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BETWEEN MEDIA AND CULTURAL PRACTICES: SEARCHING FOR IDENTITY OF THE TORONTO SCHOOL

ABSTRACT

The problem of the Toronto School's theoretical identity emerges from the recognition that the most influential figures of this orientation do not agree regarding the general idea of the School as a coherent theoretical trend. Moreover, the idea of "medium" central to this orientation is fundamentally ambiguous. Therefore the aim of the paper is to consider the identity of the Toronto School by referring to the so called materialistic interpretation of the media. The paper supports the thesis that the minimal definition of communication technologies in terms of physical artifacts comprises the conceptual core of the Toronto School's identity. The failure to consider the minimalistic definition of media results in the general blurring of the Toronto School's theoretical identity.

Keywords: media; communication technologies; Toronto School; theoretical identity; technological determinism.

INTRODUCTION

The name 'Toronto School' was coined by Jack Goody in his *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, where he mentioned that his famous article *The Consequences of Literacy* had been inspired by the works of the Toronto School, particularly of Harold A. Innis and Eric A. Havelock (Goody 1975, 1). Without fear of exaggeration, it can be claimed that this very comment by Goody constituted what could be called the act of baptism, one that formally established this school of thought, despite its rather varied methodological background and subject matter content. Ever since, most commentaries pertaining to the Toronto School have repeatedly referred to that particular moment as the act of original cognomination (Kerckhove 1989; Strate 2004). In time, the Toronto School would be mentioned among the most significant schools involved in media studies and theories of communication. Unfortunately, as quoted by Derrick de

Kerckove, during the 1985–conference on "Innis McLuhan and the Frontiers of Communication" Jack Goody invalidated the act of baptism he himself had proclaimed. Furthermore, Brian Stock and David Olson have also voiced opinions skeptical of the treatment of the "Toronto School" as a separate category (Kerckhove 1989, 74–75). Regardless of the reasons which ultimately led Goody to change his mind, the situation as a whole does arouse a certain suspicion in terms of the actual viability of the name "Toronto School."

   Even more doubts arises when we analyze the various strategies employed in defining one of the concepts central to the Toronto School approach: "media of communication". Rather than "media," various wordings are used including: "channels of communication," "material ground for meaning," "communication technologies," "information technologies," "technologies of the intellect," "extensions," "communicational environment," "symbolic form," etc. On closer inspection of the varying definitional strategies one might conclude that the Toronto School comprises a multitude of research approaches that seem to have rather little in common. Are we therefore still in right to even use the name "Toronto School"? Or should we follow Goody giving it up altogether?

   The expression "medium of communication" remains one of the most ambiguous concepts not only within the Toronto School but in media studies as a whole (Mock 2006). Nonetheless, it seems rational to assume that in order to even begin discussing the Toronto School as such, a certain consensus must be reached concerning the minimal definition of this central conceptual category. The following deliberations consider the identity of the Toronto School by reference to the so called materialistic interpretation of media. Such a minimalistic interpretation of media as material vehicles for information does not exclude the existence of other, superimposed and more complex ways of understanding the said category. By no means I claim that the conceptualizations of the notion of "medium" within the Toronto School are limited to the above minimal definition. I will argue, however, that failure to consider this minimalistic definition results in the general blurring of the Toronto School's theoretical identity. I aim to support the thesis that the minimal definition of communication technologies comprises the conceptual core of the Toronto School's identity.

TORONTO SCHOOL IN THE CONTEXT OF COMMUNICATION THEORIES AND MEDIA STUDIES

   When we consider the identity of any given phenomenon, we should establish at first the particular qualities that set it apart from its environment. Therefore, the following deliberations are needed to reveal the distinctive characteristics of the Toronto School. For the sake of clarity, the considered context will be narrowed down to media and communication studies. Before we can contrast the Toronto School with other movements prevailing in media studies, we ought first to provide an overview of communication studies in general. It is not an

easy task to examine the highly disorderly character of the field—problems considered in it, its employed methods, or developed theories. The scale of the phenomenon can be seen in reading Robert Craig's article (1999) who, having analysed seven different communicology textbooks, managed to distinguish as many as 249 separate theories of communication. Providing a broader theoretical context and presenting a number of available classification strategies may facilitate a better understanding of the Toronto School.

Standard classification systems utilized in communication studies typically fail to include a category corresponding to the Toronto School. Popular divisions would just as readily assign the Toronto School to a number of research orientations at a time, as to none at all. For instance, Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama (1999) list four paradigms of communication studies: functional, interpretative, critical-humanistic, and critical-structuralist. The failure of this classification derives from the fact that it does not account for the particular features of the Toronto School which set it apart from other popular theories. It does not mean that it is completely neglected, although the attempts to characterize the Toronto School would typically treat it as a sort of curiosity or an additional feature complementing the prevailing theories of communication.

For reasons of practicability and clarity, the most commonly offered division within theories of communication involves two main orientations: American (pragmatic-empirical) and European (humanistic-critical) (McQuail 2005). The main criteria of the division include: research methodologies, the focus of analyses, and the historical scope of considered phenomena. The American school of communication studies relies mainly on quantitative methods, stressing the importance of developing adequate research tools; it focuses on the attitudes of media users in the present. This approach allows the cognitive accomplishments of the American school to offer tangible, practically applicable solutions. The European school adopts a considerably different approach based on the interpretation of available historical sources. The school's authors do not devise research tools or participate in the production of the analyzed material, as is the case in empirical studies. Instead, they are preoccupied with social conditions of scientific, philosophical or religious thought, analyzed over extended historical periods. A pronounced example of this approach is provided by the Frankfurt School. The methodology employed and the research focus adopted make it impossible to unambiguously confirm the cognitive accomplishments of this orientation. As far as the Toronto School is concerned, apart from geographical considerations there is little to qualify it for membership in the American orientation. Similarities in methods and the scopes of researched phenomena suggest its possible membership to the European school. Researchers such as Harld Innis, Eric A. Havelock or Walter Ong rely on interpretative methods; researchers analyze extended historical periods, typically focus on temporally distant cultural transformations and are interested in the broadly understood social context of cognition (Watson and Blondheim 2008, 7–26;

Meyrowitz 1994, 50–57; Nerone 2006, 94–102). However, the characterized opposition between the American and the European approaches fails to reflect one of the particularly significant aspects of the Toronto approach. Namely, the research focus of the Toronto School falls on the actual medium of communication rather than its content. For this reason, this school of thought remains outside the analytical model sketched above. Publications concerning the school tend to emphasize the awareness of remaining on the margins of mainstream communication studies (Lister, Dovey, and Giddings 2003, 123–127; Kroker 1985, 7–20; Babe 2000, 3–38). It seems therefore that the Canadian approach can neither be classed as American or European.

In the search for the specifics of the Toronto School, it would be useful to consider briefly the history of communication studies as such. The prevailing approach to research of communication focuses on analyses of the message carried therein. The preference is rooted in the historical background from which the science had originally emerged. The first theories of communication (1920s and 30s) concentrated on studies of propaganda. The theories constituted as the basis for the established assumption that propaganda could influence all individuals within a society and directly further the agenda of its authors (Meyrowitz 1985, 13–15). Regardless of certain modifications, the theories of the 1930s to 1960s could generally be classified under the same category (Katz 2007, 1–2). Research problems typically encountered by mainstream media studies include questions about the way the recipients react to media messages, the frequency with which they utilize a given medium, who and to what end controls the message, what are the main goals that motivate its users and senders. In short, the studies are concerned with the content of messages and methods of media use rather than patterns of information flow modified by media as such (Meyrowitz 1994, 50).

As observed by Joshua Meyrowitz, even proposals intended by their authors as alternative to the study of the actual content of communication provide nothing more than yet another variation of the theory aimed at content analysis. Such was the case with the theory of cultivation proposed by George Gerbner in the 1970s. The author used the term "media environment" by which he understood the symbolic setting created by media to organize the worldviews of the recipients. The medially shaped images of reality influence the way in which recipients perceive and respond to the non-media reality that surrounds them. In this sense, media do indeed create social reality. As depicted by Gerbner, media do not provide a metaphorical window on the world, nor do they reflect reality. Media constitute the reality itself (Meyrowitz 1985, 13–14). If we consider only the choice of metaphors, certain apparent similarities can be observed between the theory of cultivation and the concepts advocated by McLuhan. However, any extension of the said correspondence to claim a certain analogy between the theory of cultivation and the Toronto School would be unfounded. Gerbner's research interest focused on the way in which content presented by media

shapes social reality. Meanwhile, analyses conducted by the Toronto School aimed to reconstruct the elements of the world image that resulted from the impingement of the medium itself, regardless of the message carried by communication. Similar analogies may be suggested to exist between the Toronto School and the Frankfurt School or political economy. Both these approaches constitute a clear alternative to the prevalent (empirical) orientations of media studies. Researchers of the critical school will insist that media do not and cannot constitute an unbiased means of providing information about reality. Their function is predominantly that of the confirmation and legitimization of the relations of power existing within the society (McQuail 2002, 6–8). The mentioned thesis of the non-transparency of media seems to correlate with the central claim of the Toronto School. Seeking a meaningful analogy in this respect, however, would be highly premature as the relations of power evoked by the critical approach are maintained by the messages forwarded by media, not media themselves. The critical school, with its thesis of medial non-transparency, focuses on the opacity of media messages contaminated by ideological content. A medium is understood here as a basically neutral vehicle for meaning which, although used for ideological purposes, does not in itself in any way modify the message.

DENIS MCQUIL'S ANALYTIC SCHEMA

Researches on the impact of media conducted as a part of mainstream media studies fail to account for the significance of the means of information transfer itself. Media are treated as neutral vehicles allowing the transfer of messages intended by the senders. Standard classifications will therefore typically rely on the opposition between the study of the communicated content and the study of the medium. A classification based on this distinction is only partially applicable in the attempt to determine the theoretical identity of the Toronto School. As it turns out, other orientations also stand in opposition to the study of the content, such as those focused on media treated as social institutions in a given political context. This research profile is not, however, typical of the Toronto School. We should therefore ask further questions pertaining to the very concept of the "medium of communication." Should such a medium be understood as an institution, a material channel of communication, a cultural practice, or maybe as something entirely different? Do media, as material vehicles of meaning, possess any form of autonomy in shaping a socio-cognitive consequences? Or does the entire consequences of media amount to merely their use as dictated by the society and culture?

It seems that the above question can best be answered by employing the analytical model proposed by McQuail (2002). The schema suggested by him refers to the two pairs of conceptual oppositions: the opposition between the

socio-centered and media-centered orientation, and between the culture-centered and materialistic approaches. The same can be illustrated as follows:

Basic theoretical orienta-tions in media theory	**Culture-centered orienta-tion**	**Materialistic orienta-tion**
Socio-centered orienta-tion	Frankfurt School, function-alism	political economy
Media-centered orienta-tion	agenda-setting theory, culti-vation theory, uses and gratifications theory	Toronto School

The socio-centered orientation grasps media as a tool wielded by social forces such as cultural values (the culture-centered orientation) or economic and political factors (the materialistic orientation). Meanwhile, the media-centered orientation emphasizes the importance of the vehicle for meaning as a factor organizing the act of communication itself. According to McQuail's classification, the Toronto School falls in the category of the media-centered, materialistic orientation. Media are viewed here as the basic factors of social change activated by material transformations within communication technologies (McQuail 2002, 5–6). It is this very characteristics that establishes the unique character of the Toronto School among other orientations in communication studies (Meyrowitz 1994, 50–52). Therefore, in the context of media studies, the minimum condition of the Toronto School's theoretical identity is the adoption of media-centered and materialistic assumptions regarding the nature of communication technologies. So understood communication technologies constitute an important although not sole factor of socio-cognitive change.

TOWARDS THE STUDY OF MEDIA AS SUCH

The above comments sought to determine the characteristics setting the Toronto School apart from other orientations in the context of media studies. It turns out, however, that even within the Toronto School as such, there is no consensus as to how communication technologies are to be viewed. Moreover, researchers studying this particular intellectual tradition also seem to disagree regarding the interpretation of this central category. For instance, Menahem Blondheim and Rita Watson, in the introduction to their book *The Toronto School of Communication Theory,* rightfully observe that the most characteristic trait distinguishing the Canadian orientation from other theories of communication is its focus on "technology or medium." What they fail to do, however, is specifying the way in which said categories are to be interpreted. Blondheim and Watson settle for a general statement that communication technologies include all forms of technical and non-technical means that serve to mediate

communication (Watson and Blondheim 2008, 10). The broadness of this interpretation is in line with the spirit of McLuhan's work. However, being so vague, the definition cannot serve as the quality distinguishing the Toronto School from other orientations in media studies. For instance, in accordance with this inclusive interpretation, non-technical means of communication include both language and other cultural semiotic systems, such as the systems of fashion or eating. The so understood communication technology does in no way set the Toronto School apart from semiological or structuralistic communication theories which focus their research interests on the messages carried by cultural semiotic systems and their relations with the social structures of power.

Interestingly, the creators of the Toronto School themselves tend to lean towards similar interpretative strategies. Some follow in the footsteps of McLuhan and rely on the inclusive understanding of communication technologies, others seem to be somewhat vague in this respect. In an article entitled *Writing is a Technology that Restructures Thought*, Walter J. Ong criticizes the narrow interpretation of communication technologies:

> "The concept of 'medium' or 'media' applied to human communication uses an analogy which is useful but nevertheless so gross […], that it regularly falsifies what human communication is. I MYSELF TRY TO AVOID THE TERM NOW, though I have used it in earlier books and articles. 'Medium' applies properly to manual or machine transferral of pattern, not to human communication" (Ong 1986a, 38).

The quoted comment constitutes Ong's attempt to distance himself from excessively narrowed definitions of media as material vehicles for meaning. In his interpretation, writing viewed as a technology that restructures thought means the social practice of its use. A similar interpretation of the Toronto School's research, particularly the works of Goody, was suggested by M. Cole and J. Cole (Cole and Cole 2006, 317–319). Their understanding of practice was that of: "a recurrent, goal-directed sequence of activities using a particular technology and particular systems of knowledge" (Scribner and Cole 1981, 237)**.** Such an interpretation of communication technology attributes primary importance to the actions and intentions of the participants in culture. However, it also seems to lose the track of media understood as material artifacts. Instead, it focuses on social means of using communication tools.

Indeed, the theses formulated by the authors of the Toronto School tend to be concerned with the shaping and consequences of certain specific communication practices. Therefore, I do not go as far as claiming that studying communication practices is irrelevant or marginal. What I wish to stress is that considering communication technologies solely in terms of cultural practices threatens the theoretical identity of the Toronto School. It would result in blurring a key idea of the orientation expressed in the claim that: "media themselves put an indelible stamp on the structure of knowledge and on the mentality of their us-

ers" [underlined by MT](Olson 2007, 355). One must concur with the thesis that communication technology defined as a practice constitutes an important aspect of social organization. However, with such an interpretation of the concept of technology, the central thesis of the Toronto School would boil down to the position that a certain aspect of social organization—in this case communicational practice—impacts other dimensions of socio-cognitive life. The attractiveness of this interpretative pattern lies in the fact that it can hardly be branded as ethnocentric or claimed to advocate technological determinism. However, such understanding would also hinder the expressiveness of the Toronto School, and it would make its key thesis on the consequence of media *as such* being loosed a lot of it original significance. To illustrate the above with a specific example: if one would give up the materialistic interpretation of media, the research goals of the Toronto School could be expressed by quoting Ruth Finnegan, who wrote that while studying media:

> "what counts is its use, who controls it, what it is used for, how it fits into the power structure, how widely it is distributed—it is these social and political factors that shape the consequences (…) it is a social not a technological matter what kind of information is expressed in which medium" (Finnegan 1988, 41–42).

The above formulation of research goals is fairly cautious and reflects the exceptional complexity of cultural phenomena. However, Ruth H. Finnegan's intentions did not include a characteristics of the Toronto School. Quite the contrary, she sought to advocate a research program set in opposition to the same. Moreover, the statement is a near perfect reiteration of the already well defined research objectives of mainstream media studies. Meanwhile, as already mentioned above, the Toronto School is commonly defined as standing in theoretical opposition to classic studies of communication. At this point, the blurring of the Toronto School's identity becomes more than apparent. Once the material dimension of media is marginalized and replaced with the notion of cultural practice, the unique character of the Toronto School against the background of other theoretical orientations becomes somewhat dubitable. It also seems to obscure the meaning of the very statement that the Toronto School studies the cultural consequences of media as such. As a consequence of defining communication theories too broadly, we are faced with what J. Halvenson pictorially described as the "implosion of the literacy thesis" (Halverson 1992).

DO MEDIA AS SUCH MODIFY THE CONTENT OF COMMUNICATION?

Even if we agree with R. Finnegan that the most interesting results are obtained by studying the social methods of employing communication technologies, we do not necessarily have to concur with the claim that "it is a social not

a technological matter what kind of information is expressed in which medium" (Finnegan 1988, 42). In a sense, Finnegan is right. It is the individuals as members of a given culture that decide the content of their own communication. The same information can be expressed in many languages and with the use of many different media. However, there is also a point in which R. Finnegan is mistaken. The claim that "it is a social not a technological matter what kind of information is expressed in which medium" (Finnegan 1988, 42) may be read as a particular application of the general thesis claiming that the material vehicle of meaning does not impact the message it carries. To put it more simply: the medium as such does not influence the content of communication. At first glance, this general thesis seems to directly follow from the rather evident observation that any given thought may be expressed by means of any given vehicle (medium). However, even if the latter statement is true, it does not automatically presume the same logical value of the former.

It is commonly accepted that a given language in a given form of expression can equally well carry any given meaning. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis may serve as a telling example here. The Inuit language includes approximately twenty different words to describe snow. This, however, does not mean that the so called Standard Average European languages lack the means to express the same semantic nuances as those used by the Intuits. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis remains in line with the belief that both types of languages are capable of expressing any hues of meaning. The gist of the position, however, lies in the claim that the grammatical structure of ethnic languages can facilitate or hinder referring to certain aspects of reality. It may also suggest certain topics, rendering them central elements of the cultural worldview (Lucy 1992, 148–149).

The Toronto School evokes a parallel line of argumentation. Any given meaning can be freely expressed, both in writing and orally. This does not mean, however, that the material form of media bears no relation whatsoever with the type of information being carried. The researchers of the Toronto School have convincingly demonstrated that particular channels of communication may favor or hamper the transfer of given information. Two telling examples should suffice to demonstrate the claim's validity. Walter Ong's and David Olson's deliberations on decontextualisation of written communication provide characteristics of the minimum consequences of the chosen medium for the content of the message.

When considering the interpretation of the Gospel according to St Mark, Ong explains the particular difficulties in interpreting biblical texts (Ong 1986b). Specifically, a correct interpretation requires understanding that the written text is not a mere transcript of Jesus' words and deeds. The text of the Holy Bible is to a certain extent an artificial construction of the described occurrences, one that sacrifices the literality and fidelity of the account in order to ensure that the events are easily understood by the reader separated from the dynamic context of the described oral situation. To follow Ong's argumenta-

tion, this was the only available way in which biblical stories could be recounted. The very act of writing down an oral utterance separates it from the living situational context which carries much of its meaning. The act of transcription eliminates a part of the oral utterance's meaning. But that is not the most important thing. After all, the context can be recreated through a verbal description of the situation at hand. In this sense, the claim that any message can be expressed by means of any channel of communication still stands. However, the fact of the matter is that a context introduced verbally will have a completely different character from the original, dynamic situation of direct communication. The meaning of an oral utterance is always somewhat elusive, not perfectly defined and non-verbalized as it reflects the elusive and non-verbalized context. The written representation of a spoken utterance requires the context to be given, this, however, can only be accomplished by means of a verbal description (Ong 1986b). Consequently, the information carried by an oral utterance does, in fact, significantly differ from the seemingly identical written message.

By referring to John Austin's theory of speech acts, Olson gives an even more telling account of the consequences of written decontextualisation. According to Austin's theory of language, any language statement carries, alongside its literal meaning (the locutive aspect), an illocutive force which refers to the specific communicational intention of the sender. The same sentence uttered in a different situation will have the same literal meaning (locutive) but may also carry varying illocutive force. It may after all serve as simple information, a warning, a piece of advice, a suggestion, an order, etc. (Austin 1975).

The study of the cognitive function of writing conducted by the Toronto School often refers to the new possibilities offered by the use of writing. These refer to such characteristics as its temporal durability and spatial localization. Olson goes on to reveal a whole new dimension of this process. He demonstrates that the influence of writing on cognitive processes is not limited to the new possibilities it creates. Writing has also a negative impact in that it hinders or even renders impossible certain specific types of communication acts. Olson ventures that in oral contexts, it is relatively easy to recognize the illocutive force of an utterance as every sentence always operates within a broader, non-verbal context. It is that context that allows us to determine the illocutive force to be attributed to a given statement. To follow Olson's argumentation, writing is very effective in translating the locutive aspect of a statement, but it also separates the utterance from its living context. As a consequence, the literal transcription of a spoken utterance will not carry its original illocutive force. Writing a spoken statement down is enough to blur its illocutive strength:

"If writing cannot capture speakers stance, gaze, tone of voice, stress and intonation, reading such text calls whole new world of interpretative discourse,

of commentary and arguments as to how precisely an utterance, now transcribed, was to be taken" (Olson 1994, 266).

The lack of a dynamic situational context and nonverbal semantic cues necessitates an additional specification of a written sentence's meaning to ensure its proper interpretation. In oral communication, the illocutive force of an utterance is attributed and read intuitively. On the other hand, having resorted to writing induces the participants of communication to translate the nonverbal context of an oral utterance with the use of a more or less accurate terminology. The phenomenon of the disappearing illocutive force of oral utterances results in the emergence of various cultural practices aimed at accurate reconstruction of complex, paralinguistic contexts. This, in turn, leads to the creation of a sophisticated conceptual apparatus to describe the intentional state of individuals (Olson 1994).

The processes described by Ong and Olson are good examples that illustrate both the limitations and possibilities offered by writing itself, not just by its usage. In both situations writing, being a material vehicle for communication, brings along both restraint and opportunity. In such cases, we can talk of the minimum consequences of media understood as material vehicles for information. Notably, this does in no way exclude studying the consequences of communication technologies as cultural practices. The object here is to demonstrate that a part of communication practice is constituted by the minimum consequences of media understood as material vehicles for meaning. This minimal interpretation of media and their consequences allows us to maintain the identity of the Toronto School and at the same time to appreciate the role of technology understood as a cultural practice.

SYNOPSIS

The reluctance to use the narrow concept of "medium" results from the belief that the adoption of such a constricted interpretation leads to technological determinism and related ethnocentrism. Indeed, the danger is a real one. Critics argue that if the Toronto School has to study the consequences of the material dimension of media, it must understand the relations between said media and their users materialistically. It seems, therefore, that studies of the material dimension of media lead to the use of causal explanatory schemas typical of technological determinism. The desire to avert accusations of technological determinism has become one of the key factors affecting the formulation of broad definitions of media. My argument is that such an interpretational strategy may threaten the theoretical identity of the Toronto School. Broad interpretations mean that rather than studying media as such, we focus on their social application. The Toronto School is thus faced with the dilemma: to face accusations of technological determinism, or risk having its very identity questioned. Both

options seem equally unsatisfactory. Future considerations should therefore focus on finding a way out of this difficult situation. What conceptual schemas and interpretational strategies should be employed to retain the narrow understanding of media while at the same time warding off accusations of technological determinism? The so formulated problems prepare the ground for further researches of the fundamental analytical categories used by the Toronto School such as media and mind.

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