INTRODUCTION

MARSHALL MCLUHAN'S "MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE": INFORMATION LITERACY IN A MULTIMEDIA AGE

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The writings of Marshall McLuhan have had an enduring influence on our understanding of the social and cultural impacts of communication media. The idiomatic resonance of McLuhan's famous statement, "the medium is the message," has entered language and contemporary consciousness, influencing the way we think and feel about media, the way we perceive their effects, and our awareness of their potential repercussions.

In the summer of 2005, The McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology in the Faculty of Information Studies (FIS) at the University of Toronto presented a multidisciplinary lecture series that explored the meaning of "the medium is the message"—its translatability to different disciplines, and its relevance to issues of contemporary concern surrounding the growth of information. The public series was offered in conjunction with the graduate seminar in media theory, C&T 1003: Comparative Orality and Literacy. Distinguished local researchers were invited to interpret "the medium is the message" from the vantage of their technical expertise, and in the context of questions concerning information literacy in an age of multiple media. Members of the McLuhan and FIS communities responded to each lecture.

This inaugural issue of *MediaTropes* features essays of those lectures and responses. Together, the speaker series, the seminar, and this peer-reviewed eJournal comprise an initiative to mobilize knowledge by developing innovative courseware that opens the doors of the academy to the wider public and then disseminates this information internationally. In addition to the papers presented at the speaker series, we are pleased to include the work of two notable scholars: W.J.T. Mitchell and Lance Strate. In formulating "the medium is the message," McLuhan not only contributed a phrase to the language, he "invented" a discipline—media studies. Strate represents a media ecology approach, which is part of the larger domain of the study of media associated, in particular, with the New York School that was initiated in 1967–68 during McLuhan's tenure as Albert Schweitzer Chair in Humanities at Fordham University in the Bronx, and was expanded into a Master's degree in media

ecology at New York University under the direction of Neil Postman. In this volume concerning media as a framework for the study of culture and technology, Mitchell and Strate contextualize definitions related to media research and add an American perspective to the Toronto-based discussions from the lecture series. Collectively, the contributed papers in this first issue of *MediaTropes* provide an opportunity for researchers across a range of disciplines to share ideas about communication, information, and media—in Canada and internationally.

MediaTropes eJournal

Our new eJournal allows us to share this research online. This volume opens a venue for formal peer-reviewed discussion of a range of issues involved in understanding media today. "The medium is the message" is a trope that uses a phrase to encapsulate the fundamental premise of the study of media: that the medium communicates messages. McLuhan predicted the "flip" from print to electronic technologies more than forty years ago. As the transition to the Internet continues to gain momentum, and the contents of our museums, archives, and libraries are translated onto the World Wide Web, academic research will increasingly be presented online and in the form of multiple media. In the coming years, new technologies will radically reconfigure the media landscape, altering the way information is organized, reviewed, and disseminated. In the McLuhan tradition, we are pleased to be at the forefront of these developments.

Information Literacy and Media Education

As new communication technologies increasingly pervade every aspect of contemporary life, understanding media and their effects has become one of the pressing challenges of our time. At the same time as access to information has become increasingly tied to technology, inequities have emerged in the levels of education, skills, and abilities needed for critical engagement and understanding of new communication media. Information and media literacy skills are distributed unevenly throughout populations, with patterns that correlate with other social, economic, geographic, and demographic disparities (Gui, 2007; Lipton, 2007; Tien & Tsu-Tan, 2008; Urquhart & Rowley, 2007). A growing body of research points to the need for further reconsideration of the core assumptions, goals, and practices underlying media education (Alvarado & Boyd-Barrett, 1995; Bazalgette, 1991; Buckingham, 2003; Edzan, 2007; Gee, 2004; Goldfarb, 2002; Lipschultz & Hilt, 2007). Educators have acknowledged

the need for a more comprehensive study of media as an interdisciplinary approach to information, where students develop different kinds of literacy, acquiring the skills and knowledge necessary for advanced research, employing the processes of information organization, storage, and retrieval across many disciplines, integrating a range of information management techniques, and synthesizing methodologies and insights to simulate ideas, test variables, and produce new products or perspectives, or find and implement solutions that go beyond established disciplines (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 4). The rapid rate of diffusion of electronic technologies among wide segments of the population and the convergence of technologies such as the cell phone/camera/video are blurring the boundaries between commerce, entertainment, education, and information. New communication technologies are reconfiguring cultures in ways that leave behind those without the resources and education needed to participate in new occupations, forms of leisure, and patterns of association that are taking shape in the mediated world. McLuhan recognized the problems and tensions experienced by those unfamiliar with a new medium during shifts in technology, and laid the early groundwork for education as the remedy for knowledge gaps and negative media effects.

Introduction to the Essays in this Volume

Accordingly, my purpose here is to introduce the studies in this volume, summarize their contributions to the study of media as an interdisciplinary approach to communication, and to explain how this research both extends and refines the ideas and methods pioneered by McLuhan.

McLuhan established the boundaries of the study of media as a discipline and created the framework for viewing media as communication. In making media and mediation the focus of attention and concentrating on points of overlap or "break boundaries" between different media systems, he delineated a field, grounded it in a theoretical foundation, and created models and methods for investigating media as manifestations of cultural communication.

At the same time, no scholarly endeavor is independent of the social and cultural context in which it is created. Certain arguments presented by McLuhan will inevitably require reassessment and revision. Similarly, academic work is rarely completely separate from the work of other researchers; arguments are incomplete if they do not respond to alternative views and garner responses in turn. McLuhan's work exemplifies this commitment to revision in light of critique as well as a dialogic approach. His

investigations were informed by dialogues with leading thinkers of the late 1960s and early 1970s. McLuhan introduced a discipline and staked out its territory. The scholars in this issue extend his approach and display the method in action. We hope these essays help to explain why McLuhan's writings continue to be required reading for anyone interested in understanding media today.

The papers in this inaugural issue of *MediaTropes* show how the study of media and information has developed over the last forty years even as so many of the concerns remain the same. The essays approach media and messages from different directions. Some consider questions of theory and method in the study of media, some look at a problem from the perspective of media and mediation in combination with the more traditional methodologies of their discipline, some explore domains of scholarship that McLuhan himself investigated, while others look directly at educational questions concerning the import of his contributions to understanding media. And so the essays are all concerned with media as modes of communication.

Of the areas of McLuhan's project that continue to be developed, one of them would have to be the study of media itself, as W.J.T. Mitchell's "Addressing Media" makes clear. Mitchell asserts that McLuhan's pioneering ideas laid the ground for media studies, an emerging discipline that holds a nebulous place in the university and is still seeking an identity. Mitchell argues that it is the ambiguity of the relation between middles and their boundaries in the concept of media that has hampered the establishment of media studies as a discipline. His essay suggests that as the connections between media studies and closely related fields—such as rhetoric, cinema studies, literature, visual arts, and cultural studies—become increasingly systematized, media studies will become more widely acknowledged as a distinct domain and increase in prominence in the university.

The transition in ancient Greece from primary oral culture to the phonetic alphabet was the paradigm for McLuhan's analysis of the Gutenberg and the Electric Revolutions. McLuhan emphasized the violence on the frontier between two communication systems. He pointed to instances of borders between cultures dominated by different media. Challenging the received wisdom that writing and literacy are technological advances that have entirely positive effects, McLuhan emphasized that the "alphabet" has always "filled people with the idea of imperial domination" (McLuhan, 1974/2003, p. 228). He pointed out that "Western man with his alphabet has always felt it mandatory to impose it on all other people" (McLuhan, 1974/2003, p. 228). Monique Tschofen builds on McLuhan's research concerning the impact of

new communication technologies on primary oral societies. Her case study of print culture as a colonizing force brings compelling evidence to bear on the arguments concerning the violence and chaos on the frontier and interface between oral and literate societies. Applying a media studies methodology to the example of the encounter between the indigenous Canadian oral and tribal cultures and European civilization represented by the Jesuit missionaries, her investigation sheds new light on how the culture of the printed word was used to subjugate native peoples in the process of converting them to European Christianity. The lens of her inquiry focuses on words as locations wherein the social and cultural processes associated with literate forms of power are made manifest, thereby exposing them to observation and analysis. Her study concentrates on hands, teeth, and eyeballs as sites of the encounter between oral and literate civilizations, an encounter that literally rips apart human bodies. In the years since McLuhan penned his major works, there has been a tendency to deemphasize the divide between oral and literate media systems (Foley, 1999, pp. 17–18; Gibson, 2005, pp. 1–18). Tschofen's examination of references to hands, mouths, and teeth in the Jesuit letters adds fuel to contemporary debates concerning the effects of communication media and messages at historical moments involving revolutionary transformations in technology, debates that were sparked by McLuhan's research, and that continue to provoke strongly polarized responses from researchers.

McLuhan's own Catholicism haunts the background of Donald Carveth's exploration of the parallels between psychoanalysis and religion. His essay probes the intersection of gesture, orality, and literacy as media for the communication of messages. Carveth describes psychoanalysis as a treatment that works through oral as well as non-verbal communication. His argument is that psychoanalysis—in its processes of symbolization—has effects that are analogous to those produced by religion. He engages with the theme of the "global village," and contributes to the dialogue concerning the dark side of literacy as a colonizing force. Carveth expresses the hope that the village created by globalization will be different from the fictional village established by Colonel Kurtz in the Francis Ford Coppola film, *Apocalypse Now*, a village that is delineated from the surrounding jungle by poles topped with decapitated human heads. In applying the approach from media studies to an examination of parallels between psychoanalysis and the Christian faith, Carveth's discussion makes a diagnostic and prescriptive contribution to McLuhan scholarship on the themes of religion, orality, and literacy. According to Carveth, talking is a "cure" because "When the desire to sever heads is put into words, it is less likely to be put into action" (p. 45).

McLuhan observed the rise of religious fundamentalism and terrorism during the 1960s and early 1970s, and identified the phenomena as a search for identity in the emerging "global village." Stuart J. Murray's contribution to this volume reminds us that McLuhan's global village was never a utopian and peacefully connected world. Though such a society was indeed his hope for the long term, Murray argues that McLuhan's view of the transition to the global village was more complex and nuanced than the vision that has most often been attributed to him. He underscores McLuhan's view of the "global village" as a place of "arduous interfaces and very abrasive situations" (McLuhan, 2003, p. 265). He discusses the politics of symbolization by tracing Carveth's image of Colonel Kurtz in the film, *Apolcalypse Now*, to the Colonel Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*, which he frames as a "'talking cure' and its refusal"—and engages with the themes of religious fundamentalism and terrorism as a search for identify in the global age. Murray describes an instance of "the medium is the message" in Kurtz's speech, pointing out how Kurtz speaks for God and Empire, so that the content of his statements are not as significant as the fact that those statements come from him—"an unstoppable colonizing force." He identifies Kurtz as a representation of "secondary orality" described by Walter J. Ong and McLuhan, or as he calls it, a "neo-primitivism." Comparing the parallel effects of the loss of individual identity in therapeutic encounters, the identity loss which occurs in colonialism, and the loss of personal identity that may be found in religious fundamentalism, he carries this research through its connections with the frontiers of human identity, extending the discussion of "secondary orality" to religion and identity in our postcolonial era.

Murray offers a distinction between the sort of secondary orality found in the "talking cure" offered by psychoanalytic treatment and the secondary orality in religious speech and its abuse. He challenges Carveth's assumptions about who has final "authority" over translations and interpretations of messages. He also questions Carveth's assertion that that "metaphors and myths … properly decoded, contain profound existential, ethical, psychological, and social truth" (Carveth, 2008, p. 52). Murray asks: "Who is qualified to decode these myths and metaphors?" and "Who is qualified to render them into some kind of truth?" He points to the metaphor as "that which must be voiced but which cannot in its entirety be made explicit" (p. 68). Metaphors always escape any one interpretation, he asserts. The analyst learns to take the patient's words, his gestures, his symptoms, and reads them critically, disclosing what McLuhan called the hidden ground of their meaning, which can never be fully disclosed. He reminds us that academics in the humanities perform this kind of analysis in a cultural context, socially and politically. In insisting on a difference between

words spoken in therapy and words that invoke the absolutes of religious authority, the medium is the message in psychoanalysis and religion because both cases involve induction into a symbolic order. But the symbolic order must leave space for resistance and critique, he argues, concluding that "each word, each medium, opens a gap 'for the light to get in,' for further signification, for critique, and perhaps for a politics of resistance" (p. 65).

Deanne Bogdan looks at musical performance as embodied experience in her essay. Her research deals most directly with issues concerning the value of information literacy and media education. She takes up the age-old question: Does rehearing the same piece of music increase or decrease enjoyment? In order to "probe" larger questions about media effects, Bogdan's study brings McLuhan's ideas concerning music as medium and message into dialogue with the arguments of musicologist, Leonard Meyer, and cultural critic, Edward Said. In her 2005 lecture, Bogdan led an experiment in musical listening aimed at testing how different media and new information affect the pleasure derived from the experience of a musical performance. The experiment involved exposing the audience to Chopin's Mazurka, op. 63, no. 3—first as she performed it live on the piano, and then as performed by other pianists on different recording media. She alternated both the "hearing" and the "rehearings" with her lecture, which provided "various kinds and levels" of information about the musical work. Her article in this issue, a written document of that live "performance lecture," has implications for the philosophy of music and music literacy, and by extension, for the empirical study of other media. She explains the implications of McLuhan's radical reversal of the form/content distinction. Developing the construct of "media modalities," she brings her experiment together with the dialogue on musical performance that took place between McLuhan and pianist, Glenn Gould, concerning the effects of different media on the understanding, interpretation, and experience of the meaning or messages audiences take away from musical performances.

Bogdan argues that modality is one of the notions that holds promise for heightened critical awareness of the ways in which media contextualize communication. The musical example that she brings to the discussion is helpful, especially the illustration from live performance, because in theorizing a place within media studies for ephemeral auditory phenomena such as music, she makes a place within media studies for other evanescent phenomena as well. She proposes a model of critical awareness that involves a kind of dual focus that alternates between engagement and detachment. Engaged awareness gives over to the seductions and pleasures of the medium, taking in the aesthetic dimensions of the work. Detached awareness inserts an interval of

distance between the pleasures of the medium so that there is the possibility of critical awareness of effects.

In his response to Bogdan, Michael Edmunds offers his observations as a musician and performer. He considers Bogdan's arguments in light of his own performance practice and reflects on the way that the artist communicates meaning by drawing on life experiences and channeling them through performance techniques. He sees Bogdan's research as furthering the investigations initiated by McLuhan and Gould. He probes further the boundaries separating the composer, composition, and performance in light of McLuhan's and Gould's own practices as musicians, communications thinkers, and performers. He maintains that McLuhan was himself a performance artist, and argues that his works in various media constitute a vital component of his legacy. Charting and comparing theories, he points to the many parallels between their philosophies of performance in support of his argument that Gould relied on McLuhan for a number of his ideas on the relation between performance and technology. Whereas McLuhan's media performances were "of a piece" with his ideas concerning the virtual, Edmunds sees a disjunction between Gould's theoretical views and his practice. At the same time, he points to an example of "the medium is the message" in the way that Gould incorporated into his interpretation and performance of Schumann the pauses that resulted from the shift of the disk on the record player, the "flip-side overlap." Using the pause in the music that came as an aspect of the technology as a source for the interpretation of the music is a key example of the medium as the message.

In hindsight, argues Marcel Danesi, it has become obvious that McLuhan's ideas and their implications were both accurate and prescient. Danesi credits McLuhan with having anticipated the methods of semiotics (the "science of signs"). His essay explains how semiotic methodology constructs meaning as it relates to the physical nature of the medium. McLuhan "worked with the fundamental principles of sign theory," argues Danesi, "when he saw media as unconscious extensions of our inbuilt sensory and cognitive systems" (p. 114). Moreover, his observations of the ways in which "the 'meaning structures' that the media produce shape human cognition" (p. 113) are accurate descriptions of processes we see underway in mass media—especially the Internet—processes that are reshaping language, culture, and cognition. McLuhan noted that a positive effect of mass media is that more people than at any other time in history have access to information; however, a negative effect is that constant exposure to the mediated world triggers feelings of alienation, "disembodiment," or "de-personalization." In offering his reflections on how McLuhan's research presaged both a discipline and cultural processes that were

still germinating at the time when he produced his major works, Danesi touches directly on the reasons for the continuing significance of McLuhan's scholarship.

Media ecology is the study of "media *as* media," asserts Lance Strate. His written paper is in fact the text of a lecture, and so the work that appears in this eJournal is a form of remediated secondary orality. He emphasizes that media ecology prioritizes form/ground over figure/content in the study of media as messages. He points out that McLuhan emphasized that becoming aware of various media, and the ways in which they affect us, is the only way we can liberate ourselves from susceptibility to media influence. The antidote, he argues, is to attend to the medium, because the most significant effects come not from the content we send or receive, but rather, from the symbolic form in relation to the content. Strate offers a wealth of observations concerning the field of media ecology; he outlines the ideas of major thinkers in the history of the discipline, explains subtleties in media theory and methods, and presents arguments that respond to critiques and counter-objections that have been leveled by commentators. For these reasons, Strate's study makes a significant contribution, not only to this volume, but to the study of the ecology of media more generally.

My culminating essay in this volume, a companion to this introduction, ties together some of the themes that emerge from the papers, either through background research or by way of contemporary discussions, so that the studies are placed in a wider context. A related aim of the essay is to reflect on the significance of McLuhan's contributions to communication and media studies and for research on information literacy, media education, and interdisciplinarity.

These explorations concerning the meaning of McLuhan's "medium is the message" deal with key themes in approaching media and messages. Mitchell presents his observations on McLuhan's influence on the history of media studies, his dialogue with other thinkers, discusses some of the challenges facing the discipline due to the ambiguous nature of the objects of inquiry, and proposes solutions. Tschofen explores a case study of the violent disruption between oral and literate cultures as a way to theorize the frontier between oral and literate media systems more generally. Her focus on teeth and mouths as sites of the collision between two media systems resonates with recent research on orality and literacy in the ancient novel, where "the oral poetics of ancient fiction is mirrored and enacted in an obsession with mouths [and] tongues" (Rimmel, 2007, p. xvi). Carveth looks at psychoanalysis from the perspective of media studies, and finds that analysts use a method that

incorporates gestures, speech, and ellipses or silences into a larger theory of signs. His study, along with that of Bogdan, helps to create a place within media studies for ephemeral phenomena involving music, physical gestures, and even silences in speech. Murray engages his critique of Carveth by underscoring the aggression and hostility that may be expected to accompany the shift to the global village. By comparing and contrasting the rhetorical meanings associated with a character in the novel and in a film, he examines global politics by tracing his investigation across two different mediums. Other contributors directly address educational questions concerning the significance of McLuhan's scholarship. Danesi offers instruction in semiotics, the theory of signs, which has proven to be of value in examining mass media. He also discusses the bias and somnambulism induced by mass media and argues that semiotics or education in hidden meanings can function as an aid to subverting manipulations in advertising and other forms of popular culture. Working with the medium of music, Bogdan puts forward the notion of "modality," and stresses the role of shifting attention in her proposal for an antidote to the trance and spell induced by media. Edmunds continues her explorations, and offers a musical example of "the medium is the message." Strate presents an extended meditation on "the medium is the message" from the perspective of media ecology. The final essay in this volume seeks to highlight major themes that emerge from the essays, and describes McLuhan's pioneering contributions to the interdisciplinary study of media as modalities for the communication of cultural information. Though these studies come from diverse fields and offer unique perspectives, the focus on the "medium is the message" means that the primary concern of all the essays in this volume is McLuhan's insight that the medium communicates meanings over and above the meanings conveyed through the content.

The relation between media and messages involves questions that are critical at a time when we recognize the need for various kinds of literacy to interpret different kinds of media and forms of information. McLuhan contributed ideas that founded the discipline of media studies. The essays in this volume add to the ongoing conversations surrounding the central problems posed by media as communication. The range of the essays and responses in this volume reflect the interdisciplinary scope of media studies. They confirm the continuing significance of McLuhan's central premise that the medium communicates messages, underscore the need for information and media literacy, and direct us to influences that have import for fields of inquiry that overlap with the study of communication, information, and media.

Finally, several essays remind us that revolutionary shifts in media are accompanied by turbulence, alienation, and conflict. Tensions in the world

arena today indicate the importance of the study of media for understanding the divisions that differentiate cultures from one another, suggesting ways in which intercultural dialogue could proceed. When questions of communication are so substantial, given the urgency of the need establish common ground among countries and cultures in conflict, understanding how media shape messages is of vital importance. These essays provide provocative contributions to the ongoing exploration of this complex terrain.

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