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RETHINKING MARSHALL McLuhan's CONCEPT OF 'THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE' IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA AGE

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Abstract

This article examines the applicability of Marshall McLuhan's famous dictum, 'the medium is the message,' from the broadcast era of the 20th century to the algorithmic platform capitalism of the 21st. The systemic shift from centralised, linear broadcast infrastructures to decentralised, recursive, and automated digital platforms serves as the framework for the main argument.

This article shows that media effects are no longer only extensions of the human nervous system by analysing the structural characteristics of modern social media networks, algorithmic loops, and the developing metaverse. It argues that while McLuhan correctly identified the structural primacy of the medium over its content, his original framework lacked the vocabulary to explain an ecosystem where the medium is no longer a fixed material artifact (like a television set or a printing press), but a dynamic, learning, and hyper-personalized computational architecture. Rather, they are predatory loops intended to extract data and change behaviour. In the end, this paper offers a formal reformulation of McLuhan's proverb for the digital era: The Algorithm is the Architecture of Co-Created Behavioural Modification, and the Platform is the Algorithm.

Keywords: The Medium is the Message, Social Media, Algorithmic Communication

Introduction

Marshall McLuhan's popular assertion that "the medium is the message" has attracted more attention than almost any other idea in communication scholarship. First presented in his 1964 book *Understanding Media*, McLuhan's concept redirected communication studies from merely analyzing media content to investigating how the technologies themselves reshape human perception, social dynamics, and culture (McLuhan, 1964). He argued that every new medium redefines human experience by amplifying specific human faculties while fundamentally changing how we interact, think, and organize society. Therefore, the environment created by the media has a much more significant influence on society than the content of the message itself. (McLuhan, 1964; Ohiagu, 2022).

While McLuhan argued that the medium shapes society more profoundly than the content it carries, the emergence of algorithmic-driven social

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media platforms suggests a new dimension (Ohiagu, 2022). In the contemporary digital environment, users influence algorithms through their online behavior, while algorithms simultaneously determine the information, perspective, and experience users encounter. This reciprocal relationship indicates that the communicative environment is no longer shaped solely by the medium itself but also by the algorithmic systems embedded within it. Consequently, McLuhan's famous proposition may require theoretical expansion to accommodate the realities of personalized digital communication. (Kahar & Abd Fatah, 2025; Ohiagu, 2022).

McLuhan's proposition remains valuable, but in the social media age the "medium" can no longer be understood simply as the platform. It must also include the algorithmic architecture that personalizes, prioritizes, and shapes each user's communication environment.

This paper argues that while social media users operate within the same communication medium, they do not inhabit the same communication environment. Rather, algorithmic recommendation systems construct multiple personalized environments within a single medium, exposing different users to different realities based on their behaviors and interactions. Consequently, McLuhan's proposition that 'the medium is the message" requires theoretical reconsideration to account for the role of algorithms in shaping these individualized communication environments.

'The medium is the message'

Marshall McLuhan's concept of "the medium is the message" remains one of the most influential propositions in communication theory because it shifted scholarly attention from media content to the broader effects of communication technology on society.

Contemporary scholars have reaffirmed the continuing relevance of McLuhan's proposition in explaining the influence of emerging communication technologies. Ohiagu (2022) explains that McLuhan's theory redirected communication scholarship from analyzing message content to explaining how media technologies themselves influence human perception and societal development. Rather than treating media as neutral conduits, the author argues that communication technologies actively construct social environments that shape how individuals interpret and engage with the world. Similarly, Kahar and Abd Fatah (2025) contend that McLuhan's insight remains applicable in the digital era because contemporary communication continues to demonstrate that media technologies exert significant influence beyond the information they transmit. Their review suggests that although digital platforms differ considerably from the media technologies available during McLuhan's time, his central proposition continues to provide a valuable theoretical framework for understanding technological change and its societal consequences.

According to Bini (2025), McLuhan roughly described a medium as any extension of the human body, mental equipment, or collective nervous system. Print media is an extension of the eye, the wheel is an extension of the foot, clothing is an extension of the skin, and electronic circuitry is an extension of the central nervous system. Therefore, any medium's "message" is the structural change it brings about in human psychology and social structure (Aganbi, 2021). McLuhan offered the well-known example of the electric light bulb to illustrate this point. In the same manner that a newspaper has articles and a television has shown, an electric light has no content. However, by erasing the natural distinction between day and night, the electric light bulb fundamentally re-engineers human society, changing urban design, factories, and sports. Although electric light lacks substance, its structural message is evident (Mcluhan, 1967).

In McLuhan's view, the electronic age bypassed the visual isolation of the print era, plunging humanity back into an acoustic, interdependent environment where information wraps around the globe instantaneously. This structural contraction of time and space birthed his famous concept of the 'Global Village.' In this village, electronic media binds humanity into a hyper-connected, collective consciousness, making isolation impossible and turning public discourse into a shared, immediate tribal experience (Logan, 2019).

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that McLuhan's concept extends beyond the content of communication to the transformative influence of media environments on human experience. While communication technologies have evolved considerably since McLuhan first introduced the

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concept, contemporary scholarship generally agrees that the medium itself remains a powerful determinant of perception, interaction, and social organization. This continuing relevance provides theoretical foundation for examining whether the emergence of algorithm-driven social media requires a reconsideration of what constitutes the "medium" in contemporary digital communication.

Media Ecology and the Evolution of Communication Environments

Media ecology scholars generally argue that communication media should be understood as environments that shape human perception, behavior, and social organization rather than merely as channels for transmitting messages. Logan (2016) explains that communication media function as interconnected ecosystems in which new technologies reshape rather than replace existing media. Similarly, Velasquez Benavides et al. (2018) conceptualize media environments as dynamic and continually evolving ecosystems, emphasizing that communication research should focus on the characteristics of media environments rather than solely on media content. Extending these ideas to the digital era, Guarino (2023) argues that contemporary communication has transformed the relationship between media and messages, making digital communication environments considerably more complex than those envisioned during McLuhan's time.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that communication environments evolve alongside technological development and continue to shape patters of human interaction. Nevertheless, existing discussions largely treat digital platforms as unified communication environments, giving limited attention to the ways in which algorithmic recommendation systems personalize users' experience within the same platform. This emerging dimension provides an important context for understanding communication in the social media age.

The Medium is the Message in the Age of Social Media

Social media is an emerging technology that has garnered a lot of attention lately and is a potential future development of the internet. It represents the virtual world where individuals can interact with one another in a way that blurs the distinction between the real and physical worlds. Bini (2025), observed that social media offers a unique and immersive method to experience the environment and content that is fundamentally different from traditional, which gives it the ability to transform communication. This study attempts to provide an analytical understanding of the emergent medium (Social media) and its likely ramifications for society by looking at it through the prism of McLuhan's concepts.

In his 1964 essay, Marshall McLuhan originally presented the idea that "the medium is the message" (Mcluhan, 1994). McLuhan's thesis states that the listener is more affected by the medium than by the content itself. To put it another way, the medium shapes the message while managing its impact and meaning (Carmona, 2019). According to McLuhan, each medium has a unique quality that affects how it is used and comprehended. He gave the example of television as a media that presents information in a fragmented and subservient manner, while the telephone is an isolated and participatory medium. He claims that each media's distinct forms have an impact on how we interpret and react to the ideas it conveys (Pinchevski, 2019).

In the subject of media and communication studies, the idea that 'medium is the message' has been hotly contested and questioned. McLuhan's ideas have been expanded upon by later theories like his 'global village and technological determinism' (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967, pp. 6) and applied to a variety of media, including print, television, film, and the internet.

Theunissen (2021) claims that the reintroduction of medium in social media explores the idea that consumers' perceptions and understanding of technology are influenced by the medium through which they interact with it. The communication route becomes a key component of the message and determines how consumers receive and interact with social media, where virtual and physical realities coexist. This emphasises how important it is to represent both the content and the platform in order to influence users' views and experiences on social media (Alawaad, 2022).

Therefore, the primary thesis of Marshall McLuhan's message is that the medium used to convey information has a bigger influence on people and society than the substance itself. According to McLuhan, every media has distinct features that influence how people absorb and process information. To put it another way, the mode of communication is just as crucial as the message itself (Urban, 2015). It is a fact that every media innovation alters how people interact with one another, is impacted throughout history, and is influenced by the dominant.

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To McLuhan, every new communication medium profoundly expands and modifies human perception, cognition, and culture. For instance, he believed that television was an extension of the central nervous system that established a worldwide village, and the printing press was an extension of the human eye that made knowledge widely available (Easa, 2019). Paul Levinson expands on Marshall McLuhan's theories in his book, contending that digital media is an extension of human potential and a continuation of McLuhan's theory that media and technology are extensions of the self (Levinson, 2001).

According to Levinson (2001), the internet has made the idea of a "global village" a reality in the digital age by offering a new means of communication that instantly links individuals all over the world. Additionally, he explores the notion that digital technology is creating a new process of collective consciousness and transforming how we think, speak, and engage with one another

Social Media and Algorithmic Communication

Scholars have investigated the ways in which the format of digital media influences the message. Manovich (2002), for instance, contended that the database style of digital media has altered how we engage with information. According to him, the database format promotes non-linear thinking more than traditional media's linear thinking. Social media's development as a new communication tool altered how people connected with one another. Shirky (2010) used statistical research to demonstrate how social media apps have improved, sustained, and strengthened relationships between people regardless of geographic boundaries. Additionally, this media has given people an easy means to communicate their emotions and tell each other their tales.

In the digital age, researchers were worried about how the advent of visual culture and digital media as a new communication channel have supplanted in-person conversations. Castells et al. (2009) investigated how digital media facilitates equitable creation and consumption of information while accelerating interactive conversation. Additionally, he found that in the modern era, mediated communication allowed users to work together by exchanging knowledge and skills. According to Jenkins (2006), digital media have significantly improved participatory culture since they allow users to produce original content in a shared online space. He noted that the next revolutionary medium, such as virtual reality, is changing and replacing communication techniques. Dynamic Networked Ecosystems take the place of these pipelines in the contemporary platform concept. According to Rashid and Khan (2021), platforms such as Meta, X, TikTok, and YouTube do not primarily produce content; instead, they offer the computational infrastructure for user interaction, sharing, and data generation.

The user of a platform is no longer a couch-sitting, passive observer. The user is an active participant whose clicks, scrolls, pauses, and likes are all immediately recorded and sent back into the system (Dickson, 2022). This structural change eliminates any distinctions between sender and recipient, transforming communication into an ongoing, participatory loop. McLuhan's idealised "Global Village" has its limitations shown by this interactive design. Although, McLuhan predicted that electronic media would unite humanity into a harmonious, hyper-connected community, the rise of algorithmic social platforms has executed the exact opposite, fragmenting the public sphere into hyper-polarized Echo Chambers and Info-Silos (Pinchevski, 2019).

According to Rashid and Khan (2024), the convergence of machine learning models, predictive analytics, and spatial computing has led to the creation of immersive virtual realities known as the Metaverse, marking the pinnacle of communication technology evolution. For example, a medium continued to exist as a separate entity outside of the human body during the print and television eras. The user had either stare at a television screen across the room or pick up a book. This physical separation created a tiny psychological barrier that allowed a user to take a step back, exercise critical thought, and consider the media experience.

Every glance, hand gesture, heart rate spike, and physical movement is recorded in real time in this spatial environment (Sweetser & Becktel, 2017). Urban, (2015) argued that the medium now fully envelops and absorbs the consumer's sensory equipment rather than only transmitting information to them. Beyond anything McLuhan could have predicted, this immersive reality signifies a new degree of media control. A medium ceases to be a simple tool or extension of your body when it can monitor your eye movements and dynamically change the virtual environment around you to affect your choices (Aganbi, 2021). Therefore, the medium turns into an invisible, automated reality engine. Your entire sensory environment becomes a monetised realm where corporate algorithms subtly guide your

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decisions, closing the loop between human perception and computational control (Bini, 2025).

The platform design of X, formerly known as Twitter, shows how structural limitations determine the character and tone of public discourse. X now modifies political communication by prioritising viral metric displays (retweets, likes, impressions) and imposing hyper-short text constraints (initially 140 characters, then enlarged but still structurally brief). This medium's physical restrictions prevent it from expressing complicated logical arguments, historical background, or nuance. Rather, the platform's design encourages attacks, harsh, divisive remarks, and overly simplified slogans. Therefore, the normalisation of ongoing conflict is the real message of X. It destroys the shared nuance needed to resolve complicated societal issues by turning real public discourse into a never-ending digital arena where politicians and public figures are compelled to perform for metrics.

On the other hand, Tiktok is intended to give a clear illustration of a contemporary "hot" medium that overwhelms human senses in order to modify cognitive ability. TikTok completely avoids human decision-making by streaming material through its centralised recommendation algorithm, in contrast to early social networks that depended on a user actively creating a social graph of friends.

TikTok features a continuous vertical scroll, hyper-abbreviated video formats (often lasting only 15 to 60 seconds), and instantaneous algorithmic rewards designed to cause continual dopamine releases in the human brain. The fragmentation of human attention is the platform's fundamental message, regardless of the content of any particular TikTok video. The human brain is rewired after prolonged exposure to this extremely quick media. It damages deep reading habits, decreases tolerance for linear storytelling, and fosters a psychological reliance on rapid satisfaction. TikTok terrifyingly demonstrates McLuhan's central thesis: the platform's enduring legacy is not its viral dancing trends, but rather its structural devastation of human capacity for linear, long-form thought.

Boeker and Urman (2022) examined the mechanisms underlying TikTok's recommendation system and found that content personalization is largely driven by users' behavioral interactions with the platform. According to the study, factors such as viewing during, likes, follows, and other engagement patterns significantly influence the content subsequently recommended to users. Consequently, individuals using the same social media platform may encounter markedly different preferences and online behavior. Similarly, Keijzer and Mas (2022) argue that personalized recommendation algorithms embedded in social media platforms contribute to the formation of filter bubbles by selectively exposing users to information that aligns with previous interests and online behaviors. The authors contend that algorithmic personalization influences the diversity of information available to users by prioritizing content consistent with their existing preferences. Consequently, individuals using the same social media platform may experience different information environments because the recommendation system curates content differently for each user. This finding reinforces the argument that algorithmic personalization fragments communication environment within a single social media platform.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that algorithmic recommendation systems have fundamentally transformed the nature of communication on social media platforms. Rather than providing a uniform communication environment for all users, algorithms continuously personalize content based on individual behaviors and preferences, resulting in multiple communication environment within the same platform. This emerging understanding challenges the traditional conception of the medium as a singular communication environment and provides the basis for rethinking McLuhan's proposition in the age of algorithmic communication.

Reformulating 'The Medium is the Message'

We must go beyond broadcast paradigms from the 20th century in order to provide contemporary researchers with the theoretical instruments required to criticise this socio-technical reality. For our digital age, this essay so formally suggests a metatheoretical reformulation of McLuhan's central aphorism: Today, the Algorithm is the Architecture of Co-Created Behavioural Modification, and the Platform is the Algorithm.

Some characteristics of the platform as observed by the researchers

1. Elimination of Passive Neutrality: It substitutes an active, algorithmic architecture for the appearance of a passive, neutral channel. It is acknowledged that the medium is an independent communicator

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that actively monitors, deciphers, and moulds human connection.

2. The Dynamic Feedback: It emphasises that communication is now a recursive loop rather than a one-way broadcast pipeline. By continuously improving its predictive models based on human behavioural data, the medium turns communication into a co-created reality in which computer intent and human action are intricately intertwined.
3. The Economic and Political Foundation It firmly establishes the medium inside platform capitalism's hierarchies of power. It compels researchers to examine how algorithmic filtration is a purposeful corporate strategy intended to monetise human attention through the manufacture of social separation and emotional anger rather than an unintentional evolutionary step.
4. The Sensory Immersion Capture: It recognises that a medium ceases to be merely an extension of our body when it encircles and consumes our complete biometric and physical feedback system. It turns into an automated world that dictates public reality, controls our decisions, and re-engineers our cognitive attention spans.

Conclusion

The 1964 assertion by Marshall McLuhan that "the medium is the message" is still a great indictment of the naive notion that technologies are entirely neutral tools. According to Jefferson (2004), Al is both a medium and a message—that is, a medium that both transmits and receives messages. However, McLuhan's original paradigm has serious flaws when compared to our modern world of platform capitalism, algorithmic control, and immersive virtual environments. His technological determinism ignored the corporate power structures and political-economic interests that shape these technologies, seeing media as a singular cause. Moreover, his notion of the Global Village was unable to foresee the way computational networks would divide society into divisive, hostile online communities. The medium is no longer a passive tangible thing like a printing press or television. It is a computational, learning environment that monitors our small actions and dynamically modifies reality to increase business profit. Given the present fragmented media ecosystem, McLuhan's insight can be revisited with an update that includes the aforementioned features. It is possible for communication studies to transcend sentimental media theories from the middle of the 20th century. In an increasingly automated environment, it enables contemporary scholars to tackle our digital terrain with analytical rigour, safeguarding human autonomy, critical thinking, and democratic stability.

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