

The Origin and Institutionalization of the Media Concept: Guillory and McLuhan

Currently linked to matters of communication, the “concept of a medium of communication was absent but wanted for the several centuries prior to its appearance” (Guillory 321). The absence of this term, as noted by John Guillory in “Genesis of the Media Concept,” created a latent gap on early efforts to theorize communication. Although Guillory does a great job of tracing the origin of the concept, I believe, in order to complete Guillory’s analysis of the media concept, it is both important and practical to consider how we, as a society, were led to understand media and validate the term, as well as that which surrounds it as a common and necessary part of our culture. In other words, although Guillory analyzes the origin of the media concept and traces its history back to an English version of Aristotle’s *Poetics* from 1447, it was not truly institutionalized, popularized as a term in our common vocabulary or understood as a concept with theoretical implications that needed to be studied in order to better understand society until the work of Marshall McLuhan, beginning during his time at Cambridge University (1934-1936) and becoming popularized during his time at the University of Toronto through his most famous book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964).

Medium – defined as middle or the middle position – and its plural form *media* have a long history that date back to uses in the English language as early as the fifteenth century with a variety of understandings, but only more recently, in the later nineteenth century, did the term begin to enter our vocabulary in the modern use in which we currently relate it, on most occasions, as a collective noun for our most advanced communication technologies. The recognition of this term in the later nineteenth century was due to the emergence of new technical media, such as the telegraph and phonograph, that could not be assimilated to the older system of the arts, in which all “media” were associated.

To ground his analysis of the media concept, Guillory tries to trace the foundation of the term “medium” beginning with its first known undeveloped usage in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. In analyzing the term mimesis, Aristotle refers briefly to a concept with a phrase that his translators consistently render as “media” or “medium.” As noted by Aristotle, “But imitations differ from one another in three ways, for they differ either by being imitations in different things, of different things, or differently and not in the same way” (Guillory 323). The first of these three ways, “in different things,” is followed by examples that include “colors and figures” and “harmony and rhythm,” leading translators to believe that “different things” is equivalent to “medium” or “media.”

From this point, the development and usage of the concept of “medium” continued to remain untouched until the invention of printing, which brought the idea of remediation to the forefront and, in turn, reinstated interest in the idea of “medium” and the lack of a necessary term in our vocabulary to comprehend the practice of reproducing the content of manuscript writing and the new possibilities for writing in print. As stated by Guillory, “It is much easier to see what a medium does – the possibilities inherent in the material form of an art – when the same expressive or communicative contents are transposed from one medium into another” (324). In other words, even though the technical innovation of print was not labeled as a medium, its capacity to remediate generated the visibility of something that had not yet been seen.

Consequently, rhetoric, which emphasized speech over writing, was influenced by the print “medium” and generated a reordering of the relations between speech and writing, “a reordering in which writing – in the remediated form of print – would come increasingly to dominate the most important social venues of communication” (Guillory 326). Rhetoric assumed

that the speaker occupied a forensic position, in which his or her thoughts were best kept within oneself. Communication, by contrast, posited the transfer of the speaker's thoughts and feelings to the listener. This reordering from rhetoric to what we now understand as communication, as noted, was heavily influenced by the invention of print; however, before embarking on a discussion about our current understanding of "communication," it is first important to chart, as Guillory does, the reorientation of language with the goal of communication, in hopes of better understanding the genesis of the media concept.

According to Guillory, the communication concept emerged in early modernity as an explicit challenge to the system of rhetoric. As noted, rhetoric assumed that the speaker's thoughts and feeling were best kept to oneself. "Communication by contrast posited the transfer of the speaker's thoughts and feelings accurately to the mind of the auditor" (Guillory 327). Francis Bacon was one of the first theorists to struggle with trying to find a way of describing the technical means of communication, and he did so primarily by moving away from speech in order to affirm the greater utility of writing for transferring thoughts. On the other hand, Bacon's disciple, Thomas Hobbs, did not celebrate the technical medium of print. He felt that speech was "the most notable and profitable invention of all other" (Guillory 329). Although both theorists had different ideas about whether speech or writing was the better means of portraying thoughts, both were struggling with the idea of "communication."

Though humans were anciently labeled the "speaking animal" by Aristotle, only since the later nineteenth century have we defined ourselves in terms of our ability to "communicate" with one another. From the Latin word *commnicare*, meaning to impart, share, or make common, "communication" entered the English language in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. As in Latin, one dominant brand of meaning in "communication" has to do with imparting, quite apart

from any notion of a dialogic or interactive process. Another branch of meaning involves transfer or transmission. And, a third branch of meaning is communication as exchange, that is, as a transfer times two. Communication in this sense is supposed to involve interchange, mutuality, and some kind of reciprocity. Communication can also serve, in a more modest way, as a blanket term for the various modes of symbolic interaction (Peters 7-8).

The first recorded usage of “communication” in the modern sense of the “imparting, conveying, or exchange of ideas, knowledge, information, etc. (whether by speech, writing, or signs)” is 1690 by John Locke (Guillory 331). John Peters argues that “communication” made a huge shift, from a concept of matter to one of mind, by Locke, who first associated the term with sociability, stating that the “Comfort, and Advantage of Society is not to be had without Communication of Thoughts” (Guillory 332). Locke believed that the job of language was to convey ideas, with the aim of communication. In this sense, words were seen as the conveyer of thoughts, with the aim of communication.

Restated, words were the “medium.” And, although the “medium” makes communication possible, it also makes it possible to fail. Therefore, for Locke words were seen as the medium of thought, and clarity was the ruling outcome because language should always be transparent to meaning (Guillory 339). As noted by George Campbell, “the failure of communication brings the medium into an unwanted visibility” or, in Campbell’s terms, draws our “attention” to it (Guillory 339).

This idea has many similarities to the theories of John Wilkins, in which he used the communication concept in a more modern sense than Locke by hoping to “correct the communicative deficiency of language by means of a technological fix” (Guillory 336). Wilkins believed that although technology may deliberately frustrate communication, the effect is to

bring the medium into greater visibility. Therefore, Locke and Wilkins have different perceptions of where one locates the undertaking of the medium. For Locke, it is simply a vehicle of thought that should be transparent, but for Wilkins it is a material technology that effects how society's values, norms and ways of doing things change over time. This concentration on the medium and how it conveys information – rather than on the specific content of the information – is the focal point of McLuhan's famous and ever-present phrase "the medium is the message," which, along with McLuhan himself, is essential to any analysis of media or our understanding of the media concept.

As a scholar who rose to celebrity during the 1960s, and has remained a person of public interest since, McLuhan put "the study of media on the academic map...Although others were responsible for the invention of media technology, McLuhan's contribution was the rhetorical invention of THE MEDIA as a phrase and a category that made its way into public discourse." (Strate and Wachtel 1). Before McLuhan, we understood that there was the press and there was speech; that there were techniques and technologies; that publishing, broadcasting, motion pictures and sound recordings were understood as vehicles of communication; however, until McLuhan we did not understand that language is a technology, that tools and machines are forms of communication, and that all of these things are media.

McLuhan attended the University of Manitoba from 1928 to 1934, where he earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in English literature. After Manitoba, McLuhan moved on to Cambridge University, which is where McLuhan's shift toward media analysis is often pinpointed. At Cambridge, McLuhan was trained in the New Criticism of I. A. Richards, William Empson and F. R. Leavis. New Critics believe that one should treat a work of literature as if it were self-contained. They do not consider the reader's response, author's intention, or

historical and cultural contexts. New Critics perform a close reading of the text, and believe the structure and meaning of the text should not be examined separately. For McLuhan, if words were ambiguous and best studied not in terms of their “content” (i.e. dictionary meanings) but in terms of their effects in a given context, and if those effects were often subliminal, the same might be true of other human artifacts – the wheel, the printing press, and so on (Marchand 34).

The premise behind McLuhan’s first book, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*, published in 1951 while he was working at the University of Toronto, where he spent the majority of his career (1946-1979), drew from the lessons he learned at Cambridge. Primarily, *The Mechanical Bride* consisted almost entirely of an analysis of advertisements, following the premise that practical literary criticism could be associated with training in awareness of the environment. As stated by McLuhan, “Practical Criticism – the analysis of prose and verse – may be extended to the analysis of advertisements (the kind of appeal they make and their stylistic characteristics) followed up by comparison with representative passages of journalese and popular fiction” (Marchand 35). This book, and subsequently the thought process it produced, helped McLuhan veer away from being a purely literary critic to becoming a student of society and, eventually, the media.

It is important to note, however, that although *The Mechanical Bride* studied the products of media and popular culture, and McLuhan’s analysis was informed by the history of technology, he later disavowed the book’s focus on content in order to emphasize the significance of the medium. This change came about during McLuhan’s time at the University of Toronto where he met a political economist named Harold Innis who had discovered that certain media of communication are time based and certain media – more portable and ephemeral – are space based. Working with this hint, and discovering simultaneously in the works of James

Joyce, notably *Finnegans Wake*, a critique of radio and television, McLuhan articulated his perceptions of media as extensions of the human body, and of electronic media, in particular, as extensions of the nervous system, imposing, like poetry, their own assumptions on the psyche of the user. Additionally, it was with another one of McLuhan's colleagues at the University of Toronto, Edmund Carpenter, that he began laying out these perceptions in a journal entitled *Explorations*, which further provided McLuhan with some of "the conceptual foundations for his shift from a literary, content orientation to a focus on media structures and their cultural and cognitive implications," leading him to refine his ideas about media and eventually produce his two major works on media: *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962), in which he analyzes the effects of mass media, especially the printing press, on European culture and human consciousness, and *Understanding Media*, which elaborates upon the sensory manipulation of the electric media.

Understanding Media was McLuhan's single most popular work. Eventually translated into over twenty languages, it brought him public acclaim and truly institutionalized the concept of the media through the phrase "the medium is the message," meaning that the form of a medium embeds itself in the message, creating a symbiotic relationship by which the medium influences how the message is perceived. In contrast to Locke's argument which states that the medium is simply a vehicle of thought that should be transparent, but similar to Wilkins' argument which posits that it is a material technology that effects how society's values norms and ways of doing things change over time, McLuhan proposed that media itself, not the content it carries, should be the focus of study. He said that a medium affects the society in which it plays a role not only by the content delivered over the medium, but also by the characteristics of the medium itself. As stated by McLuhan:

In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, 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. (McLuhan, “The Medium is the Message” 107)

In other words, the things on which words were written down count more than the words themselves.

To use an analogy formed by McLuhan in order to better understand the idea of the medium being as important as the content it carries:

The instance of the electric light may prove illuminating in this connection. The electric light is pure information. It is a medium without a message, as it were, unless it is used to spell out some verbal ad or name. This fact, characteristic of all media, means that 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.

(McLuhan, “The Medium is the Message” 107)

To think of media in this way leaves the door open for including Guillory’s debate of mediation as a process whereby these different persons or objects are brought into relation in order to produce content (communicate a message), and can only do so through mediation because there is no direct relation between the two objects or persons and therefore the two things may come into conflict.

As noted by Guillory, the range of meanings for mediation is broad, but the basic premise is that mediation is needed when there is an “interposition of states or process between stimulus

and result, or intention and realization” (342). Therefore, the idea of a medium, if defined as “a means of effecting or conveying something,” often requires mediation (“medium”). From this understanding, the process of mediation would seem to be everywhere implied by the operation of a technical medium; however, the concept of mediation has few instances before the twentieth century in which it was extrapolated from the medium (Guillory 341). Prior to this time period, mediation was mostly understood as a reference to agents or actions involving intercession between alienated parties. However, Charles Sanders Peirce concluded through his research that “representation is a means by which objects in the world are mediated,” which fails to capture the complexity of the very process for which mediation stood for so long (Guillory 321).

This revolutionary idea of mediation was reorganized by theorists such as Benjamin Whorf, Edward Sapir, Lev Vygotsky and Ludwig Wittgenstein who posited that reality itself can be described as mediated by language (that is, more than just represented).

The hypothesis of language as medium is no longer just a way of pointing to the distorting effect of words, in Locke’s sense, but of evoking the world making of semiotic mediation...The proliferation of communication media in the social environment suggests that communication can no longer be modeled as the representation of silent thought by spoken word. (Guillory 350-351)

In order to better understand this, one can analyze the basic communication model that involves a sender, a receiver and a message to be sent. Whether the message is being sent directly between the two persons face-to-face or via a technological medium, such as a telephone, radio or computer, external and/or internal factors may occur during this transfer of information that could distort the message and prevent the receiver from receiving the original message that is meant by the sender. Additionally, based off of the medium and the sender, the message is

encoded and certain things are added or organized accordingly. On the other side, the receiver has to decode the message, and assume what the sender meant to say. This often results in distortion of the message and can affect the original purpose of the message.

Based on this communication model, there is a new literary context for modeling linguistic communication: language mediates thought, rather than language represents thought. In this case, the selectivity of any medium leads to its use having influences of which the user may not always be conscious, which may not have been part of the purpose in using it, and therefore, may require a need for mediation. However, the user can also be so familiar with the medium that he or she is blind to the mediation it involves, and as long as we are numbed to the processes involved we cannot be said to be exercising choices in its use. Amongst the phenomena enhanced or reduced by media selectivity are the ends for which a medium was used. In some cases, our purposes may be subtly (and perhaps invisibly) redefined by our use of a particular medium (Chandler).

An awareness of this phenomenon of transformation that is possible by media has often led media theorists, such as McLuhan, to argue deterministically that our technical means always and inevitably become “ends in themselves,” and has even led some to present media as wholly independent entities with purposes (as opposed to functions) of their own. However, it is not necessary to adopt such extreme stances in acknowledging the transformations involved in the processes of mediation. Instead, Daniel Chandler believes that when we use a medium for any purpose, its use becomes part of that purpose. Writing is an unavoidable part of sending a letter; it may even become a primary goal. Writing by hand versus sending an email becomes part of the experience.

In using any medium, to some extent we serve its 'purposes' as well as it serving ours.

When we engage with media we both act and are acted upon, use and are used. Where a medium has a variety of functions it may be impossible to choose to use it for only one of these functions in isolation. The making of meanings with such media must involve some degree of compromise. (Chandler)

Therefore, complete identity between any specific purpose and the functionality of a medium is likely to be rare.

The likelihood of mediation is higher when distance is added into the communication process through technology. Technologies such as the telegraph and radio refitted the old term “communication” into a new kind of quasi-physical connection across the obstacles of time and space. Such media of transmission as the post office, telephone, camera, phonograph, and radio did not necessarily effect face-to-face communication as an already constituted zone of human activity, but rather media, such as these, made mediation even more necessary. And, the potentials for disruption in long-distance communication have since come to describe the frustrations of face-to-face communications as well, which is interesting to look at from McLuhan’s point of view.

For McLuhan, speech was not the only mass medium, nor was it necessarily the dominant one. In technologically advanced societies during this time period, McLuhan believed that print, broadcasting and film could replace speech as the dominant mode through which knowledge and feelings were communicated. In such societies, speech did not disappear, it just assumed the characteristics of the dominant medium. McLuhan began his analysis of this theory by acknowledging that the senses – sight, sound and smell – are interdependent. Therefore, to alter one of the senses is to change the relationship between all three, which, therefore, alters the way individuals organize experience and fix perception. The key to McLuhan’s argument, however,

is that the relationship between the senses and the power of the senses is altered by more than just physical impairment. In other words, media of communication also encourage the overuse of one or more senses and the underuse of others; in turn, changing the way different people organize experiences and understand the world around them. “Modes of communication, including speech, are then, devices for fixing perception and organizing experience” (Carey 18). This seems rational because McLuhan views the media not merely as technical accessories to society, but as crucial determinants of the social fabric. As noted by McLuhan:

Technology is literally an extension of man, as the ax is an extension of the hand, the wheel of the foot. Most instruments are attempts to extend man’s physical capacity, a capacity shared with animals. Communications technology, on the other hand, is an extension of thought, of consciousness, of man’s unique perceptual capacities. Thus communication media, broadly used to include all modes of symbolic representation, are literally extensions of mind. (Rosenthal 273)

Media of communication, in turn, are vast social metaphors that not only transmit information, but determine what is knowledge; that not only orient us to the world and excite and delight our senses, but tell us what kind of world exists and actually change our character by altering the ratio of senses that we utilize.

It is through such an analysis that McLuhan came to and expressed his central point: the medium is the message. “By such argument, McLuhan insists that the meaning and effect of any communications innovation is to be found in the way it structures thought and perception” (Carey 20). The excitement that McLuhan brought to the study of media was further derived from his extension of this argument to newer media at the time, such as television, and the relationship of this newer media to traditional vehicles, such as print, and the effects of these

newer media on people.

Television, according to McLuhan, not only devalued the effect of the written word by providing another means for transferring knowledge, but it also provided a radically new way of organizing experience. Unlike print, television is not only an eye medium; it uses a much broader range of sensual equipment and reorganizes the senses and engages the entire person through the use of sight and sound, as well as eliciting a sense of touch. One does not just watch television; one engages in it. Therefore, McLuhan notes that because television engages all the senses and because it is a medium that encourages and requires participation from the user, a culture in which television is the dominant medium will produce a person different than will a culture based on print. Consequently, a society's values, norms and ways of doing things change because of technology, which forces us to realize the social implications of media.

The idea that the device of communication used, whether it is face-to-face communication or mediated through a technological vehicle, such as print or television, supplies reasoning for the characteristic differences between generations, was revolutionary at the time. And it is through this that McLuhan helped society understand that “every medium of communication possesses a logic or grammar which constitutes a set of devices for organizing experience. The logic or grammar of each medium which dominates an age impresses itself on the users of the medium, thus dictating what is defined as truth and knowledge. Communication media, then, determine not only what one thinks about but literally how we think” (Carey 22). This is a concept that McLuhan took with him and used to convince others about the impact of communications technology on culture and society, bringing him an enormous following and bringing visibility to the invisible environments of media, communication, culture and technology.

In conclusion, although Guillory takes the media concept and traces its origin back to when it was first implied by Aristotle in *Poetics*, as imitations that are different because they are “in different things,” as well as when it was a latent term for centuries to follow, it was McLuhan who institutionalized it. “By introducing the idea that our perspectives have been altered throughout history by the introduction of new communication technologies, McLuhan has left us with an expanded view of the history of technology and has opened doors for many to enter” (Abrams 844). McLuhan took a term that had for years been undeveloped (and had just begun to enter our society’s vocabulary) and revolutionized it, making it not only an important area of analysis and study, but also an ever-present term in our lexicon.

Currently, media is the plural form of “medium,” understood as something in a middle position; a means of effecting or conveying something (as a channel or system of communication); a condition or environment in which something may function or flourish (“media”). The concept of media has grown enormously and the term is used in the modern sense to reference the agencies of mass communication. At one time missing, but desperately desired, the concept has become commonplace in our society. It has become so common, that in terms of communication it has become known as any tool used to store or deliver information or data, such as: advertising media, electronic media, hypermedia, mass media, social media and multimedia. Whether the ubiquity of the media concept, and primarily the present usage of the term, is because of McLuhan is a debatable point, but one that I believe is hard to argue against.

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