

Multimedia Overload Produces “Symplexity”

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Introduction by the column editor:

We humans “know” from information mediated through our “natural senses.” All outside signals come to us through some medium—sound waves, pressure and touch, light waves, radio and television waves, and so forth. McLuhan’s famous mantra “The medium is the message” paradoxically highlighted the critical transformation of meaning when each type of medium—radio, television, drums, hand signals—by its very nature modifies the message it is transmitting.

In this month’s column Dr. Zingrone brings challenging new ideas to the field of human communication and vividly describes the communication distortions that occur when the overload of increasingly complex modern media results in a paradoxical diminution of meaning itself. He has coined a term for this unintended consequence and given it to his exciting new book, *The Media Symplex: At the Edge of Meaning in the Age of Chaos* (1). Many of us may recognize the effect created by this accelerating phenomenon—our stupefaction as we experience the onslaught of sound and visual signals produced by a television news screen, where an avalanche of rapidly changing, overlapping, and distorted visual images flash at our eyes while

screeching, undulating synthetic “music” crashes about our ears. And in that chaos we struggle to find meaning.

Dr. Zingrone, who worked with McLuhan and who has written extensively about his work (2,3), has succeeded in his new book to move the pioneering work of human communication scientists forward and thereby help us all to understand the developing paradox and danger of more communication yet less meaning.

In the 1960s, when Marshall McLuhan developed the insight that “the medium is the message,” he was trying to release us from our fixation on content. Most of us who were lucky enough to study with him were cocksure of the powerful, revolutionary effects of his discovery, which allowed us to interpret the modern world with a breadth of understanding that was not possible for those who were stuck in their literate modality, in which they ignored the reality of multimedia complexity beyond a narrow print bias.

In the beginning, the stuff we were dealing with was fairly simple. If I say “I love you” to a woman, it matters whether I tell her face to face, over the phone, by billboard, or by skywriter. Clearly, this message is a function of the medium that conveys it. Things heated up when we fell in love with Fellini’s *8 1/2*, savoring its brilliant play on being a movie about making a movie and the mental documentary that links the perceptual disparity in our minds. The paradoxical world of medium-content interplay was deeply satisfying to those who wanted to see a more intense intellectual dimension to films, as could be found in films such as *The French Lieutenant’s*

Woman, Coppola’s *One From the Heart*, or Truffaut’s *Day for Night*. Now as we consciously assimilate F/X (computer-enhanced special film effects) and morphing techniques, many DVDs include a deconstructionist trailer with a short documentary on the making of the film as well as alternative endings. The computerized creation of hypertext even threatens the survival of the novel.

The bias of interpretation toward the medium was absolutely necessary during the 1960s. Cinematic awareness was at a low level, and television was a complete mystery to most people. We felt it socially and politically imperative that people be made aware of the powerful shift in sensory effects when moving from one medium to another. Personally, however, I had growing misgivings about the application of this new ratio of media effects that was reducing the value of content too severely.

If an epic poem—say, “The Odyssey”—is recorded from aural performances into phonetic alphabet and then to dramatic presentation, to opera, to a printed book, to film, and to television series, one can see that content actually tends to outlive media formats or at least to transcend any single approach to telling a story. From the beginning, my view was that if “the medium is the message,” then that message has to be expressed as content if it is to be understood, though it is a content of a deeper and more complex kind. In the end, I was sure that the medium always reenters content, as contemporary filmmakers and others were emphasizing.

Overall, I became intrigued by the way in which electronic technologies and multimedia formats forced the simple view of phenomena to merge with its more complex hidden

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grounds, thus creating a new level of conscious awareness in which the simple and the complex are forced to co-exist. The simultaneous intrusion of complex grounds into perceptual awareness produced extremely difficult adjustment problems for anyone seeking a dependable reality base on which to act.

The assassination of President Kennedy is an excellent example of symplecity, as are the events of September 11, 2001. Even though television dominated the coverage of the Kennedy assassination, it was a multimedia event, and several conflicting versions of reality emerged from it. The more reflective media—newspapers, books, and radio—asked hard questions that were not based on what everyone thought they saw on television. It wasn't long before theories of conspiracy began to emerge. We are all too familiar with this outcome.

The point of interest for me was not whether there were one or more assassins. Instead, I was fascinated by the simultaneous, persistent antagonism of the simple and the complex versions of the event in the public mind, so that the actual history of the event shows the inextricable linkage of both versions, likely forever.

Because of multimedia coverage of all events, they become increasingly symplectic. As I have shown in my book *The Media Symplex: At the Edge of Meaning in the Age of Chaos* (1), symplecity is the inescapable merging of the simple and the complex that is driven by the computer mindset being generated by electronic technologies. The entire sensorium, trained by media to adapt to media forms, has become symplectic. All perceptions are adulterated by the values implicit in media translations of reality. The time-lapse filmic opening of a rose forever alters one's sense of floral growth. Such virtual insights make us symplectic. Symplecity is the effect of the process of virtualization on reality.

Mass media simplify experience and thus make reality more complex, and they speed up the rate of cultural change to the point of creating a pervasive panicky angst. In an environment dominated by electric effects, reality always seems to be collapsing around us, creating confusion and unhappi-

ness. Hypercoverage by multimedia news is partly accountable. CNN has become the ringmaster of contemporary emotional life. As part of the simplifying effects of media, symplecity promotes inhibition (desensitizing the receiver), induces us to "live mythically and in depth" (4) (that is, to engage preconsciously in programming), and leaves us too often stumbling about the edge of meaning, where the interlacing network of media paradox reigns. In addition, symplecity exposes us to the management of consciousness by subliminal (preconscious) means, which militates against independent thought and action.

The events of September 11 present an excellent example of symplecity. The hidden ground of a thousand terrorist cells merged into a monstrous organism of terror. The idyllic xenophobia of American life is now permanently threatened, submerged in complex global relations. Has meaning collapsed altogether when we learn that 15 of the terrorists were Saudi nationals but that U.S. deference to complex business relations excludes Saudi Arabia from the tyrannous reprisals that others in the oil axis are facing? Will we ever understand the complexity of inter-Arab rivalries?

These inextricable linkages of the simple and the complex make it difficult for people to act politically or in any other way. Information overload drives all events to intolerable levels of complexity. It appears to many that they must inhibit this pressure in order to maintain their mental health. We can reduce the intensity of our experience with drugs, alcohol, overwork, manic exercise, pornography, avoidance of commitments, media toys, and four or five hours of television a day. Media numb us, massage us into compliance with the flow of events. Electronic technologies create paradox and ambiguity in the perception of reality. Every paradox—for example, "Everything is rooted in its opposite"—is a simplex combining a simple observation with more psychologically resonant associations.

McLuhan observed that new technologies, including media, create antienvironments of psychic and social awareness. New media, interact-

ing in multiplexed relations, create a powerful mixed act of insights that take us to the edge of meaning. The antienvironment that results from this cross-feed of media often creates violent opposition in the short run, such as the opposition to videocam speed traps.

Art is the dominant antienvironment, and important art tends to push meaning to the edge. Picasso's work is symplectic, giving us all four sides—top and bottom, inside and out—linked together in a complex set of planes on a flat canvas. His meaning is allusive and lacks clarity. (McLuhan used to say, playfully, "Avoid clarity, it's obsolete.") The simplicity of Picasso's figures is almost childlike, and the complexity of his concept is always extreme. The same is true of much modern art.

As Jane Healy (5) and others have widely reported in regard to magnetic resonance imaging and computer tomography studies, multimedia restructure the user's mind. Television technology, for example, alters the brain-wave mix, making television inimical to rational, verbal, and analytical thought. In advertising, words and even letters not only convey verbal content but become icons—the Coke logo, the golden arches—of symbolic values. Under the electric conditions of both technology and its psychosocial effects, the relatively neglected preconscious burgeons with fragments of popular culture dissociated from any coherent pattern of meaning. Everyone's brain is full of bits and pieces of jingles, slogans, and images that whirl about just below the limen of consciousness and that can be called into consciousness by the individual alone. As Dixon (6,7) and others have observed, this material is not locked into the unconscious but is subliminal and can easily pop up into consciousness. The symbolic resonances of carefully crafted advertising exploit this perceptual arrangement as they fill our psyches to the breaking point with fragments of desire. "Trivial Pursuit" became one of the most successful games of all time by exploiting this mental fragmentation.

Information overload disintegrates

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reality. Inhibition tries to hold things together. The inhibited individual, however, is not leading a full life. This is an antievolutionary condition, if consciousness is the result of an ever-increasing complexity in cerebral development. When we resist engaging in ultracomplex human activity, we reverse the dynamic of expanding awareness. Have we reached such an impasse, a break barrier, as to how much stimulation by electronic media we can take? Must we diminish our capacity for complex understanding? Will life be simpler in a hundred years? ♦

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