CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Media

LANCE E. MASON, UNIVERSITY OF INDIANA, KOKOMO

> A medium is a technology within which a culture grows; that is to say, it gives form to a culture's politics, social organization, and habitual ways of thinking.
>
> —Neil Postman

Dictionary.com defines the word *media* as the plural of medium, a noun that indicates "the means of communication, as radio and television, newspapers, and magazines that reach or influence people widely: *The media are covering the speech tonight.*" When looking up the singular form, *medium*, one encounters several definitions centered on the idea of transmitting something between two things. When media is conceived as a message transmitter, it follows that media education would primarily involve analyzing the content of media messages.

In social studies education, content analysis is currently the dominant focus of media education. In their updated position statement on media literacy, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 2016) asserts that social studies "has an opportunity to lead the way in teaching students to both analyze and produce rich, complex, diverse, and engaging mediated messages" (p. 183). The NCSS argues that the participatory features of new media create an expectation of involvement from students, leading to possibilities for students to create their own media. However, their primary focus is having students critically analyze the content of messages:

> Through the decoding of content-rich media texts in the social studies classroom, students learn and practice the habits of asking key questions, applying historical analysis,

> identifying perspectives, assessing credibility, providing text-based evidence, drawing conclusions, and reflecting on their own process of reasoning. (NCSS, 2016, p. 183)

They also provide a series of questions designed to assist educators in investigating media messages. This focus on message content represents the vast majority of media education in the social studies. The NCSS position statement rightfully cites the close involvement of newer media, but gives no indication of how new ways of engaging with media might affect participants. Thus, they effectively treat media forms as simply being useful for more efficiently transmitting messages and content.

A focus on media as a vehicle for content delivery has also dominated conceptions in the field of communications and only began to be challenged with Marshall McLuhan's (1964) assertion that "the medium is the message" (p. 24), or that the medium itself is ultimately of greater societal consequence than the particular messages that it may carry. Media scholar Lance Strate (2012) explains:

> models of communication…typically present the medium (or channel) as an afterthought, suggesting that first we have a message, and then we decide on which medium to send it through. Based on this view, it is only natural to assume that messages exist in some ideal form, independent of the media, and unaffected by them. The *medium is the message* is intended to correct this mistaken view by also conveying the idea that the medium precedes the message. We begin with a medium, for example, a language, and compose a message by selecting and combining elements of the medium, or in this instance the code, according to the rules of grammar…there is no information independent of form. (p. 11)

If messages do not exist in isolation from the medium in which they were crafted, then the idea of media as merely a delivery device for content is inadequate for understanding the impact of media on society.

RETHINKING MEDIA

There is another way to conceive of media beyond it merely serving as a message transmitter. Consistent with McLuhan's arguments, Neil Postman (2006) explains that "a medium is a technology within which a culture grows; that is to say, it gives form to a culture's politics, social organization, and habitual ways of thinking" (p. 62). When considered through the biological metaphor of bacterial cultures, media no longer appear to be simple transmitters of messages, as they are also the environments that provide contexts for social behavior. Though underdeveloped, this basic conception is not entirely absent from the discourse of media education in the social studies. For example, the idea of *participatory cultures*, or the claim that new media spaces like YouTube and Facebook allow users to become producers as well as consumers (Jenkins, 2006), could be understood from this perspective as

the development of new cultural forms made possible by digital media technologies. However, these new cultural forms are often studied as mere additions to the existing culture, as is the case when new media enthusiasts tout advances in media that now afford multi-directional (consumers/producers to each other) instead of merely unidirectional (mass media to consumers) experiences, allowing users to disrupt mass media by creating their own media content and connecting with others via new media technologies. Such optimistic accounts about digital media and their potential to affect positive social change (see Jenkins, 2006, 2009; Rheingold, 2008) hold insights, but ultimately underplay the vast cultural changes—many of which are problematic—that emerge in the wake of new media technologies. Reconsidering *media as environments* could allow social studies educators and researchers to more effectively study both the positive and negative individual and social consequences due to media changes.

John Dewey (1916/2009, 1938) argued that educational environments were a crucial factor in the learning process that deeply influenced students' attitudes and behaviors. In many ways, a Deweyian approach to education requires attending closely to classroom dynamics and their habitual influences on students (Mason, 2013, 2016a). Recognizing media as environments would help social studies teachers identify the unique features of new media forms. It would also allow them to consider how students' changing media practices will ultimately impact how they conceive of themselves both as individuals and members of social groups, while also affecting their ideas about citizenship and social action.

Presently, there is concern both inside and outside education about the effects of new media environments on youth. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2010) highlights the individualization of online environments, with simplified interactions lacking ambiguity or complexity, "Unlike its offline alternative, the online world renders an infinite multiplication of contacts conceivable—both plausible and feasible. It does this through reducing their duration and, consequently, by *weakening* such bonds as call for, and often enforce duration" (p. 15).

Bauman argues that a strong sense of self and a deep understanding of difference are fostered by the quality and depth of human interactions, and online environments are negatively affecting these developments. For example, think of a local coffee shop. Such a place invites a mix of various groups in one public space (which is often connected to other public places inextricably linked to their physical location). The shop facilitates casual interactions while also connecting to social and political events within the community. Social media may provide some of these variables, yet tends to simplify these dynamics because it allows individuals to control the manner, degree, and duration of interactions with less worry about constraints from others. Simply put, the physical environment weaves a thicker web of community interaction that ultimately holds civic significance.

Part of the distinction between physical and virtual environments can be understood by the orientation needed to negotiate each respective space. The coffee shop may be privately owned, but is essentially a public space where one at least accepts the possibility of unexpected social engagement. By contrast, Internet spaces are engaged at the convenience of individuals who are in individualized, if not privatized, spaces, which do not preclude but also do not require social commitment in order to participate.

This aligns with Sherry Turkle's (2011) research into youth and social networking sites, which suggests that people have lower expectations for each other in online environments. Turkle describes vulnerable youth who anxiously craft their social networking profiles in the hope of earning the approval of their peers (p. 177). Many of the youth interviewed by Turkle find face-to-face interaction disconcerting because they cannot carefully control their responses. While social awkwardness may be a long-standing feature for American youth, because of new media environments, society must now contend with heightened influence from peer groups along with technologies that allow youth to more effectively retreat behind their online personas. Turkle's (2015) later research connects this research to the conception of empathy, or the ability to understand and share other's feelings. She cites a wealth of research that connects the use of social media and digital technologies to decreased ability to read and respond to others' emotional cues. Similar concerns have been articulated in education (Gardner & Davis, 2013) and in quantitative research into empathy (Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing, 2011) and narcissism (Twenge, 2013; Twenge, Konrath, Campbell, Foster, & Bushman, 2008a, 2008b). All of this suggests that the practices associated with new media technologies often foster interactions that inhibit the development of deeper forms of empathy and more robust senses of self.

If Dewey (1939/1976) is correct in asserting that democracy depends on a personal way of life connected to the depth of interpersonal engagement, then these developments should be a central concern for citizenship and democratic education (Mason, 2015a). A conception of media as simply transporters of content provides no avenues for understanding or investigating the media forms themselves. With the current way media is described in education, these concerns are often obscured behind the idea that new media make for better, faster transmitters of content, rather than as creators of new environments that help shape the attitudes and behaviors of both individuals and social groups in ways that social studies teachers should understand.

Some may be quick to dismiss such concerns by citing the many advantages that new media technologies afford users. These points also deserve consideration, but from the perspective of media as environments, it is the disadvantages or problems associated with media technologies that tend to be ignored because the advantages are often immediately apparent, whereas the problems often emerge

only after new media technologies become commonplace. Whatever one's stance on digital media, reconsidering how media is understood may help clarify the connections between the complex dynamics of personal growth, social relationships, and the media technologies that impact these matters. I do not call for a rejection of new media. Rather, I suggest that a new curriculum is needed that can help social studies teachers, teacher educators, and students attain greater awareness of the effects of media technologies.

HOW MEDIA ENVIRONMENTS STRUCTURE INTERACTION

When envisioning media as environments, it becomes easier to see how such environments structure interactions in particular ways. Marshall McLuhan (1964) argues that media extend human senses, yet because human senses function in balance with one another, this also creates amputations. Put simply, each form of media heightens certain senses while diminishing others.

Consider the physical experience of reading a book. One typically sits or lies down. The reader may notice the sensation of holding the book or smelling its pages, but the sense of vision is generally the dominant, active sense when reading. People usually hold their head steady in order to track the words from left to right on the page, while often isolating themselves to avoid outside stimuli. Compare this to verbal communication. Sound, as opposed to sight, comes at us from every direction and cannot be turned off. While people must turn their heads in a particular direction to view something, hearing pours into their ears whether they want it to or not. When listening, people tend to orient their entire body toward the speaker. In Western culture, physical gestures such as head nodding, eye contact, and brief speech utterances such as "uh-huh" are part of what can be called active listening.

When writing became widespread, words were at least partially transformed from participatory events into things that could be captured, studied, and reflected upon. When one writes a book, they become separated from what they have written, unlike in spoken language. This encourages the understanding that ideas can exist independently of people, making it easier for readers to objectify the world by perceiving themselves as removed from it (Constantineau & McLuhan, 2012, p. 51).

The television viewing experience is profoundly different from the visual emphasis of print literacy, as screen viewing offers an in-depth sensory experience that McLuhan (1964) contends is closer to the sense of touch than vision. Screen experiences are based primarily on what Peirce (1958) called iconic symbols that closely resemble what they represent. Reading requires learning vast combinations of abstract symbols that takes years to master. By contrast, the iconic symbols

of television and video are instantly perceived as an immediate, "felt" experience, which provokes a tendency to respond emotionally, as opposed to an analytic response like that encouraged by the experience of reading.

Experientially, new media are best understood as extensions of television in that they tend to encourage immediate felt experiences as opposed to reflective ones (Strate, 2014). Facebook updates and "tweets" require clipped, abrupt statements that resemble a television commercial, although in this case the individual plays the role of both marketer and consumer. New media make interpersonal communication easier and allow users to receive more sources of information, but they also extend the emotional impression bias of television and this has both individual and social consequences that should be examined as part of media education.

For example, political communication through Twitter is strictly limited to 280 characters per "tweet." Yet even political interaction through Facebook, which does not have the same degree of restrictions as Twitter, still encourages speedy consumption over depth. This may be due to privileges of the form itself, which is designed for rapid scanning of vast amounts of information. Also, when not mediated by the physical body, many seem to respond in a more emotive, less analytical way when receiving political news through social media, while having less patience for prolonged deliberative political encounters.

EXPANDING THE DEFINITION OF MEDIA

Within the idea of media as environments is not only a revised conception of media, but an expanded one. If media are seen as environments, then anything that can alter the environment becomes something to analyze. This could include traditional mass media, newer digital media, physical objects, and even language, which is the primary means of communication in most human interactions. McLuhan (1964) demonstrates this expanded idea of media with his example of railways as a medium:

> 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 area or a northern environment, and is independent of the freight or content of the railway medium. (p. 24)

From this perspective, the things that mediate social experiences influence how people make meaning of those experiences. Marshall and Eric McLuhan (2011) explain how human meaning-making is filtered through the objects we use around us: "We are the content of anything we use, if only because these things are

extensions of ourselves. The meaning of the pencil, or chair I use is the interplay between me and these things" (p. 6). In other words, changes in the objects that facilitate our interactions in the world alter both cultural dynamics and individual attitudes and behaviors. As Walter Ong (1982) states, "technologies are not mere exterior aids but also interior transformations of consciousness" (p. 81). From this point of view, what is typically identified as media should be considered along with other tools and technologies as being mediating factors in human experiences. As these variables change, so does one's understanding of social experiences and one's sense of self.

Consider the example of President Trump and Twitter. Many have criticized his use of the social media platform to express his frustrations over policy matters. In traditional media terms, Twitter is merely a venue that Trump uses to transmit ideas that express his volatile personality. However, if we follow McLuhan and Ong and take the media as environments perspective seriously, Trump's use of Twitter, which allows him to get instant gratification from his reactions, may contribute to his volatile personality by both providing a medium of immediate expression and offering rapid social validation of it. It may also stoke more volatile reactions from both supporters and critics, thereby contributing to an already polarized political landscape.

TOWARD A NEW PARADIGM FOR MEDIA EDUCATION: FIGURE/GROUND ANALYSIS

Figure/ground analysis was first applied to media by Marshall McLuhan as a way to perceive changes in media environments that might otherwise remain invisible for users. Simply put, a figure is what one consciously identifies in their environment; ground is composed of the things they ignore. Put another way, the figure is what is foregrounded; the ground is synonymous with the background. Ground provides the conditions under which a figure emerges and as such helps to shape perception of that figure. In terms of media, "the medium forms a ground for the content that it transmits and as such changes the message" (Logan, 2011, p. 2). In other words, the reader or viewer notices the foregrounded content, while ignoring the medium in the background that is an integral part of the message. Kawasaki and McLuhan (2010) elaborate:

> Media are ground in two ways. Watching a film on TV, one ignores the TV. In a cinema, one ignores the theatre, the screen, and other patrons while attending to the film. Reading a book, one ignores the page, the book itself, the room, even the actual printed words and letters while one's mind looks at meanings and images. (p. 4)

The prevailing tendency for Western media users is to ignore the ground of the media form and focus on the figure of the content. The standard notion of media education follows from this tendency. Reconsidering media education from the perspective of figure/ground analysis requires creating a perception-based curriculum that reveals the hidden ground of various media environments, leaving them open for critical inspection. The way to achieve this is for teachers to create anti-environments that allow what is typically perceived as background, or ground, to emerge as figure in the foreground (McLuhan & McLuhan, 2011).

One technique for moving items from ground to figure is to imagine what society would be like without them (McLuhan & McLuhan, 2011). This could be done for both historical and contemporary media technologies depending upon the subject and purpose of the teacher. For example, given an expanded conception of media, one can consider the automobile, which was a crucial invention that mediated culture in numerous ways throughout the 20th century and continues to do so today. In an American History class, imagining life without the automobile would bring the field of services and changes that automobiles have facilitated from ground to figure for students; increasing their ability to make connections between technological and social change. Students could imagine how they would get to school without a car, or how the size and location of schools may be different without automobiles. The entire service environment around cars would not exist as it does today, from roads and gas stations to repair shops, nor would many technical jobs. Without automobiles, the expansion of the suburbs would not have occurred in the mid-20th century, while cities would never have suffered from car congestion. Similarly, interstate and international commerce would be fundamentally different, possibly making our economic system less centralized. Such imaginings could lead into inquiries regarding ways that the automobile culture transformed life for Americans and fostered the rise of consumer culture beginning in the 1920s, or considering the role of oil consumption in decisions for the United States to enter into numerous armed conflicts in the second half of the 20th century up to the present day. Undertaking such exercises, students would acquire a deeper understanding of subject matter while simultaneously becoming more aware of how the tools they use help to construct their world in particular ways.

McLuhan (1964) observes that as users become accustomed to a media technology, they become numb to its effects. Today's students are likely to be numb to the effects of social media and mobile devices. A powerful example of the above exercise would be to have students imagine how life would change if social media or mobile digital devices did not exist (Mason, 2016b). Considering the absence of both simultaneously, students could consider how they would interact with others without such tools. How would their relationships with friends, family, and the rest of the world change? How would they share their consumer tastes and

preferences with others? How would they meet others who share similar interests? In what other ways would their lives change? Such questions would help bring the environments created by these tools from ground to figure for students to critically explore.

An extension of imagining life without a technology would be to actually live without a technology for a short period of time (Mason, 2015b). Teachers could ask students to conduct media blackouts of particular technologies such as social media or mobile devices for an evening or for one 24-hour period. If this is difficult for teachers to enforce, students could merely keep an inventory of media use for one day to one week. Many students will likely find that they spend more time with media or felt more reliant on media than they expected. Either exercise would move students' personal media use from ground to figure, which would engender opportunities for reflective examination.

Figure/ground analysis can also be used to explore screen media. For example, political commercials are a common item for analysis in social studies classrooms. Typical questioning frameworks such as that provided by NCSS (2016) focus mostly on media content, although they sometimes ask students to consider what persuasive techniques are used. Content is always important, but as noted earlier, content cannot be entirely separated from its medium. Following this, understanding more about the medium will help students gain greater command of media content. The immediacy of screens can overwhelm viewers' perceptual capabilities and leave them with mere impressions of what they viewed (Mason, 2015c). This is especially true for commercials and music videos, which tend to include particularly fast cuts and dense imagery. This is also crucial to understand for political advertisements, because campaigns use the screen form to craft subtle images about their candidate or their opponent in ways that are difficult to fully comprehend through analytic content exercises alone (Mason, 2015d).

Using figure/ground analysis, images will generally be foregrounded on a fast moving screen (McLuhan & McLuhan, 2011), with other material fading to the background. Isolating the other sensory features such as the spoken language or music will help bring this material to the foreground, or figure, for students to analyze. This could be achieved by shutting off the screen while listening to the commercial's music and spoken words to consider these aspects in isolation. Teachers can also mute the sound and ask students to focus only on the changing images in the ad or the written text.

Another powerful technique for bringing material from ground to figure is to transpose it into another medium. A teacher could type out the spoken words from a political commercial or other advertisement on a piece of paper. Often, such words amount to little substance, a point that can be cleverly obscured through the dense imagery of the screen but becomes clearer through this exercise. Larger

segments of the commercial could also be transposed into a written narrative for a comparative examination of media forms (for a detailed layout of this approach, see Mason 2015c, 2015d).

CONCLUSION

The standard idea of media as a transmitter of content is useful for basic analysis, although it does not allow teachers and students to explore how their own relationships with media impact their conceptions of the world, each other, and themselves. Recognizing media as environments can help address this deficiency, while a curriculum centered on figure/ground analysis could not only assist students in exploring their media environments, but could also lead to more robust understandings of existing subject matter in the social studies. Given the rapid pace of change in media technologies and the unpredictable consequences of those changes, a move to this broader understanding of media is needed.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the significance of recognizing media as environments?
2. In what ways is it important for students to understand how their use of media technologies influences their lives?
3. In what ways do new media practices alter conventional ways of communicating? What might be some of the positive and negative consequences of these changes for society and for individuals?

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