

The Medium is the Message

“This information is top security. When you have read it, destroy yourself.”

- M. McLuhan

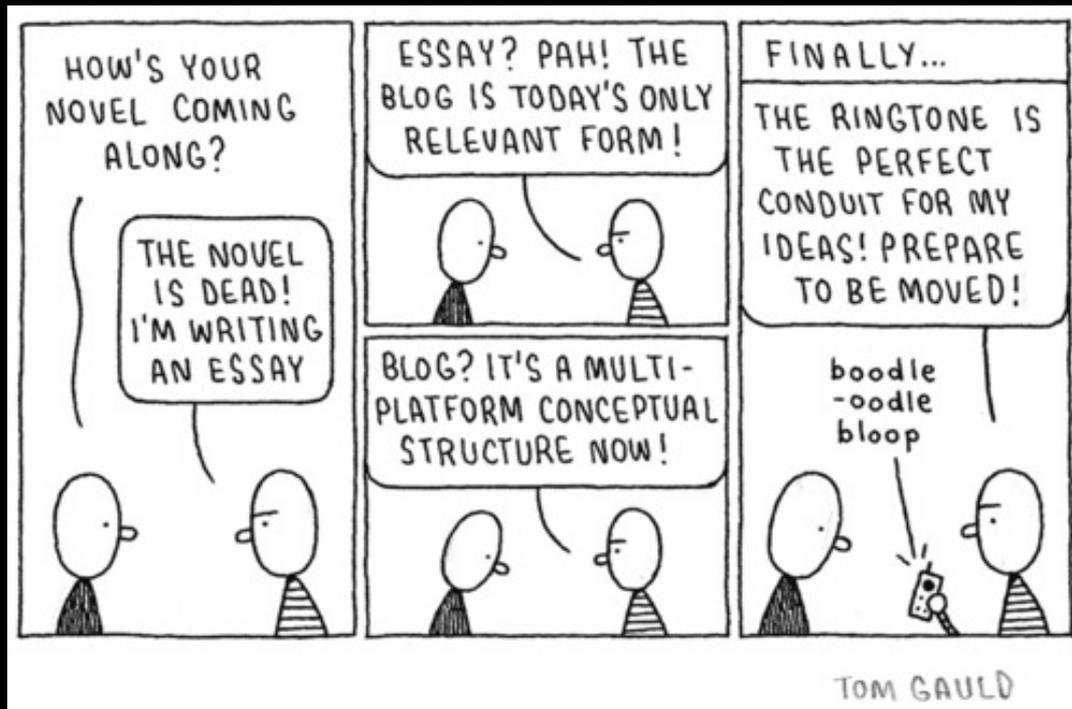


Image from: <http://sk.aphelis.net/search/Tom+Gauld>

Message or Message?

The title of McLuhan's book was the result of a typesetting error.

The book title was intended to read "The Medium is the Message."

It was typeset as "The Medium is the Massage."

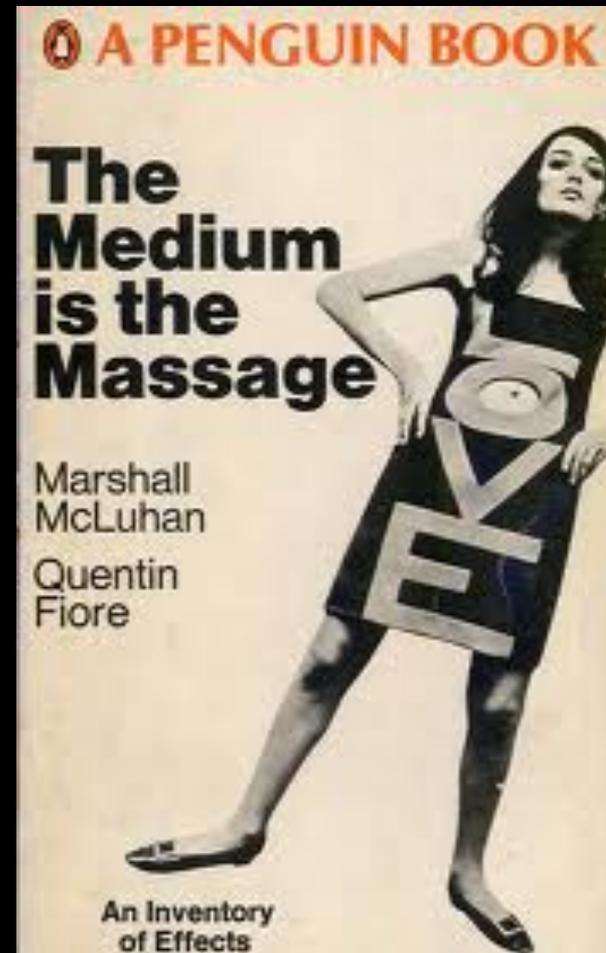
McLuhan's response when he saw the error: "Leave it alone! It's right, and right on target!"

You can interpret the title as:

- Message
- Mess Age
- Massage
- Mass Age

Source:

McLuhan, E. (n.d.) FAQs – Marshall McLuhan [WWW]
Available from:
<http://www.marshallmcluhan.com/faqs.html>
[Accessed 10/13/2010].



What Message?

“Each medium, independent of the content it mediates, has it’s own intrinsic effects which are its unique message.” – Eric McLuhan

Media are separate languages with distinct grammar and structure to their form.

What is the message of a medium?

- Change of scale
- Change of pace
- Change of pattern

It is the medium that “shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action.” - M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 1964.

Source:

McLuhan, E. (n.d.) FAQs – Marshall McLuhan [WWW] Available from: <http://www.marshallmcluhan.com/faqs.html> [Accessed 10/13/2010].

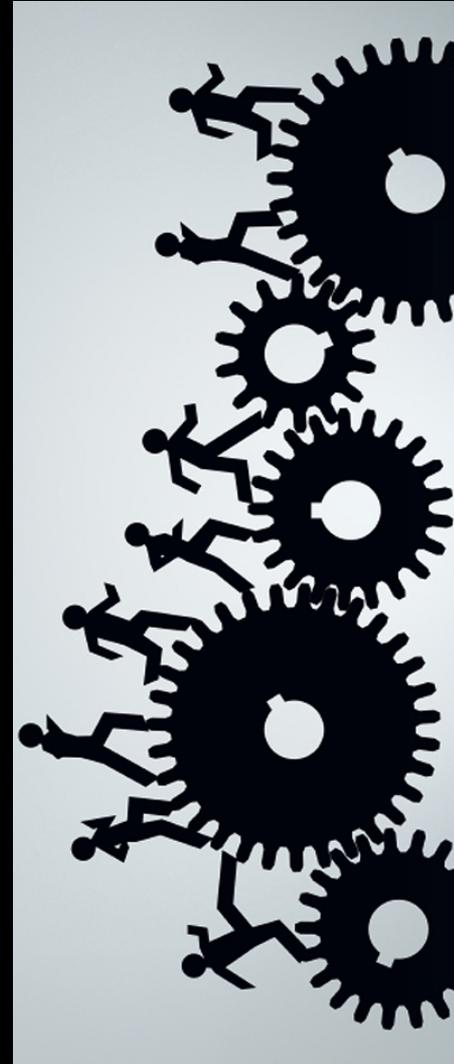


Image from: <http://www.neuro-insight.com/>

Rotated to reflect my personal point of view on changing scales and pace.

“By stressing that the medium is the message rather than the content, I'm not suggesting that content plays no role--merely that it plays a distinctly subordinate role. Even if Hitler had delivered botany lectures, some other demagogue would have used the radio to retribalize the Germans and rekindle the dark atavistic side of the tribal nature that created European fascism in the Twenties and Thirties.”

From "The Playboy Interview: Marshall McLuhan, *Playboy Magazine* March 1969

Example: Trains

Example from McLuhan's
Understanding Media (1964):

Trains did not:

- Introduce travel
- Introduce the wheel
- Introduce transportation
- Introduce the road

They did accelerate the pace and
change the distance over which these
things operated.

They created new kinds of work and
restructured cities.

They did this regardless of what freight
they were carrying.



Instantaneousness Image from:

<http://heresy-hunter.blogspot.com/2010/07/eos3-marshall-mcluhan-mass-media.html>

Example: Love

My example, inspired by the book cover of *The Medium is the Message*:

Imagine you are approached by three women. Each tells you, in an equally genuine and sincere tone of voice:

“I love you.”

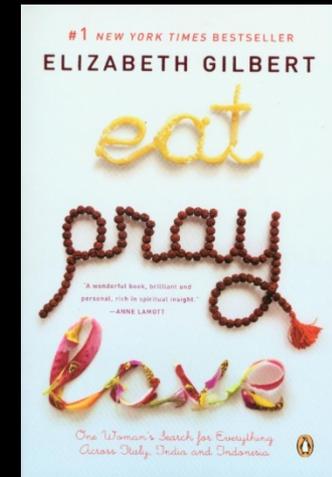
One woman is your mother.

One woman is your ex-girlfriend.

One woman is the woman you love.

One woman is a stranger.

Do you, the receiver, receive and interpret the content of the message in the same way from each of the three senders? Or is the medium part of the message?



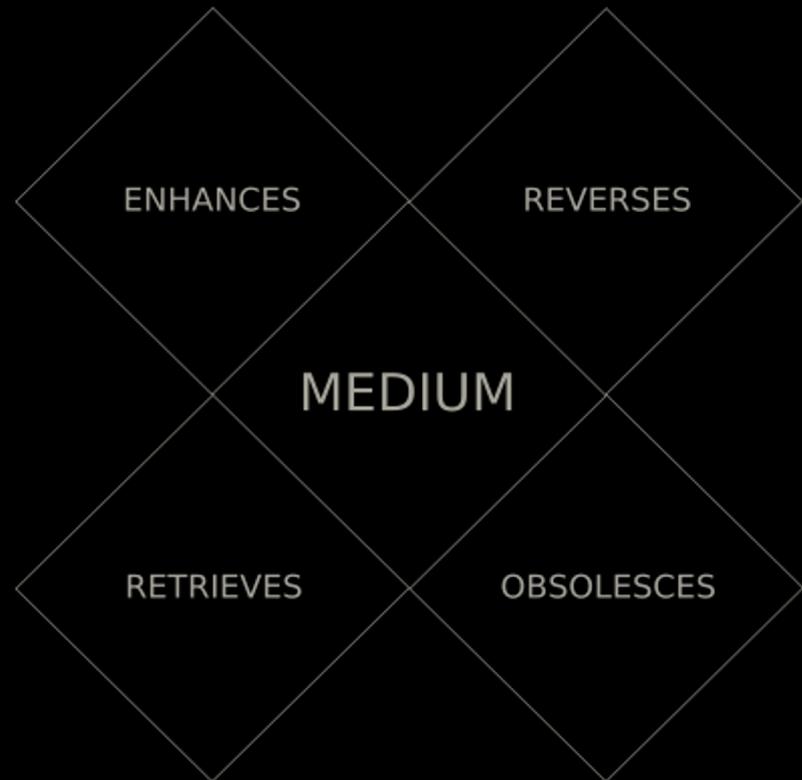
Four images from a Google Images Search for “Love”

How Do We Interpret the Message of the Medium?

In the *Laws of Media* (1988, published posthumously) McLuhan proposed the tetrad, 4 questions to pose when exploring the grammar and syntax of a medium.

When you consider the effects produced by a particular medium, ask yourself the following:

- What does it enhance?
- What does it make obsolete?
- What does it retrieve that had been obsolesced earlier?
- What does it flip into when pushed to extremes?



Example of Tetrad Analysis: Cell Phones

“What does the cell phone enhance?”

- Interpersonal communication
- Accessibility
- Response time

What does it make obsolete?

- Phone booths
- Privacy and anonymity
- Isolation and the home

What does it retrieve?

- Tribal culture
- Acoustic space
- Cameras

What does it flip into when pushed to extremes?

- Letters
- “The sender is sent”

Example from *Old Messengers, New Media* (Library and Archives Canada, 2007):

<http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/innis-mcluhan/030003-2030-e.html>

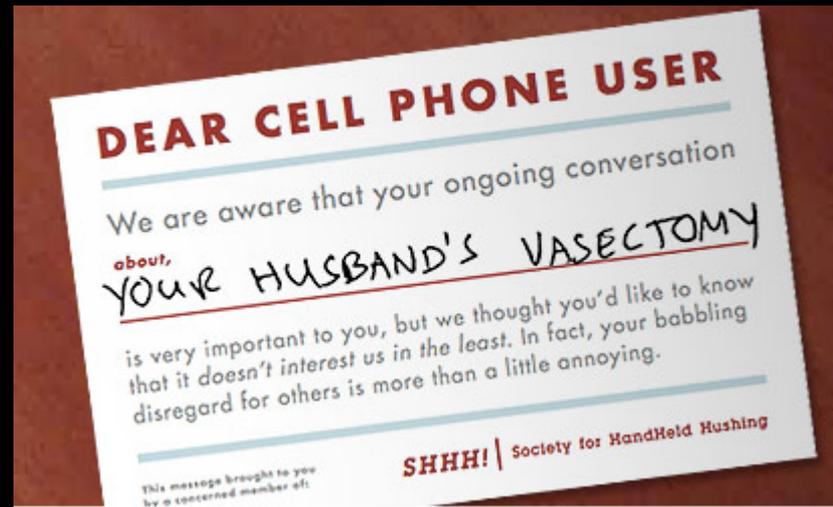


Image from Society for Handheld Hushing: <http://www.coudal.com/shhh.php>

“But most people, from truck drivers to the literary Brahmins, are still blissfully ignorant of what the media do to them; unaware that because of their pervasive effects on man, it is the medium itself that is the message, not the content, and unaware that the medium is also the message--that, all puns aside, it literally works over and saturates and molds and transforms every sense ratio.”

What happens when we become the medium?

"By requiring us to constantly fill in the spaces of the mosaic mesh, the iconoscope is tattooing its message directly on our skins. Each viewer is thus an unconscious pointillist painter like Seurat, limning new shapes and images as the iconoscope washes over his entire body."

"Nudity and unabashed sexuality are growing in the electric age because as TV tattoos its message directly on our skins, it renders clothing obsolescent and a barrier."

From "The Playboy Interview: Marshall McLuhan,
Playboy Magazine March 1969

If we remain blissfully unaware, are we selling ourselves as the message? Are we tattooing the medium's grammar straight onto our skins? Is it the message being sent, or are we sending ourselves?

If we remain vigilant, if we are aware, is the effect any different?



<http://therookiewall.com/blog/2010/07/25/larry-sanders-the-medium-is-the-message/>

The icon for Larry Sander's Twitter page.

“By placing all the stress on content and practically none on the medium, we lose all chance of perceiving and influencing the impact of new technologies on man, and thus we are always dumfounded by--and unprepared for--the revolutionary environmental transformations induced by new media.”

From "The Playboy Interview: Marshall McLuhan, *Playboy Magazine* March 1969

Marshall McLuhan's
"The Medium is the Massage"
LP recording,
Columbia records.

<http://www.ubu.com/sound/mcluhan.html>