

Is the Medium Really the Message: Disambiguating the Sender's Role.

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Abstract: McLuhan uses the term 'message' to signify both the content of the medium as a message which can be easily grasped and the character of the medium as another message which can be easily overlooked. He proposed that it was the medium itself that shaped and controlled "the scale and form of human association and action", suggesting that the "content of any medium is always another medium." Thus, speech is the content of writing, writing is the content of print, and print itself is the content of the telegraph. Does this mean that the medium is everything and everything is the medium? This Marshallian postulation leaves the role of the source/sender as the message creator as well as the medium and target audience selector in limbo. This article while agreeing with McLuhan that a medium is not something neutral as it takes hold of people and massages them, especially a new medium, notes nevertheless, that it's all at the behest and pleasure of the source/sender. This study uses in-depth literature review, analyses and synthesis to resolve this research question in favour of the sender as the message himself, and all other elements of the communication process take life from him.

Keywords: "Medium", "Message", "Disambiguating", "Sender"

I. INTRODUCTION

McLuhan in *Understanding Media* wrote: "The electric light is pure information. It is a medium without a message.... A light bulb does not have content in the way that a newspaper has articles or a television has programs, yet it is a medium that has a social effect that enables people to create spaces during night-time that would otherwise be enveloped by darkness. Likewise, the message of a newscast about a heinous crime may be less about the content, and more about the change in public attitude towards crime that the newscast engenders by the fact that such crimes are in effect being brought into the home to watch over dinner.

II. MEDIUM VERSUS MESSAGE

A message is defined as information conveyed by words (in speech or writing), and/or other signs and symbols. A message (verbal or nonverbal, or both) is the content of the communication process. Message Travels physically over channel/medium for delivery during the communication process. It is the knowledge, ideas, feelings or emotions sent from the sender to the receiver to achieve understanding.

The **sender** creates by the **message** for sending to a targeted receiver or group. The sender has important responsibilities in the communication process. The communication process begins with the sender of the message and includes selecting the type of message, encodes it message idea into a series of meaningful words and codes.

For effective communication to be accomplished, sender should clarify the idea, contemplate and decide on purpose and importance of message, analyse the idea and how it can best be presented, anticipate effect on receiver. He should select a channel that the receiver prefers and make effort to reduce channel noise and distractions.

Disambiguating the Sender's Role: Is the Medium Really the Message?

Is the medium really the message - this is the crux of this study and the dilemma of this author. The Marshallian proposition "the message is the medium", seems to raise more questions than answers. Invariably, because it's the sender who initiates the communication process, he/she has primary responsibility for its success or failure. Does this not make him the prime mover in the communication process, the beginning and the end, indeed the medium himself? Evidently, if the message fails, the sender fails – not the medium. Medium selection is the sender's *raison d'être* (reason to be).



Date: October 8, 2020 Author: Kasonga Anthea

McLuhan's formalist theory, developed the idea that in communication of a message, the medium used has more cultural impact than the content of the message itself. Yet man, the sender himself, doubles as a medium within the Marshall McLuhan's theoretical framework.

So, this example from *Smashing Magazine* comes to the rescue to get through the theory. A writer in **SMASHING MAGAZINE** gave a very good example in favour of the **Medium Theory**:

Imagine 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.

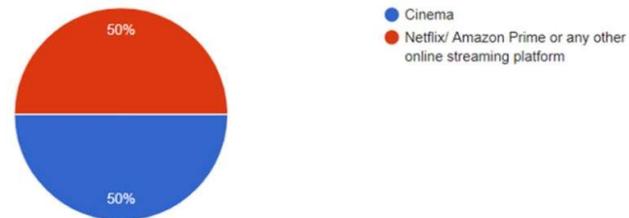
But on the contrary, stating that "the medium is the message" is tantamount to saying "the cup is the tea", or "the CD is the music". McLuhan, had a forward way of thinking, and predicted the advancement of technology with the creation of Internet. The idea that the medium is the message has now become a reality. Looking at the way the electronic age has evolved, it is difficult to pick a side. The medium is not the message anymore, **WE ARE**.

For example, the social media companies, particularly Instagram, manipulate users using algorithms to create addiction to their platforms. Technology is taking over the actual content and creators are ceaselessly launching new updates that make the technology even more an extension of the Human. But the way those algorithms are functioning is based on the Human itself. Instagram's algorithms are based on what the user likes and interacts with. The technology and the content are at the service of the human and adapting his psychology. The explorer page of any Instagram user shows that all his content is a reflection of who he is. **HE IS THE MESSAGE**. But again, ultimately it is the **content** available on the respective advertisements that matter too. Thus, this theory can have **conflicting** reviews!

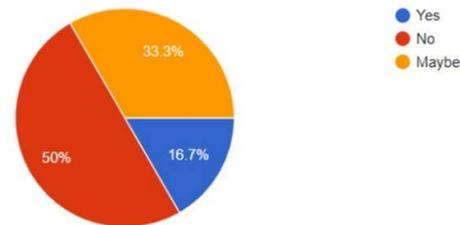
Summarily, even though a medium is important, we can't really undermine the message for which the medium truly exists. Does this theory make sense today? If a film is watched in **cinema**, the entire audience watches it together, without any interruption in a completely narrative form, but when this film is watched over internet (e.g., **NETFLIX**), a person watches it at his own convenience and the **experience** may vary. But the entire message of the film stays crisp and the medium chosen to watch the film only enhances or diminishes the experience (depending upon the medium).

A recent survey conducted on October 7, 2020 by *Theories of Media and Communication* students at the *University of Westminster* asked respondents 2 basic questions:

How do you prefer watching movies?



Do you think that watching a movie in a cinema changes the way you perceive the message of the movie?



50% people preferred watching films in cinema halls and 50% preferred an online streaming platform; and 50% made it very clear that the medium doesn't determine the way they perceived the message of the movie. This makes it evident (though on a small scale) that message carries a lot of weight and this theory is indeterminate in today's electronic age.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

In order to conclude, in my opinion, Marshall McLuhan's theory of "The Medium is the Message" may not be completely true or false, but it sure is an overstatement. A message is delivered for a purpose and we can't ignore the relevance of the content being produced. The medium through which it is delivered is important, but only till the extent of enhancing the experience of perceiving the message. Thus, stating that "medium is the message" may not be a very valid aphorism considering today's advanced media system. And lastly, largely depending upon a medium and compromising the content because Marshall McLuhan theorizes "Medium is the message" is totally wrong and we must consider both- the medium and the message as equally important in the world of media and communications.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author acknowledges my wife, Mrs Emejero Evelyn Aganbi, Uruemu Stefan Aganbi, Nuvie Aganbi, Mena Aganbi, Kome Ogemuno (MSc 2020/2021, my 2020/2021 Doctoral class in Media Literacy and other contributors during the preparation of this article.

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