REVISITING THE MARSHALL MCLUHAN METAPHOR *"THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE"*

Alemoh, Thomas Anomoaphe

Department of Mass Communication
Kwararafa University, Wukari, Taraba State

ABSTRACT

In the communication process, the medium certainly holds a place of importance, but could this be taken to mean that the medium is more important than the message that is passed through it? This is the crux of Marshall McLuhan's argument that the medium impacts on the society much more than the message does. In this paper, we differ with McLuhan on the grounds that the medium, outside the message, cannot produce any effect on society. However, as a point of convergence with his postulation, this paper admits that every medium introduced to society usually engenders noticeable changes in the communication behaviour of its users.

Keywords: Marshall Mcluhan, Metaphor, Medium, Message

INTRODUCTION

It is doubtful if in the entire spectrum of communication studies there has been a subject as controversial as the Marshall McLuhan's proposition: The medium is the message. Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian scholar stunned the academia with this simple but interpretatively complex submission in 1964 in his famous book entitled, Understanding the Media: The Extension of Man. As if the debate sparked off by this publication was not enough, McLuhan followed it up in 1967 with yet another puzzling title, The medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects. Indeed, the second publication helped immensely to fuel the already heated argument generated by its predecessor.

McLuhan's statement has been variously labeled as the enigmatic paradox' or the 'McLuhan equation (Federman, 2004 cited in Moemeka, 2007). Gordon (1982) philosophically calls it 'McLuhanism'. The quote is indeed enigmatic and seemingly ambiguous because as Moemeka rightly observes, McLuhan's proposition would probably be accorded many more meanings in years to come because by act of omission or commission, he left the statements open to interpretations with his detractors bent on the negative interpretation, and his supporters on the positive. It is also noteworthy that McLuhan, as a scholar, might be considered equally enigmatic because not only is he remembered for the above propositions as far as the field of communication is concerned, he has also immortalized his name because of his seemingly chimerical prediction that the world would someday become a 'Global Village'. In less than four decades after this declaration, the world has, although arguably,

been transformed through information and communication technologies (ICTs) into a global village, a term that has pervaded many scholarly terrains. What did McLuhan mean by the 'Medium is the Message'? In his words:

> ...the personal and social consequences of any medium - that is, of any extension of ourselves - results from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology"(McLuhan, 1964:7; emphasis mine).

Thus to McLuhan, all media are extensions of some human faculty, psychic or physical (McLuhan, 1967:26). In line with this, McLuhan sees a medium as any technical and/or technological invention that improves on the capacity of man to perform better, faster, and/or easier, and achieve expected goals without necessary physical or mental exertion. In essence, a medium helps man to go beyond what his human capability could ordinarily enable him to do. So, McLuhan listed as kinds of media in this regard devices like aircraft, electricity, railway system, introduction of money, etc, in addition to the usual media of communication as we know them today - radio, television, telephone, among others. Evidently, Marshall McLuhan's categorization and understanding of the media transcends the scope of communication to include any device that could aid man to achieve his goal at any given time in life.

Therefore, it would not be wrong to say that Marshall McLuhan approached the study of the media exclusively from a technological standpoint. It is important that one understands the context under which the much debated proposition was made before one joins the vanguard of those calling for the Canadian theorist's head or those who applaud his ingenuity. In this work, the McLuhan statement from the perspective of the significance of the medium (which formed the pivot of his analysis) in the communication process as a determinant of the quality of the message transmitted is examined.

Also, we take a look at how the medium has always changed the face of communication from the earliest times to the present. However, the study differs with McLuhan from the communication point of view on his concept of the medium being a message on its own which should therefore be regarded more important than the message, rather we see the medium as a tool, or conduit through which a message is relayed and which makes whatever impact the medium has as its so-called inherent message meaningful. This distinction is central to our discussion in this paper.

TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINISM

This study is anchored on the theory of Technological Determinism as it relates to the study of the media. This theory has been expounded by scholars like Harold Innis, who applied it to the study of the impact of the introduction of railway on the development of society, and Marshall McLuhan in his assessment of media effect on society although at different times in history, the latter taking a clue from the postulations of the former. The theory is rooted in the

assumption that every change in life is connected to a single causative factor. To the Marxists, that factor is Economic Determinism whereas to the Freudian Psychologists, the factor is the Sex drive. But to Marshall McLuhan and his fellow thinkers in the world of information delivery, it is Media Technology (Griffin, 2000). Thus the concept of determinism reduces major changes in life to a certain factor while seemingly holding other factors constant, and this has been a cardinal criticism of this school of thought.

Essentially, technological determinism as it applies to the media stipulates that changes in communication modes largely influence the course of history (Nwodu, 2004). The theory, therefore, seeks to draw the attention of media scholars to the latent effects of communication technologies. The theory links the historical, economic and cultural changes occurring in the world to the invention and development of new technologies (Nwodu, 2004). The basic postulates of the theory as advanced by Marshall McLuhan include:

a   Changes in technology invariably cause cultural changes in society.
b   The medium (the channel) is more important than the message.
c   Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) lead to Electronic Age which gives rise to the Global Village.
d   There are cool and hot media.
e   Audience response to print media messages differs from their response to broadcast media messages.

Marshall McLuhan posits that the dominant medium of any age dominates the people and that "…the form or structure of a given system of communication affects society more deeply than that which it transmits". It follows, therefore, that a new technology will create a totally new human environment just as the new media, as it were, have succeeded in "retribalising the human race". What this means is that we all now presumably belong to a Global Village because everyone is in touch with everyone else at any given time as if all belong to the same family. Simply put, distance, which has always been a barrier to communication beyond the interpersonal (face-to-face) level, has finally been conquered. In tracing the impact of technology on society, McLuhan divided human history into four basic epochs:

a   The Tribal Age -an acoustic place in history
b   The Literate Age -a visual point of view
c   The Print Age -prototype of the Industrial Revolution
d   The Electronic Age -the rise of the Global Village.

Suffice it to say here that this paper does not intend to examine in detail what constitutes each epoch. In essence, McLuhan is simply saying that each of these eras recorded an indelible mark in the development of the human society. Could he have been wrong? We can claim that the theory of technological determinism has a functional relationship with the field of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).

Ample evidence abounds in support of the power of media technology to cause changes in society. Baran (1999) notes that the invention of moveable types by Johannes Gutenberg in 1450 contributed to the success of the Protestant Reformation because ideas could easily spread through the print which brought more credibility and permanence to communication. The Industrial Revolution was given an impetus through mass dissemination of knowledge in print in that era. Mbachu (2003) notes that

> *Mass communication has always required technology to broaden its reach and expand its influence. From the primitive to the modern societies, the story of mass communication has been that of changes wrought by improvements in technology.*

Baran (1999) also observes that television changed the way members of American family interact. In spite of the sentiments expressed from some quarters, the world could be said to have become a Global Village as the Internet revolution sweeps like a torrent across the world. However, critics like Gordon (1982) in Nwodu (2004) suggests that the McLuhan theory should be discarded since it has not been empirically justified. "But can we discard the predictions/ prophecies of Nostrado-Mus on the grounds that they were not empiricall tested?" If World War I & II, the World Trade Centre and extentions such as the assasination of Princess Diana and the Ararb War? After all, the exponent of the theory, Marshall McLuhan, never conducted any empirical research to validate his claims. But Baran (1999) and Nwodu (2004) contend that McLuhan's 'probes' or better still theories have stimulated a heightened awareness of the possible cultural effects of new media technologies.

McLuhan himself seems to have foreseen such criticism when he said, "I'm not advocating anything, I'm merely probing and predicting trends" (Nwodu, 2004). In simple terms, Marshall McLuhan was of the view that each medium of communication brings about some identifiable changes in society. In his words, "we shape our tools and they in turn shape us". To McLuhan, the medium is the message, and by implication logically, attention should be paid more to the medium than the message it conveys. Technological determinism is a communication theory that is located within the ambit of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as an area of communication studies. Ruben (1988) cited in Ikpe (1996) defines communication technology as "any tool, special device, or medium that assists in information production, distribution, storage, reception or display". In this category include the computer, Internet, telephone, and facsimile machine just to mention a few.

In contemporary media studies, technological determinism theory is usually identified with Marshall McLuhan, who has been described as "The Oracle of the Electronic Age" (Griffin, 2000) in view of his prediction which has been confirmed that the world would someday turn to a "Global Village" through technology.

MCLUHAN'S CONCEPTION OF THE MEDIUM

As mentioned above, McLuhan's conception of 'medium' is on an elaborate scale in the sense that he takes medium to include any device that is useful to man which helps him to carry out his life activities. Also, we have mentioned too that the emphasis of McLuhan is that the medium is the message that is passed through it. To McLuhan, the media are mere extensions of the human faculties which not only extend our reach and increase our efficiency but also act as a filter to organize and interpret our social existence. McLuhan observes that "society has always been shaped more by the nature of the medium by which men have communicated than by the content of communication" (quoted in Moemeka, 2007).

Thus he declared as quoted earlier that "we shape our tools and they in turn shape us" and that every age has been transformed by the prevailing technology of that era. Marshall McLuhan posits that the dominant medium of any age dominates the people and that "…the form or structure of a given system of communication affects society more deeply than that which it transmits". Mbachu (2003) seems to align with this line of thought when he asserts that "changes (and) advances in the technologies for mass communication invariably imply new ways of doing old things or new things done in entirely new ways". For instance, newspaper production prior to the advent of the computer and Video Display Terminals (VDTs) used to be tedious and time consuming but today "the entire editorial process…including writing of text; editing to form, content and length; typesetting of copy, making up the page with text, headlines, pictures and graphics; and producing negatives could be done on the computer" (Okoye, 2000, cited in Mbachu, 2003).

Federman (2004) reflecting McLuhan's position on the importance of the medium as Moemeka reports notes that "it is only too typical that the 'content' of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium. But it is the character of the medium that is its potency or effect - its message". Moemeka (2007) tends to toe this line when he observes that "the inherent message -the intrinsic effect - of a medium is a constant and remains so unless the design and structure of the medium change". He illustrates this by saying that the introduction of any medium of communication changes the lifestyle of individuals. For instance, a family which had no television before will experience a change in their status, thinking, information utilization and behavioural pattern when such a medium as television is introduced into it.

Undoubtedly, such a family would spend more time together than they have ever done before, watching and discussing programmes on television just as the volume of information getting to them would increase. Liebert, et al, (1973:11-12) had earlier noted in an empirical study that "It has been found that 60% of families have changed their sleeping patterns because of television, 55% have altered their meal times, and 78% use TV as electronic baby sitter".

To this end, television as a medium has brought an inherent message as an agent of innovation. FADs (2007) cited in Moemeka (2007:8) attests to this fact that "each medium, independent of the content it mediates, has its own intrinsic effects which are its unique messages". Newsweek Magazine (June 6, 1994, pp.18-23) puts it more graphically "As communications software grows more sophisticated, there is always the danger that it will complicate rather than streamline its user's life...." A recent report in Awake! (2008) has it that:

> *for decades, the tiny Himalayan kingdom of Blutan resisted the lure of modern media. Television was introduced by government in 1999 when the people complained that they could not watch the 1998 World Cup Soccer Tournament. Now instead of sitting together singing and talking as they used to, families gather to watch television. The people are already addicted to Hollywood movies and Indian Soap operas. The Qatar daily The Peninsula reported a woman lamenting having little time for anything else anymore, "my mind is always on the television", she said.*

Could we say that Marshal McLuhan has found an ally in Moemeka and other scholars cited above? Certainly not! Moemeka, for instance, still argues that a medium such as television on its own has no message as a piece of technological device except when it is being put to use by a viewer. For example, one could not continue to stare at the blank screen of a television set moments after the set had been switched off or when there are no clear visuals on the screen. What we should note here is that any capability attached to television as a medium with an intrinsic message is a direct function of its use and relevance as a conduit for delivering messages to the viewer.

Federman (2004) notes further that the presence of a new medium sends a new message across which could trigger off changes in society. The message here implies the impact such a medium would have on society. In other words, the introduction of a new medium of communication usually produces some identifiable behavioural changes in people and with this as early warning signal, the new medium could be characterized and identified before it becomes obvious to everyone. This process, according to this source, could take years or even decades to complete. The good thing about such early observance of the effect of a new medium on society is to enable people to discover if the new medium brings along effects that might be detrimental to society. A glaring case in point is the Internet whose advent was considered as one of the best things to have happened on earth but which today has become an incubus to society. With this, the society would be in a good position to influence the development and evolution of the new medium before the effects become pervasive. One only wonders how easy it has been for society to positively influence media development in this regard.

Obviously, Federman's observation is not far from the truth. If the medium has no message for the society, the introduction of television and its

widespread use would not have been linked to an upsurge in adolescent crime in the USA that led to the Surgeon General's Report on media violence, something that has become a reference point in contemporary media studies. The latest medium of mass communication - the Internet - as observed in the foregoing, has generated hue and cry across the globe because of its gross abuse by users which tends to make the medium appear more dysfunctional than beneficial. If for nothing else, the Internet has taken lechery and crime from being glorified to the level of a norm.

Evidently, the medium has the inherent power to change people's behaviour because no society has remained the same when a mass medium is introduced into it. However, this change is only to the extent that the messages through such a medium are consumed, not necessarily because the medium is simply available. Marshall McLuhan himself notes that the 'message' of any medium or technology is the change in scale, pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs. Thus, we can say that McLuhan was more concerned about the technological significance of a medium as a device for communication used by man, which is capable of changing the way man communicates with his fellow human beings, and not essentially the content of communication that is passed through the medium. It is therefore argued that the "medium is the message" not "more important than the message" as elucidated by Marshall McLuhan. For instance, think of running very pure water (message) through a very rusty pipe (medium), you can only get an impure water, not the clean water that you ran through.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MEDIUM

Earlier in this discourse, we mentioned that the medium plays a significant role in the quality of the message received. Unarguably, if the quality of message delivery is poor, then there is the possibility of losing the message itself because it might not be understood or simply it could be misunderstood. Thus message fidelity comes under a heavy question mark in such a situation. When a message is misunderstood, it would definitely produce the wrong response. To this extent, the medium could as well be taken metaphorically as the message. This is easily noticeable in the world of advertising where the medium is selected on the basis of the type of advertisement and target audience.

By way of illustration, a development communication message that is targeted at unlettered rural farmers would prove futile when passed through a medium that they cannot access such as the print medium. This is why social mobilization campaigns geared towards grassroots development rarely make use of the printed word as much as the face-to-face communication mode supported with a dose of indigenous media of communication. Radio and television would fare better than the print media in this regard because the two broadcast media do not necessarily require any form of literacy for their

messages to be accessed and consumed. The intended message could be put in the local language and the people would just get it either by listening to the radio or watching the television. The above illustration shows that a good message channeled through the wrong medium is as good as a message not sent at all. Here, the words of V.O Key Jnr, quoted in Public Opinion and American Democracy (nd), find a meaning, "a message unheard is a message unheeded". The significance of the medium in the communication process appears to be better understood by advertisers who usually segment their target audience according to some specified variables of which media selection to guarantee access to the largest share of the audience is given preference.

Bearing this in mind, the advertiser would select the best medium available to reach out to a particular segment of the audience. It is not only the medium that appeals to the advertiser in this case but time in relation to when the target audience would be most available. This would compel the advertiser to critically examine the range of programmes or contents offered by a particular medium and at what time so as to enable him to know when he would get the attention of a sizeable portion of the target audience. Thus an advertiser who has a fashion related product to market would certainly be on the lookout for such media that give priority to fashion coverage as well as the right aesthetics to go with the advertisement. The same goes for other forms of business. The central rule here seems to be: get the right medium and you get right into the heart of your target audience, not the medium is more important than the message.

THE MEDIUM AS AGENT OF CHANGE

From the inception of communication as a human activity, there has always been a medium for transmitting information from one point to another. Communication does not occur in a vacuum; there is always that conduit or channel through which the message passes before it gets to the destination. Interestingly, the medium has always undergone changes in form and type just as such changes have brought about transformations in the way people communicate. The behavioural change in patterns of communication could be linked to innovations in communication technology over the years, starting with the invention of writing to the present day computer. Man's communication behaviour has always followed the dictates of technological changes.

The medium certainly has a message of change. For instance, with the introduction of mobile telephony in Nigeria in 2001, many people hardly write letters again especially for informal communication. They would rather call because it is cheaper, faster and more convenient than writing a letter. Also, Nigerians are more active communication wise now than ever before. In the broadcast media industry, technology has also changed the pattern of

broadcasting in Nigeria. Before now, the Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) and the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) had been broadcasting each from one station often referred to as the Mother Station. But today, these two broadcast organizations are not only effectively running network services but are able to connect to the Mother Station while broadcasting from the outstations. The resultant decentralization of broadcasting has indeed helped in a wider coverage of the entire country so much that news worthy events that could have been lost at the local level can now easily find their way into the network news bulletin.

Here again, the medium's message of change is incontrovertibly demonstrated in furtherance of the ideal of democratization of communication which paves way for increased media participation by the citizenry. Bittner (1989:4) notes with reference to the invention of moveable types in printing that "…breakthroughs in communication technology mushroomed because accelerating the recording of knowledge made possible a much more rapid exchange of information". Instead of man to draw pictures on walls of caves and carvings on wood, communication through technology could simply be written or just spoken and mass produced thereby adding speed and volume to what is being communicated. It is noteworthy that similar dramatic changes have continued to occur in human communication particularly with the advent of electronics like radio, television and the computer.

Specifically, the introduction of the Internet has marvelously revolutionized the pattern of communication among people so much that the receiver of the message could at the same time double as a sender not only to one receiver but to as many destinations as possible. This is unlike the traditional pattern of mass communication where the sender is clearly distinguished from the receiver of the message although they could swap positions in a dyadic pattern. A scholar, Escarpit cited in Corner (1980) observes that …the concept of mass is rapidly dissolving to be replaced by the puzzling yet far more workable image of an intricate network of communication channels in which new group-set identities are born year after year with corresponding behavioural patterns and balance of influences (quoted in Umar, 2000).

Sequel to this recent development in the use of the Internet, some scholars have raised a pertinent question whether the end of mass communication has come or that the world should simply think of renaming the mass communication process (Chaffee and Metzger, 2001). For instance, the use of the Internet has created a bifurcation between the old media (the traditional mass media of radio, television, newspaper, etc) and the new media under the nomenclature of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). In all this, we could sense the impact of the medium on the communication process. Also, the Internet has transformed the global landscape of business in such a way that e-commerce, e-banking, e-shopping, e-

registration, e-journalism, etc, now make it possible for one to purchase goods and enjoy services within the confines of one's bedroom! The medium indeed has a message for every age.

CONCLUSION

This study opened with a scrutiny of the McLuhan's proposition on the significance of the medium as the message. There is evidence to believe although tenuously that the medium has an inherent message in itself to the extent that its presence or rather introduction in any society usually marks a remarkable change in the communication behaviour of its users. On this basis as it has been shown in this paper, the medium could be adjudged good or bad in its effects and that this is of benefit to society because it makes it easy to know in time how to handle and harness the potentialities of any new medium for the overall good of the society. The "medium is the a message" stands out very clear that a good medium/channel helps deliver an undistorted message wheras a distorted medium compounds the "noise" and therefore diminishes the original message.

We should not be carried away with the thought that the medium is more important than the message. Agreed that a wrong medium or channel used could greatly hamper the effectiveness of any communication act on the target audience, yet this is not enough reason to believe that the medium can take the place of the message. To this extent, Marshal McLuhan's proposition tends not to hold some water. Simply put, the two are quite different but complimentary components of the communication process. Based on this, we conclude that the medium's capability of being a message is a function of its being used to deliver messages that are channeled through it. It is only when the medium is put to use that its effects can be felt in any society.

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