

Chapter 16

Understanding the Codes and Assumptions of New Media

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16.1 Understanding the Codes and Assumptions of New Media

Narcissus did not know he was looking at his own reflection. The spatial distinction between his body and his reflection in a pool of water was not understood because, while he was enamored by his displaced image, his focus was absorbed by the aesthetic code he was experiencing. Codes are only part of the story; focusing on conventional meanings, interpreters tend to overlook the context of embodied, personal perspectives colored by assumptions and preconceptions. An emphasis on Peirce's semiotic concept of *secondness*, the relationship between a sign and its meaning, helps to explain the inadequacies of code-based social network communication and new media's broader potential for identity and interpretations. In the light of a semiotic perspective, this study explores media as an extension of identity and communication.

16.2 New Media and the Meaning of *Style*

Media technologies are generally regarded as tools for getting things done. People think about technologies in terms of how they and others use various devices, machinery, and equipment. The word *media* is the plural form of the word *medium* that refers to something that comes between other things. In communication, the medium carries the message just as sound carries speech, and the visual symbols of written language represent the sounds used in speech. The semiotic nature of communication is embodied in the relationships between the media of representations,

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the ideas, events or objects represented, and the interpretations of meanings. So while most media technologies are only messengers, and the focus of communicators is on the meanings of the messages, the function of the medium and its style affect the message.

The term *style* refers to the distinct characteristics that affect the appearance or practices of something that is essentially in a similar category as something else. Signs of style are often used to differentiate meanings based on observable qualities that distinguish people or objects with similar functional characteristics. The style of new technologies affects the message, and the way we experience the impact of communication. Regardless of differences in style, new media continue to develop ways to represent the invisible experiences and natural signs that we process in our minds in order to interpret and share thoughts and ideas about events and objects in our world. Those signs are always affecting our thoughts and feelings, and telling us what to do. The meanings we interpret reveal our understanding of anticipated consequences that the signs represent. In the end, however, new media are extensions of the same capacities humans have used to communicate in the past. So, new media accomplish the same things that the old technologies accomplished, but in new ways that have social and cultural impacts.

Change is not new, but people tend to experience change in their own time as having special significance. In a newspaper cartoon strip from Sunday, October 15, 1933, Mickey Mouse is just finishing writing a letter to Uncle Mortimer. A dialogue balloon over the smiling Mickey Mouse provides his speech; “Well, I’m glad that letter’s finished! But Uncle Mortimer worries unless he hears from me now an’ then!” (Disney 1933, Rpt. in Heide and Gilman, p. 93). Mickey puts a stamp on the envelope, but the stamp does not stick. The next several frames show Mickey getting increasingly frustrated as he tries a variety of creative methods, but fails to affix the stamp to the envelope. Finally, he steps on a stool and uses the 1933 style telephone. Smiling, he says, “Hello! Central? Gimme Long-Distance! I want t’ talk to Mortimer Mouse!” (Disney 1933, Rpt. in Heide and Gilman, p. 93). Mickey’s big smile reflects his pleasure in using the new telephone technology. The wall-mounted telephone with visible bells on top to signal an incoming call, and separate ear and mouth fixtures, represented as radical a change in 1933 as an iPhone 5 did in 2013. Mickey’s verbal message to Uncle Mortimer would be different from what he wrote in his letter just as the spontaneous nature of spoken interaction is different from the formality of written language. It may lack the thoughtful preparation of the letter, but the telephone would connect with the immediacy of speech and vocal recognition, and the excitement of using the new technology.

But beyond the content of specific messages, media are often recognized as extensions of one’s identity in society. Product names are good examples of associations that distinguish economic and social classes. Just think of the major car manufacturers, or different computer-operating systems, and how advertisers have depicted the differences between users of different brands. In contemporary culture, two brands of the same type of product such as a computer, mobile phone, a car, or even an item of clothing will all essentially perform the same functions. At the same time, particular brands can potentially identify the user as being a member of

a distinct class, age, or other demographic. In such a situation, a code exists that establishes associations between the specific product and its users. What emerges is a system of signs that establish meanings among those who understand the symbolic codes associated with the products and users. So meanings are derived not from the object or its functions, but the relationships between the various product brands and social identification. The identity of an individual, then, is based on reflections between objects and the perceptions of other people.

16.3 Identity and New Media

Much of identity is constructed by relationships with others. The whole notion of new media is driven by relationships with others, but much of what motivates users is driven by self-image. Narcissus did not know he was looking at his own reflection. The spatial distinction between his body and his reflection in a pool of water was not understood because, while he was enamored by his displaced image, his focus was absorbed by the aesthetic code of an external object he was experiencing. In other words, he liked what he saw.

Codes are only part of the story because the associations between signs create meanings that are separate from nature or what actually exists. Focusing on conventional meanings, interpreters tend to overlook the context of their embodied, personal perspectives formed by assumptions, established ideas, and preconceptions.

The excitement of using new media is derived from an expression of the self that is extended, or experienced as enhanced by the capacities of the user to accomplish some familiar task. If something can be accomplished faster, better, or easier, a habit of behavior can develop an association between the technology and the task. But the completion of a task is still a *reflection* of the one who performs the action. Enhanced new media will not improve poor writing or an ill-conceived idea, but a media user can become entranced by a new style or mode of technology that can become a code.

Codes are a “systematic organization of signs whose meanings are determined in part by their relationships to other signs within a given context” (Gaines 2010, p. 155). Actions demonstrate recognition of a code used by a culture to know how to respond to particular sign relations. Narcissus rejected the advances of Echo who “tried to win his love with fragments of his own speech,” because the repetition of words uttered by Narcissus did not conform to the code of a linguistic response (McLuhan 1965, p. 41). As McLuhan explained, “the point of this myth is the fact that men at once become fascinated by any extension of themselves in any material other than themselves” (p. 41). The telescope, the wheel, the book, telephone, television, and the computer exemplify technologies that extend what we are already capable of doing, and we become fascinated by the gadgets created to alter and enhance our natural capacities.

Codes conceal assumptions about new media because people generally fail to consider the differences between personal perspectives, and the forms and functions

of communication technologies. Charles Sanders Peirce used a descriptive method to identify the *actual* qualities of a sign as “firstness,” the relationship between a sign and its meaning as “secondness,” and the potential to interpret the relationship between a sign and its meaning from different perspectives as “thirdness” (Peirce 1994, CP¹ 8.332). According to Deely, “Code-based analyses, in Peirce’s terms, reduce to Secondness” or the relationship between the representation and its meaning, but the actual signs must be understood with the potential for multiple interpretations (2010, p. 35). Missing the active nature of *thirdness*, interpreters tend to accept their own point of view without understanding the effect of different perspectives and context on the meaning of a new sign. As Peirce explains:

In its genuine form, Thirdness is the triadic relation existing between a sign, its object, and the interpreting thought, itself a sign, considered as constituting the mode of being of a sign. A sign mediates between the interpretant sign and its object (Peirce: CP 8.332).

The triadic nature of signs means that reasonable interpretation of a sign (or a message) must consider the context of perception. But the media are only messengers and can be ignored as a background obscured by the message content. Likewise, the identity of an interpreter brings an individual perspective, complicated by a personal history of beliefs affecting the understanding of new phenomena.

16.4 New Media Hiding in Plain Sight

Many aspects of media function like the aesthetic code that prompted Narcissus to interpret his reflection, not as an image of himself, but as sign representing an object of desire. The effect of the medium, still water with the mirror-like capacity of reflecting an image, was not understood. The reader of the Narcissus story knows the image in the pool is an index reflecting the subject. But Narcissus, taken by the aesthetic qualities of the image, is fooled by his desire for the beauty he perceives. Likewise, new media can potentially affect the user more than the quality of the user’s capacity for effective communication.

Media can address certain kinds of needs such as access to information, emotional or aesthetic experiences, escape from everyday problems, and linking an individual to a greater community (Lev-On 2012, pp. 100–101). From newspapers and television to *Twitter*, audience members are attracted to media that communicate stories they can identify with from the everyday experiences of their lives. Based on its Greek origins, the word *narcissus* suggests a narcotic numbness (Dictionary 2005). According to McLuhan, all media technologies that extend human capacities numb our sense of the medium itself (p. 15). With media obscured in the background, the user focuses on the content, meaning, and perceived consequences of a message.

Once new media are adopted into normal use, they can hide in plain sight because they are integrated into an elaborate system of signs. Media represent information

¹ References in the text refer to volume and paragraph numbers with a period in between abbreviated as CP.

and stories through words, sounds, and images, and thus construct idealized sign systems that appeal to the user's sense of self. These signs are understood through *codes* built on the relationships between characters and their familiar functions in stories. At the same time, the media users, like Narcissus, fail to recognize their own identities in the narrative code, which is ultimately the strength of media. How many people say they cannot live without their iPhone, Facebook account, Bluetooth, computer interface, or software? People can be numbed by their own dependencies and identification with media technologies.

Peirce explains "that the essential function of a sign is to render inefficient relations efficient—not to set them into action, but to establish a habit or general rule whereby they will act on occasion" (CP 8.332). The habits or general rules that establish codes associated with media use suggest the necessity of understanding the context of a story, the storyteller, and the receiver, as essential to critical understanding. According to McLuhan,

...it is only on those terms, standing aside from any structure or medium, that its principles and lines of force can be discerned. For any medium has the power of imposing its own assumption on the unwary. Prediction and control consists in avoiding this subliminal state of Narcissus trance. But the greatest aid to this end is simply knowing that the spell can occur immediately upon contact, as in the first bars of a melody. (15)

Receivers of communication are concerned with the meaning of a message, but are seduced by the appeal of a story. They seek its meaning and practical effects because they identify with the story, and so the medium is obfuscated by ignoring its effects.

16.5 The New Telephone

The phone is a voice, an ear, an eye, and a memory. It is, in short, an extension of the self. Since it has been liberated from constraints that limited phone use to wired spaces, the mobile phone represents the presence of others, an index to a virtual world without bodies, and a power to command the attention of individuals far from the location of a caller. A global positioning system (GPS) is integrated into mobile telephones and alters the way people look for and interpret signs of spatial orientation. It also provides government and corporate global surveillance of individuals. As a new technology, the mobile phone represents access to information, social institutions, entertainment, and other unique characteristics and services.

Interestingly, texting has introduced a new generation to the joys of writing, even if it is in a limited functional capacity. The formal qualities of letter writing, and the old spatial, temporal, and institutional processes of correspondence, are gone. The efficacy of instant messaging does not demand postage stamps, consideration of delivery times, or formal codes of language construction. The text, Tweet, and other social networking platforms have generated their own codes and grammar that allow for the barest of communicative necessities beyond the technology, access, and the new protocols. The telephone is now a portable library

for information and entertainment, all things represented through digital sight and sound. Still, the telephone is a potential index to alternate identities, consequences, and meanings.

On July 4, 2012, a huge crowd of people assembled to enjoy a traditional American fireworks display in my local community. As the rockets began bursting overhead, a great number of people in the crowd were watching the display on their mobile phone screen as they shot photos and video.

Like speech and writing, the mobile phone is an extension of identity used to share moments of experience with others equipped with compatible technologies. The mobile phone becomes an extension of the memory, recording and storing events for future reference. Attending to the device, the user sacrifices the experience of being absorbed in the event. A considerable level of attention must be focused on operating the technology, even in its remarkable simplicity. The commitment to record and share the visual experience trumped the experience of being there and just watching the show.

On the college campus in recent years, it has become unusual to see a person without a cell phone in use. The phone in hand is a robotic extension of the identity of the user enabling communication and assimilation. Often people are doing two things at once as they walk, drive, or attend a class. Inter-personal communication is not determined by location, but by the technology that makes spatial concerns irrelevant. The individual connects to and assimilates with a community, extending the self by virtue of shared technologies.

The time and attention necessary to use the mobile phone indicate an overpowering desire to be in communication with someone at a distance beyond the range of natural speech. Numb and seduced by the device, the user takes the current place and activity as secondary. The arguments supporting the importance of mobile phones for emergencies, or to be available to complete business-related and professional communication needs are certainly good reasons to use this technology. But if the mobile phone is most important for emergencies and business, most people are probably communicating about more banal topics most of the time. New media, based on computer and satellite technologies, support mobile applications that provide a form of community interaction, a means of assimilation, and a sense of immediacy. Community is not dependent on proximity and has been continuously changed by innovation in transportation and communication.

16.6 *The Big Sleep*: Telephone Lies, Identity, Time and Space

The 1946 detective movie, *The Big Sleep*, is based on a book by Raymond Chandler, and stars Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall (Hawks 1946). Despite some obvious flaws in the plot, and poor reviews from critics when it was initially released, the film has endured as a compelling cinema classic. The film noir delivers a fiction narrative grounded in a post-World War II zeitgeist including period language codes

referring to food rationing, and lots of drinking and smoking. The telephone was in common use at the time and plays an important role as a narrative device tying together issues of communication, space, time, and identity.

The telephone is used as a narrative device on 14 occasions throughout the film in less than 2 h. Traditional telephone protocols include personal identification, location, and a statement of purpose. The first phone call in the film is initiated during a confrontation between the main characters played by Bogart and Bacall. With the two of them together in Bogart's office, their interaction spontaneously becomes a prank call to the police when they provide false identities and amuse themselves by talking nonsense. Counting the prank call, the phone is used to communicate lies on five occasions. In one conversation, Bogart confronts Bacall about her lying to him on the phone. Bogart then lies about his own identity, posing as an official police investigator trying to get information on the phone. During another call, he lies in order to take advantage of time and space to mislead the bad guy. Two conversations were concerned with how far away the nearest phone was because the distance to the phone determined how much time the protagonist had for the next strategic plot development. The remaining calls all advanced the narrative by communicating issues related to identity and location.

These examples demonstrate that the screenplay writers, William Faulkner, Leigh Brackett, and Jules Furthman, used the telephone as a narrative device to identify characters, communicate lies, and advance the story in consideration of space and time. Realistic film representations imitate conventional telephone use to extend the voice and the ear to share information over long distances, or to create deceptions.

16.7 The Codes and Assumptions of New Media

Media appeal to the desires and assumptions of an individual's sense of identity. The codes implied by media have iconic qualities that pose as a form of institutional authority as if reading something in the newspaper, or on the Internet, or seeing it on TV, somehow makes it true. Wikipedia, for example, can supply valuable information, but the accuracy and authenticity of such a source are inconsistent. But the same can be said for other sources unless they can be verified. Semantic fields (demonstrate *secondness* and) build associations between words, names, images, and narratives that rely on codes to evoke emotional responses more powerfully than critical reflection. Social protocols of traditional phone calls require the identification of participating parties, but lack veracity as indexical signs as Americans have learned from telephone call-in services based in Asia where the adopted name of a speaker is Bob or Susan. Social media index virtual communities, but content beyond the association of individuals may lack substance. The medium itself is taken for granted like the pool of water that acts as a mirror. The practical consequences of a message are always a reflection of the interpreter. New media in the future will do old things in new ways that potentially conceal its effects, while appealing to codes and habits of interpretation.

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