Marshall McLuhan: “The Medium is the Message”

This paper aims to explain Marshall McLuhan’s statement “the medium is the message” (McLuhan 9) which is presented in 1964 in his work “Understanding Media: The extensions of Man.” It is an attempt to clarify the different notions and ideas that are developed by the author and that ultimately lead to a better comprehension of his statement. This paper considers the definition of the medium as an extension of the human. It places the nature of the medium in opposition with its “use” and “content.” It also examines McLuhan’s specific definition of the medium’s “message.”

According to McLuhan, media are extensions of ourselves. They extend our body, our senses and nerves in space and time. As extensions of ourselves they call into question the “use” that we make of them. In fact, McLuhan explains that we cannot understand the nature of a medium if we focus on the way that we “use” it. For studying the way that we “use” a medium leads to concentrate on ourselves and to ignore the medium itself. It also reflects a conventional response to media which is to pay attention to what the “content” is about. McLuhan disagrees with this reasoning and makes a clear distinction between the “content” of a medium and its “message.” Through the instance of the electric light McLuhan explains:

The electric light is pure information. It is a medium without a message, as it were, unless it is used to spell out some verbal ad or name. This fact characteristic of all media, means that the “content” of any medium is always another medium.
The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph. (McLuhan 8).

McLuhan mentions the instance of the electric light because the electric light does not have a “content” that could distract us from the nature of the medium itself. He explains that if we consider the “content” of a medium as its “message” the electric light does not have any “message.” However we cannot understand the nature of a medium through its “content” because its “content” always refers to another medium.

For McLuhan, the “message” of any medium is in “the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs” (McLuhan 8). Therefore we can understand the “message” of the electric light if we take into consideration the impact of the medium instead of its “use” or “content.” McLuhan explains that “electric light and power are separate from their uses, yet they eliminate time and space factor in human association exactly as do radio, telegraph, telephone, and TV, creating involvement in depth” (McLuhan 9). The “message” of the electric light is its capacity to enable human association in any place of the world whether it is day or nighttime and to create new activities such as brain surgery or a night baseball game. To illustrate his reasoning, McLuhan also mentions the example of the railway. He explains that “the railway did not introduce movement or transportation or wheel or road into human society, but it accelerated and enlarged the scale of previous human functions, creating totally new kinds of cities and new kinds of work and leisure” (McLuhan 8). The railway modifies space (enlargement) and time (acceleration). We travel larger distances in less time. The railway also marks a shift in our social life. It enables new social relations by creating new kinds of cities and new kinds of work and leisure. The medium affects both our psychic and social schemes.
Marshal McLuhan statement “the medium is the message” (McLuhan 9) challenges a conventional response to media which gives importance to their “use” or their “content”. According to McLuhan, the “use” or “content” of a medium distracts our attention from its nature. The understanding of the “use” of a medium is irrelevant because we do not have any influence on the impact of the medium. The study of its “content” does not give us any information either because the “content” of a medium is always another medium. Instead McLuhan invites us to focus on the impact that the media have on our perception of the world and the reorganization of our social life. He draws attention to the extension of our body in both space and time and to the creation of new social activities.
Works Cited


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