The Medium is the Massage

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Published in 2001 by Gingko Press
5768 Paradise Drive, Suite J, Corte Madera, CA 94925
(415) 924-9615, Fax (415) 924-9608
email: books@gingkopress.com
http://www.gingkopress.com


Printed in Germany by Clausen & Bosse
...the massage?
"The major advances in civilization are processes that all but wreck the social ties in which they occur."

—A. N. Whitehead
The medium, or process, of our time—electric technology—is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal life. It is forcing us to reconsider and re-evaluate practically every thought, every action, and every institution formerly taken for granted. Everything is changing—you, your family, your neighborhood, your education, your job, your government, your relation to "the others." And they're changing dramatically.

Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication. The alphabet, for instance, is a technology that is absorbed by the very young child in a completely unconscious manner, by osmosis so to speak. Words and the meaning of words predispose the child to think and act automatically in certain ways. The alphabet and print technology fostered and encouraged a fragmenting process, a process of specialism and of detachment. Electric technology fosters and encourages unification and involvement. It is impossible to understand social and cultural changes without a knowledge of the workings of media.

The older training of observation has become quite irrelevant in this new time, because it is based on psychological responses and concepts conditioned by the former technology—mechanization.

Innumerable confusions and a profound feeling of despair invariably emerge in periods of great technological and cultural transitions. Our "Age of

30-million toy trucks were bought in the U.S. in 1966.

Anxiety" is, in great part, the result of trying to do today's job with yesterday's tools-with yesterday's concepts.

Youth instinctively understands the present environment-the electric drama. It lives mythically and in depth. This is the reason for the great alienation between generations. Wars, revolutions, civil uprisings are interfaces within the new environments created by electric informational media.
"In the study of ideas, it is necessary to remember that insistence on hard-headed clarity issues from sentimental feeling, as it were a mist, cloaking the perplexities of fact. Insistence on clarity at all costs is based on sheer superstition as to the mode in which human intelligence functions. Our reasonings grasp at straws for premises and float on gossamers for deductions."

—A. N. Whitehead, "Adventures in Ideas."

Our time is a time for crossing barriers, for erasing old categories—for probing around. When two seemingly disparate elements are imaginatively poised, put in apposition in new and unique ways, startling discoveries often result.

Learning, the educational process, has long been associated only with the glum. We speak of the "serious" student. Our time presents a unique opportunity for learning by means of humor—a perceptive or incisive joke can be more meaningful than platitudes lying between two covers.

"The Medium is the Massage" is a look-around to see what's happening. It is a collide-oscope of interfaced situations.

Students of media are persistently attacked as evaders, idly concentrating on means or processes rather than on "substance." The dramatic and rapid changes of "substance" elude these accusers. Survival is not possible if one approaches his environment, the social drama, with a fixed, unchangeable point of view—the witless repetitive response to the unperceived.
How much do you make? Have you ever contemplated suicide? Are you now or have you ever been...? Are you aware of the fact...? I have here before me.... Electrical information devices for universal, tyrannical womb-to-tomb surveillance are causing a very serious dilemma between our claim to privacy and the community's need to know. The older, traditional ideas of private, isolated thoughts and actions—the patterns of mechanistic technologies—are very seriously threatened by new methods of instantaneous electric information retrieval, by the electrically computerized dossier bank—that one big gossip column that is unforgiving, unforgettable and from which there is no redemption, no erasure of early "mistakes." We have already reached a point where remedial control, born out of knowledge of media and their total effects on all of us, must be exerted. How shall the new environment be programmed now that we have become so involved with each other, now that aM of us have become the unwitting work force for social change? What's that buzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzing?
your family

The family circle has widened. The worldpool of information fathered by electric media—movies, Telstar, flight—far surpasses any possible influence mom and dad can now bring to bear. Character no longer is shaped by only two earnest, fumbling experts. Now all the world's a sage.
Electric circuitry has overthrown the regime of "time" and "space" and pours upon us instantly and continuously the concerns of all other men. It has reconstituted dialogue on a global scale. Its message is Total Change, ending psychic, social, economic, and political parochialism. The old civic, state, and national groupings have become unworkable. Nothing can be further from the spirit of the new technology than "a place for everything and everything in its place." You can't go home again.
There is a world of difference between the modern home environment of integrated electric information and the classroom. Today's television child is attuned to up-to-the-minute "adult" news— inflation, rioting, war, taxes, crime, bathing beauties—and is bewildered when he enters the nineteenth-century environment that still characterizes the educational establishment where information is scarce but ordered and structured by fragmented, classified patterns, subjects, and schedules. It is naturally an environment much like any factory set-up with its inventories and assembly lines.

The "child" was an invention of the seventeenth century; he did not exist in, say, Shakespeare's day. He had, up until that time, been merged in the adult world and there was nothing that could be called childhood in our sense.

Today's child is growing up absurd, because he lives in two worlds, and neither of them inclines him to grow up. Growing up—that is our new work, and it is total. Mere instruction will not suffice.
"When this circuit learns your job, what are you going to do?"

"Jobs" represent a relatively recent pattern of work. From the fifteenth century to the twentieth century, there is a steady progress of fragmentation of the stages of work that constitute "mechanization" and "specialism." These procedures cannot serve for survival or sanity in this new time.

Under conditions of electric circuitry, all the fragmented job patterns tend to blend once more into involving and demanding roles or forms of work that more and more resemble teaching, learning, and "human" service, in the older sense of dedicated loyalty.

Unhappily, many well-intentioned political reform programs that aim at the alleviation of suffering caused by unemployment betray an ignorance of the true nature of media-influence.

"Come into my parlor," said the computer to the specialist.
Nose-counting, a cherished part of the eighteenth-century fragmentation process, has rapidly become a cumbersome and ineffectual form of social assessment in an environment of instant electric speeds. The public, in the sense of a great consensus of separate and distinct viewpoints, is finished. Today, the mass audience (the successor to the "public") can be used as a creative, participating force. It is, instead, merely given packages of passive entertainment. Politics offers yesterday's answers to today's questions.

A new form of "politics" is emerging, and in ways we haven't yet noticed. The living room has become a voting booth. Participation via television in Freedom Marches, in war, revolution, pollution, and other events is changing everything.
"the others"

The shock of recognition! In an electric information environment, minority groups can no longer be contained—ignored. Too many people know too much about each other. Our new environment compels commitment and participation. We have become irrevocably involved with, and responsible for, each other.
All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive 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.

All media are extensions of some human faculty—psychic or physical.
...is an extension of the foot
the book
is an extension of the eye...
clothing, an extension of the skin...
electric circuitry,

an extension of the central nervous system

Media, by altering the environment, evoke in us unique ratios of sense perceptions. The extension of any one sense alters the way we think and act—the way we perceive the world.

When these ratios change, men change.
Ours is a brand-new world of allatonceness. "Time" has ceased, "space" has vanished. We now live in a global village...a simultaneous happening. We are back in acoustic space. We have begun again to structure the primordial feeling, the tribal emotions from which a few centuries of literacy divorced us.

We have had to shift our stress of attention from action to reaction. We must now know in advance the consequences of any policy or action, since the results are experienced without delay. Because of electric speed, we can no longer wait and see. George Washington once remarked, "We haven't heard from Benj. Franklin in Paris this year. We should write him a letter."

At the high speeds of electric communication, purely visual means of apprehending the world are no longer possible; they are just too slow to be relevant or effective.

Unhappily, we confront this new situation with an enormous backlog of outdated mental and psychological responses. We have been left d-a-n-g-i-n-g. Our most impressive words and thoughts betray us—they refer us only to the past, not to the present.

Electric circuitry profoundly involves men with one another. Information pours upon us, instantaneously and continuously. As soon as information is acquired, it is very rapidly replaced by still newer information. Our electrically-configured world has forced us to move from the habit of data classification to the mode of pattern recognition. We can no longer build serially, block-by-block, step-by-step, because instant communication insures that all factors of the environment and of experience co-exist in a state of active interplay.