

Is the Medium the Message?

Wednesday 4th April 2007 11:10 am

Category: *Unexpected*

http://spotlight.macfound.org/main/entry/medium_the_message/

Howard Gardner explores the question: Do the new digital media change everything?

My training is in psychology and biology and, as formulated, the question stirs my disciplinary conscience. As we are biological creatures, equipped with a gradually evolved nervous system, our fundamental human nature changes very slowly. We 21st century creatures understand Greek comedies and tragedies easily, and the Greeks would have no trouble understanding the plots of our current television shows, movies, and novels. On the other hand, they'd be bewildered by our cities, our household appliances, our media. Human culture changes very quickly, and the habits and ways of thinking apt for one culture or one era can be anachronistic or even maladaptive in another time and place.

I have no doubt that, over time, the new digital media (NDM) will change our minds—both their contents and their manner of processing information. But the most profound media effects occur slowly. Plato was afraid that writing would change thinking and memory, and he was right about that—but it took decades, perhaps centuries, for the ways that we write to alter the way that we speak, categorize, remember, or distort. So, too, the changes that were wrought by the printing press, the telegraph, and the broadcast media were substantial, but not immediately manifest or understood.

Though he is much criticized nowadays, Marshall McLuhan had genuine insights here. McLuhan argued that new media invariably begin by presenting the contents of the old media: radio and movies first presented the theatrical stage, television initially was visually-presented radio, and so on. This characterization is even true of the NDM, whose initial games, webcasts, search engines, and social networks draw heavily on prototypes developed in a predigital age. It takes time to arrive at the forms of presentation that take advantage of the distinctive features of each new medium.

On the other hand, another of McLuhan's aphorisms may prove timebound. McLuhan famously contended "The medium is the message." The classic example here is the 1960 television debates between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon. Those who heard the debates on radio thought that the authoritative-sounding Vice President had won on points; those who watched the debates on television felt more in synch with the young Senator from Massachusetts. But increasingly, the print, broadcast, and other communication media are merging; in the future, users may pay no attention to the source of, or the means employed by, converging media.

Returning to the question at hand, two spheres that have been most immediately impacted by the new digital media are politics and commerce. Political candidates and operatives need to master the new media of communication, lest they become victims thereof; and any company or corporation that attempts to operate without employing the speed, flexibility, and advertising powers of the NDM is likely to have a short life. We can call these changes in human culture—more fundamental aspects of human cognition, emotion, and character are not significantly altered.

A Life-Altering Impact?

Friday 6th April 2007 4:15 pm

Category: *Unexpected*

http://spotlight.macfound.org/main/entry/life_altering_impact/

Howard Gardner continues the conversation about where the most profound effects of digital media will occur. He suggests that digital media may have the power to qualitatively change life experience.

Over the long run, I expect the most profound effects of the new digital media to occur with respect to the classical categories by which we experience the world—categories that I will call, for short, the Kantian categories. As a species, we have evolved to perceive objects—animate and inanimate—as they exist in time and space, and as they interact and affect one another. And we have evolved to consider certain relations among humans as proper, others as problematic or even proscribed. Initially, most of these objects existed in the natural world, but with the proliferation of technology, each of these categories has begun to be represented and apprehended in new ways. The new digital media will accelerate this process and, perhaps, render life experience as qualitatively different.

Time: Individuals are expected to be, and expect others to be, available throughout the day and night. Rather than carry out one task at a time, one task after another, more and more individuals multi-task regularly. Information that used to travel over days or weeks now makes its way instantaneously around the world. The pace of life in a digital age seems inexorable.

Space: Individuals evolved to live in a particular region of the world, and to have access exclusively or chiefly to those who lived near them. Now one has equal and instantaneous access to individuals around the world. There is no longer a single space—there are as many virtual spaces (virtual worlds) as we care to create and participate in. Indeed, in virtual realities, space has only a metaphoric meaning.

Objects: More and more of our life is spent not with physical objects that have always existed, or with objects that one can build, handle, or destroy but rather with symbolic or virtual objects that can never be fully annihilated. Some of these resemble inanimate objects; some resemble animate entities; for an increasing number of robot-like objects or avatars, the line between animate and inanimate no longer makes sense. Indeed, as Sherry Turkle has demonstrated, young persons often attribute greater ‘reality’ to digital than to physical entities.

The issue of ownership of objects becomes vexed. It is so easy to transmit the creation of another person and to represent it as one’s own. Notions of intellectual property rights, plagiarism, authorial voice, become blurred. Wikipedia is the creation of innumerable, essentially anonymous figures; whom does one cite?

Personal Identities and Relationships: While issues of personal identity have never been completely straightforward, the ease with which identities can be created, shaped, and acted upon places new stresses on the sense of who one is, and who one is not. Similarly, the number of relations to others that can be established online, and the fluidity of these relations, is also unprecedented. We do not know whom to trust, who is as represented, who is anonymous, who exists over time and in real space.

Ethics: As implied, these strains on the Kantian categories harbor ethical challenges. To be sure, individuals have always been tempted to cut corners and cross lines, particularly when the chances of

discovery/sanction are small. As former CBS anchor Dan Rather can testify, the chance that a falsehood will be immediately apprehended actually increases in the world of the Internet; but so does the chance that a falsehood will become the "topic" of the week. The laws, rules, regulations, and implicit norms that have developed gradually over time are all vulnerable in the era of NDM, and it remains unclear which of them will remain intact, which will have to be reformulated, and which may need to be scuttled.

Of course, media do not operate in a vacuum. In addition to the forces of the media, there will be counterforces. Agencies of government, religion, family, community, and corporations will be affected by the new digital media but they can expect to resist, especially when their core interests are threatened.

The Unlimited Frontiers

Tuesday 10th April 2007 5:28 pm

Category: *Identity*

http://spotlight.macfound.org/main/entry/unlimited_frontiers/

In Howard Gardner's final post, he explores how the American Context shape the affects of digital media.

A few words about the American context are appropriate here. The new digital media bring to mind two longtime considerations. As formulated by the historian Frederick Jackson Turner, America has been a country of frontiers. At first the Eastern shore itself represented a frontier for Europeans on the run or on the make. Thereafter, the middle West, the far West, and the entertainment worlds of Hollywood represented frontiers of various sorts. With the NDM, we have a new and essentially unlimited set of frontiers—those embodied in virtual realities.

The second feature, pointed out almost 200 years ago by the French visitor Alexis de Tocqueville, is that America is a country of voluntary organizations. The NDM have spawned innumerable networks and associations, dedicated to every cause and pursuit that one can think of, and, no doubt, many that are inconceivable. Whether, in the long run, these voluntary sprouts will add up positively, negatively, or as an entirely mixed bag cannot be anticipated.

Reflecting these two features, Americans dislike to be regulated, and we push against strong government, particularly when it appears to be intrusive. Yet, it cannot be denied that the NDM are rife with opportunities for abuse, unethical behavior, or worse. We all witnessed the reaction of the government to corporate abuses in the rapid enactment of the Sarbanes-Oxley bill. Should the inhabitants of the media be unable to provide internal or self-regulation, we can be certain that other forces—religious, corporate, governmental—will intervene.

The changes in each of the Kantian spheres will occur gradually, and at first they will appear to be quantitative, rather than qualitative, clearly in the realm of human culture rather than human nature. But at least in some of the spheres, a tipping point will be reached. At that time, the human senses of time, space, objects, identity, relations, and even ethics will no longer resemble those that obtained in earlier epochs. At that point, we may well declare “The new digital media have changed everything.”