

THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE: AND THE PROBLEM?

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Suppose that Marshal McLuhan is right and that, “Taken in the long run, the medium is the message”^{1, p.3}. So when I interact with you by email or Skype, or texting, what gets communicated is much more a feature of the medium that I use than the content of the message I am delivering. This is also what Sherry Turkle is saying in her book “Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age”². And yet digital media are everywhere in our lives. When I come to work on the bus in the morning between 50% and 75% of people are on their phones. At a restaurant recently I noticed a family having dinner together, what appeared to be a mother and father and 3 children from pre-teen to early teenage, all of whom spent most of the time on their phones. Occasionally they did interact, primarily to show each other something on their phones. They appeared to be having a good time but I wondered what digital media were doing to the depth of their relationships. Turkle reports that even having a phone out between two people increases the superficiality of the conversation³. Perhaps electronic media are not simply a new mechanism for transmitting information but a profound new presence in our lives that may have unintended harmful consequences.

LUDDISM

I realize that an immediate response to my concern about digital media is that I am a Luddite*. This is an unstoppable and overall beneficial technology that we need to learn to use better. Trying to limit it and slow it down or even stop it is simply trying to halt progress. And there are aspects to digital media that do represent real beneficial effects for humanity. The question is how we retain those effects, while ensuring

*A follower of Nedd Ludd who destroyed looms at the onset of the Industrial Revolution.

that we don't pay too high a price in terms of the depth of ourselves and our relationships. Or perhaps we need an outright rebellion.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

The kind of rebellion against technology that I am suggesting is not new. In 1847 a young man in Concord, Massachusetts decided to live outside the system then operating in 19th century America⁴. He built a small cabin by a lake in the woods and lived there on his own for two years. Thoreau was not rejecting everything in the society in which he grew up. He continued to be visited by friends and walked into town regularly but he was no longer simply a cog in that societal machine. Although everyone around him was attempting to accumulate goods and money in an attempt to ensure their survival, safety, and presumably happiness, Thoreau no longer lived by these precepts. What became important to Thoreau was the quality of his presence to himself, to his surroundings (with a strong focus on his natural surroundings), and to his fellow human beings. His book *Walden* is a description of those two years in the woods that remains an inspiration for people seeking a meaningful life over one and a half centuries later. Thoreau was not a Luddite. He did not want to destroy the railway or any of the other useful technologies that fuelled the industrial revolution. He simply wanted to show that we needed a different relationship to society and to machines, and particularly to a society that treated people like machines.

THE INFORMATION AGE

If the industrial revolution emphasized the production of goods as the measure of the productivity of a society the equivalent measure in the information age is data. We all seem to want more data because that we believe is the path to survival, security, success, and perhaps happiness. But do we, like Thoreau, need to step aside from that powerful driving force that treats us as if we were simply sources or recipients of data? Are digital media our servants or could this new medium be creating a world in which we are more their servants than our own masters?

THE ILLUSION OF NEUTRALITY AND CONTROL

But you may say technology, including digital technology, is neutral in itself and we simply need to control how and when to use it. I do use electronic media but have resisted getting an iPhone because of the fear that it would be neither neutral nor completely controllable. The neutrality or lack of it is well covered in Sherry Turkle's book. She points to evidence that the use of electronic media decreases empathy⁵ and negatively affects our ability to be fully present to ourselves, our family⁶ and our relationships⁷. Do I think that a smartphone would make me a less emphatic and caring person? I believe that deep down I would remain the same person, which may or may not be true, but my fear is that I would be less present to and

more distracted from that essential part of my nature. Thoreau said that he loved “a broad margin to my life”⁸. I am concerned that an iPhone or similar device by putting me constantly in digital contact with a very large and busy world would significantly narrow those margins.

What about the control that I would exert? Surely I would have the choice about when my phone was switched on, when and how I responded to it, how I employed it in my life. Well, in theory yes but in reality I am not so sure. I already find that when I come into my office in the morning the first thing that I do is check my email, thus allowing it to initiate the agenda for my day. I check it again before I go to bed at night, in case I might be missing something, or in the vague hope that some marvelous message might have arrived. I am usually disappointed but it does not change my behaviour which I believe is a mild form of addiction. What I am afraid of is to turn a mild addiction into the full blown variety where I am spending a high proportion of my time on digital media as many young people in North America are now doing.

ADDICTION AND DIGITAL MEDIA

What we know about addictions is that they arise from pleasurable experiences that trigger our brain's rewards systems in ways that begin as deliberate choices but become self-perpetuating. Alcohol, drugs, sex and many other activities can become addictive so that seeking those pleasures drives us rather than us driving them. When I look at so many of my fellow travelers in the bus glued to their phones it is hard for me to believe this is a free choice and not an addiction. The only comparable fixation on a similar activity that I have experienced in my lifetime was when everybody, or everybody cool at least, smoked. Of course digital media are not the same as smoking since we do not take something physically harmful into our bodies, but it is possible that we are taking in is equally addictive. And if so, like smoking, it may take a couple of generations to realize the problems with this addiction and to initiate a groundswell that begins to limit and decrease its hold on the population. Unfortunately I cannot wait that long and may remain one of the “uncool” people who does not own a smartphone. Or could this be wisdom that taken in the long run will be recognized as cool? ■

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