Computers and Media: McLuhan & Responsive Media

CSCI 1200
Marshall McLuhan
Marshall McLuhan

Marshall McLuhan was a Canadian philosopher of communication theory.

His work is viewed as one of the cornerstones of the study of media theory.

As well as having practical applications in the advertising and television industries.

Predicted World Wide Web almost thirty years before it was invented.
Effects of Media on Society

Does popular media have a wide-ranging effect on society?
- Self-focused versus community-oriented
Laws of Media (1988)

Published posthumously by his son Eric.

McLuhan summarized his ideas about media in a concise tetrad of media effects.

The tetrad is a means of examining the effects on society of any technology (i.e., any medium) by dividing its effects into four categories and displaying them simultaneously.

McLuhan designed the tetrad as a pedagogical tool, phrasing his laws as questions with which to consider any medium.
Four simple questions that reveal the future of all technology.
Laws of Media

ENHANCE

OBSOLESCE

RETRIEVE

REVERSE
Enhance

What human trait or experience does the medium enhance?

- What is the intended function
- What does it improve or make more efficient
- Does it extend part of the body or senses
- Does it extend an aspect of the human mind?
- Does it amplify some human capability?
- Does it extend the individual, group, or society?
Example: Radio

Enhancement: What the medium amplifies or intensifies?

*Radio amplifies news and music via sound.*
“you shape your tools in your own image, and in their turn, they shape you”
Obsolesce

What pre-existing technology, method, system, or medium does the medium *obsolesce*?

- What technology does the new medium replace?
- What does it render unnecessary?
- What procedures does it short-circuit or bypass?
- What happens to the older, obsolesced medium?
- Does it disappear entirely, become an art object, or find a new niche?
Example: Radio


Obsolescence: What the medium drives out of prominence? *Radio reduces the importance of print and the visual.*
Retrieve

What technology, method, system, or medium that was previously abandoned or obsolesced does this medium *retrieve*?

- What archaic elements are made relevant again?
- What previously marginalized or repressed ideas, practices or artifacts are brought to the fore?
- What aspects of the prehistoric, ancient, medieval, or early modern world are revived?
Example: Radio


Obsolescence: What the medium drives out of prominence. *Radio reduces the importance of print and the visual.*

*Retrieval:* What the medium recovers which was previously lost. *Radio returns the spoken word to the forefront.*
Reverse

When fully utilized or pushed to its extreme, what will the medium reverse into?

◦ What effects will the medium create that are opposite to what was originally intended?
◦ What are the contradictions inherent in the technology?
◦ What is the ecological impacts?
Example: Radio

Enhancement: *What the medium amplifies or intensifies?* Radio amplifies news and music via sound.

Obsolescence: *What the medium drives out of prominence?* Radio reduces the importance of print and the visual.

Retrieval: *What the medium recovers which was previously lost?* Radio returns the spoken word to the forefront.

Reversal: *What the medium does when pushed to its limits?* Acoustic radio flips into audio-visual TV.
Television

*Enhances* our ability to see and hear across time and space

*Obsolesces* radio (forcing it to reinvent itself)

*Retrieves* the hearth and campfire as the centre of communal entertainment

*Reverses* into new forms of individual and social isolation
Automobile

*Enhances* our mobility

*Obsolesces* the horse and buggy

*Retrieves* the knight in armor

*Reverses* into the traffic jam
The History of Icons

In 2001, with the launch of Mac OS X (Singh, 2003) and Windows XP, the world of icons underwent a major transformation. The new 8-bit alpha channel blending feature present in these operating systems allowed icons to have smooth edges, blend into the background better and look better integrated with the rest of the graphical interface. This exciting new feature has changed the appearance of the operating systems' interface dramatically. Both Apple and Microsoft have introduced new exciting icon styles featuring bigger sizes, new perspective layout of icons, brighter, entertaining colours and an inviting glossy look (Microsoft Corporation, 2001).

With the latest Windows Vista and 7, Microsoft introduced a new icon style called Aero. Icons became "authentic, crisp, and detailed" (Microsoft Corporation, 2008). They have moved towards more realism, a new perspective view and a high level of detail.

Apple kept developing its successful Aqua style, concentrating primarily on human graphic interface improvements.

Nowadays, computer technology doesn't limit icon...
Word Processing

*Enhances* our ability to produce printed text

*Obsolesces* the typewriter

*Retrieves* the scroll and the manuscript as open, changeable text

*Reverses* into oral communication through speech recognition and synthesis software
iWatch - Exercise


*Enhances*..
*Obsolesc*..
*Retrieves*..
*Reverses*..
Digital Camera – Exercise 2

Enhances..
Obsolesces..
Retrieves..
Reverses..
“McLuhanisms”

The Medium is the message.

Truth is what we make in our encounter with the world that is making us.

With telephone and TV it is not so much the message as the sender that is “sent”.

People do not actually read newspapers. They step into them every morning like a hot bath.

The future of the book is the blurb.

Electric information is an extension of self.
Time

In 2006 Time magazine names "you" as its person of the year to reflect the importance of user-generated internet content as a driving force in the modern world.
Role of the Audience
Global Village: McLuhan described how the globe has been contracted into a village by electric technology

Watching World is a Global Village (CBC)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HeDnPP6ntic
Responsive Media
Old Spice

Summer 2010: Old Spice media campaign

Started with a TV commercial, the origin of “Old Spice Guy”

A success, a lot of attention, got people talking

The campaign then moved to the Internet
Old Spice - Commercial
Old Spice - Website
Old Spice

The campaign moved to YouTube and Twitter

Old Spice Guy responded in near real time to comments from fans, videos posted on YouTube

This is a type of Artificial Reality Game (ARG), which has been very successful in advertising
Old Spice - YouTube
Old Spice - YouTube
Old Spice - YouTube
Old Spice - YouTube
Old Spice - YouTube
Old Spice - YouTube

Basically an electronic conversation, mediated by the Internet

Broadcasting a TV commercial is very expensive, can easily get into the $100,000 range for national exposure

But, YouTube is free, if we can get a similar number of viewers this is a real bargain

Some of the YouTube videos got over 1 million views, this is much better than a TV commercial
Old Spice - YouTube

This got into papers and TV news, a major news story
It took on a life of its own, called *viral marketing*
Significant increase in Old Spice sales!
Old Spice - Conclusion

A good example of the interplay between different media, and different technologies

What this course is about, how technology and media interact

How innovative combinations of different technologies produce essentially new types of media, new ways of communicating our messages
McLuhan’s Wake

Watching McLuhan’s Wake (parts)

http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0391328/

Full version:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A9y-ZAIdxrE
Exercise

Other examples of *responsive mass media*?
Your Action Items

Read chapter 1 and 2 of course text
Summary

We:
- Introduced the life and work of Marshall McLuhan
- Discussed responsive media