

## Medium is the Message

Since the early days of communication, humanity has been captivated by the methods it uses to convey and preserve information. How we communicate with each other defines who we are and constitutes so much of what makes a culture and an individual unique.

Over the centuries, we have seen media evolve across a wide array of channels, from print to radio to television to the Internet. Each one of these channels, or media, has its own unique characteristics, much like the people who use them.

When it comes to understanding these various media, one of the best to learn from is Marshall McLuhan. Born in 1911 and passing in 1980, McLuhan had no opportunity to experience the Web the way we know it today, but that didn't stop him from exerting a huge influence on it. It was McLuhan who first spoke about technology and communication having the ability to create a "global village." As an early educator and pioneer of the study of communication and its evolution over time, McLuhan introduced a lot of observations about the impact of new forms of expression and media. Most notably, McLuhan's expression "The medium is the message" has had a resounding impact not just on Web design but on mass media in general.

"The medium is the message" as a phrase sums up a much deeper communication theory, which is that the medium through which we choose to communicate holds as much, if not more, value than the message itself. At first, this concept might seem vague and indeed a lot to grasp. But I can honestly say that understanding the meaning behind these words revolutionized the way I approach Web design; not from a technical or procedural standpoint, mind you, but from a fresh mental perspective that provided clarity on how to approach and design for the Web.

### On The Surface

McLuhan's theory has certainly not been neglected or forgotten. On the contrary, it has been widely studied in a number of circles and applied to television, print and the Internet alike. While many people seem to grasp the general point, the deeper truth is often missed or misinterpreted. In order to get to this deeper meaning, exploring the general concept first may be necessary.

The central theory behind "the medium is the message" is that the medium through which content is carried plays a vital role in the way it is perceived. We no doubt see this with the Internet today, in the way we get our news compared to how we got it with print. But perhaps an even clearer illustration can be painted without reference to technology or communication at all.

Imagine, if you will, a deep well in the middle of a vast desert. The well is our medium (as the radio or Web would be), and the water is our message. A rich and reliable well in the middle of the desert would naturally become the hub of travel routes and even a sustainable population. The water by itself is of no use without the well. If it were inaccessible or people were unaware of its existence, it could not support life. The well, as a medium, delivers water to the people passing by or living nearby. As a result, the well becomes synonymous with water and life, despite really being just a hole in the ground.

## A REAL-LIFE COMPARISON

Building on this illustration of the well being a medium for the water, we can extend the theory to modern technology. Let's compare a feature film to a website as we know them today. Communicating the same general content to the user in both media is possible. However, because the media are inherently different, we experience the content in entirely different ways.

A film is a linear experience. Everyone watching the film participates in the same preset series of a beginning, middle and end. We watch characters and stories unfold over the timeline, working towards a conclusion. Since the creation of film, this idea has been integral to the planning and development phases. All of this is determined by the medium, regardless of what the message may be.

Move the same content over to a website and the experience changes dramatically. In the context of a website, information is rarely passed to the user as a linear experience. Instead, character traits, back story and plot points might all be split up into different pages or sections. It is up to the user to decide how to consume the information and reach a conclusion. Just as a beginning, middle and end are a part of the entire film process, this segmentation and fluidity should be a part of the planning stages of a Web project.

### Reference reading

What is the Meaning of The Medium is the Message?

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"In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium - that is, of any extension of ourselves - result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology." (McLuhan 7) Thus begins the classic work of Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, in which he introduced the world to his enigmatic paradox, "The medium is the message." But what does it mean? How can the medium be its own message?

Of all the Internet searches that end up at the McLuhan Program website and weblog, the search for the meaning of the famous "McLuhan Equation" is the most frequent. Many people presume the conventional meaning for "medium" that refers to the mass-media of communications - radio, television, the press, the Internet. And most apply our conventional understanding of "message" as content or information. Putting the two together allows people to jump to the mistaken conclusion that, somehow, the channel supersedes the content in importance, or that McLuhan was saying that the information

content should be ignored as inconsequential. Often people will triumphantly hail that the medium is "no longer the message," or flip it around to proclaim that the "message is the medium," or some other such nonsense. McLuhan meant what he said; unfortunately, his meaning is not at all obvious, and that is where we begin our journey to understanding.

Marshall McLuhan was concerned with the observation that we tend to focus on the obvious. In doing so, we largely miss the structural changes in our affairs that are introduced subtly, or over long periods of time. Whenever we create a new innovation - be it an invention or a new idea - many of its properties are fairly obvious to us. We generally know what it will nominally do, or at least what it is intended to do, and what it might replace. We often know what its advantages and disadvantages might be. But it is also often the case that, after a long period of time and experience with the new innovation, we look backward and realize that there were some effects of which we were entirely unaware at the outset. We sometimes call these effects "unintended consequences," although "unanticipated consequences" might be a more accurate description.

Many of the unanticipated consequences stem from the fact that there are conditions in our society and culture that we just don't take into consideration in our planning. These range from cultural or religious issues and historical precedents, through interplay with existing conditions, to the secondary or tertiary effects in a cascade of interactions. All of these dynamic processes that are entirely non-obvious comprise our ground or context. They all work silently to influence the way in which we interact with one another, and with our society at large. In a word (or four), ground comprises everything we don't notice.

If one thinks about it, there are far more dynamic processes occurring in the ground than comprise the actions of the figures, or things that we do notice. But when something changes, it often becomes noticeable. And noticing change is the key.

McLuhan tells us that a "message" is, "the change of scale or pace or pattern" that a new invention or innovation "introduces into human affairs." (McLuhan 8) Note that it is not the content or use of the innovation, but the change in inter-personal dynamics that the innovation brings with it. Thus, the message of theatrical production is not the musical or the play being produced, but perhaps the change in tourism that the production may encourage. In the case of a specific theatrical production, its message may be a change in attitude or action on the part of the audience that results from the medium of the play itself, which is quite distinct from the medium of theatrical production in general. Similarly, the message of a newscast are not the news stories themselves, but a change in the public attitude towards crime, or the creation of a climate of fear. A McLuhan message always tells us to look beyond the obvious and seek the non-obvious changes or effects that are enabled, enhanced, accelerated or extended by the new thing.

McLuhan defines medium for us as well. Right at the beginning of *Understanding Media*, he tells us that a medium is "any extension of ourselves." Classically, he suggests that a hammer extends our arm and that the wheel extends our legs and feet. Each enables us to do more than our bodies could do on their own. Similarly, the medium of language extends our thoughts from within our mind out to others.

Indeed, since our thoughts are the result of our individual sensory experience, speech is an "outering" of our senses - we could consider it as a form of reversing senses - whereas usually our senses bring the world into our minds, speech takes our sensorially-shaped minds out to the world.

But McLuhan always thought of a medium in the sense of a growing medium, like the fertile potting soil into which a seed is planted, or the agar in a Petri dish. In other words, a medium - this extension of our body or senses or mind - is anything from which a change emerges. And since some sort of change emerges from everything we conceive or create, all of our inventions, innovations, ideas and ideals are McLuhan media.

Thus we have the meaning of "the medium is the message:" We can know the nature and characteristics of anything we conceive or create (medium) by virtue of the changes - often unnoticed and non-obvious changes - that they effect (message.) McLuhan warns us that we are often distracted by the content of a medium (which, in almost all cases, is another distinct medium in itself.) He writes, "it is only too typical that the "content" of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium." (McLuhan 9) And it is the character of the medium that is its potency or effect - its message. In other words, "This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium - that is, of any extension of ourselves - result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology."

Why is this understanding of "the medium is the message" particularly useful? We tend to notice changes - even slight changes (that unfortunately we often tend to discount in significance.) "The medium is the message" tells us that noticing change in our societal or cultural ground conditions indicates the presence of a new message, that is, the effects of a new medium. With this early warning, we can set out to characterize and identify the new medium before it becomes obvious to everyone - a process that often takes years or even decades. And if we discover that the new medium brings along effects that might be detrimental to our society or culture, we have the opportunity to influence the development and evolution of the new innovation before the effects becomes pervasive. As McLuhan reminds us, "Control over change would seem to consist in moving not with it but ahead of it. Anticipation gives the power to deflect and control force." (McLuhan 199)