REVISITING MCLUHAN'S THOUGHTS ON MEDIUM AS MESSAGE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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ABSTRACT

This paper makes a brief discourse of Marshall McLuhan's popular expression 'the medium is the message', a discourse that has been diversely interpreted. Despite their different understandings, fundamentally, most media scholars believe that the Canadian theorist never meant that information content should be ignored as inconsequential; rather, that McLuhan drew attention to the fact that the medium of communication matters. The paper looked at the readings of the idea, then experiments with the consistency of the theory to our digital era. By subjecting the same message to different media in real-life settings, the findings re-echo that the medium through which content is carried plays a vital role in the way it is perceived, and this is true, especially in the digital age. The study expands this idea with a discussion of other phenomena that alter how a message is understood. Some of these other factors that are significant in message interpretation include context, prior knowledge, pre-existing relationships or conversations, etc. Media users are, therefore, encouraged to remember that embedded in their decision of what medium of communication to use is also the choice of how the message will likely be perceived; and that it is always good for them to imagine in advance the additional message/meaning which their chosen medium will inject to the content, resulting from the medium's peculiar nature.

Keywords: Digital, Internet, McLuhan, Media, Medium, Message.

Introduction

In the communication world, the name of the Canadian Communication theorist Marshall McLuhan is a household name given his aphorisms and theories that gained much popularity over the years. Today many people even from other disciplines talk of the world as a '*global village'* which was McLuhan's coinage that became very apt many years after following the advent of technological advancements such as television and the Internet. The global village concept was his idea of illustrating the shrinking of the world into a highly connected and interdependent society where everyone knows about everyone else's business. On the other hand, Technological Determinism Theory, often referenced in new media studies, is a communication theory that was polished, advanced and popularized by him to explain that the technology of every age determines and changes the lifestyle of that age.

Considering that McLuhan lived from 1911 to 1980 when many of today's technologies were not yet as developed as they are presently, communication scholars admire him as an innovative thinker who lived ahead of his time and hence study his philosophies with much interest. In 1964 McLuhan, in his very popular book 'Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man' asserted that *the medium is the message.* Like his other expressions, this assertion too has been diversely interpreted even in controversial and contradictory ways. The advent of the Internet and its characteristic way of affecting every area of life kindled the curiosity to review what the philosopher meant by the medium as message also against the background of scholars' multifaceted interpretations.

Media Scholars' Interpretations of Medium as Message

One dominant and general interpretation of this idea is that the medium through which a message is communicated influences how the message is perceived. Consequently, such intrinsic effects of the medium of communication on the content it delivers become the medium's unique message. Because the media are inherently different, we experience their contents in entirely different ways, thus each medium adds a unique message to the original content it carries.

The medium is the message has continued to be widely discussed among communication theorists and philosophers. For example, Federman's (2004) rethinking of this idea is that the change of scale, pace or pattern that a new invention or innovation (medium) introduces into human affairs is the message of the medium. Because the medium shapes and controls the scale and form of human interactions, it is the message. His second construal is that McLuhan was stressing the fact that we often focus much attention on the obvious and tend to ignore structural changes in our affairs that are introduced subtly, or over long periods. Another interpretation is that the medium affects the society in which it plays a role not only by the content delivered over the medium but by the characteristics of the medium itself. The form of a medium embeds itself in the message, creating a symbiotic relationship by which the medium influences how the message is perceived, causing subtle change over time.

For some other communication philosophers, McLuhan's statement simply means that the medium of communication determines how the message it carries will be decoded; that modern electronic media, which of course includes the Internet, would have far-reaching sociological, aesthetic and philosophical consequences, to the point of actually altering how we experience the world. Specifically, Gross (2011) believes the expression 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. 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.

Perhaps from a similar but more definite perspective, Gil (2012) understands that the medium in itself wields a much more powerful effect on the receiver than the content it delivers, which is just incidental. In this case, the medium is not only significant but perhaps has more to offer than the content it carries. Therefore, how the content is packaged or conveyed is much more influential and significant than what is being conveyed.Another related explanation is that it is the medium that modifies our senses when processing the received information, so the medium of communication makes a critical contribution towards understanding the message. Therefore, the medium in itself is the message. In this sense, the medium through which a message is experienced shapes the user’s perception of the message.

Similarly, in Gilley (2013) how information is communicated has more of a profound effect on the person receiving the information than the information itself. In this regard, the style of message presentation, method of delivery and packaging all have a way of influencing the meaning or interpretation given to a message. Even if the same information were presented, the effect of that information (the message) is transformed by the manner or mode in which it is delivered (the medium). So, the medium through which we choose to communicate matters. Gil (2012) also interprets it that the processed information is transformed by each different medium in unique ways. This is against the premise that the media have specific characteristics such as reach, speed, accessibility, ability to personalize the message, accommodating varying languages/clues, etc. Each of these features can mingle or interfere with the content and produce an entirely fresh meaning different from the original message.

From an entirely different angle, Watts (2012) believes McLuhan intended that context is more important than the content itself. From this perceptive context is not just the medium carrying the message, nor the manner it is delivered, style of packaging and presenting the message but also includes the circumstances or milieu of the communication elements. Wogu (2008) in his explanation of the McLuhan ideologies contributes to this discussion that “McLuhan was talking about the general influence a medium wields irrespective of its content. He was

concerned with the nature of a medium rather than what the medium is saying" (p.84).

Although McLuhan lived at a time when the Internet was still in an experimental age, his idea still captures the digital experience of our time. So, while the theory has been discussed for over fifty years now, in general, most people as illustrated with the citations above think he never meant that content is not important, rather that he intended to stress that the medium of communication is as significant as the content; that perhaps, the medium is more important than the sum of all the contents it conveys. Establishing between the content and the medium which one is more relevant, therefore continues to sound like the egg-chick controversy.

Theoretical framework

This study theoretically is hinged on the media richness theory which prescribes that media are rich to the extent they satisfy certain criteria; implying that others that do not qualify by such standards may not be as rich or influential. This theory in essence grades or ranks different media as rich or implicitly poor depending on the ability of the medium in question to bring out the 'message' understood as the value, clarity or lucidity in the information it delivers. Tracing its historical paths, Ohiagu (2021) notes that in 1984 Daft and Lengel advanced the media richness theory postulating that media as channels of communication should correspond with the content of the information they carry. The richness of any medium which indicates its capacity to carry information is measured by the medium's ability to personalize the message it transmits, speed of feedback as well as the availability of multiple cues and language variety. Thus the effectiveness of communication is enhanced by reducing ambiguity when a richer medium is selected for message delivery. Therefore, ambiguous messages are better delivered with rich media to guarantee clarity while lucid messages require lean or not so rich media to avoid oversimplifying the message. The emphasis here is to make a proper choice of the media to be used in transmitting a message to achieve effective communication (Dainton & Zelley, 2011).

Arising from this discussion, Ohiagu (2021) argues that since most online platforms provide the opportunity for instantaneous feedback and are easily personalized and can accommodate multiple clues and languages, the Internet is perhaps one of the richest media of communication. Because the Internet is so adaptable to all levels of communication and all kinds of use, online platforms such as E-mail, Instant Messaging, Social Media, Blogs, Video Conferencing/Calls, etc., can be selected accordingly to match most messages. Therefore the online communicator is believed to have several unparalleled

opportunities to match the medium to the message. Accordingly, depending on the desired effect, the nature of the message, the target audience and other dynamics, s/he can select which Internet platform can appropriately deliver a message.

This theory is relevant in this work since it also recognizes that media or channels of communication are more than just conduits through which meaning is transmitted The media are not merely conveyors of information that do not affect the message they carry, hence should be carefully chosen to correspond with the content they bear. The media in essence constitute the message, contribute to the message, flavour the message, may alter the message, supersede the message and finally deliver the message until we cannot but agree with McLuhan that indeed the medium is the message in its own right.

Testing the Theory in Real Life Digital Settings

Beyond theoretical assertions, the researcher was curious to ascertain the extent that McLuhan's theory of medium being message can apply to the digital world. Consequently, to the study subjected the theory to testing using digital media and interpersonal communication. Digital media in this context referred to the Internet and some of its channels, as well as mobile communication; while face to face discussions represented interpersonal communication.

Methodology

This was an experimental study carried out on 60 lecturers of the University of Port Harcourt. From a population of about 1200 academic staff, 60 lecturers of the University constituting 5% of the population of the study were conveniently sampled for the research and exposed to the same message while noting their responses. Being a qualitative study, analysis of the responses was done descriptively. This simple experiment involved delivering the same message through different media and different platforms of those media and observing the effects of the same message on members of the audience who share similar characteristics. The message was a simple phrase that read thus: *'the exchange rate now is five hundred naira to a dollar'* (Naira is the local currency used in Nigeria where the study was carried out.).

The following media were used for the investigation: the Internet, Mobile Phones, and Face-to-face Communication. On the Internet, the message was sent as an E-mail to five participants; then posted privately on Whatsapp to five other participants and another 35 participants on a Whatsapp group page. On Mobile Phone, it was sent as a text message to five respondents while five other

participants were engaged in telephone conversations initiated with the same message. For face-to-face communication, the test was done by having discussions with five colleagues at different locations. The discussions were also started with the same message. So, in summary, all 60 lecturers of the University of Port Harcourt were reached more or less within the same time frame through different channels of communication with the same message. By sending/sharing the same message through different media, different results were obtained. Below are the varied meanings/interpretations that were given to the message in the different media.

Results and Discussions

None of the five persons whom I sent the message to their telecommunication networks via Mobile Phone text messaging responded. Replying through the same channel would cost them four naira (#4) for each message which is almost nothing considering that dollar exchanges at five hundred naira. Their silence could be interpreted to mean that they were reluctant to spend even that small amount to engage in a discussion that didn't seem so important to them. Besides the cost implication, it could also be that replying in that form would be more time consuming or laborious than just clicking on an emoticon if they had received the message on Whatsapp or other online channels. Their silence implies that for a communicator who desires feedback in the communication process, except where the content is of great benefit to the receiver, the choice of telecommunication mobile text messaging may not be ideal. Based on the above finding, the medium has the capacity of reducing the significance of the message, because the receiver's money, time and convenience are all involved. Much later the next day one of them called me wondering what the earlier message was about. This implies that telecommunication mobile phone texting can reduce the speed of communication and may make the communication ambiguous requiring further clarification by other means.

Whatsapp messages were sent to five other participants privately also as text messages and the feedbacks shown below were received from five of them all on the same day. Some replies were sent a few seconds after my original post, indicating the speed of communication on Whatsapp.

Participant 1: "That means it has come down if you are sure. The last time I changed (money) in December, it was 565 naira to a dollar". Then I responded that I meant the online conversion rate. And he replied thus: "Still check the black market rate online to see the difference".

Participant 2: “Were you directed to give me some dollars? Please don't bother about the exchange rate. Just wire the cash” (Just send me the money).
Participant 3: “I no even see the naira not to talk of the dollar”. (I have not even seen the naira not to talk of the dollar).
Participant 4: “Reducing. Let it get down more. I hope you sent to the correct person”.
Participant 5: “It will come down gradually”.

Like the telecommunication mobile text messages, the messages to the sample group on Whatsapp were also sent as text messages. Perhaps because replying did not make the receivers incur an additional cost, would take less time and was less cumbersome, the participants reached on this channel were more willing to engage in the above-shown interactions. Besides, a look at the responses showed the messages were quite personalized. The interpretation of this is that online chats, all things being equal, give room for message personalization, instant feedback as well as allow for multiple cues and language variety as shown in the messages from Whatsapp private chats. This implies that online chatting is a richer medium of communication than telecommunication mobile texting. For although both media have the potential for personalization, immediate feedback, multiple clues and languages, financial considerations may limit that potential in telecommunication mobile phone texting.

This corresponds with Normon’s (2021) assertion that “media themselves, not the content they carry, should be the focus of study…McLuhan's insight was that a medium affects the society in which it plays a role not by the content delivered over the medium, but by the characteristics of the medium itself” (n.p.). In the two instances above, the same message produced in the same format (text messaging) but transmitted via different media – telecommunication mobile phone texting and online texting- produced different results. This confirms that the characteristics of the media affect the impact of their contents (message) on the receivers of that message. One cannot but agree with Federman (2004) that the medium shapes and controls the scale and form of human interactions as exemplified in the muteness that followed the telecommunication mobile texting in contrast to the conversation that ensued from the Whatsapp chats.

From the Whatsapp group page, although there were thirty-five (35) participants on the page and thirty (30) persons read the post as of the time of data collection, only one participant made the following comment: “Really? Is it still going up or

coming (down). You know your brother doesn't understand these exchange things. *Me no get dollar*!". (I don't have dollar!). The silence of the other participants could be interpreted as a lack of interest in the topic or the spiral of silence playing out in a familiar setting where people are afraid of expressing an unpopular opinion for fear of being isolated or judged. Some of them may not even know or be interested in the current exchange rate and may not want to expose such 'ignorance or lack of interest' to people who know them well. Of course, apart from these factors of fear, shame or lack of interest, there could be also other intervening variables such as extreme workloads that do not allow people to have much time for every 'idle talk' in all the groups they belong, relationship or state of mind concerning the person initiating the post, etc. The silence by the other participants was thus perceived as communication that is subject to various readings or interpretations.

In contrast, the five participants who were reached through telephone calls that were commenced with the same message engaged in long conversations. First, they expressed their doubts/confusion regarding my interest in the topic, sought clarifications and got instant feedback as we discussed. Besides, they were not afraid of long conversations perhaps since they were not paying anything to receive the calls except the inconvenience of time and energy. This form of use for Telecommunication Mobile Phone (making calls as opposed to texting) gave room for instant feedback, made communication less ambiguous and did not attract additional cost for the receiver. These characteristics accordingly made the medium a rich channel that controlled the scale, pace and pattern of communication. In McLuhan and McLuhan's Laws of Media (the tetrad) Marshall McLuhan and his son, Eric, analyzes mobile phone. Adapting their study Euchner (2016) records that Mobile Phone is a medium that enhances interpersonal communication, accessibility, and response time. Based on the findings of this study, while the three features apply to Mobile Phone telecommunication calls the same cannot be said of Mobile Phone telecommunication texting especially if feedback will attract charges for the receiver.

Just like the phone calls, the five participants who were studied during a face-to-face interaction eagerly explored all the dimensions of the situation. They were detailed or comprehensive in their arguments which came after they had asked the initial questions for understanding and clarifying issues. They were also interested in the conversations. Some started with opening remarks such as: 'that is Nigeria for you', 'who asked you?', 'do you want to buy a dollar?' but

eventually engaged in discussions which took various dimensions. Some discussants focused on the political reasons behind the overwhelming depreciation of the currency, other respondents expressed their disgust with the nation's governance and administration. One respondent queried my interest in how much naira exchanges with a dollar, another digressed from the topic. In any case, a rich discourse emanated from that simple message. The conversations that followed were warm and personalized which indicate that interpersonal communication remains an effective medium of sharing meaning, as nothing can take away that personal touch when we communicate face to face.

The participants who were sent the Email did not give speedy feedback like those reached on Whatsapp. So though the Internet is known for speed, it can be deduced that some channels like social media give more instantaneous feedback than Email. On the responses received through Email, one of the participants asked me if the message was wrongly sent to him since he did not remember discussing any related topic with me. The second recipient replied in two words: 'and so?' The third person sent back a related document attached as a file running into several pages on why the Nigerian currency is depreciating and the fourth E-mail was not delivered as the Email address was no longer active, while the fifth person never replied. In nearly all the cases it was hard for me to continue replying back and forth to each person to make them understand the message. This was perhaps an indication that Email communication in some circumstances is not best suited for discussions. It might be appropriate for informing and sending messages but not necessary for engaging in back and forth conversations. The third participant highlighted that with Email you can speak as much as you want since there is no additional cost involved and no space limitation as in mobile phone texting.

So what is evident from this research is that each medium of communication has its richness and limitations, and all of these factors affect how the message the medium carries is understood. Although the new media scholars believe that content is king, the result derived from this investigation re-echoes McLuhan's idea that indeed the medium through which content is carried also plays a vital role in the way it is perceived, at least to the extent that the medium of communication can add new meaning to the original meaning of the content. The medium can expand or shrink the meaning of the content. This is especially true in our digital environment where the same medium has multiple platforms and each of them exhibits different features, potentials and limitations. For instance, Social Media, E-mail, Instant Messaging and Blogs are different forms of the

Internet, yet each of these media constituting various forms of one medium (the Internet) have their peculiarities that alter how their contents are interpreted. As shown above, the different media produced different results with the same message among a study group with similar characteristics.

Furthermore, this research expands the McLuhan idea with other phenomena that alter how the message is perceived to include: context, prior knowledge, pre-existing relationships or conversations; etc. To confirm or refute if context, relationship and prior knowledge also affect the message, a similar experiment was conducted previously by the same researcher (Ohiagu, 2013) with the same message on exchange rate on a Facebook Group Page titled*Uniport Advanced Digital Comm.* Then later it was also posted on my Facebook Timeline. The responses were different. Because the group page is strictly for discussing issues that relate to digital communication, which is a course I teach the group, many of the students construed the post to mean that I wanted them to relate the message to digital communication. Some of the comments were on how digital technologies have made it a lot easier to know the exchange rate, some recommended the use of software like currency converter, etc. The entire discussion tilted towards digital communication and exchange rate. Also because the post came a few weeks to the examination, someone asked if they should research the topic of exchange rate and ICT for the examination. It was almost like a guided discussion.

So, different contexts generated different meanings to the same message. The context in which an interaction occurs has a profound effect on communication. In face-to-face encounters, factors ranging from psychological to environmental to cultural all affect how the message is transmitted and how it is understood. Online communication is no less subject to context and may bring with it additional contextual issues that will affect the intended message.

Prior knowledge or conversations between the sender of a message and the receiver also proved to have some effects (additional meaning) on a message. On my Facebook Timeline persons who had previous knowledge of my plan to travel outside the country at about the same time, the research was going on immediately associated the statement with my project and disappointment with the drop in the value of the Naira. Their understandings were quickly coloured by their knowledge and even unconsciously, their perception of my message was influenced by what they imagined I was saying. On the other hand, those who were blank or who had no pre-conceived ideas were more open, receptive and

curious. Their discussions or comments were centred mainly on the topic at its face value. So, apart from context, a person's previous knowledge can also bring a change of scale, pace or pattern of understanding to a message.

Pre-existing relationships also proved to alter meanings as discussions on the same message with friends and colleagues ended up in very lively discussions where people freely expressed their thoughts on the issue, asked for clarifications and made a lot of unguarded remarks. With strangers, I could see a lot of unexpressed questions like: is she a journalist, or a government spy? What is she getting at? Thus their emotional distance from me inhibited them from freely commenting on the issue.

Conclusion

Based on the above empirical evidence, it can be said that this study re-echoes McLuhan's idea that indeed the medium is the message; that the medium matters,especially in our digital era where each medium adds its unique message to the original content and different platforms of the same medium give additional meanings to the message. In addition, context, prior knowledge, pre-existing relationships or conversations also make significant contributions to the overall meaning of the message.

Following these observations, media users are encouraged to remember that imbedded in their decision of the medium of communication to use is also the choice of how the message will be likely perceived; and it is always good to imagine beforehand the additional message which the choice medium will inject to the content resulting from its peculiar nature. We would like to conclude with a thought-provoking question: what is the message of the Internet, for example? This study advocates that it is time to see the Internet not just as a medium but also as a message: the same of course applies to all other media of communication.

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