

The Function of Media

Internet vs. hard copy, analog vs. digital, 'physical' or 'virtual,' my media or your media - it's an argument with one basic message: "My way of communicating is best." No matter how much energy is funneled into this tired debate it still leaves a curious, empty feeling. Subtle but absolutely essential, message falls by the wayside as rivals fight bitterly over what type of images and sound our future can be built out of. This classic, and even anachronistic, struggle leads to bounded lists of 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' formats, instruments, and practices, while real discourse fails to materialize. The theory of media is a story of media about media, a discussion that today has become the worst kind of abstraction: an empty one. Perhaps it is time to take a step back, could something be missing? Media is humankind's platform for abstraction but it's lessons are outside of, not within, its dreams and nightmares. The role of media is found not in it's production but in its application; the message is not the medium, but how the medium is used.

Mediate is what media does; by definition it is a metaphor of reality, not reality itself. Still, mediation does not exist to abstract away our messages, but rather to give us an ever increasing level of insight into what that message is. There is no intrinsic action, no immovable statement inherent in any medium. Any media provides us with a scope: a range of things that might be said and a range of ways to say them. Television can expand our vision or manipulate our minds; the web can augment our education or encourage our addictions. Sometimes a new medium can give us ways to say things that couldn't be said before; the same is true of an old medium used in a new way. Nevertheless, what we choose to say is most important.

When we critique media, we should discuss it's messages. We should recognize the different ways a format can be leveraged, and identify this use as part of its message. It is common to blame 'Television' for various societal ills and situations, but the responsibly actually lies with the creators

television programming. When we discuss the pros and cons of our global information web, we must also remember that the difference between a vast porn popularity contest and a visionary, unrestricted digital library lies with the people who use this technology. The question is one of responsibility and thoughtful practice not one of technological innovation vs. reactionary atavism; the realities of what our media is, or has become, rest with one party alone: humans. Unfortunately, an endless argument between old and new media completely clouds this necessary engagement. Often we imagine that something twenty or thirty years older is innately more human than something we are experiencing for the first time. Seriously now, which formats, instruments, and practices are best? The answer can be any of them - if they are leveraged in a useful, interesting, and insightful way. The responsibility for what is communicated, for what is said through any channel, lies not with the channel but with the person who said it. The corollary to this is that defense of a particular modality should never masquerade as an actual message. *All* tools available to us can be celebrated or debased, but whether we allow their individual abstracting powers to destroy or expand our lives is our choice. We cannot expect these tools to make the decision for us.

Each generation must use its media in ways appropriate to its time. This isn't a cue to celebrate some miraculous solution to all problems nor is it a challenge to the nature of humanity to be resisted at all costs. Rather, the expanding awareness brought through media follows exactly the human experience that has been unfolding for millennia. Some indulge themselves pining for the spirit of the past while others imagine a sci-fi fairy tale future, but life is about grappling with what exists in the moment. Yesterday we grappled with television and telephone, before that we examined both the dominating and freeing vectors of fonts and paper. Today, our moment is postmodern. We grapple with fragmentation, the arrival of advanced tools of media creation, and huge access to information. These features of our current stage in history don't erase our humanity, they simply define it as it exists now.

All media, from cave wall scratchings and oral stories to synthesizers or computers, are tools of

abstraction built out of physical substance. By configuring this substance, be it air and ears, paper and ink, or electrons and bits, we externalize our memories and use perception to catalog and break down experience. Does playing an analog synth or hand drum constitute a defense of reality? Does chopping up a digital audio file in a computer constitute a radical statement on the position of mankind? No, they do not. The exploration of media is a valuable phase in development, but it is a stepping stone not a goal. Context arises from what our discoveries are used to say, from what they accomplish. If the intent is self-superiority, then media participates in the process of domination. If its statement amounts to little more than a gag it threatens to enhance the practice of careless living. But instead, if media is cooperatively oriented toward freedom and expansive thought it will support reflective living, human awareness, and simply, and perhaps most importantly, making good decisions. This is the function of media.