

Understanding McLuhan and His Use of Double Entendre in His One-Liners: The Medium is the Message, The User is the Content, The Medium is the Massage, The Medium is the Mass Age, The Medium is the Mess Age and The Global Village: A Probe

Robert K. Logan

Volume 4, numéro 1, printemps 2024

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1111653ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1111653ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

New Explorations Association

ISSN

2563-3198 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Logan, R. (2024). Understanding McLuhan and His Use of Double Entendre in His One-Liners: The Medium is the Message, The User is the Content, The Medium is the Massage, The Medium is the Mass Age, The Medium is the Mess Age and The Global Village: A Probe. *New Explorations*, 4(1).
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1111653ar>

© Robert K. Logan, 2024



Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

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



Understanding McLuhan and His Use of Double Entendre in His One-Liners: The Medium is the Message, The User is the Content, The Medium is the Message, The Medium is the Mass Age, The Medium is the Mess Age and The Global Village: A Probe

Robert K. Logan

Dept. of Physics and St. Michael's College, University of Toronto

logan@physics.utoronto.ca

"A double entendre is a figure of speech or a particular way of wording that is devised to have a double meaning, one of which is typically obvious, and the other often conveys a message that would be too socially unacceptable, or offensive to state directly (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Double_entendre, accessed February 23, 2024)."

THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

In his Introduction to his book *Understanding Media*, McLuhan (1964) wrote:

THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

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's 5-word one liner "the medium is the message" contains two double entendres. The use of the term double entendre here and elsewhere in this article is justified as it is intended to signify a double meaning but its use does not signify that the second meaning is something that is "socially unacceptable, or offensive."

The first double entendre in the one liner "the medium is the message" is the use of the word "medium" which most commonly is thought of as a vehicle for communication such as the spoken word, the written word, the printed word, newspapers, magazines, journals, telegrams, radio, television, faxes, the Internet, email, the Web, and social media. McLuhan adds a second meaning to the term medium in his one-liner to include any tool, technology or device created by a human to carry out some function such as manufacturing, transportation, shelter, clothing, (or even) communication. Therefore the automobile (which includes trucks and buses), the refrigerator, buildings, clothing and the screw driver are each an example of a medium. And the use of the term medium is not just to signify the technology itself but also all the infrastructure to support that technology and all the things that technology makes possible. For example, the medium of the automobile includes all the road and highways to make their use possible, any of the infrastructure that supports their use such as car dealerships, auto repair shops, the gas stations or charging stations that dot the roadways to provide the energy vehicles require; the suburbs the automobile made possible, the drive-in businesses like motels, fast food outlets like MacDonalds, drive-in banks, shopping centres with lots of parking spaces all of which the automobile encouraged and made possible.

The second double entendre of "the medium is the message" is the use of the word "message". The

common understanding of the word message is that it is the content of some form of communication. The message could be the literal content of a communication and it could also include the overall implicit sense of a communication that was not explicitly stated but which the recipients of the message took away from the explicit content of the communication and which the communicator intended to send.

The second meaning of message and the one that McLuhan used in his one-liner “the medium is the message” is that the message of technologies and media aside from their content are all of the subliminal and unintended impacts of that medium. According to McLuhan all technologies have certain subliminal effects as he noted when he wrote in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*:

Is it not possible to emancipate ourselves from the subliminal operation of our own technologies? Is not the essence of education civil defense against media fallout (McLuhan 1962, 294)?

For the medium of the automobile the unintended messages were the infrastructure that arose to support it, the suburbs and all of the drive-in businesses that it made possible as described above. It also includes some of the unintended subliminal effects of the automobile such as the way it changed the social interactions of its users. For example the social structures of the inner city of a metropolitan area and its outlying districts and suburbs which are so dependent on the car are quite different due to the way in which the car affects the social interactions of its users. Inner city people get to know more of their neighbors than suburbanites. Walking in one’s neighborhood leads to social interaction whereas driving in a car as is won’t in the suburbs does not.

Another message or effect of media is the way the meaning of a message’s content changes depending on which medium is used to transmit that message or content. The same words transmitted by different media do not have the same meaning or the same effect. McLuhan (1964, Chapter 30) pointed out that the viewers on TV of the 1960 Nixon-Kennedy presidential debate thought Kennedy won the debate whereas the listeners of the debate on radio thought that Nixon won the debate because of the way the two media affected the content they transmitted. Radio is a hot medium and well suited to Nixon’s hot personality where TV is a cool medium and well suited to Kennedy’s cool demeanor, which explains why TV viewers of the debate gave their nod to Kennedy.

THE USER IS THE CONTENT

“The user is the content of any situation, whether it is driving a car, or wearing clothes or watching a show. The user is the content.” (McLuhan 1976 on the Tom Snyder Tomorrow Show - <https://libquotes.com/marshall-mcluhan/quote/lbc9q8l>, accessed Feb. 28, 2024).

The **“the user is the content”** is another 5-word one liner that contains double entendres depending on whether the medium under consideration is a medium of communication or a tool/technology.

We begin with a medium of communication in which case the first double entendre in this one-liner is with the word user which can refer to sender of the communication or its receiver. The double entendre of the word content is the meaning of the content the sender intended to send, on the one hand and the meaning of the content as interpreted by the receiver, on the other hand. The content of the user/sender and that of the user/receiver-interpreter are not necessarily the same and are many times different.

The user/sender is both the author or procurer of the message and also its sender whereas the

user/receiver is both the recipient of the message and also its interpreter.

Specifically in the case of watching a show the content is literally what the producers of the show created but it is also the interpretation of the people/users watching the show. In the latter case the content of the show is literally what each member of the audience or users of the medium of the show took away from the show.

If the medium is a tool or technology the user is the person using the tool. No double entendre here. But in terms of the content, the user determines the content depending on how they use the tool or technology. In the case of the car and clothing the users are literally the content of these media.

In the case of a medium that operates as a tool the content is what use the user makes of the tool. For example the content of a screw driver could be inserting a screw to fasten something or the screw driver could be used to pry open a can of paint. This is how the user determines the content of a tool and this is why the content is the user or more accurately the content is what the user uses the tool to do. The content of a car is its occupants but it includes transportation for the most part but or for a teenager its content is often a place to find some privacy for activities such as necking.

THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

The Medium is the Message is the title of a book McLuhan co-authored with Quentin Fiore where McLuhan provided the text and Fiore the images. The medium is the message is another 5-word one-liner that contains a double entendre.

The medium is the device that transmits a message/content or provides a use/function and it is also the masseuse of the receiver of the message or the user of that medium as a tool. The reason for the doubling of what the medium transmits and what it massages is that the term medium is itself a double entendre that can be a medium of communication or a technology/tool.

The message is the content of the message or the function of the tool and its second meaning is the effect it has on the recipient of the message or the user of the tool/technology, namely to massage that recipient or user.

Some claim that medium is the message was actually a typographic error by the publisher's typesetter of the book. This might be true but its origin does not take away from McLuhan ability to see that the typo suggested that a medium is indeed a form of massage.

THE MEDIUM IS THE MASS AGE AND THE MEDIUM IS THE MESS AGE

These are two other one-liners, but with 6 words this time and they pertain to media as communication devices. The medium is the electronic transmitters of the messages it sends across the world as well as the environment created by all these electronic media. The mass age is the age created by electronic media and it is also the Global Village. What is interesting about McLuhan's formulation of this one-liner is that he formulated it before the existence of the Internet as a publicly accessible medium.

McLuhan himself seems to have treated his most notorious slogan as a bit of a joke, abbreviating it punnily to "The medium is the mass age", "The medium is the mess age" and "The medium is the massage". He said he wasn't necessarily issuing statements of truth, merely making "probes"

https://www.google.com/search?q=%22the+medium+is+the+mass+age%22&client=firefox-b-d&sca_esv=a32461fe05b6239e&ei=eEX4ZaE10MjA3g-N_ligBA&ved=0ahUKEwih0YmQ-f2EAXVQJNAFHQ0-AkQQ4dUDCBA&uact=5&oq=%22the+medium+is+the+mass+age%22&gs_lp=Egxn d3Mtd2l6LXNlcnAiHCJ0aGUgbWVkaXVtIGlzIHRoZSBtYXNzIGFnZSlyBBAAGB4yC xAAGIAEGIoFGIYDMgsQABiABBiKBRiGAziLEAAYgAQYigUYhgNI048BULYjWMO

[EAXAGeAGQAQCYAWigAakEggEDNi4xuAEDyAEA-AEBmAINoAKDBcICChAAGEcY1gQYsAPCAg0QABiABBiKBRhDGLADwglOEAAy5AIY1gQYsAPYAQHCAhMQLhiABBiKBRhDGMgDGLAD2AECwglTEC4YQxiABBiKBRjIAxiwA9gBAsICChAuGA0Y1AIYgATCAgcQABiABBgNwglZEC4YDRjUAhiABBiXBRjcBBjeBBjgBNgBA8ICBhAAGBYHpgDAIqGAZAGE7oGBggBEAEYCboGBggCEAEYCLoGBggDEAEYFJIHBDEyLjGgB60e&sclient=gws-wiz-serp](https://www.themediumisthemessage.com/the-medium-is-the-mess-age/), accessed March 18, 2024).

As a lover of puns McLuhan also suggested that “medium is the mess age (<https://www.themediumisthemessage.com/the-medium-is-the-mess-age/>)” to indicate that all new technologies create both service and a messy disservice.

THE GLOBAL VILLAGE

The Global Village is a double entendre in that it is the whole planet and all its inhabitants, on the one hand and it is also a village on the other hand. Like the “medium is the mass age” it was formulated before the Internet became an every day reality. The Internet is in a certain sense the primary communication vehicle of the Global Village.

Conclusion

McLuhan’s use of double entendres was his way of describing the multiple effects of technologies, media and communication. It enabled him to analyze both the apparent impacts of media/technologies and their subliminal ones. His analyses revealed to us the complexity of technologies and communications media, both their obvious ones and their subliminal ones.

Acknowledgement: This article is the result of conversations with Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof and her students at Toronto Metropolitan University. I also wish to thank Iurii Mielkov and Tom Cooper for their suggestions.

References

McLuhan, Marshall and Quentin Fiore. 1967. *The Medium is the Massage*. New York: Ginko Press.

McLuhan, Marshall. 1962. *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, Toronto: University Press.

McLuhan, Marshall. 1964. Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man. New York: McGraw Hill.