Summary of McLuhan’s “The Medium is the Message”

Marshall McLuhan lived from 1911 to 1980 and offered thoughts on media, communication technology, and how the content is received by people. He is well known for this chapter “The Medium is the Message” in his larger piece “Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man.” McLuhan explains the content carried through media as having two parts, that which captures the receivers attention (the content), and the message (the medium).

To fully understand this simplification, McLuhan describes media as “any extension of ourselves” and while he concentrates on electronic media, he is referring to applying any technology to direct information. This can mean physical artifacts and language itself. Since media is technology that develops on the mastery of the technology before it, McLuhan states that any new media is simply old media presented in a new way. The content that is carried by this new media is nothing new to be enlightened by. It is simply pre existing content that is presented differently. Therefore, time spent on studying the content offers little insight into the actual context. While the content may be captivating and intriguing, the true message underlies the content.

For further comprehension of this, McLuhan offers two principles to consider when attempting to separate message from content. These principles are the figure and the ground. We can think of the figure as the weather, and the ground as the climate. The figure of media is a temporary but sensational experience. The ground is a deeper context of the entire situation, which we don’t often think of.

*Summary by G. James Mitchell*

McLuhan, M. (1964). The medium is the message. In Understanding media: the extensions of man, New York: McGraw-Hill. Retrieved from http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/mcluhan.mediummessage.pdf