

The Convergence of William Stephenson's and Marshall McLuhan's Communication Theories

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ABSTRACT: This essay develops the thesis that the communication theories of William Stephenson and Marshall McLuhan share a set of core concepts. These central issues will be compared in order that each of these iconoclastic theorist's ideas can be seen as enriching those of the other. These four areas will be discussed: 1) exploration and facts; 2) the self and medium; 3) quantum-theory, complementarity, and transitive and substantive thought; 4) communication pleasure and play in the communication process. Probing Stephenson's clarion call for Q methodology as the new methodology for McLuhan's new epistemology, this paper searches for the underpinnings of that convergence in communication theory.

Introduction: McLuhan's Shadow

This essay will expand on an earlier one (Grosswiler, 1992), aided by the recent publication of William Stephenson's *Quantum Theory of Advertising* (1994) in which Stephenson commented at length on Marshall McLuhan's communication theories. Before this publication, Stephenson already had found significant parallels between Marshall McLuhan's media theories and the central concepts of the quantum-theoretical approach to mass communication research of Q methodology (1986). It was Stephenson's own comparison of Q and McLuhan that sparked the earlier essay exploring both theories. Limiting that essay from the outset was the absence of any other references to McLuhan in Stephenson's published work. Still limiting a comparison of their theories is the absence of any references to

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Stephenson or Q in McLuhan's published work, including his letters. In Stephenson's unpublished papers, several pages of handwritten notes on McLuhan's *Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (1951) and on McLuhan's background, books and concepts offered descriptive comments but no evaluation of his theories. Also, in a graduate course lecture at the University of Missouri (1987b), Stephenson discussed McLuhan and his mentor, Harold Innis, in relation to Q, and his videotaped interview (1988) includes comments about consciousness that resonate with McLuhan's notions of the individual.

In *Quantum Theory of Advertising*, however, Stephenson expanded greatly upon McLuhan's relevance to quantum theory, the principle of complementarity, transitive and substantive thought, communication and consciousness, and play theory, particularly through McLuhan's notion of "hot" and "cool" media, his three distinct media cultures -- oral, print and electronic -- and, as the title suggests, his work on advertising.

This essay will infer from Stephenson's published comments on McLuhan, his private notes, his lecture and videotaped interview to explore the convergence of McLuhan's and Stephenson's communication theories in these four areas: (1) explorations vs. facts; (2) self vs. medium; (3) quantum theory, complementarity and substantive vs. transitive thought; and (4) communication-pleasure and play in mass communication.

According to Stephenson (1986), McLuhan explored transitive thought's beginnings, casting a shadow on communication methodology while the rest of communication research proceeded in substantive thought. McLuhan, as well as his mentor, Harold Innis, were "two progenitors of communication research at its most profound level" who explored the effects of oral, print and electronic media. Having demonstrated the pervasiveness of oral, typographic and electronic media in our culture, the central problem for Stephenson was how to proceed with transitive thought instead of substantive representations in print.

Stephenson equated McLuhan's new epistemology with Niels Bohr's quantum-theoretical concepts, and Stephenson suggested the "nuclear subjectivity" of Q methodology provides a new quantum-mechanic methodology for both McLuhan's and Bohr's epistemology. In his clarion call, Stephenson argued that Q methodology is "the first straw in the wind that must blow for McLuhan's and Niels Bohr's epistemology." This essay will compare the core concepts of Stephenson's and McLuhan's communication theories in the hopes

that some light may shine into the shadow of McLuhan, alluded to by Stephenson, where may be found the transitive beginnings of substantive thought.

The Spirit of Explorations vs. Facts

Before examining the letter of Stephenson's and McLuhan's communications theories, it should be noted that they share much the same spirit. Both of their theories sprang from fields far outside of media studies and both swam against mainstream mass communication theories. McLuhan hailed from English literature; Stephenson from physics and psychology. McLuhan was soundly drubbed by mainstream media researchers because his ideas were not framed to facilitate testing and his books were unorthodox (Gronbeck, 1981); he worked outside the social science tradition and became a popular culture figure in his own right (Olson, 1981); and he attacked logic itself (Levinson, 1981). Rather than rejection, Stephenson and his "unique scholarly category" suffered a lack of acceptance in mass communication research, perhaps because he and Q occupied a "Twilight Zone between qualitative and quantitative methods" when those two camps are divided (Logan, 1991). According to Logan, Stephenson understood that his work challenged most researchers, took a different approach to communication, and used unfamiliar interdisciplinary ideas.

Stephenson (1986) remarked on McLuhan's preference for "explorations" to a preoccupation with facts and then calls Q methodology "explorative" because one cannot predict and only knows after the Q sorts what existed. In discussing the single-case experiment in Q, Stephenson stressed that the point is to conduct an exploratory think-piece, adding facts if it is important to have them: "The beginnings, however, are always in 'explorations.'" Applying this to mass communication research, Logan pointed out that Stephenson's criticism of Wilbur Schramm's newsreading reward categories as too limited led to a Q study to explore newsreading habits and Schramm's concepts. This study yielded unexplained factors that led to the discovery of a new hypothesis -- play theory of newsreading.

Commenting in a lecture, Stephenson said that McLuhan, in his search for principles, did not like facts. "Neither do I," he said. Rather than measure facts, Q measures feelings that are self-referent. McLuhan's method also rejected classification, which he called the end of the study of a problem. He relied on tentative "probes," which he felt obligated to make outrageous and extreme in order to be effectively

strong, yet which he also felt free to discard (Sanderson & Macdonald, 1989, p. 32.)

As Stephenson (1994) wrote, McLuhan in the 1960s drew attention to the general lack in academics of a communication theory that encompassed the realities of communication. Similarly Stephenson criticized the theories of the day, among them Hovland and Schramm, for being "serious" and for proving nothing about the effects of communication:

I took a different approach. Much communication, in any medium, is "fun," enjoyable, and not for changing anything except one's own delight and conceits. . . . To account for this enjoyment, I developed play theory (p. 22).

Play, according to Stephenson, began in ritual and myth, which he noted was characteristic of the oral media culture of McLuhan's "tribal man," although Stephenson thought that McLuhan was wrong in believing that "fun" had eluded educated Westerners of literate print media culture. Stephenson neglected to note, however, that McLuhan included newspaper and magazine mass media reading with the "cool" medium of television -- this reader's experience, unlike that of the reader of the "hot" medium of the book, is steeped in participation and play (1964, pp. 182-190).

Communication Theory Core: The Self vs. the Medium

Although the spirit of probes and exploration may be shared, the core of Stephenson's and McLuhan's communication theories may appear to be irreconcilably opposed. Stephenson might well adopt the aphorism: "The self is the message," rather than McLuhan's "The medium is the message." At first blush these two concepts seem totally disparate; they can be seen, however, to spring from a common disagreement with mainstream mass communication research. Both could be argued to say: "The message is not the message."

Stephenson distinguished between the substantive text of a message and the transitive process of giving meaning, and he was critical of the categorical theories of mass communication, such as Shannon and Weaver (Logan, 1991, p. 34-35.). Similarly, McLuhan criticized the Western approach to the study of media in linear terms epitomized by the Shannon-Weaver model (McLuhan and Powers, 1989). McLuhan soundly disregarded the importance of content, calling messages the

distraction given by the burglar to the guard dog (McLuhan, 1964)

While McLuhan abandoned messages to pursue what one scholar calls "medium theory" (Meyrowitz, 1985), Stephenson shifted the emphasis of communication to join an area called "self theory" (Logan, 1991, p. 32). As summarized by Logan, Stephenson rebelled against psychometrics' rejection of the self and worked to operationalize the self back into empirical psychology using Q methodology. When he shifted his work to mass communication in the 1960s, Stephenson found this field dominated by an approach derived from psychometrics that ignored the role of the self in media behavior.

The self is central to Q method and its critique of normative psychological methods for neglecting self-reference, which is the key to subjectivity (Stephenson, 1967, p. 11). In Stephenson's notion of the self, however, he indicated a concept that resonates with McLuhan's media-induced sense of self. In his videotaped interview (1988), Stephenson made a distinction between the self implied by the word "consciousness," a concept introduced by Descartes, and the notion it replaced, which meant "to converse." Stephenson replaced the self of "consciousness" with "communicability," or "me saying things to you," or expressing the self. The self is the core of Q, but it is a notion of self not in isolated consciousness but in interactive communication.

In a discussion contrasting consciousness and communication, as well as information and communication, Stephenson drew on Innis and McLuhan to support his contention that communication is self-referential, as well as conversational, or shared. Information, by contrast, is a matter of fact, and the concept of consciousness emerged in the 1650s as a product of print culture. Innis's writing, although not centered on self-reference, did focus on the "oral tradition" of conversation, of communication, before printing, and of the essential role of the "oral" process in creativity (1994, pp. 94-95).

As Brenner commented, Stephenson found much of value in McLuhan's proposition that the dominant media have deep communication effects as these media shift from oral to print to electronic in the three "ages of man" (Stephenson, 1994, xii). Stephenson focused his meditation on advertising with McLuhan's mantra, "the medium is the message," and credited McLuhan's *Mechanical Bride* with helping researchers to understand what ads used in a Q sample could mean to a consumer in conversation with the ads, which reaches into the transitive thought behind the substantive form (1994, esp. pp. 13, 17, 50). McLuhan's terms of "hot" and "cool" media focused, for Stephenson, on a new mode of communication brought about by

television that involved individuals in reactions and making meaning rather than distancing the self as do the "hot" media.

Stephenson contrasted the level of media effects that concerned McLuhan and Innis, pointing out that Innis focused on the effect of printing on society, while McLuhan was concerned with the effects of media on the senses and perceptions of the individual. The dominant medium becomes a language through which individuals filter their transitive thought. In Stephenson's (1994) words:

Thus, for McLuhan, television and computer and photocopy technology had become the language mode of modern youth, the dominant way in which people are communicable. On this ground, book education become obsolete; television . . . becomes the way we organize experience. It is "cool," low on information. . . . It is "cool" -- everyone is spasmic, acting without much information or argument (p. 50).

Throughout this work, Stephenson contrasted "hot" and "cool" media, extolling the latter and condemning the former. In calling for seeing advertising as a new discipline devoted to communication pleasure, self-enhancement and the future of "cool" communication in mass media, Stephenson hoped "cool" media would "offset the deadly bias of 'hot' communication everywhere prevalent (p. 106)." For Q, McLuhan's theories were "very significant" and almost all acceptable to Q theorists, except McLuhan's interest in media effects on the brain (p. 51).

On its face, the core of McLuhan's communication theory is the medium, and this has often been interpreted as including a technological determinism that does not involve humans in any way, whether socially or individually (e.g., Carey, 1968). This author (Grosswiler, 1996) and other scholars (Jeffrey, 1989; Stamps, 1990, 1995), however, have argued that Carey has misleadingly categorized McLuhan as a technological determinist. Jeffrey contends that Carey's criticism has shaped scholarly rejection of McLuhan and impeded new readings of McLuhan's work. This author has argued that McLuhan focused on the open-ended, processual interplay of media among themselves, and the interplay of each medium with each individual as a force that shapes the individual's sensory perception, and the sense of self (Grosswiler, 1996, pp. 102-105). Each medium is an extension of a body part, or of "consciousness" itself, and the effects of each medium penetrate back to the individual. The open-ended, non-deterministic nature of this relationship and its focus on freedom

of choice is illustrated by the following quote:

The present book, in seeking to understand many media, the conflicts from which they spring, and the even greater conflicts to which they give rise, holds out the promise of reducing these conflicts by an increase in human autonomy (1964, p. 93).

Further, as media interact:

The moment of the meeting of media is a moment of freedom and release from the ordinary trance and numbness imposed by them on our senses (1964, p. 63).

For McLuhan, the self was an experience that is a product in part of the dominant medium, which would change as the dominant medium changes. The Cartesian dualism that replaced conversation with consciousness is a theme elaborated upon by McLuhan. Descartes' notion of self was a product of the dominant print medium. A concept of self as conversation, or involvement, is the result of the dominance of either oral media or electronic media (McLuhan, 1962, 293-297).

One Q study (Brown, 1972) unintentionally illustrated the notion of subjectivity which underlies McLuhan's theory regarding sensory perception balance and bias, in which individuals are dominated by visual or acoustic senses. Intended to illustrate the differences between normative and ipsative approaches in a study of the human body as a perceptual organism, the study showed that normatively the body looks much like any medical textbook diagram, or in a message-focused media theory. Perceived subjectively through a sort of the importance of a Q sample of body parts, the human body becomes unrecognizable and alien, with oversized eyes and head and a diminutive chest and limbs. Leaving aside whether the media influence these subjectively operant, and very different perceptual balance factors, the point is that McLuhan's ideas carry, if unconsciously, a notion of self and perception that are allied with Q's.

Quantum Theory, Complementarity, and Transitive and Substantive Thought

In his discussion of specific communication theory concepts and McLuhan, Stephenson looked at the complementarity of transitive and substantive thought in McLuhan's terms of oral and print forms (1986, pp. 20-21). A thought as thought or spoken in everyday conversation

is transitive with infinite possible meanings. When written or printed a thought is substantive, with only one meaning. In a lecture, Stephenson noted that Innis argued that everyday speech was being overlooked as he favored the oral era and oral communication. Stephenson added that Q methodology is based on oral techniques. The first principle of Q is to get people to talk in interviews, much as in oral tradition people talk to each other. Also, substantive thought is factual; transitive thought is self-referential.

Stephenson (1986) wrote that transitive and substantive thought are complementary, with the former being "fortuitous," and the latter normative. This duality challenges Newtonian notions of determinate causality with notions of discontinuity and uncertainty.

These theme were expanded at great length in *Quantum Theory of Advertising* as Stephenson strengthened the links he observed between his theories and McLuhan's. First, Stephenson reiterated the importance of the different media of oral, print and electronic ages brought forward by McLuhan, and he contrasted the type of scientific theory made possible in print culture, the Newtonian system in which space, time and matter were only geometrical concepts, to the type of scientific theory -- quantum theory -- made possible by electronic media culture, and expressed in the Einsteinian system in which these dimensions of space, time and matter are shown to be realities. And McLuhan was tied directly to quantum theory:

Critics thought that McLuhan's thesis was mere chaos and irrationalism. His friend Walter Ong had to defend his judgment that McLuhan's mode of thought corresponded to quantum-theoretical principles -- tolerant of contradictions, and putting exploration ahead of fact-finding as the methodology at issue. Far from chaos, quantum theory made discoveries that "make irrationalism tolerable for the intelligent person (p. 16).

Working with a quantum theoretical mode of thought based on discontinuity and contradiction, as well as the unexpected, McLuhan's "exploratory attitude" led Stephenson (1994) to conclude that "McLuhan must have had knowledge of the principle of complementarity in nuclear physics (p. 18)." Under the principle of complementarity, an orally communicated thought, or thought as thought, is transitive, and self-referential. By contrast, a printed thought is substantive. These two categories of the transitive and substantive, which are central to Stephenson's communication theory, were equated by Stephenson directly with McLuhan's, and Innis's, categories of oral

and print communication.

A thought as we experience it is usually colored with emotion (of joy, certainty, wishing, and every feeling we know). As written or printed, however, the words are naked, subjected to grammar, abstract, devoid of emotion (except such as we express by exclamation mark, italics, etc.). (William) James called the thought, as thoughts, transitive. As printed, it was substantive (pp. 17-18).

The one is transitive (in the person's mind). The other had been put aside on a printed page. . . .

. . . And if thought is mainly orally expressed, then thoughts as spoken are likely to be close to what James called transitive, whereas as written or printed, they would become substantive (pp. 17-18).

In line with Stephenson's condemnation of substantive, or print, thought, Innis and McLuhan were critics of print media's effects on Western culture, according to Stephenson (1986). Innis championed "oral" culture before the invention of printing and concluded that print had disastrously affected civilization. McLuhan argued that television and new technology would lead to a rejection of print media and destroy print culture.

Stephenson has provided the primary match for transitive vs. substantive thought; it is oral vs. print, or in McLuhan's terms, acoustic vs. visual. For McLuhan, visual space is an empty container that separates objects as the eye is abstracted from the other senses; it is homogeneous, static, continuous, linear, sequential and logical, separating figure from ground. Acoustic space focuses on the ground, or environment, as a unified sensory experience containing figures; it is multisensory, simultaneous, immediate, resonant, natural and analogical (McLuhan and McLuhan, 1989, pp. 17-22; McLuhan and Powers, 1988, pp. 54-55).

Complementarity finds its analogy in McLuhan's tetradic laws of the media, which are probes offered as a right-hemisphere answer to a right-hemisphere problem: to get at the hidden properties and concealed effects of language and technology (McLuhan and Powers, 6). The tetrad model does this by including both figure and ground, raising the ground to perception instead of obscuring the ground, as visual/print culture does. The probe-tetrad asks the four questions of an artifact: What does it enhance, or extend? What does it erode or obsolesce? What does it retrieve from the past that was obsolesced? What does it reverse or flip into when pushed to the limits of its

potential? McLuhan offered the model as the replacement to all Western scientific models of communication, like the Shannon-Weaver model, which is linear, logical, and sequential, based on efficient causality, figure-minus-ground, and left-hemisphere cognitive modes.

Each tetrad includes the acoustic and visual elements, much as complementarity in Stephenson includes the substantive and transitive modes. McLuhan cautioned there is no "right way" to read a tetrad because its four parts are simultaneous; the tetrad comprises two figures, enhancing and retrieving, and two grounds, obsolescing and reversing (McLuhan and McLuhan, 1988; McLuhan and Powers, 1989). The four aspects are complementary, or, in Stephenson's words, one cannot occur without the others, and they cannot exist together.

The complementary pairs of the tetrad are: retrieval is to obsolescence as enhancement is to reversal; also, retrieval is to enhancement as obsolescence is to reversal. The relationship among the tetrad's elements is likened to that between left and right brain: They may be capable of interchange, but are incommensurable. The left brain works in visual space with sequential ordering; the right brain works in acoustic space with simultaneity. The tetrad sheds light on the border between visual and acoustic space where the two form "an arena of spiraling repetition and replay, both of input and feedback, interlace and interface" (McLuhan and Powers, 1989, pp. 8-9).

Play and Mass Communication

While Stephenson (1994) embedded play in his theory of communication, McLuhan embedded his theory of communication in play. Stephenson believed that McLuhan had ignored the central idea that people enjoy the media, both "hot" and "cool" (p. 53). In all institutions, such as church, the law, college and science, as well as in media use, Stephenson's "ludenic" theory applies. The key elements of play theory include communication pleasure, which involves conditions that enhance self-reference and leads to convergent selectivity. The opposite concept is communication pain, which involves a diminishing of self-reference and is related more to needs than wants. This leads to conditions of social control.

Although Stephenson was aware of McLuhan's style of contradiction and the unexpected, he did not comment that McLuhan's probes and precepts came often in jokes and puns. Although McLuhan did not systematically develop a place for play in his theory, play seems to permeate his work. For McLuhan, humor afforded the most "appeal-

ing" system of communication for probing and becoming aware of invisible environments, or grounds (1967, p. 92). He also found play in the "embryonic stages" of any new technology. The telegraph and radio were used for play -- the telegraph to play chess and the radio for ham operators -- for years before they became commercial. The telegraph, applied to journalism, created "human interest" news, a natural outcome of instant communication and immediate participation in the experience of others (1964, pp. 221-23). Politics moved with journalism from delegation to immediate involvement of the entire community. The press became the "group confessional" with the "inside story" rooted in human interest. The play functions of the press were heightened -- as it presented a mosaic of the variety and incongruity of daily life. All media "repeats the excitement we have in using our wits, and by using our wits we can translate the outer world into the fabric of our own beings." The press is "a daily action and fiction of things made, and it is made out of just about everything in the community." Yet the communal image is not limited to the factual: "For the pseudo or fictitious character has always permeated the media" (McLuhan, 1964, pp. 182-190).

Having granted the press a function far removed from information or surveillance, McLuhan (1964) applied to games the same position he did to the media: the extensions of man. He expressed a similar distinction between work and play as Stephenson: "We think of humor as a mark of sanity for a good reason: in fun and play we recover the integral person, who in the workaday world . . . can use only a small sector of his being. (p. 207)" Without games, the individual is "sunk in the zombie trance of automation." As with media, for McLuhan, the form of a game is more important than its content. The pattern of the game makes it relevant to the individual's inner life. Games are controlled situations that allow a rest from daily patterns; games also are social in that they allow society as a whole to talk to itself. McLuhan posed and answered his own question, asserting that games are mass media in that they are "situations contrived to permit simultaneous participation of many people in some significant pattern of their own corporate lives" (p. 216). Although he does not come out and say that mass media are games, as Stephenson does in play theory, the inference seems to be there.

Stephenson's comments on his ludenic theory of newsreading (1967) provide many resonances with McLuhan. Apperception, the readiness to perceive objects in relation to prior interests, has a kernel of thought comparable to McLuhan's sensory bias. Neither assumes the

audience is a *tabula rasa*, a blank mind awaiting a message. Newspaper reading, Stephenson commented, is playful because the reader moves from item to unrelated item, in other words, the reader follows McLuhan's mosaic. Stephenson argued that most media research ignores that the news reader is playing with communication, resonant of McLuhan's idea that the newspaper audience is participating, not blandly getting information. Stephenson (1967) also noted that newsreading becomes a formal game with each newspaper or magazine offering its pattern of play. He wrote that newspapers and magazines "permit of a game element, that is, of regularity, order, and perspective in the reading" (pp. 147-151). The patterned quality of print media is an element to which McLuhan drew attention. Stephenson also commented that play completely absorbs the player, echoing McLuhan's idea that acoustic media (including the press) require in-depth participation (McLuhan, 1964, pp. 188-189). And at the social level, Stephenson's comment that "(m)ass communication in its play aspects may be the way a society develops its culture--the way it dreams, has its myths, and develops its loyalties" (Stephenson, 1967, p. 48) matches McLuhan's notion that games (which are mass media) allow society to talk to itself (Stephenson, 1967, pp. 45-49).

Stephenson also provided himself with evidence of the relationship of McLuhan's theory to play theory. In the single-case Q study that forms several chapters of *Quantum Theory of Advertising*, a subject sorted ads according to conditions of instruction based on 17 communication and related theories. Factor I was concerned with communication pleasure, and included among its seven theories, both play theory and McLuhan's "cool" media theory (Stephenson, 1994, p. 74).

But even more evidence was provided when Stephenson himself sorted a sample of ads using the 17 conditions of instruction for theories existing up to 1964. All the theories tested in the single-case Q study were involved in Stephenson's sort, except for the sort "for McLuhan's 'cool' communicability." The reason, Stephenson noted, is that all of the ads were "hot" and the study was done too early to test McLuhan's "cool" communicability.

Conclusion

Stephenson and McLuhan shared an orientation toward the play function of media, but Stephenson, unlike McLuhan, developed a systematic theory with principles, postulates and pragmatics, which includes a methodology. Stephenson responded to McLuhan's shared

rejection of the same reductionist communication theories focused on messages and information (Stephenson, 1986). Both dismissed Newtonian notions of determinate causality to pursue communication theory through quantum-mechanics and unified field theory, suggesting discontinuity and uncertainty. For Stephenson, the eras of oral, typographic and electronic media provided a framework to better understand the transitiveness of thought and spoken communication, in contrast to its substantive form in print. In McLuhan, Stephenson saw a new theory of knowledge for which Q could provide a new methodology.

It is hoped that this essay provided some arguments for pursuing the convergence of this new epistemology and Q methodology in researching communication. The medium theory approach used by McLuhan, whose fall from academic favor lacked the fourth law of media -- reversal -- has found new life, often without attribution, in the works of others, such as Walter Ong (1982), Neil Postman (1985), Meyrowitz, and Donald Lowe (1982). None has, however, applied the "nuclear subjectivity" of Q to explore the acoustic-transitive process of the new "cool" media. Both McLuhan's and Stephenson's communication theories have challenged contemporary researchers. They have taken a different route to explore communication and based their theories on interdisciplinary ideas. Perhaps both, each in a unique scholarly category, should be retrieved together from the Twilight Zone.

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