

Revisiting McLuhan's View on Media Literacy

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Abstract: As a great communication scholar of the 20th century, McLuhan's profound insights into media shines with wisdom. Little has been studied on McLuhan's ideas on media literacy. The purpose of this paper is to explore McLuhan's view of media literacy in order to better guide the practice of media literacy education.

1. Introduction

In 1933, the masterpiece of Leavis, *Culture and Environment*, a collaboration with D- Thompson, was published. Leavis' practical literary criticism had a shocking effect on McLuhan, whose book *The Machine Bride* published in 1951- Folklore of the Industrial Man was the most direct consequence of *Culture and Environment's* influence. *The Machine Bride* is almost entirely about advertising, analyzing the text and how it affects its audience, which was McLuhan's last book published during his lifetime [1]. *The City as Classroom*, was also influenced by Leavis. The book led McLuhan back to Leavis' book *Culture and Environment*, a qualified book for teachers to examine the social environment and the media, offering a neo-critical reading of the media environment in an attempt to inform students of the nature and impact of the media.

In 1951, McLuhan published the first book of his life - *The Machine Bride: The Folklore of Industrial Man*. McLuhan's previous academic accumulation and intellectual understanding were finally demonstrated in this book. In his book *The Machine Bride*, he made a small attempt to criticize the illusion behind advertising, analyzing the social impact and psychological effects, with the aim of freeing the public mind from the manipulation of the advertising industry.

2. The Development of McLuhan's View of Media Literacy

2.1 "The Machine Bride": the Presentation and Interpretation of Media Education

From the beginning of his teaching career, McLuhan used the classroom as a place of practice, following the path of Leavis, where he interpreted the hidden meanings of advertisements, cartoons and newspapers. Thus, McLuhan's first book, *The Machine Bride*, came out in 1951.

The book utilizes many perspectives to examine the popular imagery of industrial society in order to get as a clear grasp as possible of the overall situation. In McLuhan's view, advertisements can only be defeated if its victims stop ignoring it and pay serious attention to it. McLuhan believed that the emerging education of advertising should be used as a means to enlighten those who are its prey.

In McLuhan's view, the ultimate goal of commercial advertising is to leave an imprint on people's brains for a long time, to arouse consumers' desire to buy and to make profits from it. McLuhan proposed that it is important to train one's consciousness and to look at it with a critical eye. In this book, McLuhan is not criticizing advertising, he is revealing the illusion behind it. McLuhan's idea of educating his audience about the media was already evident when *The Machine Bride* was published in 1951, when the age of television was approaching and the "machine bride" was about to be replaced by the electronic bride. For the generation that grew up with television, McLuhan believed that it was necessary to educate them about the nature of the medium, to understand the conflicts that created it and the larger conflicts that it generated, and to offer the hope of undermining those conflicts by increasing human autonomy [2]. Thus, in 1964, *Understanding Media* was born.

2.2 “Understanding the Media”: Media Studies Emphasizes Reflection on the Nature of Media

In the fall of 1959, McLuhan was commissioned by the president of the National Association for Radio and Television Education to develop a textbook for 11th graders on the nature and effects of the media, and in June 1960, the text of the project report, *Report on the Understanding New Media Research Project*, was published. The first part of the Report, “*The Ryerson Media Experiment*,” focused on whether each medium transmitted information in its own unique way and whether these differences affected the subjects’ learning. The second part of the new media syllabus discusses the various media in sections. Each section contains several sections: an introduction, class exercises, references, comments, and questions --questions very similar to those in McLuhan’s last book, *The City as Classroom*, except that the latter goes further. The questions are all in the form of questions exploring the nature and impact of the media.

The Report of the Understanding Media Research Project was full of glittering theoretical analysis, but they were too deep and obscure for high school students to understand [3]. McLuhan revised and published *Understanding Media* based on the report.

While the concepts in *Understanding Media* are obscure, he gives a way of thinking about things, in this way, he breaks away from the ‘protectionist’ stance of earlier media literacy. Some of McLuhan’s statements in this book illustrate the idea of media literacy.

This book seeks to understand the many media, the conflicts that produce them and the larger conflicts that they produce, and to raise the hope of weakening these conflicts by increasing the freedom of human independence.

The medium-as-message refers to any impact of any media (i.e. any extension of a person) on individuals and society as a new result of new technology being applied to our everyday things.

It is typical for the “content” of any medium to blind us to the nature of the medium. The “content” of a medium is resembled to a tasty piece of meat that a burglar uses to attract the attention of a watchdog.

“Medium is the message” tells us that the emergence of a new medium, no matter what specific content it conveys, is by its very nature a carrier of information. The nature of different communication media determines and limits the scale and form of human communication, and media technology is a potential force for change in the nature of society that cannot be ignored. .

Furthermore, McLuhan focuses not only on the nature of media from the perspective of individual media development, but also on understanding the nature of media from the perspective of the development of the entire history of communication [4]. In the history of the development of media and communication technology, various media types have emerged, technologies have complemented and penetrated into each other, media technologies have become increasingly integrated. “The reason why the influence of a particular medium is very strong is precisely that another medium becomes the content of that medium.” Therefore, in the near use of multi-media convergence of communication technologies, media literacy is the first and foremost the ability of people when to access and disseminate information through various communication media, which includes the ability to use both printing media, electronic and digital media.

2.3 “The Four Laws of Media”: Proposing Tools and Paths for Analyzing Media

The Four Laws of Media was initially intended as an update to *Understanding Media*, both as a summary and as a new beginning. The book opens with a long essay on perception, and in particular on the new forms of perception offered by new media. Indeed, McLuhan has long been thinking about the laws of media. In *Seizing the Day*, McLuhan argues that any significant artifact enhances and accelerates a certain process, while at the same time it tends to make another process or thing obsolete [5].

In summary, McLuhan's *Law of Media* raises four questions when used to analyze any significant medium:

A. What does (media and technology) extend/enhance/enhance?

For example, the car extends the foot and the telephone extends the voice.

B. What has (media and technology) discarded/weakened/replaced?

The automobile weakened the function of the foot and the telephone abandoned the function of the beacon to transmit signals.

C. What has been recaptured/reproduced/recovered (by media and technology)?

The automobile brought back the feeling of adventure on foot; the spread of the telephone brought back the sense of community or group.

D. (Media and technology) reverses/pushes to/inverts what?

Car traffic is the reason people want to return to a more controlled, walkable lifestyle; the overuse of the telephone makes people nostalgic for the old days of uninterrupted time and the authenticity of face-to-face communication.

The *laws of media* is intended to provide convenient means by which we can identify the properties of technologies, media, artifacts and their effects. Media technology is constantly evolving, from spoken, written language to print, electronic to digital network communication, and different periods of communication technology all pose different challenges to our ability to access information.

3. Qualified Textbook of Media Literacy: the City as a Classroom

3.1 A Shift from Traditional Classroom to Perfect Media Education Mode

McLuhan addressed the National Academy of Higher Education in Chicago in March 1959. He argued that the mission given to teachers by the electronic revolution was no longer to provide information, but to provide insights; the identity he gave to students was no longer that of consumers, but that of teaching partners, because students had long accumulated a wealth of information outside the classroom. In his 1964 lecture on the theme of “*Cybernetics and Human Culture*” and in his 1966 lecture on the theme of “*The Medium as Massage*”, McLuhan twice referred to the city outside the campus as having a wealth of information that should moreover be a resource for our learning. McLuhan’s thoughts about the relationship between the city, the media, the environment, and the classroom finally blossomed in 1977. That year saw the release of McLuhan’s final book in his life, *The City as Classroom*.

3.2 Media Reflection in Media Ecology

In his teaching and practice, McLuhan did not just emphasize the urgency of education as sensory training; he also thought about how to put this perceptual training into practice [6]. The city, located outside the traditional classroom, became the ideal place for McLuhan’s perceptual training, with its variety of environments that interacted with each other, more importantly, were familiar but not that familiar to people on a daily basis. The urban environment is only the object of learning; the place where instruction occurs remains the traditional classroom. Ultimately, McLuhan provides one of the most detailed illustration, *The City as Classroom*.

The City as Classroom attempts to enable middle school students to become more perceptive, to be able to sharpen their perceptual knowledge of the world and the city in order to mitigate the effects of contemporary life. McLuhan wanted to train middle school students to be detectives like him, to explore their surroundings for clues to understanding the nature of the times. McLuhan attempted to use the larger media environment of the city to train middle school students in media perception. He is not trying to protect the students from the media; rather, he is attempting to make the middle school students more sensitive to the media around them.

The City as Classroom opens with an analysis of the medium using McLuhan’s appearance/context approach. McLuhan argues that when people observe the medium or other things, they focus their eyes on a certain part of it, actively and intentionally selecting it as the object of perception, while treating the rest of the surrounding things as the background of perception. The background is precisely what is easily overlooked by most people, which leads to our inability to see things holistically.

McLuhan’s methodology of appearance/context as a tool for analyzing media aims to consider whether, in understanding media, we often overlook some factors and deliberately emphasize certain

aspects [7]. Media do not exist in isolation; the context in which they exist has an important influence on them. Media ecology emphasizes the important role of people in media studies and focuses on caring how to study the relationship between people and communication media, the original purpose of media literacy.

3.3 Reflection on the Nature and Impact of Media

The second chapter of the book is an introduction to the characteristics of each medium. McLuhan understands the medium in several broad ways, including listing all the types of that medium, reviewing the history of that medium, how that medium relates to life today, thus manipulating that medium. The creation of each medium brings changes to the cultural and social environment, but if you grow up immersed in that environment, you hardly realize the changes, so what changes would be brought about if the medium disappeared? This is the question McLuhan ponders in Chapter 3.

McLuhan advocates Media Education, in which he wants citizens to have basic media literacy skills, to be able to critically understand the media, to understand the mechanisms of media operations and the process of media production, and, most importantly, to know how to analyze and interpret media information. Most importantly, citizens should know how to analyze and interpret media information. In his media education, McLuhan emphasizes the understanding of the media itself, which he analyzes from the essence of the media and then operates the media or creates the media through practice. Specifically, McLuhan's media education focuses on the following three areas: 1. Understanding the basics of media and the history of media; 2. Recognizing the impact of media on individuals, media, and society; 3. Learning the knowledge and skills to create and disseminate messages.

3.4 Cultivating the audience's Ability to Interpret the Media

There are four core terms in media literacy, namely "proximity" "analysis" "judgment" and "creativity"[8]. Media analysis is a core component of McLuhan's understanding of media, analyzing media content, media audience, media advertising, and media role. media advertising, the role of the media, etc.; media judgment is also greatly emphasized by McLuhan, without the ability to assess and judge, then the audience will be drowned in the whirlpool of media production, and the near use and analysis will be meaningless; finally, media creation includes the production of the media itself and the production of the content of the media, McLuhan asks students to make their own newspaper advertisements, cartoons, western mirrors, tapes VCRs, etc.

3.5 Approach and Framework of Media Education

In his book *The City as Classroom*, McLuhan's media education has largely departed from the protectionist paradigm, arguing that the media environment is changing all the time and that to understand media deeply, students need to understand the paradigm and structure of media, which can eliminate our sense of helplessness and also enable us to face media comfortably and stay awake at all times.

McLuhan advocates a student-centered media education, where students should not be passive learners. The protectionist paradigm of media education tends to adopt a more rigid approach to teaching, which does not focus on students' personal experience and makes the teacher the main subject of teaching, playing the role of the preacher of values, thus losing the vitality of media education.

4. Conclusion

McLuhan's return has been studied from various aspects: media technology, media culture, media philosophy, and so on. But only McLuhan's ideas on media literacy have received little attention from scholars.

First, McLuhan has always emphasized understanding the medium, i.e., cognizing and judging the medium. Second, McLuhan also emphasizes the interpretation of media content. The media constructs the social reality, it presents only the world it wants us to understand, which seems

complete but is actually very one-sided, it is leading its audience into its trap. McLuhan reads the media and tries to equip individuals with the ability to interpret the media through media education, to have the ability to use and criticize the media.

Finally, McLuhan has always advocated for media literacy education to improve people's ability to interpret media. McLuhan's media literacy education goes beyond protectionism. He argues that the media environment changes all the time, students need to understand the paradigms and structures of media. The teacher helps students acquire critical thinking skills by guiding their thinking through questions and aiding or guiding them to find the answers to their questions.

McLuhan gives us a perspective on learning about media that inspires educators to think and give birth to new strategies for media education practices.

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