MEDIACY: A way to enrich media literacy

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ABSTRACT

We propose that the discipline or practice of media literacy defined as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms can be enriched and made more effective by incorporating two of Marshall McLuhan's insights into the nature of media. The first insight is that the effects of media that are independent of their content and intended function are subliminal and they are important because they "shape and control the scale and form of human association and action." The second insight is that the notion of media includes not just communication media but also all forms of human technology, tools and artifacts. We define "mediacy" as the study, understanding and consideration of these two key insights from McLuhan, and that mediacy compliments, and enriches, the traditional media literacy approach.

Keywords: *mediacy, media literacy, literacy, media ecology, Marshall McLuhan*.

INTRODUCTION

We propose that the concept of media literacy can be enriched by incorporating Marshall McLuhan's notions that (1) media independent of their content have subliminal effects on their users that impact the way in which we interact with each other and reality, and (2) that the study of media should not be restricted to communication media but that all forms of technology and all human artifacts, are media and deserve consideration.

We will argue in this essay that, by incorporating these ideas of McLuhan, the practitioners of media literacy might wish to go beyond their current goals of media literacy that were defined as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms" (Media Literacy: A Definition, n.d., para. 2) by participants at the 1992 Aspen Media Literacy Leadership Institute or as were defined by the Center for Media Literacy:

> Media Literacy is a 21st century approach to education. It provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate, create and participate with messages in a variety of forms — from print to video to the Internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy. (Media Literacy: A Definition, n.d., para. 4)

While these are laudable goals, they do not take into account the following two insights from Marshall McLuhan. The first is the notion that there are subliminal effects of a medium independent of the content it is transmitting, which he expressed with his famous aphorism, "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 7). The second is that all human artifacts and forms of technology are media, and that one cannot limit the notion of a medium to only communication media.

The medium is the message and that message is subliminal

McLuhan expressed the first notion with his famous one-liner, "The medium is the message". This one-liner confused many because it is obvious that the content of a medium is its message. But according to McLuhan there is also a second message, one that was the focus of McLuhan's studies, namely, the subliminal effects that affect users independent of the information it transmits, which he described in the following way: "The message of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 24).

The subliminal nature of the effect of a medium independent of its content was described by McLuhan in the very next paragraph after the above quote:

> It is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action. The content or uses of such media are as diverse as they are ineffectual in shaping the form of human association. Indeed, it is only too typical that the "content" of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium [i.e., makes it subliminal]. (1964, p. 24)

The effects of a medium impose a new environment and set of sensibilities upon its users. Media literacy, in our opinion, can be enriched by being aware of the environment and the sensibilities that each new medium creates. This is particularly critical for the Internet, the World Wide Web, smart phones, the various social media apps that populate these media, and new emerging digital technologies, such us virtual reality, augmented reality, immersive media, artificial intelligence, kinesthetic interfaces, and other technologies whose principal nature or essence is not related to communicating messages.

Young people seem to have no problem when they access, analyze, evaluate, create and participate with messages that they encounter in social media. What they are not aware of for the most part, is the subliminal effect that these media have on the way they live their lives. As a result, instead of them controlling social media, social media are controlling them. Many have become addicted to these social media apps and their smartphones through which they access these apps.

Media are not just communication media but all forms of technology

When McLuhan wrote: "the message of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs" (1964, p. 24), which we discussed above, he implied that a technology and a medium are equivalent. McLuhan supported his point by applying it to the technologies of the railway and the airplane as is revealed by looking at the full passage in which the above quote appeared:

> The message of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs The railway did not introduce movement or transportation or wheel or road into human society, but it accelerated and enlarged the scale of previous human functions, creating totally new kinds of

cities and new kinds of work and leisure. This happened whether the railway functioned in a tropical or northern environment, and is quite independent of the freight or content of the railway medium. The airplane, on the other hand, by accelerating the rate of transportation, tends to dissolve the railway form of city, politics, and association, quite independently of what the airplane is used for. (McLuhan, 1964, p. 24)

For McLuhan, a medium is not limited to communication media but includes all forms of technology. Media literacy, as it is commonly practiced, limits itself to communication media. We believe that as important it is to understand the effects of communication media, it is also critical for us to be aware of the impacts of all forms of technology particularly artificial intelligence and robots as these developments will have an increasingly greater impact on our lives.

Mediacy

We have proposed that media literacy could be enriched and expanded by including as a complement to media literacy, as currently defined and practiced, McLuhan's two insights into understanding media: namely understanding the subliminal effects of media; and the notion that all forms of technology, tools and human artifacts are media. We believe that there is more to media literacy than just the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms. To address this problem, we believe that media literacy needs to incorporate a new element into its practice, which we have defined as "mediacy."

We begin by describing what is meant by literacy and then justify our coining of the term mediacy, which entails understanding of media as environments. We will argue that consideration of mediacy will lead to a better understanding of how to access, interpret, critique and meaningfully produce all media including the spoken word, the written word, mathematics, audio-visual media, digital media, social media, robots, artificial intelligence and virtually all forms of technology and all forms of information. We will argue that mediacy is, in the end, an awareness of the ecology that media and technology create, and that taking mediacy into account supports the objectives of media literacy.

The concept of literacy historically relates to the ability to read and write. Behind the everyday business of writing and reading, there was also a need to interpret sacred texts. Literacy is a mundane reflection of hermeneutics, the ability to understand and interpret

books such as the *Torah*, the *Bible*, and the *Quran* as well as the *Bhagavad-Gita* and other sacred texts of Asia and the corpus of classical Greek texts, as they were the core texts upon which the idea of hermeneutics, or text interpretation, was built.

Literacy was a reduction of hermeneutics to the mundane level. Hermeneutics, in turn, has always related to the sacred or basic text of a given culture. This is why literacy is always about book/text (self-evident from the word "literacy," which itself is derived from the term literature). The hermeneutic (text-related) nature of literacy predefines the prevalence of the semiotic understanding of literacy today. Literacy is seen as a semiotic ability with the core application to text (and other symbolic media), which is very well described in Renee Hobbs's (2016) definition, "Literacy is the sharing of meaning through symbols," as presented in her lecture at the 19th Annual Convention of the Media Ecology Association (Hobbs, 2018).

In order to complement this semiotic approach, mediacy can be understood as a cognitive ability with the core application to technologies or media in general and not just text. Mediacy is about understanding, being aware and being critical of the effects of media independent of their content – it is about the tools and platforms of the oral, literate, electric and digital ages. Mediacy incorporates McLuhan's idea that "the medium is the message" as well as his observation that:

All media work us over completely. They are so persuasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the massage. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments. (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967, p. 26)

The traditional semiotic approach to literacy corresponds to an instrumental approach to media. This semiotic approach seemingly fits a view first developed by Marshall McLuhan (1962;1964), according to which a medium is a tool to enhance a human faculty or a combination of human faculties. The traditional semiotic/literacy approach sees media as a semantic instrument that is solely a carrier of the meaning. However, McLuhan clearly rejected this exclusive "carrier-of-the-meaning" take on media by stating that "the medium is the message" to take into account the additional impact of the medium independent of its content.

Moreover, McLuhan moved further and established, with his concepts of acoustic and visual spaces, a

foundation for an environmental approach to media, which has afterwards been developed by other practitioners of media ecology. Media ecology treats media as environments and not just as instruments. Therefore, the concept of literacy needs to be updated from the instrumental paradigm (how to use), to the environmental paradigm (how to be oriented to or survive with media). Unlike textual literacy ("literate literacy"), mediacy as the term we propose here suggests - is not about extracting/producing meanings just from text (or other symbolic form), but is about detecting or spotting the human self (identity) in the space-time continuum of social interactions. Mediacy is not instrumental but environmental. It aims not at making people good at using *Facebook* or other social media but at becoming aware and critical of them and of who they are or will become with it.

Mediacy is literacy about literacy; it is meta-literacy. It operates not just with meanings but rather with intentions. The skill of mediacy relates not to knowledge but rather to deliberation. Hence, social context is all-important, where the time spent with a certain medium is a crucial factor.

An argument for the incorporation of mediacy into the practice of media literacy

The creators or demiurges of the digital media environment apply all their power to compete for people's attention and time. In 2016, the average time spent per day by USA adults was estimated to be 12 hours and 7 minutes (TV Continues, 2016). As the digital environment is ignorant to space, it is very much sensitive to time. Time becomes both a spatial and economic category in the digital space. As we consume media, media consumes our time in exchange for services they provide us. This media ecological view, which includes the notion of human will, intentions, and the time consuming media, requires a revision of the purely semiotic concepts of literacy.

In order to capture as much of the user's time as possible, developers have produced highly accessible and intuitively consumable media interfaces. Interfaces of contemporary digital media do not require users to learn how to use them. Mediacy is not about the ability or the skill to use digital media. Mediacy is about how not to use media or how to use media discriminately and wisely both as the producer and the consumer of information.

With digital media, not only are media extensions of man as McLuhan (1964) posited in his book

Understanding Media: Extensions of Man, but the reverse happens in which man or the users of digital media become an extension of those digital media as these media scoop up our data and use them to the advantage of those that control these media (Logan, 2018). The implications for this loss of privacy is that we become "an item in a data bank" (McLuhan &Powers, 1992, p. 94).

B. J. Fogg (2002; 2010) is the founder of the field of captology, which he describes in the following terms:

> After we ran a number of experiments, and after these studies were replicated elsewhere, the results were undeniable. Computers could indeed be designed to influence people, to change their thoughts and behaviors… The feedback of the users of digital media become the feedforward for those media. (Fogg, 2010)

Social media are habit forming because they have been designed to be so. One of the people who mastered the art of making social media addictive is Nir Eyal (2014), the author of *Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products*. He consulted with a number of social media firms teaching them the techniques to make their products addictive. To protect his family from the insidious effects of addictive websites and apps, Eyal installed in his home an outlet timer connected to a router that cuts off access to the internet at a set time every day (Lewis, 2017).

What is media literacy any way?

The term media literacy, a portmanteau of media and literacy, is a term used by educators to describe the ability of users or consumers of media to make effective and critical use of communication media other than, and in addition, to the written word. The term literacy has traditionally been used to describe the skills associated with the use and production of the written word or literature and hence the term literacy was coined. We will expand on this definition of literacy in this article and define literacy to be: possessing the skills to access, interpret, critique and meaningfully produce the written word or literature. The inclusion of critiquing to the list of skills that defines literacy incorporates a suggestion made by one of our authors, Eva Berger (2004), in her article "The Exhaustion of the Literacy Metaphor in Education," where she proposed that media literacy could be better described by the term "media criticism" in the following passage from her article:

The conclusion of this article is that literacy is an overused metaphor that does not illuminate the

complications of our current media environment. As a remedy for this overuse, it is suggested that we replace the term media literacy with the term media criticism and try to turn schools into institutions that are dedicated to media criticism. Media literacy in the basic sense of being skilled at using technology is something children will learn how to do almost without guidance. But learning to be critical and defend themselves against the seductions of the products of that technology is something to which educators can make a real contribution. (Berger, 2004, p. 137)

Generalizing our definition of mediacy and applying it to mathematics, we define numeracy as possessing the skills to access, interpret, critique and meaningfully produce mathematics or numbers. If literacy is associated with literature and numeracy with numbers, then it follows that the skill to access, interpret, critique and meaningfully produce media in general should be mediacy. We therefore propose that mediacy incorporate the two insights from McLuhan, namely: that media are environmental and have subliminal effects that affect the way in which we interact with each other; and that the consideration of media must incorporate all forms of technology and not just communication media.

In the *Wiktionary* (Mediacy, n.d.)*,* mediacy is defined as: "1. The facility to work with words and numbers," and "2. The facility in working with media" (Mediacy, n.d.). The etymology of mediacy is described as a "blend of media + literacy". The second *Wiktionary* definition is exactly how we are using the term mediacy with the addition that working with media entails its access, interpretation, critique, and meaningful production. We earlier described the term "media literacy" as a portmanteau, but actually, mediacy is more accurately a portmanteau as it combines two words, media and literacy, into one word: mediacy.

As we have suggested, mediacy is a compliment to media literacy, and a brief discussion of the role of the suffix "acy" is in order. "Acy" is a suffix of nouns denoting quality, state, or condition. Thus, immediacy, for example, is the quality of bringing one into direct and instant [i.e. immediate] involvement with something, giving rise to a sense of urgency or excitement; fallacy is the use of invalid or otherwise faulty reasoning, or 'wrong moves' in the construction of an argument.

Along these lines, literacy is defined as the ability to read and write, or competence or knowledge in a specified area, and numeracy is the ability to use numbers. And media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms

and hence includes literacy and numeracy as specific examples for letters and numbers respectively. For the medium of speech media literacy is not described as 'speechacy,' but rather as rhetoric, or possibly, fluency.

As we have tried to clarify here, mediacy goes beyond just the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media: it is also a learned point of view, an awareness of the ecology of media that leads to an acquired point of view. It is a survival tool.

Mediacy deals with time, space and sensory biases of a medium (due to its physical form); with its political biases (due to varying levels of access); with its social biases (due to conditions of attendance); and with its epistemological biases (the worldview advanced by the medium). It also deals with a medium's content biases. This is what was meant by Media Literacy or Lankshear and Knobel's (2006) "literacies" [in the plural]. But as it is probably clear by now, mediacy also includes awareness of and adaptability to media environments and not just their content or messages.

Mediacy is about awareness of the various aspects of a medium or a technology, of what it is best at, and of who it encourages one to become. This awareness helps us make a more rational use of the media that surround us and allows us to enjoy what technology has to offer, diminishing its potential harm.

We call for the inclusion of mediacy, as we have defined it, in media literacy curricula where the focus is on the semiotic approach (understanding of meanings hidden in texts, advertisings etc.). By adopting our proposal for including the mediacy approach into media literacy curricula, we believe it would foster in the student, the ability to be the masters of their lives and masters of their use of media rather than media being the masters of them. Mediacy includes the ability to consciously switch on, switch over, and switch off media. Mediacy is not only about skills but also about intentions and will. It includes time management and the ability to "unhook."

CONCLUSION

We believe that the incorporation of the notion of mediacy based on McLuhan's notion that media are environmental and have subliminal effects and that media includes all forms of technology or human artifacts will enrich the study and practice of media literacy. We hope that this essay will lead to a dialogue between the authors, the media literacy community, and

members of the media ecology community. We look forward to your comments, readers. Let's dialogue.[1]

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[1] You can find the authors' contact information on the first page of this essay.