

Semiotics from a Media Ecology Point of View and McLuhan's Notion that "The Medium is the Message": A Probe

Robert K. Logan

Volume 3, Number 2, Fall 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1107778ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1107778ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

New Explorations Association

ISSN

2563-3198 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Logan, R. (2023). Semiotics from a Media Ecology Point of View and McLuhan's Notion that "The Medium is the Message": A Probe. *New Explorations*, 3(2).
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1107778ar>

Article abstract

Semiotics and media ecology are compared and an attempt is made to reconcile semiotics and media ecology and translate the terminology of semiotics into that of media ecology and vice versa that of media ecology into semiotics. An attempt is also made to create a bridge between these two closely related studies of communication to create a hybrid study of the media ecology of semiotics and the semiotics of media ecology.

© Robert K. Logan, 2023



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>



Semiotics from a Media Ecology Point of View and McLuhan's Notion that "The Medium is the Message": A Probe

Robert K. Logan
Department of Physics and St. Michael's College, University of Toronto
logan@physics.utoronto.ca

Abstract: Semiotics and media ecology are compared and an attempt is made to reconcile semiotics and media ecology and translate the terminology of semiotics into that of media ecology and vice versa that of media ecology into semiotics. An attempt is also made to create a bridge between these two closely related studies of communication to create a hybrid study of the media ecology of semiotics and the semiotics of media ecology.

Introduction

It is an honor to be invited to give this key note address to a gathering of semioticians here in Bucharest at the Semiosis in Communication Conference. I am more of a media ecologist having collaborated with Marshall McLuhan than a semiotician but I have published in *Semiotica* and other journals where my focus has been on biosemiotics. For example, I co-authored an article with Stuart Kaufman and others entitled "Propagating Organization: An Enquiry" making use of semiotics. I do not often address an audience of semioticians and this is the first time I have attempted to reconcile semiotics and media ecology.

So now I turn to my mission here which is to talk about semiotics from a media ecology point of view and talk about media ecology from a semiotic point of view and to try to create a bridge between these two, for the most part, unrelated studies of communication. I hope by doing so I will create an outline of a hybrid study that combines the best of these two grand academic traditions which I will call the media ecology of semiotics and the semiotics of media ecology. I will consider a number of different semiotic points of view, namely that of

- i. Saussure with his 'signifier' and the 'signified',
- ii. Pierce with his representamen, the interpretant and the object
- iii. the definition of semiotics in Wikipedia, namely,

"Semiotics... is the systematic study of sign processes ([semiosis](#)) and meaning making... Semiosis is any activity, conduct, or process that involves [signs](#), where a sign is defined as anything that communicates something, usually called a [meaning](#) (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semiotics>, accessed March 26, 2023)."

And now to make things more interesting here is my fourth point of view of semiotics influenced by my media ecology experience:

iv. the sign process entails four elements: the sign itself; the sender; the receiver and the medium by which the sign is instantiated and is sent. The sign, the meaning of the sign and the medium in which the sign is instantiated cannot be separated. They operate as a unified whole.

Marshall McLuhan indirectly suggested that the "study of sign processes" is not just about the content of the signs but also the medium in which the signs are instantiated and that is used to communicate the signs because as he famously said "the medium is the message." The message of the alphabet as

we claimed was monotheism, codified law, abstract science and deductive logic in our paper "Alphabet, Mother of Invention" (McLuhan and Logan 1977).

What he meant by "the medium is the message" is not that the medium is literally the message but rather that, independent of its signs, its content and its messages, a medium has its own intrinsic effects on our perceptions which are its unique message. As he once said,

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 1964, 7).

For the 'message' of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs (ibid., 8).

A medium has effects that are independent of its content and these effects are largely subliminal. As McLuhan said, "Program and 'content' analysis offer no clues to the magic of these media or to their subliminal charge (ibid., 20)."

The same messages or content of different signs, have a different impact depending on the medium in which those signs are instantiated and communicated. In other words "sign processes" entail both the content of the sign and the medium in which the sign is instantiated and communicated.

This fourth point raises the interesting question of what defines a sign. Is it the content and the medium that transmits and instantiates the content or is it the content independent of the medium. I believe that a sign consists of both the content and the medium that communicates that content. So for example, the written word: stop, the spoken word: stop, and a traffic stop sign are three different signs. So for the purposes of this inquiry a sign is characterized by both its content and the medium that transmits and instantiates that content. And even the spoken word stop can be a number of different signs if the word stop is shouted, whispered, said sarcastically, or said with the inflection of a question. The written sign: 'stop' in lower case letters is different than the written sign in upper case letters: 'STOP' or a stop sign.

Is a medium itself a sign? According to the definition of a sign as anything that communicates a meaning, a medium without any content is not a sign in that it does not have a meaning per se. It is merely the vehicle that carries or transmits signs and the medium in which signs are instantiated. But it changes the effect and hence the meaning of the signs it transmits or which are instantiated in it and therefore semiotics, the systematic study of sign processes, must take into account the effects of the medium on how a sign is perceived and interpreted. Hence, my assertion that the sign is both the content and the medium that transmits and instantiates it. Put simply two signs, one written and one spoken both with what seems to have the same content and both of which have the same dictionary definition will have different effects and therefore they are not the same sign, they are actually two different signs. We cannot have a sign without a medium that instantiates and transmits it. A Shakespearean play that is read, played on a stage and a film that is made of the play are not the same set of signs. To review, a sign has two parts consisting of its content and the medium that instantiates and transmits that content. They cannot be separated. And therefore, semiotics and media ecology by this same criteria cannot be and should not be separated either.

I therefore propose that semiotics and media ecology are complimentary studies of communication, one with a focus on the content of the sign and the other on the medium of the transmission and instantiation of the sign. I further suggest that semiotics cannot only be enriched by media ecology but without an understanding of the effects of the media transmitting and instantiating the signs, semiotics is incomplete. The meaning of a sign is not only its literal meaning or its content but the medium that transmits and instantiates its content. The content of a sign and the medium transmitting and instantiating that content cannot be separated.

Media ecology, on the other hand, which studies the effects of a medium must for its part understand the role of the signs that a medium instantiates and transmits and hence it will be enriched by semiotics.

As things now stand, they are two separate fields of study that are both concerned with communication. I therefore suggest we need to explore the idea that the study of communications requires a merger of these two fields since communication requires both signs and media and the sign itself is defined in part by the medium that instantiates it.

Let me repeat this idea. Communication requires a medium studied by media ecologists to transmits the signs studied by semioticians and without the signs studied by semioticians there would be nothing for a medium to transmit and without a medium a sign cannot signify. Signs are instantiated in a medium and the content of a medium are signs. Without signs to propagate there is no medium and without a medium there are no signs. Which came first the chicken or the egg; the medium or the sign? My answer to this question is that they co-emerged.

1. A sign is simultaneously a meaning and a medium or a medium and its content.
2. Four; 4; iv. and |||| (Please note that the sign |||| I have employed represents the best way I could represent a tally using my keyboard.) are all written signs with basically the same meaning but they are not interchangeable in terms of their effects. One could add that four; 4; ||||; or iv as handwritten, printed, seen on a TV screen or seen on a movie screen are each different signs.
3. In terms of Saussure's 'signifier' and the 'signified' I suggest that the 'signifier' is the medium and the 'signified' the content.
4. And in terms of Peirce's representamen, interpretant and object, I suggest, that
 - i. the representamen is the medium,
 - ii. the interpretant is the literal meaning of the representamen colored by the subliminal effects of the medium and
 - iii. subliminal effects of the medium and
 - iv. the object is the content

This is how I attempt to square the semiotic terminology of the sign with that of media ecology's terminology of the medium, the content and the subliminal effects of the medium.

How is semiotics used in media ecology and how is media ecology used in semiotics? I do not know the exact answer to this question but I can say it does not happen very often.

Conclusion

I believe what is needed is a dialogue between the semiotician community and the media ecology community. So the kind invitation of Nicolae Sorin for me to address you has created a new research agenda for me. For those who wish to join me in this endeavor, I invite you to think about how to integrate media ecology and the notion that the medium is the message into to your studies of semiotics. Please contact me with your thoughts at logan@physics.utoronto.ca.

Acknowledgement: I wish to thank Nicolae-Sorin Drăgan for inviting me to present at the International Conference - Semiosis in Communication: New Challenges of Multimodality in the Digital Age held in Bucharest, June 22-24, 2023.

Reference:

McLuhan, Marshall & Robert K. Logan. 1977. Alphabet, Mother of Invention. *Etcetera* 34: 373-83.