

# The Internet Age: A Commentary on McLuhan's "The Medium is the Message"

M.E. Quitain

## Preface

This paper is my commentary on Marshall McLuhan's "The Medium is the Message." McLuhan wrote this essay in 1964, during a time when the internet was not yet invented. Hence, my contribution to his philosophy and the main content of this paper is to apply his analysis on the age of the internet particularly on the role of this medium in education and remote learning.

## The medium is the message

McLuhan was straightforward in the title of his work. He argues that the "content" of any message lies in its medium, and that studying the medium is more important than the "content." However, to avoid misinterpretations, we must first understand what he meant with the terms "medium" and "message."

By **medium**, McLuhan seems to break the common notion of a dichotomized form and content. He argues that "the 'content' of any medium is always another medium." (McLuhan, 1964) McLuhan cites several examples of this such as the electric light, the typographic print, and the radio and explains its impact to social patterns. For instance, the discovery of electric light as a medium sends the message of the electric power in the industry: radical, pervasive, and decentralized. Moreover, McLuhan repeatedly refers to the media "as extension of ourselves." Federman (2004) provides us with a clearer interpretation of McLuhan's "medium."

"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." (Federman, 2004)

Advancements in scientific technology enable newer media vehicles for communication, in the process, transforming former media into messages of a newer medium. Since media is the extension of man's senses, society tends to adapt to the introduction of these new forms. For McLuhan "...the '**message**' of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs." (McLuhan, 1964) The message of a medium is the "unanticipated consequences" or unintended change in social behavior brought about by its introduction (Federman, 2004). It is with this that McLuhan has enumerated several social developments that became possible because of the electric age and its impact towards society.

## The message of the internet

The problem of media analysis which focuses solely on “content” instead of medium is that it fails to make a comprehensive and overall judgment of its message. (McLuhan, 1964) If we focus too much on the quality and ‘content’ of online classes independent of its medium, we are bound to make the same mistake as the physician<sup>1</sup>. As we look into online classes as a new “medium” of instruction, we are able to see its “unintended consequences” not only to the academic sphere but to society as a whole.

In a much similar fashion as the electric light<sup>2</sup>, the internet was a medium without a message. It was not until the COVID-19 pandemic that the internet contained a message in the world of education when its use became widespread through online classes. Of course, the internet has always been a tool of academic research but it was only with the advent of online classes that the internet became an educational necessity.

The message of the internet is thus: remote productivity at a rate and scale that the electric age<sup>3</sup> has never imagined. The internet has enabled work from home setups and made online classes possible. McLuhan has jokingly been labeled as ‘the man who predicted the internet’ for he describes the probable characteristics of the next technological media invention. “that unlike the hot technology of print, it would encourage interactivity and participation, allowing anyone to contribute.” (Griffin, 2017)

“The next medium, whatever it is – it may be the *extension of consciousness* – will include television as its content, not as its environment, and will transform television into an art form. A computer as a research and communication instrument could enhance retrieval, obsolesce mass library organisation, retrieve the individual’s encyclopedic function and flip it into a private line to speedily tailored data of a saleable kind”. (McLuhan, 1962)

McLuhan’s prediction is accurate. The TV and the photograph as visual extensions, the radio as an auditory extension, the telephone as the verbal – which all used to be the media – have

---

<sup>1</sup> In *The medium is the message*, McLuhan explains this problem through the “stress idea of illness,” where a physician tends to make individual diagnoses and remedies for isolated causes whereas a Chinese sage recognizes the “syndrome of ‘just being sick.’” In the process, the physician fails to see the general and comprehensive overview of things. Traditional Chinese medicine has always been known for its holistic approach when treating diseases, instead of treating the symptoms individually and separately. McLuhan stresses the importance of a comprehensive understanding of the “content” by scrutinizing the medium.

<sup>2</sup> McLuhan uses the electric light as a classical example to explain his notions of the medium and the message. For him, “*The electric light is pure information. It is a medium without a message, as it were, unless it is used to spell out some verbal ad or name. This fact, characteristic of all media, means that the “content” of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of telegraph...’What is the content of speech?’...It is an actual process of thought, which in itself non-verbal.*” (McLuhan, 1964)

<sup>3</sup> The term “electric age” was also extensively used by McLuhan to refer to the period when the electric light, and consequently the radio and TV, were invented.

now become the message. Hence, the ‘content’ of the internet is a collaboration of all media during the electric age, and along with its extensional peripheries have merged into an extension of man’s consciousness. The message of the internet is the projection of our consciousness into the online sphere, allowing us to engage into learning despite vast geographical distances.

But if the media is truly an extension of man and that the internet as a medium is more forgiving in terms of social interaction compared to all of its electrical age ancestors combined, then how come we are having difficulties expressing and experiencing social presence in online classes?

If we look at education in a McLuhanian sense, learning during the electric age was passive and much similar to the Frege’s banking model of education. The masses are passive receivers of information from the TV, radio, and print; while the media corporations served as fountains of ideological production and reproduction. It allowed no participation from the receivers whatsoever. With the advent of the internet and its revolutionary interactiveness, learning has been transformed from passive receiving into a simulation of face-to-face classes.

It is with this train of thought that I would like to entertain this alternative view of education amidst the pandemic. It has always seemed apparent that the transition of instructional medium was a leap from face-to-face classroom discussions to online virtual classrooms. What if this is not necessarily the message of the internet? Instead, what if it was meant as a leap from the passive, one-way learning acquired from the electrical age media towards the interactive, “global village” environment of the internet age? If we focus on the development of the medium rather than the “content,” instead of seeing remote learning as a regress from face-to-face classes, we could interpret remote learning as an evolution of secondary sources of education – a better alternative to the TV, radio, and print. Seen in this manner, a community of inquiry at a remote learning setup may actually be more feasible than what we have expected.

### **The undercurrent**

These perks of the internet age do not come without a cost. McLuhan warns us of such blows, or rather **effects**<sup>4</sup>, on the social sphere when introducing new technology as communication medium:

“massive social surgery is needed to insert new technology into the group mind...technical change alters not only habits of life, but patterns of thought and valuation...The area of impact and incision is numb. It is the entire system that is changed. The effect of radio is visual, the effect of photo is auditory. Each new impact shifts the ratios among all the senses.” (McLuhan, 1964)

---

<sup>4</sup> McLuhan interchangeably uses the term “effect” with “impact” and he discusses this notion quite metaphorically in *The medium is the message*. In simpler terms, the “impact” is the adjustment of the society, similar to an undercurrent, when confronted with new technology. What the radio provides is auditory but it lacks visual, hence its effect or impact is a regression of the visual aspect of the message. This will then affect the overall psyche of society – its patterns of thoughts and valuation.

To understand the impact of the internet in the educational sector, we must investigate the area around the incision – the area that receives the greatest trauma. If the message/content of the radio is the audio and the effect/impact is visual, then the impact of the internet should occur somewhere around the negation of the consciousness. What immediately comes to mind is the notion of the self. For when we project our own consciousness into the internet media, we are lending ourselves into the public sphere. Because it is an extension of our senses, the line between the personal and the public sphere becomes blurred out. The personal becomes invaded. Such is the message of the internet age: yes, it is productive and yes, it is interactive, but only because it is invasive. “For any medium has the power of imposing its own assumptions on the unwary.” (McLuhan, 1964) There are already several studies that prove too much internet can cause social fatigue. When online classes attempted to replace face-to-face classes, it is as if at any given time, we are only either teachers or students. There was hardly any moment when we just feel that we are “ourselves” as human beings. Alienation is the impact of the internet age. In the electric age, we are teachers and students in the schools or in the classrooms, and only momentarily at home; but such is the invasiveness of the internet that it has transcended the physical geographical barriers of educational institutions. The school has become everywhere, and it is assumed as though we are students every time. Is this what it means to be human in the internet age – that we have to become superbeings of ourselves, existing our various social roles simultaneously?

###

### References:

- Federman, M. (2004). What is the Meaning of the Medium is the Message.
- Marshal, M. (1962). *The Gutenberg Galaxy*.
- McLuhan, M. (1964). *The medium is the message*. Understanding media: the extensions of man.