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McLuhan Between Concepts and Aphorisms

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Introduction

In *McLuhan Misunderstood: Setting the Record Straight*, Robert Logan (2011) takes advantage of the centenary of the birth of the famous Canadian author to make a series of clarifications about the many controversial points of McLuhan's multifaceted work. Pointed out by some as the "oracle of the electric age," McLuhan was also decried by many as a "technological determinist," and some even questioned his academic credentials. After all, his provocative attitude, expressed in phrases such as "I don't necessarily agree with everything I say", and "do you think my fallacy is all wrong?" McLuhan built a unique trajectory in the context of the social sciences and humanities in the years of the 1960s and 1970s. His "one-liners", short and scathing aphorisms, brought disconcerting insights and complex formulations on themes that were then incipient, but which would become central to the communication research agenda 40 years later. Therefore, I consider it important to take into account the work of this irreverent and original thinker, whose ideas continue to theoretically influence a society that is constantly redefining itself through its digital communication technologies.

Recently, McLuhan's work has been the subject of reinterpretations. When it was written in the mid-1960s, television was in black and white, the world was divided by the Cold War and the idea of the world of the future as a "global village", where folks could be connected to each other through different media seemed too utopian, too optimistic for a planet that seemed to be on the eve of nuclear war.

With our contemporary digital world, McLuhan's once strange ideas about the future of communication gained the status of "prophecies", and his work began to be read and valued again. The objective of this article is to discuss some elements of McLuhan's theory about the social consequences of the introduction of new communication technologies and apply them to the study of social interaction in the digital environment.

Understanding McLuhan

Herbert Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980), a Canadian scholar, was one of the founding authors of modern media studies which came to be known as media ecology. McLuhan became a prominent figure in pop culture in the 1960s with the publication of his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, in 1964, and released in my country Brazil in 1967 with the title

O*s meios de comunicação como extensões do homem*, translated by Décio Pignatari, in an edition that is still in the catalog today. The expression "global village" was described as early as 1959, and appears in his 1962 book *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, in which McLuhan (1962) studies the psychological and cognitive effects of the printing press on members of society.

What McLuhan understands as a 'medium' can be defined as 'technology'. Each tool or technique allows the human body to extend its capabilities. A hammer extends the power of the hand, the wheel extends the ability of the foot, etc. Media would be another of these technical extensions. Each technology produces a bias on the world of life, on the organization of societies, on the formulations of ideologies or a specific worldview. Thus, the invention of writing allowed the creation of empires, as the steam engine allowed capitalist expansion, and as electricity made the global village possible.

In his theorizing, McLuhan maintained that each different medium is an extension of the senses, which affects the individual and society in different ways; in addition to classifying some media as "hot" – media that engage the person's senses in a high-intensity, exclusive way, such as typography, radio and film – and others as "cool" – media with lower resolution or intensity , which requires more interaction from the viewer, such as telephone and television. While many of his statements and theories were considered impenetrable and even absurd, McLuhan's central message, that to understand today's world, it is essential to study media processes, remains even truer in this our digital age.

Between Concepts and Aphorisms

The Medium is the Message

McLuhan's most famous aphorism, the apparent paradox that "the medium is the message", is a good starting point for understanding the digital universe (the major part of McLuhan's work predates our experiences with networked personal computers and it should be noted that McLuhan did not make use of computers in his work). This short phrase, "the medium is the message" is deceptively simple, and carries several meanings. The first is the notion that, regardless of its content or explicit "message", a medium has its peculiar effects on people's perception, constituting another "message" in itself. For example, there is something revolutionary about the telephone, something that radically transforms the relationship between human beings and their notions of space and time. This dimension, the "medium message" or the message of the medium independent of its content is what McLuhan revealed. What the telephone does with human communication – is not found in the "content" or "message" of any particular phone call. In other words, the explicit message or content of the medium is affected by the medium itself.

In this sense, McLuhan called the "somnambulism of our days" the critical obsession with the explicit "contents" of a medium while ignoring the bias imposed by the medium itself on its very content. For him, the programs shown on TV are like a juicy piece of meat offered to the guard dog, while the thief robs the house. In this famous metaphor, the guard dog represents the conscious awareness and attention of the viewer, which is entertained by the content of the

medium (i.e. soap opera episodes, television news, interviews, series, football matches...), while leaving them unaware of the fact that all these products are part of the same "activity" (for the audience), that is, sitting and watching TV.

Another meaning of the "medium is the message" aphorism is that a medium transforms its content: the same film shown on TV or in the cinema, for example, results in very different experiences for those who watch it. The recurrent discomfort of spectators when faced with literary adaptations for cinema or book versions of famous films is another example. What this second meaning highlights, therefore, is that each technology brings with it a bias (to use the term of Harold Innis, McLuhan's mentor), which conditions the meaning of what is transmitted through it. And this conditioning of meaning makes each medium itself part of the significance of what is communicated and this is why McLuhan says "the medium is the message." The meaning of the literal content of a message changes ever so slightly from one medium to another.

A third meaning was suggested by McLuhan himself and consists of a new aphorism: "every new technology creates a new environment". The cell phone meant that people could be reached anywhere, not just "at home" or "in the office," places where there are landlines. E-mail, coupled with phones and Internet access, meant that complex text messages, with attached files, could be received in real time, anywhere. In other words, with these technologies, notions such as "work environment" and "free time" are radically transformed. With them, many people can work from home, making contacts and meetings online, as well as having fun in front of the computer during work hours. On the other hand, they take on an overload of tasks, which makes the idea of a "weekend" a distant memory of pre-internet times. Furthermore, in the context of the Internet, a series of new "environments" have emerged, such as chat rooms, collective computer games with thousands of people from all over the world interconnected simultaneously, social networks or email lists. Each of these technologies creates "environments" for their activities, symbolic "places" where people interact and social action takes place. A very promising path to explore are the many "mini-internets" within the Internet, all digital environments.

The User is the Content

This McLuhan aphorism, "the user is the content" complements the previous one, and anticipates the results of media reception research by almost 20 years. As with "the medium is the message", this aphorism is also an apparent paradox. "The user is the content" if we consider that each member of the "audience" of a medium incorporates what they read, see and/or hear according to their background knowledge, according to their own categories and value systems, and makes the "content" something that serves and relates to their own needs and capabilities. Commenting on this aphorism, Logan (2011) highlights with a certain irony that in five words, McLuhan managed to express a feeling that a postmodern theorist would have taken an entire essay to explain.

Studies of media reception and ethnographies of reception (Jacks, 1996; Barbero, 1987) since the early 1980s have overcome apocalyptic fears (current in McLuhan's time) about the "effects of media". From subliminal propaganda to ideological manipulation, the spectrum of harm attributed to the mass media has systematically come up against an empirical obstacle: people. Outside the laboratories and samples, people watching mass media discourse thought for themselves and made sense of what they saw and heard. The dominant communication

theory until the mid-1980s credited great power to the media, presupposing a passive and dominated "audience". Only by carrying out research from people's points of view and their use of the available means of communication was this paradigm relativized. But McLuhan's phrase "The user is the content" had already been published in the 1960s, anticipating this position by around 20 years.

In this sense, Levinson (2001) comments that on the Internet, this aphorism "The user is the content" goes from the metaphorical to the literal meaning. After all, any online activity leaves "traces", produces more or less evident "content", signed or not, website records, keywords, links. For Levinson (2001: 40), considering that the user is the content implies assuming, at the same time, that: – Human beings serve as or determine the content of all media through their ability to interpret everything that is manifested. The human being "travels through" an electronic medium such as television, radio or telephone and thus becomes its "content." Human beings literally create most of the content of the oldest interactive media such as letters or telephone calls, for example, as well as most of the content on the Internet.

In fact, technologies such as Instagram, blogs and Facebook have given a new dimension to the idea of "active listening". One of its consequences – notable when it is said that the user is the content – is the organization on social media of groups of fans of book series and films, who begin to produce and distribute their own apocryphal books, in the phenomenon called "fan-fiction " (Hellerson and Busse, 2006).

The Tetradic Theory (The Laws of Media)

The most functional notion for the conditions of the digital era seems to be the posthumously published tetrad theory (McLuhan, M. and E. McLuhan, 1988: 129). Late in his life, McLuhan and his son Eric undertook a project to renew 1964's Understanding Media. The unexpected result was the book *Laws of the Media: The New Science*, published in 1988 long after McLuhan's death in 1980.

The tetradic theory, known as *The Laws of the Media* predicts four effects arising from the introduction of a new technology or medium into the social context. They are that every new technology or medium

1. **enhances** some human function,
2. **obsolesces** a previous way of achieving that function,
3. **retrieves** something from the past that was obsolesced earlier and
4. when pushed to the limits of its potential **reverses** or **flips into** an opposite or complementary form (McLuhan M. & E. 1988).

According to Horrocks (2001), it is possible to see each of the effects predicted by McLuhan in contemporary society as a result of the entry into the scene of the personal computer connected to the Internet. In this sense, the media in question would have:

• expanded public participation as a means of communication to consider the promotion of interactivity between participants at a global level, an activity merely suggested by television;

• eclipsed the functions of the telephone, fax, typewriter, brush, paper, CD, among others;
• reinvented the written letter in the email format;
• revitalized the cell phone with the development of wireless Internet-based networks (Horrocks, 2001).

By placing all the focus on content and practically none on the medium itself, according to this theory, we would lose the chance to perceive and influence the impact of the new technologies on humanity, and therefore, we would be unprepared for the revolutionary environmental transformations induced by new media and new technologies.

In an attempt to develop the theory proposed by McLuhan, American researcher Neil Postman elaborated a reflection on the ideology of computer technology, with a very particular vision, which goes beyond a discussion based on the content conveyed and practices that emerged, but presents the ambiguities of technology. In times of enthusiasm in academia, motivated by the communication possibilities opened up by computer technology in the field of media, Neil Postman released, in the early 1990s, an important book for Communication studies, called *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*.

Digital Environments: Exploring the Internet

Both McLuhan's theory and Postman's critical approach corroborate results of ethnographic research in digital environments. The emergence of VoIP protocols and so-called Web 3.0 demonstrated that there are many "internets" within the Internet. E-mail, YouTube, Zoom, Instagram, Facebook, instant messenger, online multiplayer games and discussion lists, for example, are completely different structures, which promote different social practices and which need to be adequately studied, making it difficult to consider "the internet " as something monolithic and simply just a new media. As McLuhan predicted, the content of a new medium consists of all the previous media. Thus, radio incorporated the newspaper; television incorporated radio and cinema, and the Internet incorporated all previous media. The effect of "revitalizing" previously obsolete media is particularly acute in the dynamics of social interaction and organization of groups and communities in digital environments in what are called "digital media".

The process of social interaction occurring in Internet environments is recent, and is based on individual and group strategies acquired through the appropriation and adaptation of already established rules, typical of other relational contexts. Such strategies are applied to meet the demands of each new situation.

In traditional relational contexts, people act aiming at a certain impression within their daily coexistence group. There is a tacit regulation that creates expectations of social practices among individuals. In computer-mediated communications, one improvises in the face of unexpected situations, adapting models from other interactional contexts.

Considering that "the medium is the message", that is, that each technology configures the field of meanings in which it is inserted, thus creating a new "environment" mentally, morally and materially, it is important to highlight the configuration specific organization that structures digital environments. It is the social situations that demand an environment for their occurrence. Online activities are limited to the practical conditions of their use. And so indeed, the medium is message.

Final Considerations

The McLuhanesque perspective seems to be a promising contribution to the understanding of the most recent digital communication phenomena, highlighting its heuristics and innovation more than 40 years after the death of its enunciator. In terms of digital interaction, there is an interesting use of different web structures, in response to the different demands of each social situation. The Internet seems to present characteristics of several media, those used to establish both interpersonal and mass relationships. When carrying out online activities, participants demonstrate full social and technological competence in choosing and managing different media and environments according to the specific demands of each situation. However, regardless of the details of the communication that is established in these environments, media are used that carry and disperse the logics that arise from their technical characteristics and their production conditions. Upon use, the user becomes the content, and the medium becomes the message, its sense and meaning or its significance.

Note: In Brazil, some researchers have dedicated themselves to McLuhan's work, such as Pereira (2006), Martino (2008), and others.

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