). Hence, media was unlikely to fail in living up to reality. It is the techno-romantic dimension of McLuhan's theory.

After the preceding discussions, the aphorism 'The medium is the message' may become not so opaque. The medium itself can be equated to the message, or is further important than its content, medium is not content, hence, it cannot be text analyzed for denotation and connotation, nor searched for its bias or invalid premise. The immersion of media allows no outside standpoint. In so doing, it convinces people regarding the path we have chosen to observe and understand the present world as it is, which is actually determined by the dominant media technology, without ever considering other possibilities.

After McLuhan and Ong, the theory concerning media, its content, and their impact on people's understanding of the world has been advanced. Neil Postman (1985) contributed the idea that 'medium shapes the message', stating the content of the media is regulated or even dictated by the form of medium. The television, he argues, which is geared towards entertainment rather than representative (which explains the lack of fit between the electoral preferences of the press and public), demands everything to be amusing, and excludes any serious public discourse, which in consequence, makes everything trivial.

Several of McLuhan's assertion has turned out to be incorrect, especially his unbounded optimistic vision concerning the electronic media era. On the contrary, Innis became increasingly pessimistic in his later life. He argues that the bias of communication remains in any form of communication, and is now proficient in reducing time and controlling space (Carey, 1967), rather than 'time has ceased, and "space" has vanished' (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967). In so doing, it strengthens collective memory and consciousness. When certain groups acquire control of the media system, whose interests, economic, political or priestly, are to be attached with superiority or dominance, then the corollary is the monopoly of information and message. Standing opposite to McLuhan again, Innis claims the consequences of electronic media is possibilities of centralization and imperialism of culture and politics, not the return to what is 'primitive', reunification, global instantaneity or decentralization.

Extensively important, mass media reshapes our understanding of the world in various ways, further than shifting our sense ratios only. As been criticized, McLuhan focuses on the method in which we experience the world, not on what we experience (McQuail, 2006). In other words, his emphasis is on the form but not the content, which makes analyzing the text carried by any medium irrelevant (Berger, 2005). His positive idealistic vision of the electronic media epoch is bounded with his refusal to consider its content and serves as his blind spot of engagement with the mass media realm in the political and economic dynamics. Frequently, mass media tries to conceal the truth from its readers, audiences and viewers, or distort it, rather than fail to represent or reflect a coherent reality. If the message we receive from the media is not produced with intention to lead us to the real society or world, how can we have a proper perception of it? As such, in order to understand the way mass media functions, implementation is demanded for the theory of McLuhan.

The environment within which mass media or any other industry exposes can be state control or free market, or most commonly, a mixture of both. Alternately, either of them may hinder people from understanding the world via mass media. State control denotes surveillance and censorship of the content, the information and the messages conveyed by all media, even assuming different forms, are unified, or narrowed in range, status quo oriented. Within the free market system, the increasingly concentrated ownership makes a 'private ministry of information' (Bagdikian, 1990), which means, few dominant giant media corporations who command the nature of media industry disseminate increasing amount of similar output. Meanwhile, the refusal of large corporate advertisers to sponsor media content with low purchasing power targets audiences which are not helpful to sustain popularity. This forces the profit-fixated media enterprises to make 'common' text or programme as a commodity to attract audiences who are sold to advertisers. Castells stated that, 'message is the medium'. Medium is tailored in its entirety to its targeted audience, or further, to its advertising sponsors (Horrocks, 2000, 22). In short, as mass media propagates message, image or information selectively, our knowledge on which our understanding is constructed appears neither neutral nor comprehensive. The most well-known theory covering this scheme is the propaganda model proposed by Herman and Chomsky (1988).

However, the subsequent discussion below is the viewpoint known as situationism.

Guy Debord views mass media to be one of the main spectacles. Together with other ideas, it constitutes a society of spectacles within which social relation between people is mediated by images. Mass media, for Debord (1967, #24), is a technical apparatus developed in accordance with the internal dynamics of the spectacle to enable the dominator of the existing system to continue and pursue their domination on public discourse. It is a podium where the ruling order bestows its monologue of self-praise. Moreover, it is the 'unilateral communication' which has the effect of alienating its consumers from reality. As media is concentrated in the hands of the administrator, it can by no means be neutral, rather a main dynamic in the migration of alienation from the production and labour realm to consumption and everyday life. Despite regarding McLuhan as the 'first apologist' of the society of spectacle (1990, 33-34), due to his excessive optimism for the electronic media era and his neutralization of mass media, Debord noted McLuhan's change in his later life, admitting the negative effect of mass media which can lead to irrationality.

Jean Baudrillard developed this thesis by his theory of simulation and declaring of 'death of the real'. According to Baudrillard's theory, wherein the impact of McLuhan can be reflected as well, the spectacle made by the mass media trumps the direct experiences of the world. Simulation of reality has become more real than reality to the consumers who regard the significance of the sign over what it signified, or to say, the copies of reality go beyond reality. The distinction between them is blurred in the white noise of media. Hence, the concept 'hyperreal' is created. He argues that the evolution of simulation has been experienced in three stages since the Renaissance. The current and final stage we are in, where the reality is not being represented, copied, or reflected, has been created by the post modern culture, which is shaped by the electronic technology (Baudrillard, 1988, 119-48). At this point, the familiar media-determinism is again evident. In the abyss of the postmodern theory, the belief is that we are living in a society where there is nothing 'real' left that is not being mediated. Baudrillard asserts that economy is nothing more than circuits of the imaginary, politics has become a 'pure game', and even the war can be regarded as merely a media event. It is already a radical post modern view with the post-1960's despair and media cynicism. Furthermore, it is an extension of McLuhan's theory as well, suggesting that mass media, through which we understand the world, has now become the unique and omnipotent sense faculty that we can rely on. Outside of it, there is nothing.

Conclusion

In spite of the revival of McLuhan in the current digital media, linking him to the virtuality, and gaining the title as the 'patron saint' of the Wired magazine, it would be difficult to discover anyone who accepts McLuhan's all, or even most of his ideas at present. After him, various theories have been brought into play. Several of them are successive to McLuhan in numerous ways. As an example, Baudrillard asserts 'medium is the message' as the underlying axiom of his entire theory; the second generation of media ecologists attempt to apply McLuhan's model to further specific social practices and upgrade it to acquire factors (social, economical, political etc.) into their consideration of media's effect on the people and society. Meanwhile, critical voices came from other scholars against his technological reductionism and determinism. On the other hand, Castells identified McLuhan as obsolete, for his disregard of the diversification of media followed by interactivity (Castells, 341). All the critiques encouraged people to reconsider and re-estimate McLuhan from brand new perspectives. The questions remain; how are these voices heard and how could we successfully study McLuhan and his theory? How is our understanding of McLuhan refreshed time and again? The answer is the media. How can we deny the contention that media is shaping our understanding of the society and the world? Even the figure of McLuhan himself is moulded by media. Hence, Marshall McLuhan asks, 'You mean my whole fallacy is wrong?' (*Annie Hall*, 1977)

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