WHAT IF MEDIA ARE NOT “EXTENSIONS” OF OUR SENSES, BUT “INTRUSIONS” ON OUR SENSES?

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MARSHALL MCLuhan based much of his thought on a powerful metaphor. This metaphor says that all media are extensions of our senses. McLuhan felt that print media extended the eye, with consequences rebounding through the entire culture. Now, electronic media extend the entire nervous system, which produces an entirely different state of being. (See McLuhan 1964)

The metaphor of “media as extensions of the senses” is simple and productive. But I have often wondered about it. What if this metaphor has the most important relationships backwards? What if media do not fundamentally extend our senses? This line of questioning has led me to reverse McLuhan’s metaphor. In this reversal, media do not extend our senses, media intrude upon our senses.

Media come at us from outside. They approach our senses with something new. Media are an intrusion.

Different media intrude in different ways. They attract our attention in different ways. Print media, for example, are still, and silent. They require us to put forth some effort to use them, and we must call into play learned symbol systems. A television, by contrast, provides moving pictures and sound. We do not have to put forth much effort to watch television.

But both print and television come at us from outside. Both bring something new to our senses, and invite our attention. Both are intruders.

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If we look at media as intruders upon our senses, it leads us to ask, just what is coming at us? What are the intruders like, and what are they doing?

Media have always provided context. Written and print messages have had great effects on their readers — letters from home or news from around the world. But this contexting power of media has been ramped up by electronic media.

Clearly over the past two centuries, electronic media have become more inclusive and enticing. We started with only getting dots and dashes over a telegraph, but now we see color moving pictures with surround sound. The electronic media are providing an ever-growing simulated environment. Video games allow us to “move” and “act” in this environment. New generations of television will allow us to participate in dramas and affect the storyline.

Our senses are having an electronic environment increasingly imposed upon them. This environment is not an extension of our senses. It is much bigger than any one person’s senses could create. This electronic environment mixes with the real environment in puzzling ways, as when people sometimes do things in the real world because it will become “news” in the electronic world. The question “what is real?” has taken on entirely new dimensions.

McLuhan’s metaphor of media as extensions of our senses was insightful and useful, and in an earlier age of electronic media it was plausible. However, with an increasingly “converged” media world starting to present an all-encompassing environment, we need to reverse McLuhan’s metaphor. I suggest it will be useful to think of media as intrusions upon our senses. Then we might be better equipped to discuss how we turn off these lights and close the windows if we want to.

REFERENCE