

## Comparison of Perspectives on the Effect of the Modern Media

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McLuhan, Ansolabehere, and Iyengar & Kinder are all trying to decode what it is about the television media that influences people and to what extent does it influence people. By their arguments they form two exclusionary camps. Ansolabehere, Iyengar, and Kinder have focused their work on the content news media. McLuhan rejects the content in favor that the medium itself is underneath it all. The propositions about the nature of media advanced by McLuhan undermine the findings of Ansolabehere, et. al, and Iyengar & Kinder. There may be room for reconciliation between the two views, but McLuhan makes a strong stance on the unimportance of the details after the impact made by the medium itself.

Ansolabehere, Iyengar, and Kinder's studies only test the correlations between behavior and the content being watched on television. Their studies include the ability of top news stories for issue priming, agenda setting, and the actions taken by the audience. All of their studies are missing a control group of no television. In studies where the only difference between experimental groups is the content of television news ignores the possible effect that the medium itself is has. From here on, I will refer to everyone explicitly studying characteristics of the news as the Content Camp.

One primary effect that the Content Camp looks at in their studies is 'agenda-setting'. Iyengar & Kinder found that people who were shown network broadcasts edited to draw attention to a particular problem assigned greater importance to that problem. They compared the importance the person assigned to the problem before viewing news broadcast and the importance assigned the problem after the news broadcast. It is clear that there was a change of the person's perception of the issue after viewing the news broadcast. However, was it the problems shown in the broadcast that caused this change or the media itself? If the same experiment had been conducted with a newspaper, would the effect have been as great?

McLuhan would argue that the content of the news broadcast was irrelevant. To McLuhan the most important part of the situation was the medium used. It wouldn't matter what the problems were that were being presented in the news broadcast. Rather the most influential component is the extension of the human experience that the television is bringing. Perhaps the person would be thinking about and be more aware of the problems closer to them, in their local community, rather than any national or world problems. McLuhan would reject any agenda setting conclusion by the content of the news, because the medium itself is not being considered.

Another aspect studied by the Content Camp is 'issue priming'. In several studies they presumed that television news would be a powerful determinant of what is recalled and what is forgotten. Through drawing attention to some aspects of political life at the expense of others television might help to set the terms by which political judgments are

reached and political choices made. They tested this by changing news stories that the test subjects were exposed. They did find that people primed by the news stories on national defense, judged the president largely by how well he has provided for the nation's defense. The same occurred with people primed by stories about inflation. Iyengar and Kinder feel that their studies results support their claim handsomely.

McLuhan would counter that Content Camp has still missed the point. For measuring the social or political change caused by television, the content is simply not the real cause of change. Says McLuhan, "Program and 'content' analysis offer no clues to the magic of these media or to their subliminal charge." Perhaps McLuhan would admit that which stories are in the news do have their effect, but the real message is from the medium that the media is being carried on.

An illustration of why McLuhan thinks the medium is the most important component is the example of Alexis de Tocqueville's ability to foresee the coming of changes in America and France. McLuhan credits Tocqueville for recognizing that the medium is the message. Alexis de Tocqueville was the first to master the grammar of print and typography. This enabled him to read the message of coming change in France and America as if he was reading aloud from a text that had been handed to him. What he understood was the impact that the new medium was having on those two cultures. It wasn't really important to him what subjects were being discussed in the printing. Print's impact on England was less predictable because the English stuck with the dynamic, oral common-law tradition. The United States in contrast had much more easily adopted a print culture that created uniformity and continuity. The full acceptance of the new medium gave the clues that Tocqueville needed to understand the impending changes.

In the end this does become a battle of emphasis. On one side is the importance of the choice of content on a given medium. On the other is the power that a particular medium offers simply in its existence. These are not necessarily exclusionary ideas. Indeed, the truth probably lies somewhere in between. Reality is probably a mix of the effects of the medium itself and the content that is carried on it. It is hard to deny the results of the studies like those done by Anasolabehere, Iyengar, and Kinder. Agenda setting and issue priming do have their effects. One also can not deny the impact that invention of the light bulb, print, radio, and print has had on our view of the world. The writers considered here do, however, focus on their chosen presumption. Studies and analysis conducted by Anasolabehere, Iyengar, and Kinder completely leave out the impact that medium they are studying has regardless of the content that they are manipulating. McLuhan dismisses all content analysis in lieu of the greater impact of addition of the medium as an extension of our human senses. In a grander scale, certainly our awareness and experiences are configured by the medium and media we expose ourselves to.

## Bibliography

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