

Minds and Media – a Symbiosis

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(Notes on slides)

2. Marshal McLuhan, 1964: "...the medium is the message. That is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by [it]." Clark and Chambers published in 1988.

3. Obviously the mind is not the same as the brain: it is nonsense to speak of having a thought or image in my brain, or to say that I have made up my brain. It appears that we think of stuff being IN our minds and us being IN minds. So, locality is not of the essence; we can think and talk about minds without worrying about exactly where they are. Indeed, if we think of minds as ongoing, as process, not objects, then they can be scattered yet co-ordinated into one.

On the other hand, if there were no limits to our minds, if they were unbounded, and all the adjuncts that Chalmers cites were part of it, including what it sees and hears, then everything would be mind; so, with nothing that is *not* mind, the concept becomes redundant.

4. What I want to talk about now is that it is pretty well impossible to conceive of a mind without content, the undoubted fact that minds both receive and express their contents, and what that implies about the kind of stuff that makes up that content. Beliefs, for example, which most of us think are in our minds, have to come from somewhere, unless they are illusions. My interest is in the ways into and out of the mind, its external relations, the way it deals with what most of us take to be an external world. I shall call these relations the media, how we mediate.

5. This is a pretty bold claim: "The body is part of the mind". What I have in mind(!) here is proprioception, our sense of being a physical presence and of what it is doing: without that a lot of our ordinary thinking and speaking makes no sense – action, for example. Such a consciousness, if it is anywhere, is part of our minds, of the way our minds work.

6. From Chalmers etc: "In each of these cases, the major burden of the coupling between agents is carried by language. Without language, we might be much more akin to discrete Cartesian "inner" minds, in which high-level cognition relies largely on internal resources. But the advent of language has allowed us to spread this burden into the world. Language, thus construed, is not a mirror of our inner states but a complement to them. It serves as a tool whose role is to extend cognition in ways that on-board devices cannot. Indeed, it may be that the intellectual explosion in recent evolutionary time is due as much to this linguistically-enabled extension of cognition as to any independent development in our inner cognitive resources."

7. Here's an example of one of the ways language works (not, note, what it IS). It invites participation, collaboration; in fact, it relies on these. Language alone, as just 'my language', makes no sense. These examples are rhetorical devices intended to draw in the listener or reader – a kind of thought-trap. And they work, because the hearer uses the gap to confirm their prejudices, which is exactly what they want to do.

8. Language is public; so is the mind it helps to form. In order for us to communicate, we need a common medium – just as sound needs air. The medium becomes part of us, of our minds; if it didn't, we could not communicate. Worse, we could not find out what we have in common with others: we could not confirm our existence as human beings, or our identities as... whatever we take them to be.

9. I propose this model: rock-pools. Each pool fills up when the tide comes in, and then contributes to the sea when it goes out, meanwhile maintaining a separate life. Some life is specific to the pool, some to the sea; but there is continual give-and-take, continual refreshment of content. Part of the pool contributes to the sea, part of the sea contributes to the pools, continually.

10. Language is not the only medium (or form of life): there are pictures, drawings, moving pictures – selfies. So far, we are unable to extend all our senses: smells and tastes stay at home. But this continuing, and increasing, volume of aural and visual information buzzes between us – a huge quantity of... something. I would call it a *public mind*, in that what goes on there is very similar to what goes on inside the individual minds that generate it: memories, debates, arguments, news, images, fears and appetites, love and loathing.

When the mind starts and stops, so do we; we are coterminous with our minds. But if that public mind is continually reacting with our individual minds, it is putting stuff in and taking stuff out; it is *changing* our minds, forming it. That is not surprising, surprisingly: we take our beliefs and perspectives from outside; we learn from it; we emulate what's out there, and develop strategies to deal with it – or what we think it is – and re-form it to our needs. We take pains to *fit* the world, fit ourselves and fit it. Specifically, we also fit our minds with the public mind; we form narrative memories with ourselves as heroes in that arena (or protagonist at least), define an identity, accumulate knowledge acquired from public authority, useful skills and a list of friends – with 'like minds'. We take positions, have views, form opinions, based on what we take in.

11. Mind makes its own history, from the materials provided – largely by the public mind (Popper's World Three?).

But the mind so constituted has an extraordinary ability: having been made (largely) by the world out there, it can then proceed to make that world – or, at least, change it a little. In particular, it can contribute to and change, or try to change, the public mind. We are made, and make, as we move from past to future. We do that using our unique (I think) ability to imagine future possibilities, choose among them and act accordingly. So, whereas these plastic, malleable minds can be formed by interaction with the public mind, they can also do some of the forming.

In order to do that well, however, we need to understand how our minds are being formed; how the public mind interacts with our own – the intimate relation between maker and made that forms one whole. We learn: from experience, from our parents and teachers, but also from example and from books and from the media of communication surrounding us. Much of this is passive: it is not actively *trying* to mould our minds – but comes from minds already moulded. It frames the discourse. We learn within that frame, the frame of norms and models; we emulate, what it is to be an adult, a success, a parent... and so go on perpetuating the frame of reference. We call it culture.

Because it is normal, normality, the norm, we don't notice it: what we notice are the exceptions, the *news*. So we look for the news. Here are some headlines, culled at random (I promise) from one of our most popular media:

12. *From a smiling pose to staring eerily into the distance: Chilling selfies taken by Gable Tostee with his Tinder date Warriena Wright show her in the minutes before she plunged to her death off his balcony*

Scots 'have better quality of life than the English': Brussels bureaucrats claim they're more tolerant and their schools are superior

Fuel prices are set to rise by another 5p a litre before the end of the month as soaring cost of oil and weak pound leads to a 'double whammy' for drivers

13. *Spag bol? That's British, not Italian, says Carluccio: Restaurant chain's founder pours scorn on the UK version of the dish*

Farage almost blew it for us, claims Vote Leave mastermind: Dominic Cummings says Out would have won by 60% to 40% without the Ukip leader's intervention

Sir Shifty's £2m bonus for key staff as BHS went into administration: Green handed out money dubbed a 'Philip bonus' to 200 employees at the company's HQ

Four in ten GP surgery patients delay booking appointments because they fear receptionists will pry into their symptoms

What do these examples tell us about the norms we have absorbed, the background against which they count as 'news'?

14. First, they are all *only slightly* disturbing – they are not exactly what we expect; yet, at the same time, they are not amazing, not incredible. They deliver ; their content serves as much to confirm our view of the world as to add to it. You sort of expect Tinder dates to be dodgy, the Scots to be better educated, an Italian to criticise our cooking, UKIP to insult each other, Philip Green to be up to something, the NHS to be in trouble and petrol prices to rise. The 'new' information is selected to comfort us, to reassure us that things don't really change. Every day, we are thus drawn along this groove of expectation: even the shock, horror stories give us a frisson of self-congratulation. “How awful!” we say, as we learn of more death and destructon and dirty deeds; but how reassuring that it's not us, because we are not like that; we are normal (these are Daily Mail readers I am talking about).

And they are personal: they centre on people – not statistics or facts or scientific discoveries . I would compare them to ordinary gossip – what the Americans call water-cooler talk, or the chat between clothes-washers at the fountain in old villages: they form, in an informal way, the norms of a society, by allowing us to compare ourselves with others – to assess if and how we are 'better' or 'worse' than they are, or better or worse off. We are invited to approve and disapprove.

15. In effect, they tell us who we are and how to judge others: the media mould, I say, a public mind that becomes a large part of our own. Or, that may be seen as its obverse: our minds collectively partake in the public mind. There is a merging, a reciprocal relationship, where the borders cannot be easily discerned – like, maybe – the way the sea comes in and forms tidal pools, which then run out into the sea again. Or *a* public mind. Because there are many many identities, many kinds of minds, of people we like to think we are. There is a well-known psychological phenomenon called the 'confirmation effect': we seek out just the information that tends to *confirm* what we already think; we do not welcome contradiction, or anything that may confuse us, any subtleties or ambiguities. We not only look for confirmation of what we believe, but actually *see* or hear it, preferentially, ignoring dissonance – cognitive dissonance.

Information is not neutral: it either reinforces our prejudices or weakens them – and we don't want them weakened. We take – I should say *mistake* – our strength of prejudice for strength of mind. This appetite for reinforcement is an example of *positive feedback*.

16. So is this: fire. Heat produces combustion, which produces more heat, which produces... etc etc. Until everything is burned. Positive feedback produces an exponential growth curve; if that curve is not damped by some external factor it goes off the scale – fire becomes explosion. Any process that takes this form eventually self-destructs. The mind-media relation is often such a process of exponential self-reinforcement: a mind literally *makes itself up*, like a story, one where you are the hero and therefore must be right, must win. This process is called *the echo chamber*.

17. Wikipedia defines this relatively new phrase here. It is now well-known, and established by research (the latest in the *Wall Street Journal*). It is not new: people have long chosen to associate primarily with the like-minded, and have shared habits and prejudices; snobbery, for example, is a form of echo chamber, as are religious communities, racialism and political parties. But its effectiveness as a force to bind and divide, rapidly and deeply, has been increased by social media.

The headlines I quoted just now are from newspapers, now a relatively old-fashioned medium. The newspapers have traditionally offered such confirmation: you are either a Telegraph reader or a Guardian reader – unless you scan the Sun or Mail. You choose the medium that confirms what you already know (one of the things you know is that the other papers are just *wrong*). Social media are often much more the substance of the public mind now – though the print media follow and amplify them. They pick up what is trending on Twitter and Instagram and replay it, filling out the story and culling pictures. A recent, and extremely important example is the US election. Here are some quotes from a BBC story about it:

"These days it's about engaging with your support base and constantly feeding them information, and certain hashtags that will keep their level of interest high."

"It's affirming that social media platforms can still present spaces where some people can have political conversations with their networks to genuinely discuss their views," concludes a certain Prof. Howard. "But when nearly a quarter of Twitter activity turns out to be automated it can compound the view that politicians are out to manipulate public opinion." This orchestration and automation are thought now to have played a part in the US election.

But note this remark: 'One silver lining from the study is that humans are still the dominant force on Twitter and for the most part they seek out posts from other people.'

The public mind is made up of, and by, private individual minds. The social media once appeared to be more democratic, not dictated by owners and editors; that was the hope in the early days of the internet – everyone could talk to everyone, and exchange views! A true democracy, the voice of the people! But it hasn't worked out that way.

18. What happens with the algorithms on social media is that your news feed is set up to show you what is most popular among your friends. So increasingly as people get their news from social media, they are only seeing the opinions of people like themselves.

For example, if you were anti-Trump, every day you would probably see 30-40 anti-trump messages. (I have never seen a pro-trump article or news item.) Which means his supporters are seeing the same consistency of viewpoint. And the same information, the same stories, many of which are invented, false. For perhaps the majority of people now there is no neutral news read or seen. We become less educated and less tolerant of each other's opinions because we don't understand them.

[While denying that claim, Facebook did sack its human team, instead relying solely on an algorithm to determine which stories were shown to be most popular. As a consequence,

stories which were later proved entirely false appeared on the timelines of a large number of users.

When asked about checks and balances needed to keep a company like Facebook in line, Mr Zuckerberg said it was about "listening to what people want".]

19. Businesses use this phenomenon to target their potential customers. Have you noticed that if you search for something on line, ads for that will keep popping up for weeks afterwards? Not only do marketers know who we are, they know what kind of people we are. (I believe you can now find apps that allow you to do that for yourself – to understand what kind of person you are.)

20. We are herd animals; we go with the flow of the mob. We like, not just to *do* what others do, but to *think* what others think (Heidegger called this phenomenon *das Man*). Sometimes that's good, to become part of the public mind, to swim with the tide. Sometimes it's bad. The trouble is, how to tell which? Because we don't *like* feeling isolated in our own little rock-pool.

[Studies (<http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/xge/72/6/847/>) have shown that, given a choice, people will opt for a definite electric shock now rather than the risk of a possible electric shock at some unknown time later. It seems that it's the not knowing that gets to us.]

21. So we seek certainty by confirmation. We check our Facebook feeds, sent by the like-minded, a chorus of approval, a tide we can ride. That makes us happy. We can even confirm our happiness. The new media will help, and the new businesses. Maybe the ultimate confirmation is the selfie, sent out to all your friends to join in a community of happiness and certainty of it.

Mind you, that's nothing new; here's very old selfie.

22. This is called a 'donor portrait', very popular a few centuries ago. If you were rich and wanted to confirm your happiness and certainty you commissioned an artist to do a portrait of you adoring the deity. Selfies are nothing new.

23. But not all certainty leads to happiness sometimes you can be certain that others are *wrong* – that you are the hero of your story and they are the villains. Then the positive feedback, the self-reinforcement, explodes into conflict. There is no room for two versions of the public mind in one public space.

[At the height of the financial crisis in 2007, Prof David Tuckett, director of University College London's Centre for the Study of Decision-Making Uncertainty, was researching how money managers made investment decisions in the midst of financial and economic chaos.

He found that their decisions weren't based solely on hardcore research and calculations, but also on the stories the money managers told themselves. They created a narrative around the outcome of their actions and convinced themselves about it. "In effect, the narrative removed the reason not to do it," he says.]

[Gove v. the 'experts'.]