



## **MEDIA AND THE QUEST AFTER THE *SELF*:**

### **McLuhan's Deconstructionist Move**

#### **MÍDIA E A BUSCA PELO *SELF*:**

#### **O MOVIMENTO DESCONSTRUCIONISTA DE MCLUHAN**

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#### **ABSTRACT:**

McLuhan's interest in studying media seems to rest to a great extent on his presupposition according to which we regularly tend to misunderstand the nature of any and each medium. We could call this the presupposition of the deceiving effect of media. It is not an exaggeration to say that in conceiving of media as "extensions of man," McLuhan makes a deconstructionist move against the Western intellectual tradition, since this tradition conceives of media merely as instruments, that is, as something merely posed between us and a certain goal, therefore, letting us completely unaltered. In this way, already the term "medium" misleads us in such a way that we cannot understand technology in its deeper effects, which reach far beyond the uses of any medium. In considering media as "extensions of man," McLuhan's target is the deceiving character of technology. The aim of this presentation is to examine McLuhan's move in considering media as "messages" and as "extensions of man," and not merely as instruments, that is, not simply as media.

**KEYWORDS:** processos media; McLuhan; technology

#### **RESUMO :**

O interesse de McLuhan em estudar meios de comunicação parece repousar em grande medida em seu pressuposto segundo o qual constantemente tendemos a interpretar mal a natureza de todo e qualquer meio. Poderíamos chamar isso de pressuposto do efeito enganador de mídia. Não é exagero dizer que na concepção dos meios de comunicação como "extensões do homem", McLuhan faz um movimento desconstrucionista contra a tradição intelectual do Ocidente, uma vez que esta tradição concebe a mídia apenas como instrumentos, ou seja, como algo simplesmente colocado entre nós e um determinado objetivo, portanto, deixando-nos completamente inertes. Desta forma, já o termo "meio" engana-nos de tal maneira que não podemos compreender a tecnologia em seus efeitos mais profundos, que vão muito além da

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utilização de qualquer suporte. Ao considerar a mídia como "extensões do homem", o alvo de McLuhan é o caráter enganador da tecnologia. O objetivo desta apresentação é examinar o movimento de McLuhan, ao considerar a mídia como "mensagens" e como "extensões do homem", e não apenas como instrumentos, ou seja, não apenas como mídia.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** mídia; McLuhan; tecnologia

"To the student of media, it is difficult to explain the human indifference to social effects of these radical forces. (...) So extraordinary is this unawareness that it is what needs to be explained. The transforming power of media is easy to explain, but the ignoring of this power is not at all easy to explain. It goes without saying that the universal ignoring of the psychic action of technology bespeaks some inherent function, some essential numbing of consciousness (...)" (McLUHAN).

Self-understanding is an everlasting problem in the philosophical and theological tradition. In a somewhat unexpected way Marshall McLuhan restates the problem of self-understanding along his famous media theory. In fact, McLuhan's interest in studying media seems to rest to a great extent on his presupposition according to which we *regularly* tend to misunderstand the nature of any and each medium. Indeed, according to McLuhan, media not only have the effect of "shap[ing] and controll[ing] the scale and form of human association and action (...)" (UM 9),<sup>2</sup> but we just do not understand such an effect of media. And on its turn, this misunderstanding is, let's say, an additional, *special* kind of effect they also have. We could call this the presupposition of *the deceiving effect of media*. This presupposition implies in fact a whole theory about deception concerning media. In the very end, it is not an exaggeration to say that in conceiving of media as "extensions of man," McLuhan makes a deconstructionist move against the Western intellectual tradition, since this tradition conceives of media merely as *instruments*, that is, as something *merely* posed between us and a certain *goal*, therefore, letting us

<sup>2</sup> See the abbreviations and bibliography at the end of this text.





completely unaltered. In this way, already the term "medium" misleads us in such a way that we cannot understand technology in its deeper effects, which reach far beyond the *uses* of any medium. In considering media as "extensions of man," McLuhan's target is the deceiving character of technology. The aim of this presentation is to examine McLuhan's move in considering media as "messages" and as "extensions of man," and not merely as instruments, that is, not simply as *media*.

#### THE MEDIUM AND ITS "CONTENT"

According to McLuhan, "[p]olitical scientists have been quite unaware of the effects of media anywhere at any time, simply because nobody has been willing to study the personal and social effects of media apart from their '*content*'." (UM 323)<sup>3</sup> In fact, McLuhan is very emphatic about the "content" of a medium and says, "(...) it is only too typical that the '*content*' of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium." (UM 9) Furthermore, "(...) the 'content' of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind." (UM 18) Thus, we need first to gain some understanding of McLuhan's concept of "content."

In speaking of communication media such as newspaper, radio, or TV it is relatively clear what their content is, but not so, if we are concerned with other media such as axes or clothes, or even communication media such as car and railway. Nevertheless, McLuhan's concept of "content" is quite general and applies to every technology. No wonder, then, that in the quotations above he puts the term in scare quotes. He is obviously using it in some idiosyncratic way. Indeed, McLuhan uses the term "content" as synonym for "uses," as it becomes apparent when he says that "[t]he content *or uses* of (...) media are as diverse as they are ineffectual in shaping the form of human

<sup>3</sup> Italics in a quotation are mine unless otherwise indicated.





association." (UM 9) For this reason we can paraphrase McLuhan's claim by saying that "typically it is the *uses* of any medium what blinds us to the character of that medium," or, in the same way, that "political scientists have been unaware of the effects of media anywhere at any time, simply because nobody has been willing to study the effects of media apart from their uses." In other words, in focusing on their uses we become blind to "the personal and social effects of media" (UM 9). It is, thus, the attention on the uses of media what seems "to explain the human indifference to social effects of these radical forces." (UM 304)

#### FROM THE "USES" TO THE "MEDIUM"

On his part, McLuhan just denies the importance traditionally attributed to the uses of any medium. This leads him to stress the medium itself. In referring to "electric light" (UM 8) he says that "[w]hether the light is being used for brain surgery or night baseball is a matter of indifference. (...) This fact merely underlines the point that *'the medium is the message'* because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action." (UM 9) It becomes, thus, apparent that McLuhan's famous catchphrase is dictated by his interest in shifting our attention from the uses (the "content") of a medium to the medium itself. On the contrary, relating to this passage, it is clear that the common-sense attitude would stress the specific use of electric light, that is, either the brain surgery or the night baseball, or both. But McLuhan seems to be merely interested in the fact of "human (...) action" (UM 9), its scope, being *extended* by electric light. The same is true when he says that "[t]hat the railway did not introduce movement or transportation [mere uses] or wheel or road into human society, but it *accelerated* and *enlarged* the scale of previous human functions, creating totally new kinds of cities and new kinds of work and leisure." (UM 8) Obviously this is nothing but the railway "(...) shaping and controlling the scale and form of human association and action (...)" (UM 9),





what, McLuhan adds, "(...) happened whether the railway functioned in a tropical or a northern environment, and is quite independent of the *fright* or *content* of the railway medium. The airplane, on the other hand, by *accelerating* the rate of transportation, tends to dissolve the railway form of city, politics, and association, quite independently of what the airplane is used." (UM 8) In this sense, each, the railway or the airplane, not its uses, "(...) is the message." (UM 7, 9)

In the first quotation about the railway McLuhan refers not only to "movement or transportation" as accelerated or enlarged - *extended* - "humans functions," but also to the wheel and the road. This leads us to another moment in McLuhan's concept of "content". In the context of his discussion of electric light McLuhan says: "characteristic for all media, (...) the 'content' of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph." (UM 8) In other words, the uses of "any medium" are always related to "another medium." So, the uses of railway are not only "movement or transportation," but they are related to "wheel or road" (UM 8). In centering our attention on the uses of a given medium we are necessarily referred to other media, and, in the end, through a chain of them, to some specific *use* of the first one. This illuminates famous but at first glance obscure passages about the electric light as "a medium without a message" (UM 8), that is, without any specific "content or uses" (UM 9). Electric light is pervasive, has so multifarious uses that "[w]hether the light is being used for brain surgery or night baseball is a matter of indifference." (UM 8) In other words, "[t]he electric light escapes attention as a communication medium just because it has no 'content' (...)" (UM 9), that is, no specific, primary "content or uses." Its uses are "all pervasive" (UM 85), and for this reason they cannot be easily attended. Thus, "(...) it is not till the electric light is used to spell out some brand name that it is noticed as a medium. Then it is not the light but the 'content





[use]' (or what is really another medium) that is noticed." (UM 9) The electric light is a special medium in the sense that it becomes visible only in a very specific use - when "used to spell out some verbal ad or name" (UM 8). But this shows our bias toward considering any medium *first* in view of its uses. If its uses escape awareness, then the medium itself escapes awareness, too. In focusing on their uses - their "content" -, we are not aware of the "social and personal effects [the message] of media apart from their 'content'." (UM 323) In the case of electric light we are unaware of its "totally radical, pervasive, and decentralized" (UM 9) effects or "message" (UM 9).

#### THE "MESSAGE" OF "MEDIA"

We have now to briefly consider McLuhan's concept of "message." From both McLuhan's thesis that "[t]he content or uses of (...) media are as diverse as they are *ineffectual* in shaping the form of human association (...)" (UM 9), and his criticism to the attention centered on the "content or uses of (.) media" (UM 9), it follows that he is interested in media as "radical forces" (UM 304) that are "(...) shaping the form of human association." (UM 9) And that is really McLuhan's main concern, as it is apparent, when he says that "(...) in all cases 'the medium is the message' or the basic source of *effects* (...)" (UM 314.mu). Just this leads him to his famous thesis: "(...) the medium is the message." (UM 9) And he immediately explains it as follows: "This is merely to say that the personal and social *consequences* of any medium (...) result from the new *scale* that is introduced into our affairs by (...) any new technology." (UM 9) McLuhan's concern is, thus, the "effects" (UM 314) or "consequences" (UM 7) of media. Not really the medium but its consequences are the "message." In another formulation, "(...) the 'message' of any medium or technology is the change of *scale* or *pace* or *pattern* that it introduces into human affairs." (UM 8)





Up to this point we have only referred to McLuhan's famous book *Understanding Media* (1964), but the idea becomes clearer by the following passage of *The Global Village* (1989): "(...) every human artifact is a medium of communication whose *message* may be said to be the totality of the satisfactions and dissatisfactions it engenders (...)" (GV 8). If the uses of a medium are at least some of "(...) the satisfactions it engenders (...)" (GV 8), then it follows that we have a different concept of "message" in GV as in UM, for in the last text McLuhan keeps the medium (the "message") and their uses quite apart each other. But anyway, in both texts McLuhan wants undoubtedly to center the attention on the broad effects of media, beyond their uses ("satisfactions"). That is apparent when McLuhan says: "More and more we turn from the *content* (...) to study *total effect*." (UM 26)

#### THE CONCEPT OF "MEDIA" AS "EXTENSIONS OF OURSELVES"

Now we can address McLuhan's concept of media, and a promising way to do it, is attempting to throw some light on what should we understand as "consequences" or "effects" of media, that is, as their "message." We begin by taking together two already quoted passages: "(...) the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social *consequences of any medium* - that is, of any *extension of ourselves* - result from the new *scale* that is introduced into our affairs by each *extension of ourselves*, or by any new technology." (UM 7) From this it is plain that McLuhan conceives of the "consequences" or "effects" of "any medium" (UM 7) as a change in "scale" in "our affairs." In fact the concept is broader, for "(...) the 'message' of any medium or technology (...)" (UM 8), that is, its consequences or effects, (...) is the change of *scale* or *pace* or *pattern* that it introduces into human affairs." (UM 8) It is interesting to notice that the term "scale" is quantitative; the term "pattern" is a structural or qualitative one, whereas the term "pace" is both quantitative and structural. Nevertheless, the





quantitative moment seems to be specially stressed, as we can see in remembering a part of an already quoted passage about the railway: "The railway did not introduce movement or transportation or wheel or road into human society, but it *accelerated* and *enlarged* the scale of previous human functions (...)" (UM 8). Now, on such a quantitative basis, occur structural, qualitative changes, as the continuation of this passage makes it clear: "(...) previous functions, creating totally *new kinds* [patterns] of cities and *new kinds* [patterns] of work and leisure." (UM 8) We don't need to resort to some Hegelian-like dialectic to say that McLuhan conceives the effects or consequences of media - their message - as a quantitative change in "human affairs" (UM 8) leading to a qualitative one. At any rate, thus, the quantitative moment in the effects of media seems to have, let us say, the lead in McLuhan's concept of media. On this basis the idea of media as "extensions" seems to be only natural; in fact McLuhan simply equals both terms: "any medium - that is, (...) any extension of ourselves" (UM 7). Media should be considered as extensions "of ourselves," for what they "(...) accelerate[ ] or enlarge[ ] [is just] the scale and form of *human* association and action (...)" (UM 9). In a somewhat more radical formulation McLuhan says, that "(...) *all* technologies are *extensions* of our physical and nervous systems to increase power and speed." (UM 90) Furthermore, as stated above, the quantitative change effected by media on "our affairs" has qualitative consequences, for, as McLuhan goes on a sentence below, "(...) an increase of power or speed in any kind of grouping or any components whatever is itself a disruption that causes a change of organization." (UM 90) This is, thus, the change of "scale" producing a change of "pattern." This should be considered as a McLuhanian theorem: the "*formative* power in the media" (UM 21) stems from "an increase of power or speed" (UM 90), for such an increase "(...) causes a change of organization." (UM 90)







It is necessary to stress here that McLuhan is completely serious in proposing that media are "extensions of our body" (UM 181). For this reason I will only mention here McLuhan's famous thesis, according to which we are fascinated or hypnotized by our technologies. This should be considered as a kind of "Narcissus fixation" (UM 19), and, according to McLuhan, "(...) we become what we behold (...)" (UM 19), or, as he puts it in his book *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), "[i]n beholding this new thing [a newly introduced technology], man is compelled to become it." (GG 265) As we can see, McLuhan is quite serious in his idea that media are "extensions of ourselves," that is, they are by no means mere middle-men we can use and throw away remaining as before: "To behold, use or perceive any extension of ourselves in technological form is necessarily to *embrace* it. To listen to radio or to read the printed page is to accept these extensions of ourselves *into* our personal system and to undergo the (...) displacement of perception [the change of ourselves] that follows automatically." (UM 46) In fact, according to McLuhan, "[s]ince TV, Johnny [whichever kid] had acquired an entirely new set of perceptions. *He is not at all the same.*" (UM 312) And it is noteworthy to point out that the change effected by any technological extension concerns not only "perception," but to some extent "the scale and form of human association" as a whole. So we can paraphrase McLuhan again and say that in introducing a new technological form "human society is not at all the same."

#### CONCLUSION. MEDIA AND THE SELF

In this way we come to our main result in this text, namely, McLuhan's deconstructionist move against the Western thought-tradition on media. According to McLuhan, to conceive media or technologies merely as middle-men, as mere *in*-struments posed between us and some goals (uses) misleads us, precluding understanding of the deeper consequences, the "total effect" (GV 8) of media, what primarily and centrally includes the change media effect on us. McLuhan proposes to meet this kind of deception





by considering media not as something apart from us, but on the contrary, just as "extensions of ourselves." In other words, by thinking of media as instruments, we deceive ourselves about the nature of media and *about our own nature*. Deception about media reveals itself as *self-deception*. For this reason McLuhan does not use at all the common term "instruments," and this should help us not to be exclusively concentrated on the uses (the "content") of media, but to grasp their "personal and social effects" (UM 323). In conceiving media not as instruments - something "out there" - but as "extensions of ourselves," McLuhan deconstructs the whole Western thought tradition about technology. Furthermore the notion of "extension" together with the thesis that "(...) the 'content' of any medium is always another medium (...)," that is, the thesis that individual media are to be considered as moments in a total media structure, focus our attention on the relationship between the Self and its technological environment. McLuhan could have said: tell me which is your technological environment, and I shall tell you, who you are.

Understanding the technological environment amounts to deep, structural, self-understanding. The philosophical quest after self-understanding becomes thus, the philosophical quest about the dominant technologies. By deconstructing the notion of media as "instruments," McLuhan simultaneously deconstructs the notion of "Self". The issue is not "me and my circumstance" (Ortega), rather it is me and my technological circumstance, that is, me and the dominant technological structures "shaping" (McLuhan) my relationship to myself and to the others.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY AND ABBREVIATIONS

UM = McLuhan, Marshall, *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man* (1964), Massachusetts Institute of





Technology, Cambridge, 1998. GV = McLuhan, Marshall & Powers, Bruce R., *The Global Village. Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century* (1986), Oxford University Press, New York, 1992.

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