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## Media Analysis Beyond Content

*Understanding Media* (1964) carries with it a complex legacy. Although it is a single text, its reception varies wildly, shaped in a variety of ways by the multiple fields through which it reverberated over the last half century. Woody Allen movies aside, this is especially true of the book's most famous adage, 'the medium is the message'.

Most often the formulation is read through ongoing debates about technological determinism. Raymond Williams's (1992[1974]: 120–124) critique is the most famous, and collects all the standard charges against McLuhan: formalism, idealism, the separation of media forms from 'practices'; and most polemically, calls McLuhan's method 'the cancellation of history'. The exact nature and extent of McLuhan's determinism is up for debate, for instance when Michael Heim (1992: 312) calls him a 'soft' technological determinist 'accepting destiny while studying the different ways of absorbing impact' and Brian Winston (1986) reads him as more of a 'hard' determinist in *Misunderstanding Media*. Meanwhile, a tradition of Canadian intellectuals situates the adage as a distillation and popularization of Harold Innis's more sophisticated media history (Heyer and Crowley, 1991; Kroker, 1984).

The determinism debate is fundamentally about how we read McLuhan's most famous formulations in terms of technology as an object of study. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (2011: 120–124) is certainly right that the label technodeterminist is more often an accusation than a careful description of an analytical position for the purpose of serious argument.<sup>1</sup> But scholars are not free agents. As Western intellectuals debate the power of technology, the broader discourse on technology pendulates from the extremely affirmative to the fetishistic, only occasionally swinging in other directions. To even discuss McLuhan – write about him, and often now read – we dwell in a branded world made of devices marketed as revolutions.

Yet the interesting thing about 'the medium is the message' as a proposition is that it emerges firmly from the 20th century's humanist tradition, and *not* from a mechanistic antihumanism. Ruth and Elihu Katz (1998) trace

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the formulation back to his teachers Richards and Leavis. Friedrich Kittler (2010: 29) wrote that because McLuhan 'was originally a literary critic, [he] understood more about perception than electronics'. Amplifying this reading, Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (2011: 61) considers McLuhan as a kind of cultural physiologist, bringing Claude Bernard's method of exploratory vivisection to the study of media and the senses: 'remove a liver or spleen, observe and measure the resulting physiological changes, and you will be able to pinpoint the function of the extracted organ.' Even more recently, John Durham Peters (2011: 231) has placed McLuhan in the grammatical tradition:

McLuhan's grammatical theology was critical in helping launch an appreciation for medium specificity as such. McLuhan helped to dash forever the notion of abstract 'content' carried by the neutral 'pipes' of diverse media. In a sense, he was the anti-Shannon, and his media theory was the counterpoint to the mathematical theory of communication that dominated intellectual life in the 1950s ... Perhaps it took a thinker familiar with the theology of the incarnation to take seriously the essentially embodied quality of communication. There is for McLuhan no information without form, and any percept is always coloured or constituted by the organs of perception.

All of these readings announce a humanism of mechanisms, where we read technologies and their constituent dimensions as arts and artifacts of human activity. From a normative perspective, Peters is right to pitch McLuhan against mid-century information theorists and cyberneticians. No doubt they understood themselves in conflict with McLuhan's propositions. But both sides of the argument accepted a more fundamental assumption as the basis of debate: that form and content could be separated, and that the important thing to track and account for was form. 'The medium is the message' sounds a humanist echo of Shannon's mathematical separation of channel and content. To use Wolfgang Ernst's (2013: 23) phrase, both authors provide a 'non-contentist analysis' of media. Certainly, Shannon's mathematical theory (and Norbert Wiener's cybernetics) carried with it a normative implication that the communication channel *ought not* affect the message. But the entire engineering culture that provided an intellectual resource for Shannon was based on the proposition that neither media *nor* human senses were transparent conveyers of meaning (see Mills, 2011; Sterne, 2012). For Shannon, this was a condition to be negotiated or overcome – to be engineered against. For McLuhan, the non-neutrality of media and the senses was the starting point for cultural analysis.

Today, the legacy of this conceptual separation is the very basis of many different forms of media analysis across the disciplines. Certainly the greatest advances sympathetic to McLuhan's propositions come out of the various German traditions that have built on his work alongside that of

Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Lacan and others (Winthrop-Young, 2011: 145). But even writers less sympathetic to McLuhan's politics have to acknowledge the importance of a mechanical humanities. Foucault's notion of a *dispositif*, which widely resonates across the Anglophone humanities, makes a similar point, and when we turn it toward media analysis, we get very close to McLuhanite formulations even if we are undertaking a project of transformative social criticism. We can find the combination explicitly at work in Jody Berland's essays on 'cultural technologies' (e.g. 1992, 2000); a too-infrequently cited contribution that appeared long before Bernhard Siegert's (2011) recent turn to 'cultural techniques' (see also Chun, 2011; Fuller, 2005; Galloway, 2004; Gitelman, 2006). The ability to read and interpret mechanisms in relation to sensory apparatus has been essential to my own work as well. I have critiqued McLuhan for his racism, his psychologism, his social conservatism and his misunderstandings of the actual operations of the senses, but in privileging the morphology of media over what they carry – and framing it that way – I have accepted essentially the terms of argument he laid out.

Like arguments about technology, humanists' separation of form and content in the analysis of media does not occur in a vacuum. Toward the end of 'The Medium is the Message' chapter from *Understanding Media* (1964), McLuhan famously wrote that the 'content of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind' (p. 18, echoing TS Eliot on meaning in poetry 30 years before). Today, as Anna McCarthy and Aurora Wallace note, cultural goods are increasingly conceptualized as content: the scarequotes have been removed. As McCarthy (2013) argues, 'the word is now central to the trade argot of media corporations' as well as the arts, philanthropy, legal discourse, contracts, and civic regulation. Books, cinema, music, television, photography, love letters, conversation, traffic, sleep and sexual hookups are all flattened into 'content' by an industry that places the highest value (at least in terms of actual revenue) on infrastructure and bandwidth, and secondarily on consumer electronics, and those who adopt its language. As writers in the humanities turn to media and their epiphenomena as our objects of analysis – from the interdisciplinary push for media studies, to the new fascination with big data – we need to be careful not to simply abandon *content*, and all the cultural domains it implies, to the people who make the stuff we study.

## Note

1. There is something poetic about the fact that Williams's critique of technological determinism and Winthrop-Young's (half) defense of it appear in exactly the same page ranges of their books. Draw your own conclusions.

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