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### **Acoustic Space and the Alphabet: Revisiting Levinson with McLuhan**

According to Paul Levinson the work of the infamous scholar Marshall McLuhan is brought into sharper focus when reflected on in the digital age. In *Digital McLuhan* (2001) he claims that the online alphabetic milieu of cyberspace harbors acoustic space. The way in which he comes to this conclusion seems to conflict with the work of McLuhan, who saw the phonetic alphabet as the shift from acoustic to visual space. The aim of this essay is to explore *how* Levinson has appropriated the work of McLuhan into the digital age and offer insight on and a critical reflection of the argument that the alphabet, as the first digital medium, can be seen as acoustic space. My approach requires that I explore McLuhan in the breadth of his work.

Whilst I do agree that cyberspace can be interpreted as acoustic space, I find this true on the account of it being an electric technology rather than, as Levinson points out, consequent of the written word. My conviction is that Levinson, in “putting McLuhan on his head”, makes several ‘indiscretions’ in the treatment of McLuhan’s theory. He overemphasizes the relation between content and medium, conflates hot and cold media with a modern notion of interactivity and in extension hereof, he pushes aside the fundamental significance of the transition from mechanical to the electric age for media analysis in McLuhan’s work.

In order to develop my argument, I draw on the volume *Essential McLuhan* (1997). The editors of the volume, Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone, offer it in reaction to the lack of comprehensiveness by which they find McLuhan to have been read, particularly with regard to the texts that inspired the ideas to his more popular work (4). Several television interviews with McLuhan, available online, will function as a means to enhance the understanding of his theories. Based on these sources, I have the theoretical tools by which to plot the general lines of McLuhan’s media theory and, together with *Digital McLuhan*, critically assess the digital age treatment proposed by Levinson.

First off, I begin with a brief outline of the general methodology employed by McLuhan. I then discuss the two break boundaries he explores: that of oral-tribal man and visual man followed by that between Gutenberg and integral man. Consequently, the distinction ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ media is examined whilst looking at the relation content/medium. Next, I move to the anthropomorphic theory of media evolution as established by Levinson. With reference to the work of McLuhan, I will materialize my contention that in treating McLuhan in a new way, Levinson disrupts some crucial links in McLuhan’s work.

#### **Understanding Media**

According to McLuhan, “Our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot” (158). The position inherent to the statement, the offset against examining the use of media by human actors, has contributed to the interpretation of McLuhan by scholars as a technological determinist. To McLuhan media are the extensions of man, which entails that “the personal and social consequence of any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by the extension of ourselves, or by any new technology” (151). The media alter the balance between the senses and change the way in which we experience the world around us.

To take notice of the impact of technology is hard because the extension of an area by a

medium leads to the numbing of the affected areas, a process which McLuhan calls “Narcissus narcosis” (237). He explains the phenomenon by means of the metaphor of a fish in the water. As with a fish in the water, man, when extended, is unable to see the effects of the technology (237). Reformulated, through the introduction of a new technology, the human sensory balance is altered, and consequent of the numbing the impact of the technology goes unnoticed. Most often we only see the changes brought about by earlier media, so are confined to a “rear-view mirror” analysis of the effects of media (238). However, the changes in the electric age succeed one another so rapidly that it is possible for society to take note of the changes.

Inherent to McLuhan’s maxim “the medium is the message” is the idea that “The ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium” i.e. the content of a movie is a novel or play, and the content of writing/print is speech. To illustrate the subsidiary role of the content of media to its technological properties, McLuhan provides the case of Professor Wilbur Schramm. Schramm ran tests in areas where television had not penetrated, but instead of examining the medium, he looked at viewing times, content preferences and language usage. The mistake made in the research, as observed by McLuhan, is that Schramm approached television as a literary study and consequently had nothing to say about television as medium. The study neglected to measure the impact of the medium on human and social psychology (159-160). He finds that Schramm, despite the fact that he had set out to measure the effects of television, was looking at content and hereby, in fact, measuring the effects of another medium.

On a more conceptual level McLuhan, to study media, developed a methodology from the work of Harold Innis. Innis understands that in order to generate insight one must apply the method of “interface”, a term borrowed from chemistry where it refers to the mutual interaction of substances. Usually, “[i]n writing, the tendency is to isolate an aspect of some matter and to direct steady attention upon that aspect. In dialogue [the method of interface] there is an equally natural interplay of multiple aspects of any matter” (McLuhan 90). It is a method about gaining insight, “sudden awareness of a complex process of interaction” (McLuhan 90). This as opposed to taking a fixed point of view, “looking at something” (McLuhan 90). In a CBS interview in 1967 McLuhan states that he puts the method to practice by picking up information from many directions rather than a loyalty to a certain perspective. In the electric age, he finds, it is impossible to maintain a fixed position. As has been noted, this is because changes in the electric age succeed one another rapidly.

Although McLuhan is appreciative of the methodology used by Innis, he finds that Innis made the mistake of falling to the prevalent cultural consensus of his time. In analyzing the impact of radio, Innis looked at electric technology as the extension of the patterns of mechanical technology. Consequently, Innis drew the conclusion that the radio, a medium that extended the ear, had a centralizing power, which is an attribution of the eye rather than the ear. McLuhan argues that herein he neglected to pursue the idea that electric media are decentralizing and separatist (93). From this criticism, directed at Innis, one could come to conclude that to McLuhan all electric media are acoustic. I find the criticism important because Levinson makes a similar error in his anthropomorphic theory.

### **Acoustic to Visual Space/Mechanical to Electric Age**

McLuhan finds that media introduce new forms of awareness and the world around us is changed by a new configuration of the interplay of the senses. This bears no relation to the “content” of the medium, but is prescribed in the technology itself. Presently, I interrogate the centrality of brain-hemisphere dominance in McLuhan’s work and how this relates to acoustic and visual space. Consequently, the shift from oral-tribal to visual man is treated followed by the shift from the mechanical to the electric age. I find that this is central to the work of McLuhan and is given insufficient regard in repurposing McLuhan to the digital age.

Based on research conducted by the linguist Robert Trotter on brain-hemisphere dominance. McLuhan, identifies two transitions: the first is the result of the introduction of phonetic literacy. He perceived of the rise of the phonetic alphabet as a shift to the primacy of the left-hemisphere and viewed it as a contribution to visual space. The impact of the shift

from mechanical to electric technology is the second break boundary recognized by McLuhan. He equates the left-brain hemisphere to linearity and sequentiality. The right hemisphere is associated with the simultaneous, holistic and synthetic (McLuhan 368).

More specifically, the phonetic alphabet, as medium, bore with it a change in our inner logic shifting brain activity from the right hemisphere to the left hemisphere establishing linear and sequential logic. McLuhan claims, “[phonetic writing] divorced the visual function from the interplay with the other senses and thus led to the rejection from consciousness of vital areas of our sensory experience and to the resultant atrophy of the unconscious” (241). The centrality of the visual, the extension of the eye by means of the phonetic alphabet, led to the dominance of the left-hemisphere over the right. As a result, a shift incurred from acoustic space to visual space. In other words, for McLuhan, acoustic space existed prior to the alphabet. To clarify how McLuhan sees this, I cite him at some length:

Speech and writing have to be *uttered* in a *sequence*. Just as all forms of sequential activity (as contrasted to configuration or pattern) are functions of the left hemisphere, so too all forms of utterances (and artifacts), whether technological or verbal or written, are functions of the left hemisphere [...] Conversely, all technologies that emphasize the outer or the abstract or sequentiality in organizing experience, contribute to left-hemisphere dominance in a culture (372).

The technologies of the electric age bestow a different fate. They are “instant and omnipresent and create[s] multiple centres-without-margins” (McLuhan 94). Thus, in the electric ages the electric media prescribe the subversion of the dominance of the left-hemisphere. The reason for this is that in this age information is simultaneous, discontinuous and dynamic. In the electric age, unlike the mechanical age, the appeal of the new electric media is more to an emotional than an intellectual human process, much like the case of the oral-tribal man, moreover, it concerns an acoustic rather than visual space.

Thereby, McLuhan’s interface method for studying media, the sudden awareness of complex interaction rather than taking a viewpoint and looking at media, is very much in tune with the way in which he describes acoustic space. McLuhan also presents an analogy between acoustic space and religious faith that clarifies, I find, his stance on electric technologies. He claims that faith rules out petty points of view. The electric age, seen as a return to acoustic space, is a return to new depth involvement. Herein, as he expressed to Reverend Father Patrick Peyton in a television interview, man becomes a “disembodied spirit” within a new environment of instant information. He tells him that in the electric age, an acoustic space with complete involvement, we are so flooded with information that people protect themselves by switching themselves off and going numb. People are resisting the acoustic properties of electric technologies, not allowing the right-hemisphere to dominant over the left. McLuhan repeats that the vast amount of information available both *instantly* and *totally* is unlike anything encountered in previous ages.

### **Hot and Cold Media**

I now zoom into the distinction McLuhan makes between hot and cold media. My reason for doing so is twofold: first off, to discuss McLuhan’s definition of participation and secondly, to demonstrate that he saw a role for content and did not (entirely) dismiss it in the analysis of media. These two points are relevant as they are picked up in Levinson’s work and of which the former, is used to develop his anthropotropic theory.

The distinction McLuhan makes between hot and cold media is based on the level of sensory participation a medium elicits. An example he gives of a hot medium is the radio. It extends a single sense, is low in participation and as such an exclusive medium. Whilst television is seen as a cool and inclusive medium, McLuhan classifies the medium movie hot. The logic in this classification is that he sees the movies as extending a single sense in high definition. Television, on the other hand, is low in definition and consequently high in participation. It demands involvement in the process. McLuhan finds that herein the eye functions as a hand filling in and completing the low-resolution image.

Participation, the way in which McLuhan uses the term, does not correspond to what is presently called interactivity. Hot and cold media are distinct from the transition from the mechanical to the electric age. Confusion also arises because the electric age is *instant* and *total*. These qualities are seen by Levinson, as will be made apparent, as belonging to interactivity. A more general criticism of the theory is the way in which the distinction hot and cold media translates within present-day vernacular. It seems it would hardly classify as a cold medium with current standards of high definition.

McLuhan states that the Carter-Ford presidential debate of September 24, 1976 demonstrated a misuse of television. McLuhan saw the medium rebelling against the message. He concludes that those responsible for scripting the debate, did not understand the medium television. In particular this is because television, in his opinion, is not a suitable debating medium. The debate had been arranged as if it were a newspaper or radio set-up. It was the "most stupid" arrangement possible for debating. Television is more suitable for unscripted, casual dialogue. Those watching the debate on television were, rather, being held on an image and both candidates were McLuhan observed as "panic cool" and careful of introducing policies that might pose a threat to their image.

With regard to content, in a 1967 CBS interview, McLuhan finds that the Vietnam War should not be televised. To him, "hot stuff" like war is simply unbearable to be shown on a cold medium. As a cold medium, with its high level of involvement, it makes the war "unbearable." The footage of the war would work better when shown on movie or press photography. In these latter media people will feel less bothered by the event.

In another interview, with reporter Peter Gzowski in 1977, McLuhan remarked that Richard Nixon had a very private image and simply looked like himself. This in contrast worked against him. More desirable for a politician is to have a corporate image which entails "looking like many other people." With a corporate image people have to fill in the image and it thereby allows for many people to identify with it, much like a low definition television.

In the chapter on net content in *Digital McLuhan*, Levinson sets out to rectify what he conceives of the common misconception of McLuhan's "the medium is the message." He finds that McLuhan did in fact attribute content with an important role (Levinson 36). Despite McLuhan's warning of how looking at content being deceptive, as demonstrated with the research conducted by Schramm, I agree with Levinson in that McLuhan does not disregard content altogether. As a means to illustrate the pressures that content exerted on the medium, I reflected on the observations McLuhan made of the political debate between Carter-Ford and his conviction of the incompatibility of the Vietnam War with television.

### **The Anthropotropic Theory of Media**

Having established the main lines of McLuhan's work, I presently discuss how Levinson makes a case for the alphabet as motor for online acoustic space. Levinson interrogates acoustic space before the alphabet and the alphabet prior to its absorption by the Web. As mentioned earlier, I do not disagree with the fact that cyberspace is acoustic space, but rather the way in which he builds the argument for this.

In comparing acoustic space to hearing, Levinson finds that hearing "gives us some of the distance of sight, without as much loss of background and immersion" (46) and it is "with us on all occasions, emanating from every environment" (47). Speech is different from seeing and hearing because, "[w]hereas we are prone to see and hear the world in some sense as it is - as it presents itself to us, in the same differing but overlapping ways it presents itself to all living organisms - speech is prone to present the world to us as it is not" (Levinson 53). It is the capacity of being able to make things presence in absence, expressed in the citation, which makes speech so abstract. Levinson sees the search for abstraction as the driving motor of the media development. With the exception of the alphabet, the printing press and the telegraph, media prior to the Internet, he argues, have given us more of seeing and hearing and not pursued this quality of abstraction. This is why he is so prone to believe in the continuing role the written word, as content, will have in media development.

Levinson's anthropotropic theory operates on the conviction that technology is

'selected' in order to return us to the stability of the "pre-technological", thus prior to the extension of the sensorium and organs by technologies. Moreover, "the alphabet conveys abstraction so effectively that we lack the impetus to improve upon it in other media" (Levinson 53). To Levinson the "common denominator" of all the media that the Web absorbs is the written word (38). He sees that online communication as closer to oral tradition than the written word. Whilst the Internet offers a two-way engagement, characteristic of the oral tradition, instead of a one-way engagement, characteristic of the written word. To Levinson, the alphabet is the "conductor" of acoustic cyberspace (54). It is because the written word can be seen as intra-medium, there are variations of acoustic space. It is for this reason that Levinson is intent on pointing out, as has been discussed as well, that content does in fact have a place within McLuhan's approach to media analysis. Recall that McLuhan saw possible that content intensifies the properties of the medium.

According to Levinson, McLuhan missed the electronic-acoustic properties of print because he analyzed hand-written manuscripts and mass-produced texts together. When the Internet absorbed the written word, the written word became more omnipresent, simultaneous and immediate. It should be pointed out that McLuhan examined these texts together because he found the shift mechanical age to the electric age as having the same impact. For him, the written word has little to do with this transition.

The main characteristic of acoustic space for Levinson, along the lines of McLuhan, is simultaneity. However in his reflection on the oral tradition, Levinson evaluates openness and interactivity as properties of acoustic space. One-way communication media such as television and the printing press are, on the premise of these properties, relatively "closed acoustic spaces" (Levinson 50). McLuhan does not make the distinction this way. Rather, he identifies the two transitions: the first from acoustic to visual space, caused by the introduction of the phonetic alphabet, and the second, a return to the primacy of the right-hemisphere symptomatic of a shift from the mechanical to the electric age. To McLuhan, simultaneity is simply effective of the latter transition.

As noted, McLuhan found Innis to be untrue to his own methodology by assessing the radio (mechanical technology) as a centralizing power. I think that McLuhan would accuse Levinson of falling to a similar methodological error. When zooming in at the way in which McLuhan deals with interactivity, tackled under the heading hot and cold media, we find that he sees it as having multiple senses enticed and the cognitive process of filling in incomplete data. Levinson is more concerned with openness and interactivity in relation to acoustic space. Through his sub-distinction of closed (visual) and open (acoustic) space, respectively television and the Internet, it becomes clear that his interpretation of hot and cold media is different. To McLuhan, participation can take place on a mere cognitive level whilst Levinson's conceptualization of interactivity, concerns a more (physical) active participation. Moreover, McLuhan does not discuss hot and cold media as specifically visual or acoustic. Rather, his analysis is based on whether technology is mechanical or electric.

## **Conclusion**

The goal of this essay was to examine the way in which Levinson appropriated McLuhan to the digital age. I interrogated the reasoning behind the claim that the alphabet is the base of the acoustic space of cyberspace. In order to argue that Levinson made several indiscrete errors, I began by providing an outline of McLuhan's media theory. I had to point out *how* McLuhan saw the two transitions that resulted in a shift from acoustic space to visual space and back to acoustic space.

The first transition was the outcome of the introduction of the phonetic alphabet. It meant a shift from the right-hemisphere, acoustic space, of oral man to the dominance of the left-hemisphere, visual space. With the introduction of electric technology however, seen as instant and simultaneous, McLuhan found that the right hemisphere (re)gained dominance. Particularly, I reflected on the way in which media transformed the balance and interplay of senses and the oscillation in dominance of the brain's hemispheres. The role of the brain's hemispheres in McLuhan's reasoning is a crucial part of his theory and missed out on by Levinson.

I then examined the claim that McLuhan finds content relevant in the study of media, operating in agreement with Levinson's interpretation of McLuhan's work. Specifically, I defined hot and cold media and looked at how McLuhan saw (hot and cold) content operate in television. Consequently, I followed the argument of Levinson regarding the alphabet as acoustic by means of his anthropotropic theory. His theory boils down to the idea that the success of media, and hence its evolution, relies on the way in which they adapt to the human body and mind. Whilst the conclusion Levinson draws from this is attuned with McLuhan's thinking, the deductive and reductive logics by which he develops his argument misses out on the impact McLuhan saw of the electric age. In actual fact, Levinson takes a different approach to the phonetic alphabet than McLuhan and attributes it with the capacity to, as content, be the primary base for acoustic space. By stressing the role of content in a medium he draws the conclusion that the alphabet is fundamental to acoustic space. He is enabled to draw this conclusion on the premise of his anthropomorphic theory.

In conclusion, Levinson neglects the two break boundaries identified by McLuhan in favor of his own anthropotropic theory and hereby falls to a similar methodological error that McLuhan accused Innis of. Through the pre-occupation with the relation the alphabet has to the acoustic, Levinson overlooks the general ratification of the transition from the mechanical to the electric age that subscribed technologies to simultaneity. To McLuhan the Web is acoustic because of the transition to the electric age rather than the abstract properties of the alphabet as stipulated in the anthropotropic theory. This is partly caused by the fact that Levinson privileges the alphabet as common denominator of media. By arguing that content can intensify the effect of media he has, for himself, misdirected his analysis in favor of the written word over the Internet. Consequently, Levinson is not providing new insight on McLuhan, but acting out of accord with his legacy. In light of Levinson's greater project this is, to say the least, somewhat problematic.

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