

Media, Literature and Popular Culture: A Worldwide Scenario

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Abstract

The media system, like the education system, is one of society's key set of institutions, industries, and cultural practices. The term media is commonly invoked to mean both the mediums of communication as well as the products or texts of these mediums. Mass media refers collectively to all media technologies which are intended to reach a large audience via mass communication. The impact of mass media and printing press on literature has been in the dialectics of theoretical concern, and this research paper highlights the same concern. The paper tries to investigate the causes and results of the impact of media and printing on literature. Similar concerns of the written medium ravaging the human memory span had been prevalent right from the time of Socrates. The influence of media has to be looked at in the context where the whole paradigm of literature has been reconceptualized in the present century. The concept of 'Media Ecology' has helped a great deal in understanding the effects of media on the literature, culture, polity and the environment in which we live in. Media are surely central to Western societies of the past several centuries and to the emerging global societies of the contemporary era and the future. There is a thickening, an intensification, and an increasing complexity to the use of information machines-technologies that are necessary in the production, reproduction, storing, and distribution of texts, images and sounds, the constituent elements of culture. The phenomenon has been termed "Media Ecology" by Fuller Matthew (2005). Media approaches to literature provide a way of making connections between the literary texts and popular media, enabling readers to relate literary texts to their own experience, and to the media with which they themselves are familiar. Texts from the English literary canon are often seen as 'pure' literature, as opposed to media texts. This suggests a clear distinction between the literary tradition and that of popular culture and the media. Studies in media and its impact on literature, once again re-establish the Barthesian murder of the author-god. Here, the authority of the author-god diminishes to a considerable effect and the social and cultural factors of knowledge production and dissemination are brought to the limelight.

Keywords: Media, literature, theories, cultures, print-media, Media-Ecology.

Introduction:

“With the invention of writing, history begins, not because writing keeps a firm hold on processes, but because it transforms scenes into processes: it generates historical consciousness”. (Flusser Vilem, 2002) [1]

What are media?

What are media? The media system, like the education system, is one of society's key set of institutions, industries, and cultural practices. The term media is commonly invoked to mean both the mediums of communication such as radio, recorded music, Internet, television, print, film, video as well as the products or texts of these mediums, for exam. journalistic accounts, television shows and film productions, video games, web sites. The central media, print, radio, and television, are the ways we imagine ourselves to be connected to the social world.

Objectives:

The impact of mass media and printing press on literature has been in the dialectics of theoretical concern, and this research paper highlights the same concern. The paper tries to investigate the causes and results of the impact of media and printing on literature.

Discussion:

Mass media refers collectively to all media technologies which are intended to reach a large audience via mass communication. The impact of mass media and printing press on literature has been in the dialectics of theoretical concern since the publication of Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*. [2] Published in 1962, the book discussed the influence of print media on European culture. The clairvoyance of the book predicted the effect of electronic media to make the world a '**global village**', the term, which refers to the idea that mass communication allows a unitary mindset to apply to the entire world.

Nicholas Carr in his book, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, asserts almost on the same lines as McLuhan,

"media aren't just channels of information. They supply the stuff of thought, but they also shape the process of thought. And what the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation" [3].

It has to be noted that similar concerns of the written medium ravaging the human memory span had been prevalent right from the time of Socrates. Socrates worried that writing would ruin people's memories. This very sentiment has been aired by posterity as well at different junctures of media inventions like the printing press, the radio, film, television, and now, the Internet. In this context, it is interesting to outline the nexus of literature, media, and theory, and this has become one of the most exciting topics of contemporary literary scholarship.

The influence of media has to be looked at in the context where the whole paradigm of literature has been reconceptualized in the present century. According to a critic:

Literature, conceptualized not just as print books but as the entire complex system of literary production-including writers, editors, publishers, critics, designers, programmers, booksellers, readers, players, teachers, copyright laws and other legal formations, websites and other electronic dissemination mechanisms, and the technologies that enable and instantiate all of the above - is permeated at every level by computation. The belletristic tradition that has on occasion envisioned computers as the soulless other to the humanistic expressivity of literature could not be more mistaken. Contemporary literature, and even more so the literary that extends and enfolds it, is computational.[4]

It can be said without a second thought that modern technology and the processes of globalization have caused an increase in the occurrence of transmedial hybrids, as well as the blending of public and private spheres. The traditional boundaries between the arts have been blurred and transgressed with an academic permissiveness.

In this context, the concept of media ecology has helped a great deal in understanding the effects of media on the literature, culture, polity and the environment in which we live in. Notably, media are surely central to Western societies of the past several centuries and to the emerging global societies of the contemporary era and the future. "There is a thickening, an intensification, and an increasing complexity to the use of information machines-technologies that are necessary in the production, reproduction, storing, and distribution of texts, images and sounds, the constituent elements of culture. The phenomenon has been termed "media ecology" (Fuller, 2005).[5] It exhorts anyone engaged in any critical discourse to take a serious account of media as it holds the key to understanding the process of globalization in relation to a new configuration of interaction between humans and machines.

McLuhan's observations that initiated a revolution in the media studies by his emphasis on four different aspects of the media, are relevant in the light of defining 'media ecology'. According to McLuhan:

- 1) *Media are not neutral tools, but they have considerable psychic and social consequences, without regards to their content.*
- 2) *Media are extensions of the men's and women's senses*
- 3) *Each medium is in constant interplay with other media*
- 4) *Media manipulate our perception of the space and time.[6]*

These observations on the media as an active agent in social and cultural changes and manipulative authority of the same, made McLuhan's work one of the most pioneering one in media studies. The work of Marshall McLuhan is one key to the cultural study of Media, and he emphasized on the point rather riotously that 'media is message' and the effects of the media as such permeate the society in every fashion.

After McLuhan, Habermas, for instance, has been deeply concerned with communication theory since his earliest book on the public sphere and the role of print in coffee houses (***The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere-An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois***

Society, 1989). In his book, he brings in the phenomenon of public and private spaces, where the public space was a place between

"individuals and government authorities in which people could meet, and have rational-critical debates about public matters. Discussions served as a counterweight to political authority and happened physically in face-to-face meetings in coffee houses and cafes and public squares as well as in the media in letters, books drama, and art" [7].

Habermas saw a vibrant public sphere as a positive force keeping authorities within bounds, lest their rulings be ridiculed. The public sphere, very much akin to the media, encompasses a variety of meanings and it implies a spatial concept, the social sites or arenas where meanings are articulated, distributed, and negotiated.

The next big name which comes up as a media theorist is Walter Benjamin.[8] His essay on the work of art considers mechanical or technical reproduction only and focuses on media of photography and film in particular, not on media in general. Elsewhere, Benjamin points to language in general as a medium, without however raising the issue of its materiality and specific technological configuration.

Another significant critic who must have anticipated the electronic media and their webbing in the world of information was Michel Foucault whose work of the 1970s is densely sprinkled with metaphors of media. **Discipline and Punish** (1977) and **The History of Sexuality, Volume 1** (1978) centrally rely upon such figures as "technology of power" and "networks" in which Individuals are understood as "nodes." His understanding of the individual or subject as constituted by and in networks in everyday life is highly suggestive for an understanding of the role of media. His depiction of the confessional as the peculiar space of speech in early modern France moves very close to an analysis of one form of language in relation to subject positions. Even more, his enigmatic depiction of a world beyond the author function suggests exchange on the Internet before the phenomenon existed:

All discourses... would then develop in the anonymity of a murmur. We would no longer hear the questions that have been rehashed for so long: Who really spoke? Is it really he and not someone else? With what authenticity or originality? And what part of his deepest self did he express in his discourse? Instead there would be other questions, like these: What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject functions? And behind all these questions, we would hear hardly anything but the stirring of an indifference: What difference does it make who is speaking? (Foucault, 1984) [9]

Here, Foucault seems to anticipate the world of chat rooms, email, blogs, and web pages where authorship is always in question. He seems to depict and even to desire a space of communication where identity may be in doubt and may be subordinated to the flow of text, to the impulses of creativity. And yet the word "media" is absent from the vocabulary of the critic of authorship. In the end, however, aside from passing comments on the importance of

writing in the care of self, Foucault does not theorize media as a significant domain of what he calls "**subjectivation**." [10]

Vilém Flusser, the Czech cultural theorist, was one of those critics who perceived the direct impact of media on culture well before many other cultural theorists thought seriously about it. Flusser's media theory deserves special attention, because, he stressed on the primacy of writing. He believed that history became possible only because of writing, thus drawing the connection between history and writing:

"With the invention of writing, history begins, not because writing keeps a firm hold on processes, but because it transforms scenes into processes, it generates historical consciousness" (Flusser, 2002). [11]

Flusser's theory of media emphasized temporality of writing by underscoring the fact that writing is linear, that in this medium one thing comes after another. In writing, one cannot skip the linearity unless the hypertext emerges through digitalization.

In the context of hypertextuality, theorists such as Roland Barthes and writers like Laurence Sterne have at best great difficulty in constructing texts that allow or encourage readers to find their own way through the page. Hypertexts, allowed the readers to cruise through the book and manoeuvre the contexts and narratives according to their own will. But, it was the electronic media that could exploit the hypertextual modes in narration and experimentation within literature. The easy access to other worlds and narrations of hypertexts, through links, images, tables and other presentational devices have been the marking features of hypertexts. According to Ted Nelson, who coined the term,

Hypertext is the branching and responding text, but the corresponding word "hypermedia", meaning complexes of branching and responding graphics, movies and sound and it is also called interactive multimedia. [12]

The advent of hypertextuality has helped in the development of its own style of fiction, coinciding with the growth and proliferation of hypertext development software and the emergence of electronic networks. Two software programmes specifically designed for literary hypertext, *Storyspace* and *Intermedia* became available in the 1990s. Storyspace 2.0, a professional level hypertext development tool, has also published many notable works of electronic literature, including Michael fternoJoyce's *afternoon*, a story, Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* Stuart Moulthrop's *Victory Garden*, and Judy Malloy's *its name was Penelope*, *Forward Anywhere*.

An advantage of writing a narrative using hypertext technology is that the meaning of the story can be conveyed through a sense of spatiality and perspective that is arguably unique to digitally networked environments. An author's creative use of nodes, the self-contained units of meaning in a hypertextual narrative, can play with the reader's orientation and add meaning to the text. Critics of hypertext claim that it inhibits the old, linear, reader experience by creating several different tracks to read on, and that this in turn contributes to a postmodernist fragmentation of worlds. In some cases, hypertext can be more a problem to get appealing stories than a tool to develop creativity.

The recent and highly influential work of Friedrich Kittler, stated that literature is a subgenre of the media. He took on a New Historicist approach, emphasizing on the fact that,

literature is a mode of data production basically determined by the technologies of reproduction and archival available to its historical and cultural context. For this, an excellent example would be the works of Shakespeare and their sources which would be traced back to either popular literature or news bits or popular events of Jacobean England.[13]

Media approaches to literature provide a way of making connections between the literary texts and popular media, enabling readers to relate literary texts to their own experience, and to the media with which they themselves are familiar. Texts from the English literary canon are often seen as 'pure' literature, as opposed to media texts. This suggests a clear distinction between the literary tradition and that of popular culture and the media. However, most of the books which are now promoted as part of the canon by authors such as Dickens and Hardy were originally published in serial form in magazines, complete with cliff-hanging endings to each episode, like those used in television drama and daily soap opera nowadays.

Oral literatures have always influenced the print media as well as literary cultures of the west and east. The seminal work of Milman Perry and his student Albert Lord,[14] rewrote the way in which conventional thinking about the classical and much canonized works, which have been held in honor and reverence in the Western literary world. Perry travelled to what was in Homer's day ancient Greece, where he studied and recorded guslars, who compose their songs using formulations remarkably similar to the style of Homer's epic poetry. Perry was convinced that instead of being composed by a single monolithic author, epics like Illiad and Odyssey were composed by many oral performers who passed their stories from generations to generations. The same could also be said about the epic stories in India, the Ramayana and The Mahabharata. Many Ramayanas, by Paula Richman, [15], tell us about the multiple narrators, heteroglossia, as well as the interpolations and changes in points of view that have taken place in the text over centuries. Many critics have also contested and questioned the simplistic definition and divide between orality and literacy, however, they also argue that the medium that transmits narratives and information is of ultimate importance rather than the question whether a culture engages in written practices or not. Critics are also of the opinion that the centrality of manuscripts as the most important medium for knowledge dissemination is nevertheless, a European phenomenon, and the emphasis on literacy to orality, a colonial mechanism, likewise.

Conclusion:

Studies in media and its impact on literature, once again re-establish the Barthesian murder of the author-god. Here, the authority of the author-god diminishes to a considerable effect and the social and cultural factors of knowledge production and dissemination are brought to the limelight. Thus, literature, once gain ceases to be authoritative and monolithic. Instead, the specific medium of its transmission and archival are taken into account and studied in detail with the help of media studies and theory.

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