Towards an Ecology of Understanding: Semiotics, Medium Theory, and the Uses of Meaning*

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Abstract (E): This paper argues for a bridge between the paradigms of semiotics and medium theory. It inquires into how the two paradigms define media (as text, massage, environment, …) and relate them to other components of the communication chain (the message, receiver, channel, …). While some semiotic approaches tend to concentrate on message interpretation, most medium theorists emphasize the medium or media form rather than content. A link between these two theoretical realms can allow for a more cogent analysis of media and their place in society.

Abstract (F): Cet article plaide en faveur d'un rapprochement entre sémiotique et médiologie ("medium theory"). Il analyse la manière dont ces deux paradigmes scientifiques définissent les médias (comme texte, impact, environnement, …), puis les rattachent aux autres composants de la chaîne communicationnelle (message, récepteur, canal…). Là où certaines approches sémiotiques tendent à se concentrer sur l'interprétation des messages, la plupart des théoriciens en médiologie accentuent le média plutôt que le contenu. L'établissement d'un lien entre les domaines respectifs de la sémiotique et de la médiologie peut permettre une analyse plus efficace des médias ainsi que de leur place dans la société.

Keywords: medium theory, semiotics, media ecology, interpretation, McLuhan, media environments

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Introduction

Among strands in the debate surrounding the theoretical approach to media, the most important division line seems to be that between form and content, or medium and message. The following paper is a critical analysis of medium theory’s explorations of communication technologies and its (unsatisfactory) incorporation of semiotics’ inquiry into the uses of meaning regarding texts and signs. In my opinion, the two fields have traditionally held oppositional views regarding concepts such as media/medium, content, and interpretation. It is the purpose here to illustrate the need to build a bridge between these two worlds.

The traditional concern of semioticians has been the meaning implicit within particular texts, whereas the main contributions of
medium theorists deal with the impact of media or technologies on culture and human consciousness. A weakness of semiotics is often its inability to distinguish between implicit and explicit messages. Its intellectual bias towards interpretation tends to lead to overinterpretation. A weakness of medium theory has been the tendency to trivialize content and dismiss the importance of meaning/message interpretation. The overarching problem that connects the two fields is semantics. Both intellectual frameworks are founded on notions and theories plagued by ambiguities, and are often turgid and contentious bodies of work that are, at times, myopic and circular. To correct these problems, it will be argued that semiotics should form and maintain an active merger with medium theory and vice versa. Through clarification and synthesis, I will argue, semioticians will gain a sense of technological effects, as well as the importance of the medium when reading content on that medium. Alternatively, this will give medium theorists a better appreciation regarding the importance of the quest for meaning and the driving need for dynamic interpretation of texts. I hope to show that medium theorists are actually followers of the tenets of semiotics. Finally, a bridge linking these two theoretical structures will allow for a more coherent and holistic understanding of the media, both in McLuhan's sense of media as messages and semioticians' views of messages framed within the media.

Medium Theory and Media Ecology

While semiotics (or semiology) has an intellectual history dating back to Peirce, Saussure, and Vico, medium theory is a relatively new discipline in communication theory. It assumes that large, amalgamated technology presupposes a process of standardization, such as specific historical eras (oral, chirographic, print, and electronic) and relational "effects" on consciousness (e.g. "print creates linearity"). The problem is that medium theory assumes society is nothing but a reverberation of the medium, and that social institutions and interactions are either nonexistent or subordinate. However, this is changing somewhat (for example, McLuhan's medium theory did not take on a sociological context until Meyrowitz's use of it). My concern, however, is not with social awareness, but rather with meaning. As a graduate student trying to find a correlation between medium theory and the immersion we maintain daily in what we ominously refer to as simply "the media," I am concerned by medium theory's negligence in regard to what the medium's message actually may mean. Semiotics provides a way of reading a symbol/sign system that allows for connotative and denotative meanings, but at the same time it ignores the form of the message and its role in altering consciousness and the social order. Medium theory, on the other hand, points to the changes brought about by symbol structures, but provides no clear explanation as to the importance of the messages conveyed. Joshua Meyrowitz, in No Sense of Place, describes the limitations of the focus on media content (see Ch. 2) and opts for an approach that bridges medium theory with the "situationism" of Erving Goffman and others.

According to Meyrowitz, in his essay "Medium Theory," "[m]ost of the questions that engage media researchers and popular observers of the media focus only on one dimension of our media environment: the content of media messages" (50, italics mine). The concern that this was not exhaustive of the questions that could, and should, be asked about the media led him to coin the term discussed herein. He writes:

A handful of scholars - mostly from fields other than communications, sociology, and psychology - have tried to call attention to the potential influences of communication technologies in addition to and apart from the content they convey. I use the singular
"medium theory" to describe this research tradition in order to differentiate it from most other "media theory." Medium theory focuses on the particular characteristics of each individual medium or of each particular type of media (50, italics original; also No Sense 16).

In this way, medium theorists argue that various factors influence how a medium is appropriated by a culture and try to account for its social, political, and psychological impact.

Due to this line of rationale, medium theory is often accused of preaching technological determinism, when in fact it is not. While media forms and structures are internalized and function as unacknowledged catalysts for change within the structure and conduct of thought and discourse, it is the interaction between media technology and human beings that is the object of the medium theorist, and not the technology itself. The most apt metaphor is that of Neil Postman's "ecology," which best describes the complex interplay between human, technology, media, and the environment (see Postman, Teaching). Herein lies the complex concept of the media environment, which is firmly entrenched in Meyrowitz's perspective, most likely due to his training, under Postman, in Media Ecology at New York University in the late 1970s.

In its essence, media ecology looks at a culture in the biological sense of the word; it is a communication theory based on science and biology metaphors. In biology, if something new enters a culture, it changes the entire culture, not just the new thing itself. This is an underlying principle firmly rooted in systems theory and ecology. "When a new factor is added to an old environment," Meyrowitz notes, "we do not get the old environment plus the new factor, we get a new environment" (No Sense 19). This is to say, the environment is always more than simply the sum of its parts. This type of examination is the work of the ecologist, both traditional and media.

The term "media ecology" was first employed in November 1968, at the annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where Postman used the phrase in a major address for the purpose of suggesting a new direction for the teaching of English (published as "Reformed"). In coining the term, and subsequently the field of study, Postman pointed out that he was not inventing a non-existing discipline, but simply giving a name to the kinds of inquiries in which a number of scholars were already engaged. He cites as examples of practicing media ecologists such people as Lewis Mumford, Harold Innis, Peter Drucker, Jacques Ellul, Marshall McLuhan, Edmund Carpenter, David Riesman, Norbert Wiener, Ray Birdwhistell, and several others (Postman "Reformed" 161). Here the connection between medium theory and media ecology is obvious. McLuhan would have considered himself a media ecologist in this sense: he was trying to create an awareness about the hidden effects of electronic technologies, in much the same fashion that Rachel Carson, in Silent Spring, exposed the unintended consequences of pesticides (Morrison 5-6, 23n3). James Morrison argues that if we see McLuhan in his true light as a "technological environmentalist," it will expose the blindness of his misperceiving critics who see him as a booster of technology; "in truth, he was no more so than Rachel Carson was a promoter of DDT" (Morrison 6). From this ecological framework, we can see that people today do not merely live in a world of the physical. The world is symbolic. We live in a reality filtered by various media; call it what you will: Plato's cave wall, the world outside and the pictures in our heads, mediated reality, second-hand world, the media environment, the media torrent. As argued above, when a new technology or new symbol system enters a culture, the entire system will change. The examination of this
phenomenon is the work of the media ecologist/medium theorist. Because it takes an entire system to enable a medium to take effect, the charge of technological determinism doesn't stand. Technological determinism is a powerful view of the nature of social change, wherein new technologies are discovered serendipitously and then go about altering social change and progress. Progress, in this view, is the history of these inventions, thus history itself, foreseen and unseen, direct and indirect, is nothing more than the effects of these technologies. For example, the steam engine, the automobile, and television are makers of modern man and his condition (Williams 13). But in medium theory's ecological paradigm we can see that is not the case. For example, the printing press didn't take hold in China, but it did in Europe several centuries thereafter, for reasons involving the cultural milieu of the age. If a printing press were to end up in the middle of a Brazilian rain forest or an African jungle, it obviously wouldn't start churning out social change. In order to have an effect it would need to involve the system as a whole. Inspired by the film *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, Christine Nyström refers to this line of thought as "coke bottle media ecology" (personal communication, April 4, 2002).

**McLuhan and Structuralism**

Ecology aside, it becomes increasingly clear that the hard-line medium theory stance is actually a structuralist point of view. That is to say, the examination concentrates on the structure of the symbol system (the medium) to understand the effects of its inherent grammar. Meyrowitz can then be seen as a structuralist, as can McLuhan and for a medium theorist such as McLuhan, content is directly relational to structure. For him, "content," is an illusion derived "from one medium being 'within' or simultaneous to another" (McLuhan and Parker *Counterblast* 24). This is to say that no medium of communication operates in isolation. McLuhan advanced three hypotheses observing how every medium affects every other medium (*Understanding Media*).

The first, and most generalized, is that the "content" of a medium is always an older medium. Thus, the "content" of writing is speech, the "content" of print is writing, and so on. The second is that a new medium is always in competition with an older medium for the time, money, attention, and loyalty of the culture into which it is introduced. Part of the heated ferocity of this competition is the fight between allies of the older medium (print, say) and allies of the new (television, for example) wherein, as the preceding principle implies, what is at stake is not merely a technology/medium, but the entire lifestyle that the technology/medium implies. Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* is an elegant example of a "typographic man" trying to come to grips with his place in a television world. The third hypothesis is when a new technology/medium is introduced into a culture and usurps the function of an older technology/medium. Either the older technology/medium will undergo some radical transformation and survive, or it will obsolesce and be preserved as an art form (I am thinking here, for example, of the commodification of handwriting (wedding invitations, etc.) in an age of fast and accessible word processing).

To return to the idea of structuralism, we can observe that since different forms of communication have different ways of encoding reality, the structure (grammar, form) of any medium of communication is, in itself, a message which reveals a certain perception of reality. This is basically what I take McLuhan to mean in his most well known aphorism, "the medium is the message." Luckily for us, and for the sake of clarity, Edmund Carpenter puts it somewhat less pithily, in "The New Languages": "Each medium, if its bias is properly exploited," he writes, "communicates a unique
aspect of reality, of truth. Each offers a different perspective, a way of seeing an otherwise hidden dimension of reality... A medium is not simply an envelope that carries any letter; it is itself a major part of that message" (Carpenter 174-6). Accordingly in this view, it is the form of the medium, not the content of the message it carries, that dominates our organization of reality. The structure of the printed book, to take one of Carpenter's examples, presents a "reality" that has been divided into static units which can be analyzed individually. The structure of television, alternatively, presents a "reality" in which everything happens at once and events are difficult to isolate and analyze (Carpenter 162-6; see also, Nystrom).

But the role of structure is no mere coincidence in McLuhan, who considered himself a structuralist. One of his primary influences, via James Joyce, was Giambattista Vico, who many see as the father of modern structural theory (see Hawkes). McLuhan's posthumously published Laws of Media: The New Science clearly betrays this influence. In a 1969 letter, McLuhan remarked:

"Vico's new science was so important for [Joyce's] linguistic probes... Vico was the first to point out that a total history of human culture and sensibility is embedded in the changing structural forms of language (Letters 385).

Structuralism, in its modern usage, is a European (primarily French) movement in humanities that conceives of any cultural phenomenon as the product of a system of "signification" and attempts to identify a "grammar" of that culture, which could be seen as the rules by which meaning is communicated. By this definition then, McLuhan was a structuralist. In a 1974 letter to historian and popular culture scholar Marshall Fishwick, McLuhan wrote, "...my approach is rightly regarded as 'structuralist.' I have acquired that approach through Joyce and Eliot and the Symbolists and use it in The Mechanical Bride. Nobody except myself in the media field has ventured to use the structuralist or 'existential' approach" (Letters 506).

A Semiotic Critique of Medium Theory: Eco on McLuhan

With this in mind, we may begin to see the connection between medium theorists and the work of semioticians. But from within semiotics, we find one of McLuhan's harshest critics. Umberto Eco's 1967 essay "Cogito Interruptus," written largely in response to Understanding Media and The Medium is the Massage, reiterates the point that, for McLuhan, the medium makes irrelevant the content transmitted. Taking into account the Guttenbergian habit of linearity, Eco insists readers must come to terms with McLuhan's denied rationality:

McLuhan has recently realized that perhaps books must no longer be written; and with The Medium is the Massage, his latest "nonbook," he suggests a discourse in which word is fused with image and the chain of logics are destroyed in favor of a synchronic, visual-verbal proposition, of unreasoned data set spinning before the reader's intelligence. The trouble is that The Medium is the Massage, to be completely understood, needs Understanding Media as a code ("Cogito" 231-2).

But Eco, the "massage" having rubbed him the wrong way, misses a simple fact: the reason Understanding Media is required to truly break through the Massage is that the latter tome is actually nothing more than a collection of previously published works designed by...
Quentin Fiore and coordinated by Jerome Agel. In a 1966 letter to William Jovanovich, then president of Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc., McLuhan writes of *The Medium is the Massage*: “I didn’t write anything for that book. It is excerpts with pictures… it would be a boost for the other books” ([Letters](#) 339). In regard to the often misspelled and misquoted *massage* title, McLuhan noted the intent was to suggest that “a medium is not something neutral - it does something to people. It takes hold of them. It rubs them off, it massages them, it bumps them around” (from an hour-long NBC-TV program on McLuhan in March 1967, qtd. in *Letters* 340n5).

Another problem Eco has with McLuhan are his “games of definition.” “Here,” he writes, “we are still at the level of a deliberate regeneration of terminology for provocatory purposes” (“Cogito” 233). But this critique is nothing new. From McLuhan’s use of terms such as “hot,” “cool,” medium,” and so forth, it would appear an academic growth industry was born. (For example, how many times will we read: “What McLuhan really meant when he said was…” See [Norvell](#) Chs. 1 and 2 and [Leverette](#) “Semantic”.) But Eco, a semiotician by trade, is concerned with meaning in the purest way. “Gutenberg man,” he notes, “and before him, alphabet man had at least taught us to define precisely the terms of our speech. To avoid defining them further precisely to 'involve' the reader further… is a trick to throw sand in our eyes” (“Cogito” 233). The drawback to McLuhan’s aphoristic, metaphorical style regarding media is that, for Eco, he seems to be confused as to what a metaphor, or a medium for that matter, actually is. He writes:

> It is not true that- as McLuhan says- all the media are active metaphors because they have the power to transmit experience into new forms. In fact, a medium translates experience because it represents a code…

> But the definition of medium as metaphor also covers a confusion in the definition of medium. To say that it represents an extension of our bodies still means little (“Cogito” 233).

But a metaphor, by definition, is a bridge, performing a kind of carry-over from one domain into another (see [Gozzi](#) 79). Within this function, media do qualify as metaphors, but it is the medium theorists’ misuse of meaning that often leads to semantic ambiguities such as these. For example, in a chapter titled “The Medium is the Metaphor,” Neil Postman writes: “Today, we must look to the city of Las Vegas, Nevada, as a metaphor of our national character and aspirations” ([Amusing](#) 3). Moreover, he goes on to implicitly recognize the city (Las Vegas), entertainment, and commercialism as the metaphors for his argument, not “the medium” as he proposes in his chapter title and in many overt declarations throughout the text ([Flahman](#) 189).

To return to Eco, it is in McLuhan’s reasoning where the theoretician of communication finds trouble, “because the differences between the channel of communication, the code and the message are not established” (“Cogito” 233, italics original). Alas for Eco, however, McLuhan’s greatest sin is in his playful misuse of the term “content.” McLuhan often saw content as irrelevant, the juicy piece of meat the burglar brings to distract the guard dog, or simply an “illusion” that a medium can be in and simultaneous to another medium ([McLuhan](#) and [Parker](#) *Counterblast* 24). Also, particularly with sports, McLuhan saw the “audience” as content. He felt the activities must reflect the image of the audience, because the audience makes and uses games (see McLuhan and Nevitt 145-6 and [Leverette](#) *Wrestling* Ch. 3). For Eco, the receiver is not the content, but the central aspect of the communication process. It is in the receiver where interpretation occurs and meaning is bestowed. He writes: “The medium is *not* the message; the message becomes what the receiver makes of it,
applying to it his own codes of reception, which are neither those of
the sender nor those of the scholar of communications... the
message depends on the reading given to it” (“Cogito” 235-6, italics
original). Where McLuhan had four "laws of media," the tetrad, Eco
has but one: "I would say that variability of interpretation is the
constant law of mass communications" (“Towards” 141).

McLuhan as Semiotician

Interestingly enough, interpretation is where McLuhan began,
starting his career as a literary critic. As a student of the New
Criticism, the notion that a text is active and people receptive can be
seen throughout his early work. In 1951, McLuhan published The
Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man, a collection of fifty-nine
concise essays on the sources and meanings of popular culture.
Examining comic strips, advertisements, and other promotional
imagery of the American press (with playfully chosen illustrations to
boot), he writes, "Ours is the first age in which many thousands of
the best trained individual minds have made it a full time business to
get inside the collective public mind... bringing about this condition
of public helplessness" (Mechanical v). Because of McLuhan's later
medium-centric oeuvre, I feel this text is too often ignored.

The Mechanical Bride is interesting in regard to Roland Barthes's
Mythologies. In "Myth Today," the theoretical essay that concludes
Mythologies, Barthes outlines the theoretical assumptions that
inform the other essays. He presents a semiotic (Barthes uses
"semiological") model for reading popular culture, essentially adding
a second level to de Saussure's schema of signifier + signified =
sign. A few years later, in Elements of Semiology, Barthes clarifies
the model with the addition of the more familiar terms of denotation
and connotation. Denotation is an object's primary signification and
connotation, then, is the secondary signification. He writes: "the first
system [denotation] becomes the plane of expression or signifier of
the second system [connotation]... The signifiers of connotation...
are made up of the signs (signifiers and signified united) of the
denotated system" (Elements 89-91).

This is how medium theorists can use semiotics, for they do, in fact,
use content by reading (in the semiotic sense of the word) both
medium and media environment as a text and face the problem of
trying to avoid the obvious (content). The media (as institutions)
provide content, not so that it can be avoided, but with the express
and ostensible purpose of being seen, heard, read, etc.

Media as Text?

"Text" has become a common nomenclature in the academic
discourse about media, particularly under the umbrella of cultural
studies. The "textualization" of television is an instructive case.

Sociologist Ron Lembo notes that the term "text" is "well suited for
explaining the social complexities of television use" (63).
Semiotician John Fiske writes in Television Culture: "no text is
simply a pattern of signifiers; a text is a bearer of meaning...” (84).
But earlier he writes: "a program becomes a text at the moment of
reading...” (14). This leads to a definition of "reader" much in line
with Eco's participatory view, as "the producer of texts, the maker of
meanings and pleasures" (Fiske 17). Media ecologist Raymond
Gozzi, in The Power of Metaphor in the Age of Electronic Media,
argues against this view in "Why Television is Not a Text." Gozzi is
clearly a print lover. His hard-line medium theory stance is
constantly compelled to differentiate between the printed word and
a televised image, therefore relocating the term "text" to a spot
under his all encompassing rubric "metaphor." In his view, usage of
the term "text" will inevitably lead to a "decline in literacy" since the
activating schema for reading will become disassociated with the
written word (See Gozzi 97). By arguing that "watching television is
not 'reading' a 'text,'" Gozzi emphasizes the fact that he has no
interest in semiotic exercises such as "reading" (97). His negatively
affected reactions, such as "a 'reading is an interpretation" (95,
italics original), skate dangerously close to technological
determinism and tautology in their denial of human cognitive
processes within the steamrolling juggernaut of print's rolling over of
us.

In my view, a text is something to be read and while television as a
medium is not a text, the individual electric artifacts disseminated
via its flow are. Infomercials, programs, movies, commercials,
sports, news, etc. all could, and should, be thoroughly combed over
by the textual analyst. In this same vein, print is not a text, but
books, magazines, newspapers, pamphlets, billboards, etc. are.
Lastly, I must again concede to Lembo: "The textual metaphor is,
after all, only one way of characterizing television use" (68).

But however we, as semioticians or as medium theorists, or as both,
may classify television, we must realize that the "tube of plenty," to
use Erik Barnouw's phrase, is one aspect of the larger media
environment, a medium among many. The following section can be
seen as an introduction to the concept of environment and the
various accouterments with which academia associates it.

Media as Environment?

In Counterblast, McLuhan notes, "Media effects are new
environments as imperceptible as water is to a fish, subliminal for
the most part" (McLuhan and Parker Counterblast 22). Running with
this metaphor, he wrote in 1970's Culture is Our Business, "Fish
don't know water exists till beached" (191). If for the most part the
technological environment is invisible to its inhabitants, whoever
actually discovered water wasn't a fish - which means that we are
least likely to notice those aspects of our surroundings in which we
are most deeply immersed (Nystrom 110). This is what Todd Gitlin
refers to as the "torrent" washing over us with an infinite glimmer
feeding us disposable feelings only to fade back into the rhythmic
twitch of the unceasing flow. In Media Unlimited, he too takes up
the discrepancy of McLuhan's "glib formulation": "the medium is the
message." He writes, "Media do not simply deliver information,
continuing:

An image or a soundtrack is not simply a set of abstract
signs that describe, point to, or represent realities
standing elsewhere. Not only do they point; they are.
They are wraparound presences with which we live
much of our lives. McLuhan was closer to the truth
when, in a playful mood, he titled one of his later books
The Medium is the Massage (9, italics original).

Though Gitlin's concern is media as institutions and as a way of life,
rather than as technology, the connection between environment
and torrent is clear. He continues: "Media are occasions for
experiences - experiences which are themselves the main products,
the main transactions, the main 'effects' of media. This is the big
story; the rest is details" (9). And: "the wonder of communications
was that the carriers of information did not simply transmit facts or
ideology. They occasioned a human experience - a sense of
connection to the world" (47). Media are, in fact, our world as we
know it.

The notion that there is a hidden environment has so permeated
modern discourse that we find the metaphor seeping into other
fields. In political science, Benjamin Barber's capitalist McWorld is a
new kind of chilly "virtual reality, created by invisible but omnipotent
high-tech information networks and fluid transnational economic markets..." (26). I won't attempt a discussion of "the global village" metaphor here, but in Barber's case, "global mall" may be more applicable.

To segue back into McLuhan, we see the importance of the term environment as a metaphor for media. He describes it as, among other things: an "active process" (Understanding vi); "formed by our new technologies," and imperceptible in its initial reign" ("Guaranteed" 200); processes and not containers ("Information" 199); either visible or invisible (an invisible environment is fragmentary and significant, a visible environment is saturating and visible: an environment is a process and not a container) ("Technology" 5); always invisible, degrading, and a process (McLuhan and Parker Counterblast 30); relying upon all the components in a situation [ecological], and acting as a process (McLuhan and Parker Vanishing 242); changing us (McLuhan and Nevitt 90). Since the environment is in constant flux, much like the torrent overwhelming us, the massage is more apropos than is the message.

In an early essay in his medium-focused epoch, 1955's "A Historical Approach to the Media," McLuhan observed that we were fast becoming passive victims, "helpless illiterates," in the new changing world of technology as the "media themselves act directly toward shaping our most intimate self-consciousness" (110). Nine years later he writes:

Over and over I've talked to groups and individuals about new technology as new environment. Content of new environment is old environment. The new environment is always invisible. Only the content shows, and yet only the environment is really active as shaping force (Letters 311, also see the related discussion in McLuhan "Relation").

Here then, is McLuhan-medium theorist, functionally acting as McLuhan-semiotician, reading the environment as text, extrapolating and illustrating both connotative and denotative levels of meaning. Interpreting the media environment is an important step towards uniting semiotic analysis and medium theory. If we can approach the environment from this two-prong strategy, we will further ourselves in comprehending its "effects," "messages," and "massage."

What McLuhan meant when he wrote "the medium is the massage" was that a medium is a complex and effective "set of events" which change our outlook and the posture of entire groups of people (McLuhan "Change-Overs" 114). Like Poe's sailor caught in the maelstrom, McLuhan insisted that we cannot understand the technological experience from the outside. We can only comprehend our situation once we've realized how the electronic age "works us over."

All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the massage. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments (McLuhan and Fiore 26).

As Arthur Kroker points out, in Technology and the Canadian Mind, "When McLuhan noted in Counterblast that 'environment is process, not container,' [p.30] he meant just this: the effect of all new technologies is to impose, silently and pervasively, their deep assumptions upon the psyche..." (56). Therefore the process that is
our environment massages us into reworking our "ratio of senses."
It is from within the media environment that a merger between
interpretive semiotics and medium theory becomes a necessity, as
McLuhan once said: He, Innis, and other explorers of media
environments are like blind men tapping canes in the dark
(Meyrowitz No Sense 343n19).

Conclusion: Necessitating a Link

Todd Gitlin, writing about environment or what he calls "the torrent,"
describes the problem of managing the unmanageable:

We are aware of its parts but oblivious of its huge place
in our day-to-day lives. It is everywhere, too much to
take in. It is, in a sense, like nature— that overwhelming
presence human beings once found so threatening yet
auspicious that they conjured up gods and demons to
imagine their way through its ungraspable allness (112).

Semioticians and medium theorists should be called to task to
replace the "gods and demons" and contribute a course of
navigation in a world where signification, mediation, and an
interface with the hidden environment all add to the need for a more
functional critical code with which to decipher reality.

Medium theorists need to incorporate semiotics into their paradigm
to gain a respect for content and the overarching importance of
meaning. And while medium theory needs semiotics to better
understand the signs of life, semioticians need medium theory in
order to better understand the "allness" of our signified
environment. "Cultivating and nourishing desires..." writes Gitlin,
"everywhere [media] leave behind deposits of what only can be
called a civilization - not an ideology, or a system of belief, but
something less resistible, a way of life soaked in feeling, seeming to
absorb with equal conviction traces of every idea, or for that matter,
the absence of all ideas" (191). The "styles of navigation" need
better navigators (see Gitlin Ch. 3).

Before we can grasp at media's enveloping "allness" we need
clarification over our understanding, agreement on what we mean
when we say "mean," and a structuralist approach that will never
simply be content with content. Delivery is but one aspect of
media's contact with human existence; to deny messages entirely is
to deny the importance of society. The semantic ambiguities of both
medium theory and semiotics require "demystification," not only of
the theories alone, but regarding the environment itself if we are to
even begin to conceptualize the tremendous Joycean divine
thunderclap that is the totality of our modern life with media.

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Different perspectives in ecosemiotics Semiotics and ecology have come into contact with each other at several points and the origins for designing the paradigm of ecosemiotics differ accordingly. Tembrock elaborates his theory of biocommunication (Tembrock 1971) towards semiotics and distinguishes semiotic types of relations between organism and environment as spatial semiosis, temporal semiosis, semiosis of metabolism, defensive semiosis, exploratory semiosis and semiosis of partners. Tembrock sees these distinctions also as basic types of semiotic relations between humans and their environment (Tembrock 1997).