

BEYOND MEDIA LITERACY

*Lars C. Grabbe,
Andrew McLuhan,
Tobias Held (Ed.)*



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INTRODUCTION

*Lars C. Grabbe, Andrew McLuhan
and Tobias Held, May 2023*

Literacy is a two-folded aspect of modern culture. Firstly, modern human societies need literacy for the accumulation and distribution of mediatized knowledge. This means, that the oral-based hunter and gatherer historically transforms into the anthropologic archivist that observes, reflects, and records the worlds data by writing. Secondly, the mediatization of information relates to every medium and its technological evolution. Oral societies have a need for linguistic literacy and the decoding of grammar, slang, phrases, phonetics, metaphors and idioms, visual societies need a visual literacy that enables a decoding of letters, numbers, images, optical cues (colors, patterns, ornaments etc.) and postmodern multimodal societies are finally distributing information through all sense modalities like music, music genre, sound design, cuisine, or fragrance and have a need for audio-visual literacy.

Nowadays, the literacy discourse has evolved into a complex framework. Media literacy, digital media literacy, media and information literacy, critical media literacy, media literacy education, and the like, are hot topics discussed from elementary schools to UNESCO and a whole industry of non-profits has sprung up in response. One thing that these programs seem to share is a focus on content, and on spotting bias and manipulation in terms of content creators and purveyors.

But there is much more to media than meets the eye. If you approach the idea of education around media from a McLuhan perspective, that is, by paying attention to form, structure, environment, and the resulting “personal and social consequences” (McLuhan 1964), you must go beyond mere literacy, beyond content.

Marshall McLuhan, who spent his career trying to understand and educate the world about the effects of technologies, insisted for three decades that “the medium is the message,” (McLuhan 1958) because “it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action. The content or uses of such media are as diverse as they are ineffectual in shaping the form of human association” (McLuhan 1964). He put it plainly and provocatively:

I am in the position of Louis Pasteur telling doctors that their greatest enemy was quite invisible, and quite unrecognized by them. Our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot. For the “content” of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind. The effect of the medium is made strong and intense just because it is given another medium as “content”. The content of a movie is a novel or a play or an opera. The effect of the movie form is not related to its program content. The “content” of writing or print is speech, but the reader is almost entirely unaware either of print or of speech. (McLuhan 1964)

The section on “the medium is the message” can, perhaps, be clarified by pointing out that any technology gradually creates a totally new human environment. Environments are not passive wrappings but active processes (McLuhan 1964, introduction to the second edition cf. McLuhan 1966).

In this volume, the editors seek the limits of media literacies, and to go beyond them. To imagine what an approach would look like were we to ignore the content and take on the media themselves as both objects and forms of attention and education. We are not attacking these various media literacies, as they can serve a useful purpose – by all means, we should be aware of marketing and propaganda and other manipulations – but searching for a complementary effort which takes on the medium (as environment) itself as the message to make sense of.

The different contributions focus on the whole variety of the understanding of media form and content to explore the range of media literacies. The editors have invited authors from

very different disciplines like media theory and ecology, educational theory, art and philosophy, sociology, cultural studies, and other research areas related to the understanding of media in general.

In the beginning, Martina Sauer is focusing with *Marshall McLuhan in a New Light. Old or New Methods of Influencing Emotions in Communities of the Electronic Age* on the relation of media and emotions and the specific interdependency of affection. Following the work of Marshall McLuhan, she argues that media and bodies are not separable and that the medium is the message expressed through the body of human beings. Finally, the body plays a crucial role for expressing emotions and the social bonding of communities that is highly influenced by the electric patterns of culture.

In *Media, Not Messages: Tools For Teaching Media Environments Across Communities and Contexts* Katherine G. Fry introduces a Dynamic Media Environments model to give evidence to elements operating within the media environment. With a focus on content, context, power, and paradigm she addresses the types of communication in a framework for teaching media as environments and discusses the different aspects in the context of four workshops, or learning tools, created, and implemented within the model's framework: The Tribe Game; Sharing Stories; News Tools; and The Chocolate Project.

Rebecca Hughes follows the steps of Marshall McLuhan in *But at what price free? And at what price mediocrity?* with a specific view on the social media era. She shows that in the social media condition of human's information is disseminated via broadcast models comprised of advertisers and their targeted audiences and that social media has been instrumental in promoting civic discourse. A key ability of postmodern life is to understand and analyze propaganda as a mode of critical media literacy. Critically literate readers can understand implicit messaging or biases to refer this knowledge to aspects of societal control.

The reflections of Jeff Heydon in *Dead Reckoning the Network: Tanks, Missiles, and the Immediate Certainty of Being* are pointing on the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the context of Google Live Maps. He shows that a live and denarrativized network text indicated that troops were on the move and were headed over the border and that the consequences of dead reckoning could impact our relationship with new media. He asks for the possibility of proximity to events that appear first in abstracted contexts delivered by social media and cell phone apps under the condition of immediacy.

Sule Ameh James discusses in *Use of Textile Fabrics in Contemporary African Paintings* the use of African fabric for creating a specific African cultural imagery. With a focus on three African artists, he describes the uses of materials in contemporary paintings as innovative and creative attempts for interrogating cultural imagery to reflect subjective, social, and cultural identities of people in African societies. In conducting a critical visual interpretative approach, he is focusing on precise works produced by the artists, and their unique styles in interrogating cultural imagery and the ideas conveyed.

Following Marshall McLuhans concepts in *Understanding Gifs: The Extensions of Movies* Wilson Oliveira Filho explores the idea that the content of a medium is another medium. With a focus on Gifs, he understands them as a new visual possibility as movie extensions and as a contemporary art form. In this direction he characterizes the power of looped images regarding Lev Manovich as narrative engine and discusses effects, remediations, and expansions of this cinematic format that goes beyond media literacy toward a new media imaginary.

Claudia Mosqueda Gómez develops in *From the visual to the audio-tactile. Study of the interface as a species* a notion of the interface as a new species. She argues that the interface can be understood in the transition from the Gutenberg Galaxy to the Internet Galaxy with a specific focus on McLuhan's notion of the audio-tactile as a

multisensory integration. She argues that the sensory perspective enhances the development of the interface and develops the idea related to Media Ecology to finalize the reflections with the interpretation of interfaces as multisensorial species that evolve and adapt in the process of interaction with the environment.

Finally, Samira Khoadei, Anas Abdelrazeq and Ingrid Isenhardt are discussing in *The artificialization of human senses: The Case for XR agency* the role of XR literacy. They argue that the use of personal data on social media platforms has eroded modern societies by spreading misinformation and that this business model could bear risks in the extended reality media (XR). Because XR literacy focuses narrowly on teaching the development of XR applications there is a need for contextual aspects from the media ecology perspective. With a focus on specific examples the authors are reflecting media production, interaction, and reflection and show that a critical observation of current tendencies to ethically design, research, and teaching of XR is needed in the race toward the ultimate display.

The purpose of this collection is to encourage new thinking in new directions. Ultimately, we need to provoke not only discussion but action if any meaningful change is to occur and that means taking these matters beyond the page, beyond college and conference. As climate change cannot be meaningfully addressed theoretically, neither can technological change.

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MARSHALL MCLUHAN IN A NEW LIGHT

Old or New Methods of Influencing Emotions
in Communities of the Electronic Age

Martina Sauer

ABSTRACT

How is it possible that emotions in the community can be influenced by media? According to the paper's concept, this is only understandable if we accept with Marshall McLuhan that media and the human body are not separable. There is no divide. The medium is the message expressed through the body/human being. This has preconditions, because the connection must be based on an analog principle that serves as the transmitter. This lies in non-discursive affectively relevant forms and an equally affectively evaluative mode of perception, as empirical research now confirms. On this basis, as Daniel N. Stern shows, people operate "with vigorous goal-directedness to assure social interactions." This points to the second premise, that every body/human being – infallibly – perceives a promise in communion with others, namely that of happiness, security, and community. This concept has far-reaching implications for how communities understand themselves, as the research of poststructuralists and frame theorists demonstrates, and as the trial and death of Socrates in ancient Athens attests.

KEYWORDS

McLuhan, Media, Embodiment Theory, Community, Rhetoric, Emotions, Transmitter, Socrates

1

PREMISE: MCLUHAN'S CONCEPT OF MEDIA AS A THEORY OF EMBODIMENT

Theories of embodiment have a long tradition in aesthetics. They go back to the middle of the 19th century, when metaphysical and empirically based concepts were irreconcilably opposed. The importance of feeling for perceiving, acting, and analogously for forming took a central position from the beginning. Accordingly, the question of the status of aesthetics played a central role and led to a heated debate in the German-speaking world about the primacy of speculative aesthetics or aesthetics as a science of form as a metascience (Sauer 2023a, forthc.). The approaches, originally considered incompatible, dissolved toward the end of the 19th century with the focus on the body-bound, also expressive abilities of humans themselves and their possibility for symbolic and thus meaning-giving activity (Sauer 2020). It is worth noting, and this is the point of departure for the thesis pursued here, that Marshall McLuhan's media theory is also at its core a theory of embodiment and thus stands in this tradition and will therefore be considered in relation to some of its protagonists. In McLuhan's concept itself, this connection is evident in his assumption that media are extensions of the body, and this applies to all media. Only because of this assumption is it possible for him to speak of "the medium is the message" (McLuhan 1964, 24). For communication with others is only possible for humans if they can extend their physical-organic bondage with the help of media. With them, people can convey any messages and – by being bound to the body, according to the extended thesis pursued here – thus also their feelings. The fact that we usually do not see this and, conversely, assume that there is only factually neutral communication via media is a myth, as already McLuhan stated.

However, if one assumes that feelings play a role in this misunderstanding, another aspect comes into play, which is again inspired and thus supported by McLuhan's approach. For these feelings are not only individual but are shaped by the community to which the sender feels he or she belongs. It is McLuhan's

reference to the specific possibilities of electronic media that provides the insight for this extension. For beyond the telephone and television in the 20th century as McLuhan still knew them, today in the 21st century with the worldwide Internet all the consequences that he already derived from human interaction in distinction to the mechanical media age are turned even more upside down. Indeed, distance becomes proximity. Time and space almost melt into a moment. Action and reaction to action happen nearly simultaneously. Everyone is touched by everyone. The differences between the knowledge and skill levels of the groups tend to dissolve. Through the network, they are “instantly” accessible to all. The relationship between those who act and those who react changes as social classes converge. Teenagers, women, men, white and colored people “are now involved in our lives, as we are in theirs, thanks to the electronic media.” The new media compel “commitment and participation, quite regardless of any “point of view” (ibid., 20). Thus, it is the developments of the new age that help to open eyes, as they show that every action and reaction is triggered by feeling. People are actively demanding that they not only be noticed, but also taken seriously and seen as equals, as McLuhan’s statement makes clear. This supports the thesis that every medium conveys a message to a person/body that has – and has always had – its premises in the community and is charged with feelings. The message is a point of view that the sender/body follows. It is an expressive message and therefore not neutral. Conversely, this means: The more the subliminally effective feelings that guide one’s own actions/media are faded out and not consciously reflected, the greater the potential of influencing the behavior, decisions, and actions of the recipient through deliberate communication that addresses precisely this emotional level. The conclusion from this extended McLuhan-inspired approach is that the medium as a message is at the same time subliminally, or intentional, rhetorically effective, and thus can influence decisions, actions and the feelings of the counterpart.

This gives rise to two strands of argumentation that build on McLuhan’s approach and thus cast it in a new light. One

is based on the supposedly neutral content and functions of the media, the other on the supposedly neutral emotionality of communication via media. Both assumptions turn out to be fallacies, which becomes clear by linking them to research from the tradition of embodiment theory within post-structuralist philosophy, frame theory, developmental psychology, and neuroscience from the publication of McLuhan's approach in the 1960s until today.

2 FALLACY: NEUTRAL CONTENT AND FUNCTIONS OF MEDIA

If media, as McLuhan emphasizes, must be understood as bound to the body and thus as a message to others, social processes between bodies/people are negotiated through them. Knowledge and services are not independent components of togetherness, but standpoints represented by groups and messages charged with feelings. Feeling and acting or receiving and feeling (and again acting) are the central parameters here. This connection is much more obvious in the philosophy of poststructuralism or postmodernism to this day than it is in McLuhan, even if it is not explicitly addressed. Rather, the poststructuralism has been instrumental in deconstructing the fallacy that knowledge, skill, and media service are neutral. On the contrary, they were explicitly emphasized as a means of communicating one's position in order to consolidate one's social position in the community. However, the fact that dealing with emotions plays a central role in this is not explicitly addressed.

Roland Barthes is the one among them who shows how social group interests can be convincingly conveyed not only through language but also through the effect of images. What is interesting about this is that his findings also make it clear that images imperceptibly influence the feelings or self-esteem of the viewers. In his *Mythologies*, published in 1957, he uses numerous examples to show how images work in each case and what