

The critical contextual studies media essay



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Marshall McLuhan wrote of existing in the age of re-tribalised man and residing in the global village. Throughout my research I will examine these concepts in relation to the effects of modern media, especially television and the internet, and how it has changed the way we communicate with others around the world.

Canadian born theorist Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) was an English graduate turned media analyst. His first Popular book "the mechanical bride" looked at advertising and it was a ground breaking piece of writing as it was the first time that anyone had ever studied advertisements as a form of communication, from then McLuhan had the concept that the content of the media was irrelevant, but the form of which the media took was the importance "the medium is the message". The telephone for example as a medium has significant impact on our environment and the way we live and communicate however the conversation we have on the telephone affects very few people just as what we print is nothing to the effect of the idea of the printed word. This can be better explained in another quote from McLuhan:

"the 'content' of a medium is like a juicy piece of meat by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind...The effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without resistance"

he recognised and understood the power of media and argued how it plays an important part in shaping and structuring human culture in terms of the way we communicate and the way we experience the world. "we shape our

tools and then our tools shape us" McLuhan also saw the importance of new media technologies as new media brings new forms of communication.

McLuhan formed the concept of hot media and cool media:

In this theory McLuhan gave the label of "hot media" to forms of media that stimulate only one of the human senses whilst interacting with it, for example he suggests listening to the radio or reading a book, watching a film, viewing a photograph or sitting in a lecture require one sense. However "cool media" requires more active participation this form of media can be conversation, television, telephone, comics, the seminar. He believes the electronic age offers a more diverse multi-sensory environment, he claims we use more of our senses with multimedia rather than singular media and this "makes us more true to our natural state". In this theory McLuhan looks simplistically to the physical interaction in terms of senses and doesn't acknowledge the engagement the "singular" media has to our imagination or to our sentiment. Although McLuhan is incredibly insightful he does get criticised for not leaving room for evaluation, he looks generally and broadly not looking at individuality or things such as values; as indicated in a debate with Norman Mailer 1968.

Re-tribalised Man

McLuhan had another theory where he defined three "ages" of man, separated according to the means of the form of communication (media) used and which of our senses is involved.

In this theory McLuhan identifies the first age was the preliterate or “ tribal” era Where the spoken word was the main way to communicate and our hearing was our most important sense, He also identified the second age is the “ gutenbergs Age” where the main media was the written word (print) and our sight became more important than our hearing. McLuhan then goes on to suggest the third age is the electronic age of the re-tribalized Man where all our senses are involved in the interaction to the form of media.

McLuhan doesn't suggest the book or the print is not still important, there is just a shift in the nature of the book; by this he means there is change with how we interact with books and how much we depend on it. As the book before digital media was the source of all our information about the world and each other. before the book we relied on verbal communication to exchange information to and from each other, it was a communal interactive experience where as the book is a very private experience and he sees we are shifting back to a more social interactive way of sharing information.

McLuhan compares the written word to an assembly line where words like parts are moving in one direction and assembled one part at a time and he speaks of how at the time the assembly line has changed where its no longer one component at a time its now as many parts delivered mechanically all at once where ever possible. he says “ you realise its no longer a line but an open field” , He also talks of the tribal man in this quote “ The world is like a continually sounding tribal drum constantly banging... the princess gets married in London bang bang bang we hear about it...”.

Global Village

McLuhan saw technology as having become an extension of our senses. McLuhan saw the Radio or Telephone as an extension of the ear and Television and Computer as being the extension of our eyes. These technologies allowed us to project our senses beyond our limited physical range. He saw the pace of which we can communicate through electronic media is parallel to the speed of our senses. Through technology such as the telephone, television, computer systems and the "Internet", we are able to interact with people across the world as quickly as it would take us to contact and converse with the people who inhabit the same physical space as us (i. e the people that live in the same village).

To understand what McLuhan means with the term "global village" we need to identify what he meant by "village" in this metaphor. In a sense the village represents a small environment in which people can easily communicate and interact quickly and know of all the events that takes place. As McLuhan writes: "Time" has ceased, 'space' has vanished. We now live in a global village... a simultaneous happening' McLuhan is communicating the idea that through our 'extended senses' we can now share and experience things on a global scale, we can share things with people on the other side of the world, as if we were with people in the same physical space.

McLuhan also saw the "global village" as a potentially invasive community in an interview McLuhan says:

" the global village isn't a place where you have harmony. It has extreme concern in everyone else's business and much involvement in everyone else's life. it means huge involvement in everyone's affairs...

The global village is as big as a planet and as small as a village post office."

In many senses I think McLuhan was very insightful when talking about " the global village" to the shift into the digital age of which we live today, particularly when analyzing the quote above and applying it to social media such as Facebook . On site's like Facebook there is constant dramas and bickering whether this is caused by over sharing some information or people digging into someone else's information, so we can see validation in McLuhan's quote. However there are many good qualities to social media too such as being instantly connected to friends and family across the world.

I can also see that McLuhan also had something in his idea about certain medias being an extension of our physical selves, although he did not mean it literally one can see that today's generation are constantly attached to their mobile phones, although its not actually physically part of us we are rarely without it as if it were a detachable appendage. The device is kept at hand like a pair of glasses. I think McLuhan is not only correct when talking about the computer or telephone but also television, I think it can allow us to experience the world and some situations as close as we can without physically being there, like living life looking through a window we get to see what world wide tragedies are being broadcast in the news as if we were there viewing it for ourselves. With television we can get to experience a reality from a distance.