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Media Ecology: The Coincidence of Events and Comparison of Information

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Abstract

The paper explores the factors that influence and contribute toward the cyclic mode of information. It looks at how information undergoes mutations over time and space and how these mutations play an important role in making the whole process of information cyclic. Information gets recycled countless times in the course of history; I also consider information to have periodicity and value attached. Like the various environments that surround the earth that are essential in maintaining balance, today media environment has become essential for human survival. The paper explains how information moves in a cyclic process making certain events possible again; it also explains how information is exchanged between the two environments (earth and Infosphere). There is an infosphere that facilitates the exchange of information 24x7. Human lives revolve and also depend on this manmade sphere called infosphere; the information generated per day is incalculable, one may wonder what is this “information” all about, who is producing it, and where is it going? Infosphere has the answers for all these questions.

Keywords: Media, Environments, Infosphere, Information, Ecology

Introduction: The present paper highlights the historical development of Media Ecology. The constant interaction of various media within the media environments and the symbiotic relationship between man, nature, and technology can be understood in the border terms of Media Ecology. Scholars like Harold Innis, Neil Postman, and Marshall McLuhan contributed to the idea and evolution of Media Ecology, as they were able to see the broad implication of media in terms of its impact on the civilizations and the institutions we have built. Scholars of Media Ecology understood media and its relationship with the larger context as an intricate one. The impact of media is not just limited to politics, culture, and economy, but it is also found to have a significant bearing on the natural environments. The different viewpoints and approaches of scholars working in the broad field of Media Ecology are taken into consideration for explaining the present information environment. Socio-political movements not

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only make information cyclic but also help the media ecology*¹ To sustain itself with changes. Harold Innis's categorization of media as time and space bias is the major concept used to understand the present socio-political movements with particular reference to the Telangana movement of India.

It is necessary to take cognizance of the history of media and its influence to have a broader understanding of Media Ecology. Communication has evolved over the centuries and has taken different forms, from sign language to oral and from written to visual. The invention of the first printing press by Gutenberg to the latest social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter have provided us a platform for information dissemination. Modes of exchange of information have an impact on the way we organize and respond to a situation in a given political and socio-cultural environment. Communication gives shape to the world we live in and helps in making sense of changes around us; more often than not, our subjectivities are located within the flux of change.

Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman (who coined the term 'Media Ecology') are considered to be the harbingers of the Media Ecology approach. Media Ecology has been defined from the vantage point of various ideological positions, and these have, in turn, informed its contemporary understanding. Harold Adam Innis was the first scholar to state the idea that various channels that help in communication become central to the changes that occur in a society and in a given civilization. The mentor of Marshall McLuhan, Innis contributed to the idea of Media Ecology with his writings like *Empire and Communications* (1950), *The Bias of Communication* (1951), *Changing Concepts of Time* (2004). Innis's categories of time and space bias media are still relevant to understand the contemporary socio-political realities.

Neil Postman broadened our understanding of Media Ecology. When Neil Postman defined media as 'ecology' many were clueless and were left wondering about its implication; he referred to media as an environment that can influence other environments. Postman, with his writings like *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (1969), *Teaching as a conserving activity* (1979), *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1985), and *Technopoly* (1992) enlarged our understanding of media and its effects on education and other aspects; his insights into the impact of media on culture and conservatism helped us to understand how the modern technological tools are changing the perceptions of people who use it. He also explained the impact of electronic media and its influence, especially the influence of tools like telegraph, radio, and television in American society. He interpreted the changing attitudes and perceptions of the public with reference to technological dependence. According to Postman

Media Ecology is the study of information environments. It is concerned to understand how technologies and techniques of communication control the form, quantity, speed, distribution, and direction of information; and how, in turn, such information configurations or biases affect people's perceptions, values, and attitudes (Postman1979: 186).

For Marshal McLuhan societies revolve around media; he saw every human action as related to media. McLuhan believed that we are never outside the media. He saw the new technological innovations as the extensions of humans. These extensions of humans in a given environment have an impact ranging from immediately felt ones to ones that are more long-term. The constant interactions between the people and the media alter and shape the society at various levels and in various fields. The rapid expansion of technologies and its impact can be seen in the world that McLuhan foresaw and predicted in *Understanding Media* (1964). He says,

During the mechanical ages, we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man-- the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of

¹The capital form of 'Media Ecology' has been used in this thesis to refer to the discipline whereas the normal font is used to refer to the media environment.

human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media. (McLuhan 1964: 3-4)

Each new technology which is added to the ecosystem plays a vital role in shaping our society; at the same time, the new technologies outdate the old technologies or tools. McLuhan concluded that four things happen to all media and human artifacts; McLuhan's laws are Enhances, Reverses, Retrieves, and Obsolesces (McLuhan and Eric McLuhan 1992:129). This phenomenon was believed to be inevitable, and they applied universally. Additionally, while some results may take years to be apparent, others have a more immediate impact.

McLuhan's message always tells us to look beyond the obvious and seek the non-obvious changes or effects that are enabled, enhanced, accelerated, or extended by the new thing. (Federman 2004)

The communication system that was earlier point to point has been revolutionized by the hundreds of satellites that are being launched. The satellites enlarged the scope for information to reach a wider audience and geographic area (from local to global and vice-versa); it has redefined the communication system, with information traveling almost at the speed of light, enabling information exchange within an environment and outside it. Luciano Floridi says, "Although the production of analogue data is still increasing, the infosphere is becoming more digital by the day" (Floridi 2010:6). People are accessing much of the required information through the infosphere. We are able to send receive and store the information with the help of the modern communication tools. The satellite communication has become essential for the exchange of information 24x7. Human lives revolve and also depend on these satellites that are operated remotely. The artificial memory (like hard disks) not only stores the information that is generated but also makes it accessible 24x7 through a complex networking structures (internet). Before the use of modern communication technologies, the spread of information was limited and it got circulated with the help of terrestrial mechanisms and systems on earth; today our communication has moved beyond earth and into the extra-terrestrial.

While Innis explains and understands the media in terms of time and space bias, Postman saw the power of electronic media in terms of its impact on people's perceptions, values, and attitudes. On the other hand, McLuhan understood the media as the extensions of human bodies and central nervous system. Innis, Postman, and McLuhan realized the shape media was taking; they were able to see the future and predict the impact of media and the new technologies on society I feel that over the years we have created a new environment that dictates the actions of humans and his day-to-day activities.

Today the term Media Ecology has been put to use to understand various fields like education, culture, lifestyle, politics, and social institutions. Media Ecology is studied for its growing significance, with the rapid change of technologies surrounding our lives. Every society is undergoing change and is adopting or modifying its lifestyle in a way that is suitable to a given environment. The modern media started as a single source with the induction of the Guttenberg printing press, but later got bifurcated into various forms, each having its own importance, and challenging the other for its survival. The new ecology of technology works in the same way as natural ecology where each component of an environment has an important role to play and at the same time has a link with the parent. Just so, we may have a television but to make it work it needs much more: electricity, antenna, wire, satellite, etc. And at the end, to make it sustainable we need different genres of programmes, advertisements, and audiences to watch.

[E]cology is not essentially about DDT, caterpillars, and the effects on muskrats of diverting a stream. Ecology is about the rate and scale and structure of change within an environment. It is about how balance is achieved, a balanced mind and society as well as a balanced forest. It is, therefore, as much about social institutions, bulldozers, freeways, artifacts, and ideas as it is about natural processes, trees, rivers, and the survival of herons (Postman 1979: 17-18).

The media has a huge impact on socio-political, cultural and economic issues; the information and communication tools are constantly changing the complex networks of environment and human perception that in turn makes them act according to the prevailing situations. The involvement of the masses with the new communication tools is reshaping the political and cultural institutions all over the world. The symbiotic relationship between the people and the media is inseparable, as we increasingly depend on each other for our survival in the larger ecosystem that we have built (of man and machines).

With the coming of the new communication tools, more information is generated than ever before. The dependence on information is evident when one looks at the modern societies, the information that we generate is so huge that it runs into millions of bytes, according to IBM.com “Every day, we create 2.5 quintillion bytes of data — so much that 90% of the data in the world today has been created in the last two years alone. This data comes from everywhere: sensors used to gather climate information, posts to social media sites, digital pictures and videos, purchase transaction records, and cell phone GPS signals to name a few” (“*Building a Smarter Planet*,” 2010). The information that we are generating today can be retrieved as and when we require and can be used according to our needs. Information once generated – oral, written, or visual– can never be static. It is a cycle that moves forward replicating itself some times in the same form and sometimes with modification. The mutations that are happening in the media ecologies are only making us vulnerable in terms of technological dependence.

For instance, the smart data, which the IBM is talking about, says it is helping improve every aspect of our lives; the IBM has indeed used the data in the 2010 US Open. The IBM says, “Through smarter data, we can also see how one piece of information relates to the things around it. Any data point, by itself, is just about useless. But when you see it in context, when you analyze that context in real-time– and when you can automatically capture the connections that one piece of data is making with other pieces of data– then one can have a smart system which is smart enough to make better predictions (“*Building a Smarter Planet*”, 2010).

The earth today is surrounded by layers of information, the artificial memories and the satellite technologies that we have in place play a vital role in information recycling processes and also in gratifying the rising demand for information, making it accessible irrespective of the geographic location. Humans over the centuries have added new information that is stored as either time bias or space bias media; this information can be recycled as and when required. Luciano Floridi (1999) coined the term ‘infosphere’ in order to describe the informational environment as similar to the biosphere. According to Floridi,

It denotes the whole informational environment constituted by all informational entities (thus including informational agents as well), their properties, interactions, processes, and mutual relations. It is an environment comparable to, but different from, cyberspace (which is only one of its sub-regions, as it were), since it also includes offline and analogue spaces of information. (Floridi 2010:6)

A piece of information may be relevant or irrelevant for an individual, but it has diverse consequences on humans. The relevance of information changes from context to context and from generation to generation. Postman talked about how in an age that is overloaded with information has tended to lose its value with the coming of the various communication tools like the telegraph, photograph, radio, and television. While talking about typography and how it enlarged people's perception on various issues, he looks at how it promoted and provided a broad base for intellectual discourse, later altering the course of intellectual debate. He talked in details about how the latest communication tools have changed information to entertainment and how the quantity and not quality has become the priority for these new technologies.

Innis says, at any given point of time civilizations are bias towards one medium. In terms of the information we live in Postman's "one neighborhood," (1985:65) and McLuhan's "global village" (McLuhan 1964:37) that has taken shape and came into existence with the launching of the satellites. Satellite communication has made the global exchange of information possible, but at the same time it has also devalued information; we can see a clear

distinction between pre and post satellite eras with relevance to information. The space bias media has taken over time bias media: modern societies and cultures cannot ignore the pervasive influence of this medium. Very often, individuals are not even aware of the impact of the circulating information; consciously or unconsciously, their views and opinions are shaped and altered depending on the media environment in which they find themselves.

The knowledge that is passed on from one generation to another through the mediums that are inclined to time or space bias media. In the global village, places and people are instantly connected, and knowledge is shared over space (knowledge can be local and foreign). Information sometimes can be foreign and can be different from the existing, and this can be used by the individual, tribe, society, or civilization according to their needs. In the process, the (foreign and local) information gets repeated and modified, and this is a continuous process that moves information forward through various mediums that are bias to time or space. As Onufrijchuck says that "form lead to changes in content, and then changes in content lead to mutations of form" (quoted in Prins and Bishop 2001-2002:115).

We propose the idea of the cyclic nature of information on the basis of the following observations:

1. If we consider nature to be cyclic, then the information it contains and reveals is also cyclic. Even the so-called dead take a form and come to life in the course of time as images, sculptures, paintings et al.
2. Mutations to the information occur as time progresses; we try to add new information with the old. But these also help in keeping the information cyclic.
3. Information gets repeated in the form of experiments, formulas, equations, words, alphabets, numbers, lines, names, music notes, and many such other that we keep using day in and day out.
4. Information also gets repeated during socio, political, cultural, and ethnic movements. These events keep repeating, and so does the information, making the information to be cyclic in the form of books, music, songs, paintings and various other forms.
5. Communism is synonymous with names like Stalin, and Mao. Every time people talk about Stalin or Mao they also recollect communism. The same can be said about M K Gandhi, who became synonymous with non-violence.
6. Through films and songs we keep information in a cyclic mode. Computers, books, and our human brain helps us in retrieving the information and putting the old information to use when required, thus making the information to exist in cyclic mode.

Information is getting recycled through various tools invented by the humans for communication (written, telegraph, photograph, art, radio, television, and internet). The process of recycling information depends on the situations and contexts. But are we recycling the information consciously or unconsciously? "Historical knowledge is not merely preserved, but is shaped by the archive and its means of selecting, storing, and presenting information?" (Libraries and Archives Canada, 2007). This statement reflects the process of information recycling. All academicians, anthropologists, geologists, scientists, over the centuries have quoted many proverbs, statements, and formulas from the books written by some unknown writers of ancient civilizations and from some known scholars like Aristotle, Karl Marx, Innis, McLuhan, Postman, and many others from different fields of scholarship. Is it not true that we are repeating the same words spoken or written by these scholars, sometimes (rarely) adding something new to the already existing? For instance, I may not have seen an event that had taken place some decades back (Apollo landing on the moon), but I know about the event and the information associated with it. It has been spoken, written, pictured, and documented in some form and has now become a part of my environment. The landing on the moon may or may not happen in my lifetime, but the information that was part of the event keeps repeating for the generations to come.

One could take the example of a few events that have happened in the present and that have some connection with the past; we retrieve the old information when such events occur. Information gets generated and repeated at any given point of time making it cyclic; for example, it can pass from television to radio to newspapers the same day or the next and so on. During identity-assertion movements, information related to the dress, food, language, religion of the community in question gets repeated time. A lot of emphasis is given to certain elements and characteristics that are unique to the community or region. During political movements, statements by prominent people are repeatedly quoted.

Construction and deconstruction of information have been a cyclic process in the evolution of human civilizations. The time bias media and the space bias media help not only each other in survival but also help in recycling the information. Today with the help of satellites, we are able to locate the ancient civilizations beneath the earth and under the ocean floors that date back to thousands of years. We are able to reconstruct the ancient palaces, temples, forts, and many others, with modern technologies. We are able to retrieve the information based on artifacts and other materials and metals used by civilizations of yore. Apart from the physical existence of the information, human memory has been playing a vital role in preserving and disseminating information. Human memory also constructs and deconstructs the information according to its needs. In the process of circulation, the information over a period undergoes several mutations; these mutations are necessary as they play a vital role in making the information cyclic. It moves forward by replicating itself sometimes in the same form and at times with modification (art, songs, stories); we are able to reconstruct the ancient temples, monuments and other important cultural aspects of the lost cities and civilizations. This reconstruction of information may sometimes be close to reality and sometimes not. These mutations are the outcome of the information that is recycled and constantly exchanged between the various environments. The construction, deconstruction, and recycling of the information would have taken a longer period if the present communication tools were unavailable to humans. In societies that are bias to space, information moves at speed of light. Also this entire process is possible because the info-societies (societies) of the modern-day are connected to the World Wide Web (www). The information that gets circulated in Infoweb is not limited for the intended few, but for millions around the globe; equally, the feedback is not just from the intended users but also from those who are part of the info-societies.

Those people who are not directly connected to the World Wide Web (www) are also becoming part of the information that gets circulated in the web through various technological devices (smartphones, print, radio, television, etc.). The information may be dormant at times, but it gets recycled at an "appropriate" time. The process of unearthing the information (recycling) may be natural or at times accidental; we come across the information while excavating the earth for some construction process, or in the process of sourcing the natural resources. The information also gets revealed as time passes by (ice ages, soil erosions); this becomes a natural process. The information that is a few decades old may not generate the same interest as it would have at that point of time. As McLuhan argued, the 'The medium is the message' (McLuhan 1964:9). The importance of information is lost if it does not pass through a selective medium.

The media ecology sustains itself with the information that is generated through various technological tools. The information and the technological tools may be dormant for some-time, but the chances are that they may come back to life. One of the striking features of the information getting repeated is through various social, political, cultural, identity-assertion movements that keep repeating a set of preferred information to motivate people. Human civilizations recycle information through these movements. What is seen in most of these political, cultural and identity struggles is that the information that is centuries and decades-old gets repeated especially during the movement periods at regular intervals and once the goal is achieved by the community, group or a political party the information also gets slowly faded away as people do not compare or look for the similarities any more.

The famous quote "History repeats itself" was proposed by Heinrich Heine and Friedrich Nietzsche in the 19th century. Many western political thinkers and philosophers and many historians like Polybius, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Saint Luke, Machiavelli, and others believed that it had to do with the cosmological events. While for others like G.W. Trompf the concept of historic recurrence as "the past teaches lessons for... future action" — that "the same... sorts of events which have happened before... will recur..." (Trompf 1979: 3)



Fig.1 History unfolds Potti Sriramulu fasting for a united Andhra Pradesh; and KCR for Telangana
(*The outlook magazine*)

In an article written by Prins and Bishop about *Edmund Carpenter Explorations in Media and Anthropology*, they say

History is a selective process. We do not, cannot, and need not remember all who contributed to making the past. Most of what really happened will never be documented, and not all that has been recorded is important enough to be passed on. As perspectives change, new questions emerge. Occasionally, historical revisionism restores some unique characters previously neglected (Prins and Bishop 2001-2002: 110).

Retrieving the old information and comparing it with the new is a process of recycling the information. All forms of media, traditional or digital (time or space bias), perform the duty of recycling the information of the past and the present. For example, 'The New York Times' issue of 4th march 2014 corrected a mistake with regard to misspelling the name 'Northup' in an article printed in 20, 1853; this happened after a gap of 161 years, this was when the movie *12 Years a Slave* won the Oscar award in 2014.

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