

Probe: The Message(s) are now the Media: A 2030 Outlook on McLuhan

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Résumé de l'article

Marshall McLuhan's seminal "the medium is the message" one-liner, title to Chapter 1 of his 1964 book *Understanding Media* is a formidable sum up of mid 20th Century media analysis. With a remarkable economy of semantics, McLuhan posited that the powers inherent to radio and television were so immense that the technology itself needed to be the focus. McLuhan's insight is worth revisiting with an updated frame of reference towards 2030, given our current fragmented media landscape. Finite analog broadcast networks who wielded immense powers have now been replaced by an abundant digital emporium, itself ruled by oligopolistic technology platforms.

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Probe: The Message(s) are now the Media: A 2030 Outlook on McLuhan

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Abstract: Marshall McLuhan’s seminal “the medium is the message” one-liner, title to Chapter 1 of his 1964 book *Understanding Media* is a formidable sum up of mid 20th Century media analysis. With a remarkable economy of semantics, McLuhan posited that the powers inherent to radio and television were so immense that the technology itself needed to be the focus. McLuhan’s insight is worth revisiting with an updated frame of reference towards 2030, given our current fragmented media landscape. Finite analog broadcast networks who wielded immense powers have now been replaced by an abundant digital emporium, itself ruled by oligopolistic technology platforms.

In 2022, an increasing number of media diets are fed by billions of narrow casted messages in the form of social media feeds where “friends” share links to text/photo/video content, as well as through messages sent by SMS, Apple iMessages, Meta Facebook and Whatsapp, Signal, WeChat and other platforms. These shared person to person messages have become a primary content vehicle, especially when they propagate GIFs, short video memes and other digital native material. Growing narrow casted sharing challenges 20th century broadcasting and it could be argued that this is propelling us into an age of unmediated media.

Today’s unmediated sharing contrasts to diets fed through mediated analog radio and television broadcasts, where information was further and better contextualized. The embrace by technology platforms of US Telecoms Acts Section 230 has for too long almost absolved them of any real editorial responsibilities, in stark contrast to the role assigned to analog networks whose very Federal Communications Commission licenses depend on their active stewardship of what is broadcast over the public airwaves.

Our current era's unmediated sharing of information and entertainment points to an inversion of McLuhan's one liner and posits that **the messages are now the media**. Unmediated media carry immense positives yet are not immune to mass manipulations and it behooves regulators to tame misdirection and abuse.

Introduction: The message(s) are now the media

2030 will mark 40 years of our current Internet age, for comparison, radio's 40th anniversary occurred in the mid-1960s when McLuhan and his sharp analysis shot to fame. McLuhan came at the perfect time to analyze and magnify television's raw power. November 1960's extremely close US presidential election pitted a telegenic Kennedy against a less-made-for-studio-lights Nixon. Their debate, the first of its kind, has been heralded as the initial "eureka" moment of the television age. Less well known is John Kennedy's remarkable performance during the West Virginia Democratic primary where he debated fellow Senator Hubert Humphrey on television and demonstrated his mastery of the medium.

Dependable profit margins produced by local media monopolies the world over lasted well until atomization accompanied digitization in the last years of the 20th century. The first few shots across the bow at these monopolies were fired by Craig Newmark's classifieds competitor Craigslist and all major "traditional" media companies have been scrambling ever since to reinvent their business models. These media companies have been facing the unrelenting assaults of technology platforms who've "eaten" much of their profits, in an echo of Marc Andreessen's "software will eat the world" one-liner.

The analog era's leading platforms, radio and broadcast television gave way to a new duo, the Internet as delivery mechanism, with its logical adjunct, the product/service/application. While mid 20th century television had solidified appointment entertainment which played a significant role in shaping culture and public opinion, the atomized 21st century Internet had other effects. First, it erased all limits of time and space and has contributed to blur boundaries between TV broadcasters, newspapers, radio networks who in the end all deliver information to our universal screens, desktop

and laptop computers in the first phase from the mid 1990s to the mid-00s. Nokia, RIM/Blackberry helped usher in the 2007 Apple iPhone revolution which contributed to mutate the Internet from wired and tethered to a mobile and wireless and the smartphone screen became the go-to real estate where media competed.

As McLuhan developed: “A new medium is never an addition to an old one, nor does it leave the old one in peace. It never ceases to oppress the older media until it finds new shapes and positions for them (ibid., p. 278).” Similarly, “every old is new again” and early newspapers functioned much like social media feeds: readers sent in news clippings from other “gazettes” and the newspaper editor selected these contributions and published them. After decades of Big Media dictating to the masses, present day social networks have seemingly reverted to the roots of media, comments and reader contributions.

Billions of person to person messages are exchanged daily as IMs, text messages, Slack messages, WhatsApp group texts and emails. Social networks’ value is predicated on these billions of messages, which drive a significant portion of the media narrative in 2020.

Even taking his hysterics out of the equation it remains a formidable sight to see so-called traditional media feverishly comment on countless unmediated tweets sent out by President Trump. If Roosevelt is remembered as the POTUS who mastered radio and JFK television, Trump the carnival barker wallows in the pits of fringe social media. In the summer of 2020, he has resorted to retweeting 50+ dubious postings an HOUR! Big Media has mostly failed in its mission to put in context and mediate his lies, and it will be held accountable. For now, these repeated failures have ushered the era of unmediated media.

Unmediated media

Reader/viewer/subscriber contributions in the form of 140/280 character tweets, comments and old fashioned letters to the Editor ARE our media now. The semantics are twisted, but media as intermediary silos seem an almost outdated concept.

Social media itself is a misnomer in the sense that social media networks are, for the most part, **unmediated**. Big Tech has had to censor violence and pornography but has succeeded until very recently to avoid any explicit, tangible and active editorial responsibility. Twitter's banning of hatemongers such as the KKK leader David Duke is a welcome development, yet is a drop in the bucket in light of the billions of hate-filled messages which pass through, in the name of free speech.

The irony of this absolutist free speech stance is that the messages are exchanged on **private networks** who as such retain all rights to police them as they see fit. It's quite clear that Big Tech has prospered in this milieu of unmediated media and that the 1st amendment has been a mere "cache-sexe". Unmediated media is the sad result of technology overtaking the purpose of media itself: the education of the body politic, public opinion.

The Dumb Pipes Fallacy

Section 230 of the 1996 US Telecoms Act has largely exempted Big Tech behemoths from any responsibility and resolved to treat them as "dumb pipes", a moniker they universally reject. July 2020's Congressional hearings of the top Internet giants Amazon, Microsoft, Facebook and Google yet again put their schizophrenia on full display. These silicon robber barons inexplicably think they're exempt from government regulation and that they will escape the fate of Rockefeller's Standard Oil, pre-1948 movie studios or Ma Bell. Big Tech's main pitch is that they're simply akin to the US Postal Service, mere couriers of person to person exchanges, i.e. "dumb pipes". This is laughable when YouTube has become the de facto #1 cable TV alternative and Facebook is the US voter's main source of information. Equally comical is of course the fact that this dumb pipes fallacy flies in the face of their market capitalization. Truly dumb pipes should be treated as utilities, dependable, odorless and without any of the pizzazz that Big Tech sells to its investors. Gone would be the outrageous PE ratios and the currency used to finance acquisitions.

2030 Outlook: Quasi Global Regulation and its Consequences

Few Big Tech leaders are as clear eyed as Salesforce's Marc Benioff when it comes to his industry's fate. Benioff shocked many at Davos 2018 when he compared Facebook to cigarettes as a way to make government regulation a foregone conclusion. He has reiterated with astute one liners on the death of capitalism as we've known it and the San Francisco inequality train wreck. His refreshing take should help his counterparts Bezos, Zuckerberg et al from waking up from their self-imposed intellectual slumber. For all of the lobbyists on the take for Big Tech, regulation is coming. Interestingly, Meta CEO Zuckerberg threw up his hands and in February 2020 relented to regulation: *"We don't want private companies making so many decisions about how to balance social equities without any more democratic process."*

Regulation in the era of unmediated media and Big Tech will be different than in previous cycles and will innovate by its global nature. The European Union has mostly led the way so far vs North America, with Commissioner Vestager at the forefront. The global nature of the pendulum shift has also accelerated transnational parliamentary initiatives such as the several hearings that Zuckerberg saw fit to avoid. Quasi global regulation is paradoxically what the financial markets are most comfortable with, given that well-regulated markets provide stable growth conducive to investment.

The 2030 outlook is uneven: Big Tech's unmediated media will continue to destabilize and imperil traditional media, with deep societal consequences. The fact that Facebook has been recognized as the culprit in inflaming violence in Bangladesh around the Rohingya pogroms; in India via WhatsApp groups that have since been curbed should jolt American lawmakers into action, but it mostly does not. Both parties are actually quite content to have American-born global web giants, confident that a modicum of values animate their management. It is a sad fact that at every opportunity Big Tech has disappointed and burned its reputation at the stake, the "do no evil" motto Google saw fit to include in its 2005 prospectus seems quaint and a slap in the face.

The positive outcome of the 2015-2020 acceleration of the dislocation of media rests in the younger digital native generations. Their prowess in smelling a rat has proven its worth in the maelstrom of fake news. May they be able to teach their elders, and fast.