Vinícius Andrade Pereira

Communication technologies as grammars:
medium, content and message in Marshall McLuhan's work.

Both in the opinion of his admirers and detractors, McLuhan's most important work is the book *Understanding Media,* which was published in 1964 and completed 40 years later in 2004[1]. Within this work, McLuhan structures an approach to exploring issues related to communication technologies that had marked his whole oeuvre and can also be understood as a game that continuously switches the observation focus, either centered on figures or on grounds. Once recognized as McLuhan's work methodology, as well as adopted and applied in practice by the author himself, this strategy allows to foresee analog objects which interested not only McLuhan, but everyone whose goal is reflecting on subjects related to communication and information technologies.

A theme/object can be considered as synthesis and emblem, however, within the diversity of objects investigated by McLuhan – that's the concept of *medium*. This article's main purpose is to discuss some meanings for the comprehension of *medium*, *content*, and *message* in McLuhan, particularly when regarded in the struggle of a presumed opposition between *medium* and *content* - an opposition assumed by some of his critics, mostly based upon a hasty reading of the aphorism the *medium is the message*. I propose that the reflections developed here might increase (with a little help from McLuhan) the instruments relevant to the deepening of comprehension towards contemporary communication technologies characteristics and dynamics.

Medium

The meanings explored by McLuhan for the word *medium* are numerous. Most of these meanings are conveyed by the English language itself. Therefore, the main senses of *medium* in McLuhan can vary or even amalgamate the following meanings: 1) as *manner*, or *mode*, *vehicle* for different operations achievement; 2) hence, whenever communication is

---

[1] For a good analysis of favorable and adverse critiques of McLuhan's propositions see Rosenthal, Funk & Wagmalls Pub, USA, 1967.

the operation in question, the meaning accomplished is *communication vehicle*, which, by its turn, practically presents itself as a synonym for different *media*: TV, radio, cinema, newspapers, magazines and so on; 3) as a synonym for *technological extensions*, a meaning that achieved huge publicity through *Understanding media* itself; 4) as *environment, enveloping substance*, in the sense one refers to *habitat* — although this does not necessarily imply the *biological environment*; 5) as a synonym for *public*, in opposition to the idea of *private*, as McLuhan explains in a very peculiar interpretation of the word's etymology, when he mentions the revolution caused by the press in *post-Gutenberg* men's quotidian: "The word 'medium' was Latin for 'public'. There not being any reading public before printing, human beings perhaps tended to think of readers at large as a kind of scattering of currency – a 'medium' in that sense" (Mc Luhan, Zingrone: 1995:272).All these meanings can be explored within different contexts in McLuhan, whenever he speaks or writes, often producing significant ambiguities typical of his non-academic style.

Nevertheless, during the final period of his work - actually, just one year before his death - McLuhan put forth, through a prosaic event, the notion he seems to have wanted to privilege for his idea of *medium*: as a synonym for *extensions,* although it accomplishes, in its turn, an approximation of the idea of a *grammar*, of a *text*.

McLuhan, supposedly upset with a misinterpretation of the meanings of the word *medium* featured in an article entitled *The meaning of the message*, published by the Canadian newspaper *The Globe and Mail*, writes to the staff responsible for the composition and publication of the mentioned article. He reprimands them while trying to be didactic concerning the meaning that should be given to the term: "The piece in your July 28 issue on 'The meaning of the message' does not give the reader any idea of what I mean by a medium. Every medium or technology creates a service environment. Thus the motor car creates super-highways, suburbs, gas stations, etc. It is this environment of service and disservice which I call medium. Since this environment of services is a kind of 'text', it has its own peculiar syntax and grammar. It is this medium which invades and reshapes every aspect of the social and psychic life of the users of the technology, regardless of what the car or radio or TV set is used for […]."[2] Explicitly, McLuhan says that the *medium*, once understood as a *technological extension, creates* an *environment* that, by its turn, acts as a *text*, as a specific grammar. Now, if a text bears its own grammar, this very text reveals a language,

---

[2] Published by the Canadian newspaper *The Globe and Mail, Weekend Magazine*, September 22 of 1979. The *McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology Archives,* University of Toronto, Canada.

the organizing matrix of the text in question. Thus, language is the order, the organization, the *form* of the text. The idea that form rules the signifying processes is absolutely determining for the sense of *medium* in McLuhan. Here, the pivotal point rests on the articulation between the ideas of *form* and signification production processes, or, in the terms of McLuhan, between *medium*, *content*, and *message*.

Medium versus content

A good part of McLuhan's critics rejected him based on a misunderstanding regarding the famous aphorism *the medium is the message*, consequently inferring that McLuhan underrated the *content* of a *medium* as *message*. This interpretation seemed to be confirmed by loose phrases that McLuhan uttered in randomly, at conferences, in various articles, books and interviews, and whenever he tried to better explicate his idea of *medium* as a synonym of *technological extensions*. He called attention to the need of acknowledging that communication technologies' nature and dynamics always require great concern when with respect to the effects they might produce in culture as a whole, and in the individuals, in particular. Apparently, in the face of reflections on the communication processes through the new electronic media back then, McLuhan's greatest intention was to expand the discussion on the analysis of message contents, adopting as a theoretical axis for his studies an investigation that considered the *medium* as a whole, understanding it as a new language which *re-forms* culture itself.

One of the passages that led to interpretations that pointed out McLuhan's presumed inattention concerning message contents is the following: "[…] the 'content' of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind" (McLuhan:1964:32). This statement, which appears in *Understanding Media*, would be a more concise variation of the same idea already expressed in a manuscript, dated May 1961, where he wrote: "[…] the content of a medium like the 'meaning' of a poem is the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the housedog of the mind, and thus to let the poem do its work."3. In this 1961 version, McLuhan makes very clear that the biggest reference for the idea he proposes were Havelock's studies on ordinary Greek

---

3 McLuhan, H.M.; *Through the vanishing point*, manuscript, unpublished, dated May 1st 1961, p.1. *McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology Archives.* University of Toronto, Canada. It is likely that this manuscript was used as a basis for the book written with Harley Parker and published in 1968 under the title *Through the vanishing point: Space in Poetry and in Painting. New York: Harper and Row.*

psychology in the age of Homeric Greek, when poetry acted as a powerful mnemotechnic.

Through strategies such as rhythm, alliteration, melody, repetition, rhymes, and gestures, Havelock calls attention to a major effect produced by poetic recitation within Greek oral traditions which, besides the recitation bearing the message in a clear form, was more of a guarantee that heroic epics would be memorized without further questioning, and, thus, passed on from generation to generation. With these studies, Havelock made clear that the subjective effects poetry brought out were not directly connected to the poem's content but to the poem's *form* and *language* as a whole. This could be clearly foreseen, according to Havelock, upon the advent of writing when a transformation of Greek psyche happens, caused not only by the new contents that have presented themselves since then, but mainly by the new detached position each person may occupy within the cultural legacy, formerly expressed almost exclusively through a rhythmic vortex of oral words.

It is within this perspective that Havelock calls attention to the fact that Plato, with his dialectics, already represented this *new man* who is born under the sign of individuality, of *psyché*, freeing himself from the imprisoning magic effects of oral poetry that entangled the spectator within a kind of trance state through a set of recitation and dramatic techniques. According to Havelock, without this rapturous, ecstatic state during which the conscience changes, the poem's effect would not actualize itself.

When, based on Plato's critiques of poetry, Havelock writes about the psychology that pervades Greek reciting performance it is noticeable how he emphasizes a polarization between *form* and *psychological effects* on the one hand and *content* on the other, without implying that this polarization means absolute independence of the elements in question: "[…] this surely is a clue to the reason why Plato, as he examines the ways of poets and poetry, seems so preoccupied with the conditions of the actual poetic performance before an audience; to the degree that when he seeks to analyze the content of poetry it proves difficult to separate the issue of content from the psychological effects of reciting it and listening to it. What the poet was saying was in Plato's eyes important and maybe dangerous, but how he was saying it and manipulating it might seem even more important and more dangerous" (Havelock: 1963, 146). Hence, what Havelock observes and demonstrates is that recitation art, by means of a series of technical

resources such as rhythm, rhymes, repetitions, melodies, and body movements, in some sort of dance produces a kind of hypnotic trance, not only in the artist who recites, but also in the whole audience, inducing the entire mobilization of the nervous system in a memorization conditioning process[4].

Preliterate Greek recitation art would work as a medium, a grammar, a language that, more than explicating contents, was able to promote intense mental and bodily investments whose effects would be extremely powerful affective and cognitive alterations regarding group cohesion and society's discursive and doctrinal maintenance. Apparently, McLuhan still wanted to observe this same dynamics model which encloses the *content*, *form*, and *effects* elements in an idea of grammar when he investigated communication and speech technologies, from writing to electronic media.

Fully aware that a medium may promote effects that act in parallel with the message content within the nervous system – instead of understanding the medium content – McLuhan suggests that the study of a medium content could be expanded, as did Plato when he undertook the criticism of *mimesis*, dissecting its form and content through two distinct and interdependent plans of analysis. McLuhan proposes two other possibilities of understanding *content*. The first one considers that *the content of a medium is another medium*: "[…] characteristic of 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. If it is asked, 'What is the content of speech?', it is necessary to say, 'It is an actual process of thought, which is itself nonverbal'"(McLuhan:1964:24). The second possibility of expanding the meaning of the idea of *content* concerns McLuhan's proposition that the *content* of a medium would be ultimately the user him or herself. "The TV user is the content of TV. Everybody who exists within any manmade service environment experiences all the effects that he would undergo in any environment as such. Environments work us over and remake us. It is man who is the 'content' of the 'message' of the 'media', which are extensions of himself […]" (McLuhan, Nevitt:1972: 89-90). Both possibilities may sound contradictory and

---

[4] It is in this sense that Havelock observes how Plato was hostile to poetry, for he regarded it as a powerful weapon that induced a sort of permanent sleep in those who did not accomplish a certain kind of *philosophical* reasoning. Still, Havelock calls attention to the adequacy of the term *mimesis* as chosen by Plato when he analyses this scenic game between the orator and his audience, emphasizing the fact that it is not the case of mere imitation. In this case, *mimesis* must be taken as an action that the audience does not *imitate*, but rather *resounds*, *stages*, in an absolutely rapturous way along with the artist, i.e., that what was transmitted. See Havelock, *op. cit.*, particularly chapters 9 and 10, pp 145-193.

confusing. After all, what is the content of a medium for McLuhan? Let us proceed with more caution regarding this topic.

Content, meaning and message

In McLuhan, the definition of the content of a medium is presented as an issue because, in general, the *content* of a *medium* inevitably is considered as the *message* itself, the *meaning* the medium bears. However, the common connection between message and meaning must not be gratuitous and immediate, indeed, for the reception of the same message by different systems does not guarantee identical understandings[5]. Nowadays, one can accept that signifying production could be understood as an emergent function within a complex system's typical order model. Therefore, meaning would be the property of a system to attribute sense to a given *message*–that which is perceived or imagined by this very system—contrasting it against a set of other messages provided by the memory of the mentioned system [6].

Concerning complex systems, each system, however, has unique mnemonic sets—albeit with a series of *common memories*, as in the case of any given social group sharing the same language, for instance—that enables the genesis of meaning to present semiotic distinct products, even in the face of an *object* perceived in a similar form, by two systems of the same kind. A good example would be an electronic message that reaches two people simultaneously. The message is written in Japanese and only one of them has proficiency in the language. Consequently, both people are facing the same received message, but they produce absolutely distinct meanings.[7] If the meaning is not directly attached to the message, but requires a participation of the mnemonic and cognitive structure of the system that processes the received message, likewise, the message itself does not prevent ambiguity among different systems.

[5] The idea of system employed as an alternative to the idea of a species is due to a strategy for emphasizing the hybridization of a live organism with technologies (see also: Pereira, V A Comunicação e Memória: Estendendo Mcluhan; Doctoral thesis, ECO/UFRJ, 2002).

[6] For further considerations on the relations between medium and memory, especially in McLuhan's work, see Pereira, V A Comunicação e Memória: Estendendo Mcluhan; Doctoral thesis, ECO/UFRJ, 2002.

[7] The question that the message is detached from the signification possibilities must be regarded as the same studied by Charles Peirce concerning the triadic character of any and every sign. According Peirce, since every sign is composed by three parts - *interpretant*, *representamen* and *object* - signification is rendered an open process once the interpreters always vary. For a review of the ideas of the triadic character of signs as proposed by Peirce, see Nöth, W., *Panorama da Semiótica: de Platão a Peirce.*

Since Kant, at least, it is known that perceiving things in the world does not mean that the perceived things are the *world*, the *thing-in-itself – Das Ding*. Perception, marked by aprioristic determinations, as commented on by the German philosopher, can only gain access to the phenomenon and never to the *noumenon*. That what a system observes with the *naked eye*, similar to the human one, is very different from what bat or frog systems observe. In principle, each system would be restricted, in perceptual terms, to the cognitive limits imposed by its own etho-grammatic patterns. Therefore, for instance, in the case of human vision, nothing that appears vibrating out of a certain range of wavelengths specific to the visual human limits will be seen. Set beyond those human limits, for example, the *gamma* and *X* rays are not seen with the *naked eye*. The novelty for the human systems, however, lies in the kinds of technological *extensions* in order to overcome the original perceptive patterns. Through the continuous production of technology, the human system surpasses and transforms itself while it transforms its own environment in a continuous movement of mutual impact. Consequently, according to the perceptual possibilities brought up by those new extension models, one might always propose new frames for the information the world provides, constituting—with distinct perceptual frames and with different informational arrangements—different *messages* of the world.

In complex systems like the human, the emergence of new messages is directly associated with the fact that the system is building rather than receiving new messages enabled by a new grammar, which presents itself as a new extension, a new technology, a new medium. The message only attains a common meaning as long as each emerging technology acts as a language that treats and modulates the system into new cognitive and perceptual patterns, exactly as it occurred with the poetry recited in ancient Greek. Therefore, such a medium, like Greek oral poetry or like television today, imposes its languages in such a way that the involved systems become its language reproducers, responding more or less homogeneously to the production of its perceptual *frames* and in the production of messages. Then, according to this perspective, the *message* is everything that is framed and organized by a given system within a wide assemblage of available information. The *frame*, the arrangement in question, must be understood as the applying of an order, of an organization, of a grammar that captures and provides information and

produces messages. And once one has a message the system will act upon it, trying to produce meaning.

Hence, a communication technology, a medium, does not have contents prior to a system, whether as messages or as meaning. It merely bears languages, as mentioned. In principle, a medium does not have a message, for the message already implies the *frame* produced by a system that submits itself to a certain language that has been employed as an instrument to put the mentioned *frame* into effect. In this way, a medium provides the order, the grammar, that directs potential informational *frames* the users might employ. It is only in the meeting with the user within this system and in the meeting of both system and medium virtualities that messages will emerge.

A somewhat random idea that might exemplify this issue is that a grammar, such as the one comprised in a TV set, would not cause the constitution of the same messages in humans and hens. Each system would only be susceptible to the medium as long as the fundamental relationships between the system's specificities and the language in question are assured. The fundamental point is the idea that there cannot be messages without: 1) a grammar that presents itself as part of the characteristics of a given medium; 2) a user/system that actualizes, reveals, this very grammar.

One must remember that a grammar is not a metaphysical entity, able to transform itself. A grammar is a technology that only gains movement, utility, and dynamics when it is used. Nevertheless, in order to use a language it is necessary to engage in negotiation with it, reveal it, submit oneself to it, learn it, assimilate it, be altered by it, and reproduce its order. In this sense, it is possible to understand one of the *amplifications* proposed by McLuhan for the idea of *content*: that the content of a medium, of a grammar, is the user of the *medium*. On the other hand, *the content of a medium is another medium*. A medium bears another medium within it, as a manner of presenting and translating itself to a user. There is an evolution in grammatical learning without which there could not be any learning at all. So, when television appropriates cinema it appropriates a medium that is familiar to the system/user of a specific generation. It will gradually be incorporated by this system/user, transformed and, therefore, it will accomplish a grammar with singular characteristics, so detached from cinema that it will shortly be recognized as a special grammar, pertaining to television. This new TV language will immediately affect other generations of systems and users in a rather more specific form.

Such a dynamic would be common to every medium, every language, that is, it is only possible to learn a grammar bit by bit, gradually, by the little already known, including preexistent language. Is it not what occurs when one learns a new language, for instance? A translation, a process of permanent analogies and comparisons between the new language and the one you already know and master? In this way, saying that the content of television is cinema, and that the content of cinema is opera, for example, would be the same as saying: the content of television is the appropriation of cinema's language, which is the appropriation of opera's language, and so on. Likewise, one could think the content of the Portuguese language is an appropriation of Latin and Greek. In every case, it is a matter of benefiting from features of an order, of a former grammar, already structured in a given system, while promoting some distortions.

Furthermost, we shall observe that that which promotes the shift of language into another is the system that employs it, the users who, in their turn, can only be transformed by this medium because, initially, the language of this medium was translated into more familiar languages. This relationship requires a representation that should resort to mathematics topology, more specifically, to the already cliché, although very effectual image of the Möbius Strip in order to represent the game between systems/users and the medium: by employing former media, former grammars, a medium provides the system/user with the grammar, the order for the messages composition. This system/user actualizes the grammar proposed by the medium and transforms it, thereby transforming the medium that transforms the system again, continuously, in a relation of reciprocity and mutual impact.

Finally, messages are for McLuhan the metamorphoses a system presents along the whole process of continuous transformations. That is, McLuhan considers the *message* to be a set of cognitive and subjective characteristics that emerge within the individual, due to the interaction with a new medium. Amid the themes discussed here it seems that McLuhan's whole effort lay in translating his strong intuition that, if meaning often slips in the communication processes, messages might be more subjected to grammars than the interaction of the human system with different media reveals. Once attached and fixed, messages reveal themselves as reflexes of a given medium's common grammar, hence achieving the famous insight: *the medium is the message*. Nowadays, for those aiming to work with the instruments provided by McLuhan, the struggle consists in

understanding how different media have revealed different grammars over the history of media evolution, so as to gain a deeper comprehension of the specificities of the messages produced by a new medium: digital technologies. Here is one of the many paths still to be explored under the guidance of the master theorist from Toronto.

References

Havelock, E. A. (1963). *Preface to Plato*. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: The Belknap Press, Harvard University.

McLuhan, E. & Zingrone, F. (1995). *Essential McLuhan*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press Lt.

McLuhan, H. M (1961). *Through the vanishing point*, (May, 1st, 1961) manuscript, *McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology Archives*, University of Toronto, Canada.

McLuhan, H. M. (1962). *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

McLuhan, H. M (1964). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: The New American Library.

McLuhan, H. M / Nevitt, B. (1972). *Take Today: The Executive as Dropout*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch.

McLuhan, H. M / Fiore, Q. (1967). *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*. New York: Bantam Books.

Nöoth, W. (1995). *Panorama da Semiótica: De Platão A Peirce*. São Paulo: Annablume.

Pereira, V. A. (2002). *Comunicação e Memória: Estendendo McLuhan* (Doctorate thesis). Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação & Cultura, Escola de Comunicação, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (Program of Graduate Studies in Communication & Culture, School of Communication, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro).

Rosenthal, R.(ed.) (1967). *McLuhan Pro & Com;* Rosenthal, R.(ed.), USA: Funk & Wagmalls Pub.