

Telegraph, Television and Twitter: from the altering of perception in McLuhan to the mediatization process

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Abstract

This paper examines how Marshall McLuhan, in the 1960's, does not restrict himself to the mediatic framework, but approaches the media in relation to the society in which they are inscribed - indicating the existence of mediatic processes -, and assigns the message exerted by such media as the one responsible for the alteration in the perception and cognition processes _ anticipating that which today we understand as society in the process of mediatization. For that purpose, we have revisited three moments of communication: 1. The invention of the telegraph and its relationship with the already established print; 2. Television and the change in the viewers' perception; and 3. Twitter in its tools as a complexification of the message. We revisited the first two moments, which are broadly reflected by McLuhan himself, in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* and, finally, we work on Twitter establishing a relationship between McLuhan's notes and contemporary concepts which involve mediatization.

Keywords

Mediatic Processes. Perception. Cognition. Mediatization.

1 Initial Remarks

The reflection about mass society gives way to the analysis of a society in the process of mediatization; the linear communication of the *mass media* is replaced by the discussion of mediatic processes _ therefore dynamic ones; and all of this trajectory of the communicational thinking does not add up 100 years, the age which would be celebrated in 2011 by one of the thinkers whom we, communicators and producers of a Communication Science, ought to be proud of: Marshall McLuhan. It is appropriate to consider that, while the great theories we make use of to analyze communicational objects stem from other sciences and therefore, intended for other objects other than communication itself, McLuhan, one of the very forerunners of media studies, is still taken by the aphorism "the medium is the message" and is little explored for the understanding of contemporary communication logics.

McLuhan is many times treated as being outdated for having been concerned about mass media which, nowadays, lose space to the interactivity and collaborative communication made possible

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by the internet. However, a simple revision of his work leads to signs of analysis of a society which goes way beyond the mid-20th century, the timeframe in which his studies are situated.

McLuhan, though pointing out the advent of media without speaking of media fields or mediatic processes, anticipates the notion of processualities and some dynamics of an ambience which today we understand as being mediatized.

In that regard, we try to work here on concepts pointed out by McLuhan and which are up to the society in the process of mediatization. For such, we approach three moments of communication; two of which (that deal with telegraph and television) have already been discussed by McLuhan in the chapters “Telegraph: the Social Hormone” and “Television: The Timid Giant”, from the book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* published in 1996, and the third moment encompasses a reflection about *Twitter*¹ as an example of the potentialization of the messages exerted by the media, which in turn lead to a society in the process of mediatization. We have opted for the reflection of these three moments for we regard them as illustrative not only of the development of the media industry,

but also and mainly of the way through which the interactions with the medium and from the medium have been modifying the experiences of individuals in society.

2 The telegraph and the overcoming of the message

He went down to the patio, where the trees thickened the shade of sunset, loaded with dusk clouds. He was opening the gate when He ran into a lad who limped breathlessly shouting: - “It’s a telegram!” How voraciously he yanked it off his hands! He ran to the kitchen, bickered at Rosa about the dim light! And, with a lit match burning his eyes he devoured, all at once, the blessed lines: “*Minister accepts, all arranged...*”. The rest was the horseman reminding him to be in Corinde at eleven on Sunday to have lunch and talk [...] Gonçalo Mendes Ramires handed five coins to the telegraph lad – then climbed the stairs. In the library, under the safer light of the chandelier, he re-read the delicious telegram. *Minister accepts, all arranged...* (EÇA DE QUEIRÓS, 1900, p. 206-207).²

The scene described above narrates the emotion of a man awaiting a message which arrives via a telegram. This scene is more than literary, as it illustrates everyday events as of the end of the 19th century, when telegrams were expected with anxiety because they were bearers of urgent messages, news which came to change

¹ Twitter is a social network and server for *microblogging*, created in 2006, and which allows its users to send and receive personal updates by its contacts, in texts of up to 140 letters, known as *tweets*.

² *A Ilustre Casa de Ramires* is a realistic romance by the Portuguese writer Eça de Queirós in his third phase. Published in 1900, it narrates the life of Gonçalo Mendes Ramires, his approach to politics and the Portuguese traditions, in an analogy with the Portuguese history, in its political changes and traditions.

the lives of those receiving them. The telegram, therefore, was worth the message it contained and, thus, made the telegraph nothing more than a medium to transmit it.

McLuhan goes beyond this perception of personal interests in the messages exchanged through the telegraph and points at technology in its usage as an important component of a “human dimension”, about which he writes specifically in the chapter “Telegraph: The Social Hormone”. In it, the idea of social hormone is taken to distinguish the mechanical era from a new era that was transforming itself starting from electricity. For McLuhan, electricity would shut the individual phases and those of specialized functions which happened in the mechanical era, and the telegraph marked the beginning of the communication medium as a projection and extension of the human central nervous system, which would relate to one’s awareness extension. It would be as if the electric media created a kind of organic interdependence among society’s institutions (hence social hormone) – as if they were extensions of our central nervous system -, whereas previous technologies to electricity would be extensions of some part of the human body.

What characterizes a mechanism is the separation and extension of isolated parts of our body – hand, arm, feet – into feather, hammer, wheel. And the mechanization of a function is effective through the segmentation of each phase of a common action into a series of uniform, replicable and mobile parts. What characterizes cybernation (or automation) is

the exact opposite, as it is a process which has been described as a means to thinking and a means to doing. Instead of worrying about separate machines, cybernation faces the problem of production as an integrated system of information manipulation (MCLUHAN, 1996, p. 278).

This organic interdependence McLuhan talks about is illustrated by the dynamics of the advent of the telegraph and its appropriation by users and by the media industry itself. Similarly to other technologies, the telegraph arises by means of state investments which, after having their objectives defined, are perceived as profitable by private companies and are thus appropriated in their commercialization. Nevertheless, the social usages employed for such tools are not entirely predictable, which for McLuhan means to say that “all innovation not only provokes commercial disruptions, but social and psychological corrosions as well”. (MCLUHAN, 1996, p. 281).

After the implementation of the telegraph line between Washington and Baltimore in 1844, users conducted chess games between experts from the two cities; the telegraph lines were also used for lottery games, but the real significant change for mediologists takes place in the very perception that the telegraph changed the way to do journalism in the early 20th century. It is McLuhan who makes note of these transformations when he says that: “with the telegraph, a revolution has taken place in the way the news is grasped and presented. Naturally, the effects caused on language,

on literary style and on topics have been spectacular”. (MCLUHAN, 1996, p. 282).

Though not speaking of mediatic processes, the author therefore defends the dynamic characteristic of the telegraph and of its appropriation, narrating the way through which telegraphic practices changed the way of doing journalism starting from 1848. As an example of such change, McLuhan calls attention to the first war correspondence, when William Howard Russel transmitted via telegraph to *The Times*³ the horrors of British military life. The news arrived via the telegraph to the newspaper in an immediate manner, thus legitimizing the “inclusive dimension of the human side”, this human side described by McLuhan as the dimension stemming from the potencialities of electricity.

The ‘human side’ dimension is simply the immediate manner of participation in the other person’s experience and which takes place with immediate information. People also become instantaneous in their responses of compassion or rage, when they should share with the whole of Mankind the same common extension of the central nervous system. (MCLUHAN, 1996, p. 284).

This human dimension discussed by McLuhan indicates the notion that the media do not exist for themselves, but are part of a process

of social appropriation. The telegraph is no longer the message that goes from one individual to the other, which was important in the private daily living, but it raises interest, above all, as a means of communication which surpasses the importance of the message to become a tool of social inclusion – it is about the extension of a man who cannot on his own reach the immediate character of the news. The telegraph is a tool and, at the same time, it constitutes new practices.

The newspapers were forced to organize themselves collectively to catch news pieces based on the existence of the telegraph and, thus, the Associated Press⁴ is created, and the increase in the number of broadcasted news decreases the strength of the editorial opinions (MCLUHAN, 1996). According to the author, the value assigned to print until then masked the strength of telegraphic practices, which made small town newspapers independent from large vehicles, for instance. And, as he believed that this acceleration produced by the electrical media would lead to the dissolution of the organizations, McLuhan points at signs of a society (dis)organized by mediatic processes, although his discourse is fixed in the communication media. One such example is the idea that the electric media would lead to an

³ *The Times* is a British newspaper, edited and published daily in London since 1785.

⁴ The Associated Press is regarded as the oldest news agency in the world, having been founded in 1846 as a cooperative, in the United States.

abolishment of the spatial dimension more so than to a withdrawal from organic relations.

The very nature of the telephone, as of any electric media, is that of compressing and unifying that which used to be divided and specialized. Only the 'authority of knowledge' works over the telephone, due to the speed which creates a total and inclusive field of relations. The speed requires decisions to be inclusive and not fragmentary or biased; hence the fact that the literate typically resist to the telephone. However, the radio and television, as we shall see, have the same power to impose an inclusive order, as if it were an oral organization. On the opposite end is the center-margin form of the visual written structures of authority (MCLUHAN, 1996, p. 286).

Finally, the practices employed based on the telegraph – Ana narrated and analyzed by McLuhan – point at a world no longer unified by its literate authorities, but by a more immediate communication from continent to continent. Thus we observe that McLuhan, as a mediologist, was concerned about analyzing conjunctures, processes, even if they dealt specifically with the communication medium as an object. One such example is the strength attributes to the telegraph in overcoming the center-margin form of structures, allowing a more inclusive communication to emerge via mediatic processes. These processes gain a new form – and more power – in the presence of the television, which alters society's perception and cognition through the new experiences provided to the viewer.

3 Television and the altering of perception

Many times, at nights like this, lately, as if taken by a bad rapture, I turned on the television and watched everything that was on without thinking, chose no specific show, looked at what came on, the movement, the sparkling, the variety. I did not notice, at that moment, how my behavior was increasingly becoming adrift [...] One of the main characteristics of television, when it's on, is to keep us continuously awake in an artificial way (TOUSSAINT, 1997, p. 16).⁵

Partly literature, partly narrative of a daily activity, the passage above illustrates directly the cool dimension assigned to the television by McLuhan. The mediologist highlighted the paradoxical feature of television as a cool medium, since it involves the public at a moving and emotionally touching depth, but one which does not excite, agitate or revolutionize.

McLuhan dwells with a lot of property on this psychic and social disturbance created by the television image and not by its program schedule in the chapter "Television: The Timid Giant" (MCLUHAN, 1996). For him, the television involves the viewer, but cannot work as a backdrop, as the radio presented itself; it would be necessary to be with the television to be part of its audience, its image exerts a subliminal force. One example of this tactile quality of the TV image would be, according to McLuhan, Medical students who, in a closed-

⁵ *The Television* is a novel written in 1997 by Jean-Philippe Toussaint, a Belgian writer, photographer and moviemaker.

circuit broadcasting of a surgery, stated that they felt more as if they were doing the surgery than watching it.

[...] TV is a cool, participant medium. Radio is a hot medium. When given additional intensity, it performs better. It doesn't invite the same degree of participation in its users. Radio will serve as background-sound or as noise-level control, as when the ingenious teenager employs it as a means of privacy. TV will not work as background. It engages you. You have to be with it (MCLUHAN, 1996, p. 350).

In that regard, for McLuhan, the power of the image ends up causing a low information content, as it is not about a still picture, like photography, but a provocation by bright stimuli, hence McLuhan's criticism to intellectuals who demonized TV programming. According to the mediologist, who believed that "the medium is the message" and, therefore, the basic source of effects, one needs to look at the television's existence in its environment instead of seeking control over its content. McLuhan justifies such power of the medium, and not of the content transmitted, through an analysis of the advent of the radio and TV in Europe and in America and the different ways of appropriation of such media in the two cultures, and states, therefore, that "It is wise to withhold all value judgments when studying these media matters, since their effects are not capable of being isolated." (MCLUHAN, 1996, p. 354).

Still in the 1960's, McLuhan pointed at the mistake of focusing one's concern in the

television content when actually the medium itself would allow for new experiences and, therefore, new perceptions to society. For him, "Political scientists have been quite unaware of the effects of media anywhere at any time, simply because nobody has been willing to study the personal and social effects of media apart from their content." (MCLUHAN, 1996, p.362-363), after all, the medium would have such social importance because of the interaction users had with it and not necessarily due to the content— educational or un-educational— they might present.

Everybody experiences far more than he understands. Yet it is experience, rather than understanding, that influences behavior, especially in collective matters of media and technology, where the individual is almost inevitably unaware of their effect upon him. (MCLUHAN, 1996, p. 358).

Well, if McLuhan points at the need to perceive the medium in its effects and not the content of television programming, it seems clear that he already signals to the need of replacing the analysis of the media itself by the analysis of mediatic processes. The mediologist states that the objective of his work is to show "that not even the most lucid understanding of the peculiar force of a medium can head off the ordinary "closure" of the senses that causes us to conform to the pattern of experience presented." (MCLUHAN, 1996, p. 370). The experience via television surpasses, therefore, the objectives of the medium and the society which is founded on

this new perception proposed by television can never again be analyzed simply by the power of media content or programming. The perception of individuals is altered by means of television experiences, thus, the very social processes are altered, which leads to what we call nowadays a society in the process of mediatization.⁶

TV has changed our sense-lives and our mental processes. It has created a taste for all experience in depth that affects language teaching as much as car styles. Since TV, nobody is happy with a mere book knowledge of French or English poetry. The unanimous cry now is, 'Let's talk French', and 'Let the bard be heard'. (MCLUHAN, 1996, p. 373).

Thus, for the mediologist, it wouldn't matter if there were one television set in every classroom based on a relationship that is established between communication media and educational systems. It matters, on the other hand, to know what the experience with television can do to the teaching of subject matters. In that regard, it is important to understand that television has developed other perceptions and, based on that, all other experiences are affected by television making. This idea is very well illustrated by the notion that "in the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is not king. He is taken to be an hallucinated lunatic", afinal "In a highly visual culture, it is as difficult to communicate the nonvisual properties of spatial forms as to

explain visuality to the blind" (MCLUHAN, 1996, p. 374).

Thus we observe how McLuhan tends to see television as part of a host of media, but especially as a medium which affects human experience in a different way. And, because of this affectation, ends up modifying other social spheres. He himself states that "there is scarcely a single area of established relationships, from home and church to school and market, that has not been profoundly disturbed in its pattern and texture" (MCLUHAN, 1996, p. 351).

Well, still in the 1960's, the mediologist anticipates the very characteristics of a society in the process of mediatization, that is, affected by experiences made possible with the media and through the media. McLuhan, therefore, is not fixed in the media, though he dwells on them, but he deals with the experiences and new forms of perception starting from the media and as a result of the media. These experiences are finally potentialized with the synesthesia provided by the internet and by social networks such as *Twitter*.

4 Twitter and the message of production-reception

*Minha terra tem palmeiras/
Onde cantam os sabiás/ Mas aqui ninguém
gorjeia/ Melhor que o Carpinejar*

Daniel Piza

⁶ Braga (2006) points out that society is in a process of transition from a written culture to a mediatic culture, that is, one in which mediatization becomes the interactional process of reference, setting the "tone" of social interactions and leaving written culture itself as a subsumed process.

*Original, criativo, ousado, exagerado, visionário,
cara de pau: se lhe faltam + adjetivos, unam-se
sobrenomes e crie-se o verbo carpinejar*

Abonico

*O pio generoso alegre a sua corte digital.
Uns milhares sortudos já viciados em tão fino alpiste...
Toma aqui o teu! E, se piscar, tem mais*

Fernanda Takai⁷

The three phrases mentioned above were published on the dust jacket of the book *www.twitter.com/carpinejar*, released in 2009 by Fabrício Carpinejar, gaucho writer who produced the book based on phrases already posted in his *Twitter* and used his microblog's URL address as the title of the book. The comments also respected the maximum of 140 letters that each publication must contain in this social network and are thus characterized as the medium setting defining the message. Moreover, *Twitter* represents a synesthesia never thought of by McLuhan, although it illustrates many of the concerns the mediologist had regarding the acceleration of mediatic experiences. If McLuhan (1996, p. 278), himself, already pointed out, in 1964, that we lived in the Information and Communication Era due to the electric media, which "[...] create, instantaneously and constantly, a total field of interacting events in which all men participate", it seems obvious that this age has been intensified nowadays, after all the internet has been accelerating our experiences day-after-day with and by means of the media. Here we are consolidating the age pointed out by McLuhan and

giving it the inscription of a society in the process of mediatization.

In May 1966, after having published *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McLuhan delivered a conference in New York entitled *The medium is the message*, in a play of words with his idea that "the medium is the message". In it, he reflected upon the effects exerted by the mass media, which would affect us, according to him, because they massage us, they modify our cognition, alter our notion of spaciality and temporality. At the time, McLuhan (2005, p.129) already said that "an environment is a process, not an outer covering" and, in that sense, the media alter our relationship with the environment because they change our sensorial perceptions. According to him, if the sensorial life of people changes when a new medium is active in a certain population, and sometimes it changes quite a lot, "their perspective change, their attitudes change, as well as their feeling towards studying, school and politics" (MCLUHAN, 2005, p.141). It is understood that the mediologist is concerned about the analysis of the media not by themselves, but mainly by the environment which is modified through the altering of perception caused by the media.

In that regard, we may infer that there are, in McLuhan's book, signs of a concern with what we call today a society in the process of mediatization – a society which employs

⁷ Comments presented on the dust jacket of the book *www.twitter.com/carpinejar*.

new forms of cognition by means of mediatic experiences and which moves towards these experiences as interactional processes of reference. That is what Braga (2006) refers to as a society which not only has its institutions (political, religious, educational etc...) getting into the logics of the media, but also behaves as a whole in mediatization interactions.

Our current concerns go beyond the media, focusing on the transformations of a society which masters the making of *mass media* and, therefore, becomes ever more likely to have mediatized perceptions and experiences. Well, *Twitter* is a typical example of a new mediatic player which is, at the same time, producer, editor and recipient. Posts via *Twitter* are characterized by the tools provided by the medium (posts of URL *links* with photos, videos, sentences) and allow users to re-publish such texts and render an opinion about them.

The notion of farmer and hunter referred to by McLuhan in the Conference comes in handy when we deal with this new mediatic producer/recipient, who worries, as does the hunter, about collecting, classifying and not necessarily planting, as does the farmer. The Twitter user is also a hunter in search of good products to classify and reproduce, also composing the text, being a part of its production as

he/she contributes to its publication. In mediatization, information is made public and come to us at all times and, thus, we become hunters of things we elect as priority, which constitute our taste and ultimately are part of our 'style' and define us as artists of this new activity of mastering the mediatic rituals and replicating them. *Twitter* is a complexification of mass media, which allows each user to have his/her own channel, his/her own audience and instantly transmitting their messages to an ever greater and distinctive public.

We then realize that media are not just messages, but messages that massage us. Nevertheless, these new experiences which stem from the mass media and their mastering the art of making are not just simple operations, but complex protocols. We used to be classified based on our *ethos*, nowadays we take upon ourselves several identities; our roles are ever more complex because we experience other forms of perception and action. The limit of 140 letters for each post on *Twitter*, for example, is constantly circumvented by new technologies that are being incorporated, such as the URL shortener.⁸ Therefore, – and McLuhan was aware of that – mediatic tools are not the problem, the greatest problematic we face is one of intelligence and cognition. The mediologist brings us the idea that the structure only typifies the objects of an area,

⁸ URL shortener is na expression which defines the services offered nowadays to shorten URLs (Uniform Resource Locator), enabling posts of URLs within the limit of 140 letters via Twitter.

of a field, yet these objects are dynamized into an environment, by means of processes.

5 In the process of conclusion

It is the processes that update the objects and McLuhan understood that, although he spoke about the media. Objects comprised of fields can only be clarified when dynamized into practices, therefore it is these practices that we, Communication researchers, must embrace. McLuhan did so as he analyzed the telegraph beyond the message, in a circuit of print modification – as an extension of the very human experience; he also did so when he reflected upon how television affected the viewer's perception and cognition, through new experiences, thus intensifying a process which today we understand as a society in the process of mediatization.

McLuhan pointed out several examples that portray the interaction between the media and society and which go back to mediatization. The messages today are not a specific result of the media, but practices of what was once understood as reception – *Twitter* being one such example. Social networks have demanded a certain pro-activity by its players who have extrapolated the simple role of mediation, allowing the medium to be re-shaped based on the so called apps which can be incorporated to the system according to the purpose of the text. Finally, only recently has the internet been accountable for the re-shaping of the roles of producer and recipient.

Nevertheless, many of the issues surrounding such re-shaping, as a process stemming from the alteration of perception and cognition of a society in contact with the media were, already in the 1960's, pointed out by McLuhan – to whom Communication Sciences owes quite a lot.

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Telégrafo, Televisão e Twitter: da alteração de percepção em McLuhan ao processo de midiatização

Resumo

Este artigo examina como Marshall McLuhan, ainda na década de 1960, não se restringe à estrutura midiática, mas aborda os meios de comunicação em relação à sociedade em que se inscrevem – indiciando a existência de processos midiáticos –, e aponta a mensagem exercida por estes meios como responsável pela alteração nos processos de percepção e cognição – antecipando o que hoje entendemos por sociedade em vias de midiatização. Para tanto, revisitamos três momentos da comunicação: 1. A invenção do telégrafo e sua relação com a imprensa já estabelecida; 2. A televisão e a mudança de percepção nos telespectadores; e 3. O Twitter em suas ferramentas como complexificação da mensagem. Revisitamos os dois primeiros momentos, que são largamente refletidos pelo próprio McLuhan, em *Os Meios de Comunicação como Extensões do Homem* e, por fim, trabalhamos o Twitter relacionando apontamentos de McLuhan a conceitos contemporâneos que envolvem a midiatização.

Palavras-Chave

Processos midiáticos. Percepção. Cognição. Midiatização.

Telégrafo, Televisión, y Twitter: desde el cambio de percepción en McLuhan a el proceso de mediatización

Resumen

Este artículo examina cómo Marshall McLuhan, incluso en los años 1960, no se limita a la estructura de los medios de comunicación, pero las direcciones de los medios de comunicación en relación con la sociedad - lo que indica la existencia de procesos de los medios de comunicación - y habla de las masajes ejercida por estos medios de comunicación como responsables de los cambios en los procesos de percepción y la cognición – anticipando lo que hoy entendemos por sociedad en lo proceso de la mediatización. Con este fin, revisamos tres momentos de la comunicación: 1. La invención del telégrafo y su relación con a prensa establecida; 2. La televisión y el cambio de percepción en el público; y 3. Twitter como una herramienta en su complejidad de la masaje. Revisamos los dos primeros momentos, que se reflejó en gran medida por el de McLuhan, en “Los medios como extensiones del hombre” y, finalmente, nos trabajamos sobre el Twitter, reflejando sobre conceptos del McLuhan in relación a mediatización y sus conceptos contemporáneos.

Palabras Clave

Procesos de los medios de comunicación. Percepción. Cognición. Mediatización.

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