



Marshall McLuhan and the Media Revolution: A Narrative Review of the Medium is the Message in the Perspective of Communication Sociology

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ABSTRACT

The development of communication technology has transformed the way humans interact and perceive social reality. This article aims to narratively review the thoughts of Marshall McLuhan, particularly the concept of "the medium is the message," within the context of communication sociology. The method employed is a narrative review of relevant open-access scholarly publications, focusing on McLuhan's theoretical contributions to contemporary social dynamics. The findings reveal that media are not merely channels for delivering messages, but also have structural impacts on social order and public thought patterns. This article concludes that McLuhan's ideas remain relevant in understanding media ecology and the current disruptions of digital communication, while also recommending a stronger sociological approach to media studies

INTRODUCTION

Marshall McLuhan is regarded as one of the most influential thinkers in the study of media and communication. He is well known for the phrase "the medium is the message," which emphasizes that it is the medium itself – not just the content – that shapes and directs the way humans think and act (Asif, 2023), (Hu, 2024), (Aarcha, 2024), (Bini, 2024). In the context of communication sociology (Holz & Wright, 1979), (McQuail, 1985) this idea serves as a foundation for understanding the relationship between social structures and modern communication technologies. Communication sociology focuses on how communication shapes social interactions and societal structures (Katz, 2009). With the rapid development of digital communication technologies, McLuhan's ideas have become increasingly relevant in explaining how shifts in media – from print to digital, from letters to social media – affect social patterns, public perception, and even power relations.

The concept of the medium as the message challenges the conventional view of media as neutral channels. McLuhan instead emphasized that the characteristics of the medium – such as speed, form, and reach – generate wide-ranging social and psychological consequences. The main problem identified in this study is the lack of in-depth understanding regarding how McLuhan's concept can be applied concretely within the context of communication sociology. Many studies remain focused on the technological aspects, while sociological approaches to McLuhan's ideas have yet to be extensively explored. Studies such as Tremblay's highlight the differences between McLuhan and Innis, two key figures in media ecology, and the importance of a non-deterministic approach to media (Tremblay, 2012). Meanwhile, Roncallo-Dow and Scolari stress the importance of reconstructing the understanding of the medium as both a philosophical and cultural construct (Roncallo-Dow & Scolari, 2016).

In the context of today's digital media, media function not only as channels of communication but also as creators of new social structures. Social media, for instance, not only delivers information but also shapes identities, creates virtual public spheres, and influences social norms and values. Within McLuhan's framework, this media transformation is a fundamental change in social structures, not merely a technological shift.

LITERATURE RIVIEW

McLuhan's thinking is often interpreted as technological determinism, but his approach is actually more nuanced. He understood the medium as an extension of humans, one that creates long-term psychological and social effects. This offers a theoretical basis for communication sociologists to analyze the structural social consequences of communication technology – not just individual behavior. However, in the literature of communication sociology, there remain limitations in systematically applying McLuhan's concepts. Many communication studies isolate media from social structures or regard media merely as tools for information delivery. This creates a gap in critical inquiry regarding how mediums influence the formation of social relations, discourse production, and everyday practices.

In recent decades, there has been renewed interest in reinterpreting McLuhan's theory in the context of globalization, digitalization, and information networks. This is reflected in media ecology approaches that integrate media analysis with social and cultural environments. McLuhan's theory gains further relevance when combined with media ecology and social systems theory, as exemplified in the work of Roncallo-Dow (Roncallo-Dow & Scolari, 2016).

The novelty of this review lies in its narrative approach, which conceptually reassesses the relevance of "the medium is the message" within modern digital society. By examining works that connect McLuhan to changes in social structures, this article is a significant conceptual effort to bridge McLuhan's classical media theory with the development of contemporary communication sociology. This review not only serves as a theoretical reflection but also provides a new framework for understanding the transformation of digital communication within increasingly complex and fragmented social orders. Thus, the primary goal of this review is to explore how McLuhan's ideas are translated into contemporary communication studies and what implications they have for the field of communication sociology. The review also emphasizes the urgency of strengthening interdisciplinary approaches between media theory and social analysis.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a narrative review method, using an exploratory approach to open-access scholarly publications available on Dimensions. The guiding research question is: How is McLuhan's thought, particularly the concept of "the medium is the message," utilized in contemporary studies of communication sociology? The search strategy included keywords such as "Marshall McLuhan," "The Medium is the Message," and "Sociology Communication" through the Dimensions database.

Inclusion criteria consisted of English-language publications in the form of articles or preprints, with open-access availability and thematic relevance to sociology and communication studies. Quality evaluation focused on articles with strong theoretical and conceptual approaches, specifically highlighting McLuhan's contribution in social contexts. For data extraction and synthesis, the authors classified the reviewed articles based on thematic focus, reinterpretation of McLuhan's theory, its application in digital media contexts, and the social implications derived from these applications.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Overview of the Reviewed Studies

The studies reviewed span the years 2010 to 2021 and adopt interdisciplinary approaches. All five studies present McLuhan's ideas critically, each with a different focus—ranging from media ontology and digital information ecology to the social representation of modern warfare. Although not all the articles explicitly fall under communication sociology, they all contain the social dimensions of media and connect McLuhan's theory to contemporary

social realities. These studies can be grouped into three major categories: theoretical reinterpretations of McLuhan, applications in digital social contexts, and media as agency in social structures.

Table 1. Classification of Studies Based on Research Focus

No	Article Title	Author(s)	Focus of Study	Year
1	Information Roles and Informationology	Shenk	Social function of digital media	2010
2	From McLuhan to Innis	Tremblay	Critique of technological determinism	2012
3	Castells' Theory as Media Theory	Kirtiklis	Digital networks and social structures	2017
4	Re-Reading McLuhan's Medium	Roncallo-Dow & Scolari	Media ontology and human existence	2016
5	War Photography and McLuhan's Theory	Kukielko-Rogozinska	War visualization and social perception	2021

Key Findings and Classification

The article by Maury D. Shenk expands McLuhan's ideas by developing a framework called informationology, which categorizes the roles of information in digital society—including memory, intellectual property rights, and social contextualization. He emphasizes that media roles are not neutral, but rather shape the structures of social and economic decision-making (Shenk, 2010),

Tremblay critiques the dominant perspective that equates McLuhan with Innis. He highlights the importance of historical and political context in understanding media expansion. Tremblay calls for a return to Innis's approach, which views media through the dynamics of power rather than simply as technological structures (Tremblay, 2012). Kirtiklis considers Marshall McLuhan as a primary inspiration for Manuel Castells. He explains how Castells' concepts of space of flows and network society can be traced back to McLuhan's framework of the medium as an extension, focusing on the shift from physical space to networked space (Kirtiklis, 2017).

The study by Roncallo-Dow & Scolari develops an ontological approach to media. They re-examine McLuhan's idea of the medium as a sensory extension and compare it with the thought of Heidegger and Don Ihde, two major figures in the philosophy of technology. This article deepens our understanding of media as both existential and social phenomena (Roncallo-Dow & Scolari, 2016). Lastly, Kukielko-Rogozinska applies McLuhan's theory to a visual study of war. Through the Basetrack project, she illustrates how digital photography is used to convey perceptions of war in the realm of social media. McLuhan is employed to interpret images as "probes" – tools for exploring human conditions through visual media (Kukielko-Rogozinska, 2021).

Comparative Analysis

Table 2. Comparative Analysis of Study Focus

Analytical Aspect	Shenk	Tremblay	Kirtiklis	Roncallo-Dow	Kukielko-Rogozinska
Theoretical Approach	Economic-sociological	Historical critique	Network sociology	Philosophical-ontological	Visual narrative
Role of McLuhan	Framework inspiration	Object of critique	Foundation of Castells	Existential reinterpretation	Visual application
Media Context	Digital & public policy	Media history	Digital structures	Media as existence	Conflict representation
Relevance to Communication Sociology	Strong	Moderate	Strong	Contextual	Strong

Thematic Analysis and Synthesis

Marshall McLuhan's idea of "the medium is the message" represents an epistemological leap in understanding the relationship between technology, communication, and social structure. In the thematic analysis of the five reviewed articles, McLuhan is not only positioned as a pioneer of media theory, but also as a social thinker who offers a new way of interpreting social change through communication technology. A dominant pattern across these studies is that the medium is not merely a neutral channel, but an agent that actively creates social, psychological, and political realities. In other words, the most powerful message of a medium is not the content it delivers, but the structural and formal impact it has on the social ecosystem that uses it.

A central theme that emerges is the transformation of social structures due to shifts in media. For instance, (Kirtiklis, 2017) contextualizes McLuhan within Castells' network theory, showing that the development of the internet as a new medium forms a new social space—the space of flows—where identities and social relations are constructed within networks that transcend physical boundaries. This provides a strong foundation for communication sociology to analyze not only the content of communication, but also the structure of media networks as arenas where social meaning and power are constructed. It emphasizes the need to see media as social arenas in themselves, not merely as mirrors of pre-existing realities.

Furthermore, the approach of Roncallo-Dow & Scolari (2016) expands the analytical horizon by placing media within the realm of ontology. The medium is not merely a tool or an extension, but a form of human existence. In this framework, each communication technology does not simply change how we deliver messages—it alters how we become human: how we perceive existence, interact, and create shared meaning. This approach opens the door for interdisciplinary synthesis between communication sociology, philosophy of technology, and media anthropology, affirming that digital communication today cannot be understood through linear models.

Across the articles, McLuhan's theory tends to be interpreted as a flexible conceptual inspiration. Shenk (2010), for example, adopts McLuhan's ideas to formulate informationology, a framework that positions information as a structural force in digital society. The digital medium is viewed as a social actor that reorganizes relationships between individuals, the state, and corporations. This synthesis reveals that "the medium is the message" goes beyond perceptual effects and evolves into a foundation for broader structural analysis—within policy, digital economics, and intellectual property rights.

On the other hand, Kukielko-Rogozinska's (2021) study illustrates how the visualization of war through digital media becomes a tool for narrative construction, not merely the representation of facts. Here, McLuhan is used as a basis to interpret images not as static symbols, but as probes that test and shape public consciousness. Thematic synthesis from this study reinforces the notion that digital media—particularly visual media—do not merely deliver reality; they create new social realities that are saturated with emotional intensity and susceptible to perceptual manipulation.

Although each study emerges from different contexts and focuses, they all affirm the causal power of the medium in shaping social structures. However, variations exist in how McLuhan's theory is adapted. Some studies, such as Tremblay (2012), adopt a more critical stance toward McLuhan's technological determinism. Tremblay emphasizes that media theory must attend to the historical and political contexts in which technologies emerge, acknowledging that the medium is never born in a neutral social space. This becomes a crucial reflection in the synthesis—McLuhan's work must be complemented with historical awareness and power analysis.

From a communication sociology perspective, three main themes can be distilled: (1) media as agents of social structure, (2) media as foundations for shifts in consciousness, and (3) media as new spaces of interaction. These themes demonstrate a continuity between McLuhan's ideas and contemporary challenges in digital communication—from social media algorithms to the role of information networks in shaping democracy. Thus, McLuhan's theory can serve as a foundational framework for developing a more systemic, contextual, and relevant media sociology in the digital age.

Moreover, the synthesis indicates that McLuhan's theory offers an alternative to the dominance of instrumental paradigms in communication studies. By viewing media as cultural forms and extensions of human faculties, this approach challenges the reduction of technology to mere tools. This is particularly important in an era of algorithmic disruption and digital platformization, where media are no longer neutral channels, but entities with autonomous logic. Communication sociology grounded in McLuhan opens the door to studying media as autonomous forces shaping new social orders—across education, politics, religion, and interpersonal relations.

Nevertheless, this review also highlights a gap in the empirical application of McLuhan's ideas. The synthesis reveals that McLuhan's work is predominantly used at a theoretical and reflective level. Empirical studies that utilize the framework of "the medium is the message" remain limited—

especially in explaining the structural transformations brought about by digital communication. Therefore, one of the key recommendations emerging from this thematic analysis is the urgent need to develop sociological methodologies that bridge McLuhan's theory with everyday digital communication practices, including digital ethnography, algorithmic discourse analysis, and participatory media observation.

In conclusion, the thematic analysis and synthesis in this narrative review reinforce McLuhan's position as an interdisciplinary thinker who bridges media theory, social structure, and digital cultural dynamics. His work remains highly relevant in communication theory and opens new possibilities for sociology, philosophy, and cultural studies to re-examine the human-technology relationship. In a world increasingly fragmented by technology, McLuhan's ideas offer an anchor for critical reflection—helping us understand how the medium creates a new world, not just as a space for communication, but as a social habitat for human life.

Research Gap

The most prominent gap identified in this narrative review is the absence of direct integration between McLuhan's theory and contemporary, empirical, and methodological approaches in communication sociology. Most studies that adopt McLuhan's thought tend to remain theoretical, philosophical, or based on conceptual speculation without concrete field research to demonstrate how "the medium is the message" operates within measurable social structures. Yet, the digital transformations over the past two decades have produced numerous social changes that should be systematically examined through McLuhan's lens—for example, through studies on the platformization of society, the algorithmization of public space, and the transformation of digital habitus.

Moreover, there exists a divide between understanding the medium as a cultural agent and as a social structure capable of mediating power, capital, and symbolic representation. Many studies fail to leverage McLuhan's theory to explain how digital media—such as social media—create new forms of social inequality through logics of virality, selective visibility, and algorithmic control. Sociological approaches that emphasize power distribution, symbolic capital (Bourdieu), or digital habitus have rarely intersected with McLuhan's framework—though such synthesis could open new directions for media studies.

Another emerging gap is the limited application of McLuhan in the analysis of digital media policies and regulation, particularly in developing countries like Indonesia. A McLuhanian approach could critique how media regulations often lag behind changes in the medium itself. For instance, algorithms used by TikTok or YouTube do not merely distribute content; they shape public taste, political participation, and the habitus of information consumption. This underscores the urgency of analyzing the medium not as a tool but as a living social and economic structure.

Furthermore, McLuhan's framework is rarely used to critique the relationship between media and contemporary social issues such as disinformation, political polarization, or cancel culture. Yet, through his

approach to hot and cool media, McLuhan had already opened up a framework to understand varying degrees of media engagement with public consciousness. Therefore, a McLuhanian approach remains highly relevant for explaining how content on platforms like Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram generates public clamor that may be irrational but is socially and politically influential.

Another shortcoming lies in the lack of methodological mapping for applying “the medium is the message” in field research. There are no standard guidelines or specific methodologies in communication sociology that utilize McLuhan’s theory to observe longitudinal changes in social consciousness. Existing studies are mostly descriptive rather than structurally analytical. Future research needs to develop sociological instruments or indicators that can measure how particular media (e.g., TikTok or WhatsApp) shift values, norms, and patterns of interaction within specific communities.

Implications and Contributions

The main contribution of this narrative review is the reaffirmation that McLuhan’s ideas remain relevant—and increasingly essential—for explaining social transformation in the digital era. In this context, McLuhan’s theory offers not only a critical lens on communication technologies, but also on the structures and cultures shaped through them. By positioning the medium as the message, McLuhan indirectly argues that society cannot be understood solely through the content of communication, but also through its modes and formats. This constitutes an intellectual contribution that opens space for a more reflective and ontological approach to communication sociology.

Another important implication is the encouragement to develop media ecology as an analytical framework in communication and social studies. Media ecology allows us not only to analyze individual media in isolation but to understand how networks of media operate simultaneously and synergistically in shaping social reality. By integrating this approach, communication sociology can expand from symbolic interaction and discourse construction to more complex systems—examining how information ecosystems, algorithms, sensory experiences, and affective structures function in the digital landscape.

This study also contributes the idea that today’s digital media have become dominant structures in social life. As such, McLuhan’s approach—once considered overly deterministic—needs to be revised as a framework that encourages viewing the medium as active agency. The medium not only mediates human interaction with the world; it shapes how humans experience, access, and interpret the world itself. In the digital platform era, this logic becomes crucial, as media do not merely distribute news but also determine narratives, control visibility, and marginalize voices.

A practical contribution of this narrative review also lies in education—particularly in the design of communication and media sociology curricula. By incorporating McLuhan’s thought more systematically into learning, students and young researchers can develop sensitivity to how media shifts affect structures of consciousness, social relations, and institutional processes. McLuhan should not be seen merely as historical media theory, but as a

foundational thinker for understanding the paradoxes and complexities of the digital world.

Finally, the conceptual implication of this review lies in the importance of interdisciplinarity in developing media theory. Communication sociology cannot operate in isolation; it must engage with philosophy of technology, media psychology, digital anthropology, and algorithm studies. Here lies McLuhan's strategic contribution—he was one of the first to pioneer an approach that dissolves disciplinary boundaries to understand media as social, cultural, and existential phenomena.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that Marshall McLuhan's thought—particularly the concept of “the medium is the message”—remains highly relevant for understanding the transformation of communication and social dynamics in the digital age. Through a narrative review of five key studies, it becomes clear that the medium is no longer simply a tool for delivering information, but a structuring agent that shapes social systems, transforms collective consciousness, and creates new spaces of interaction in a complex digital ecosystem.

Thematic analysis and synthesis show that McLuhan laid the groundwork for the emergence of the paradigm of media as active social structures. His approach opens conceptual space beyond classical communication models and challenges communication sociology to think in terms of media ecology, technological awareness, and power reconfiguration within global information networks. The research gaps identified in this study suggest that McLuhan's theory is still rarely used empirically and methodologically in contemporary social studies. The dominance of philosophical and cultural approaches, alongside the lack of sociological methods that measure the medium's direct impact on structural change, poses a challenge for future research development.

Therefore, McLuhan's theory must not only be employed as theoretical reflection but also as a critical framework for addressing today's digital communication challenges—from public polarization and disinformation to algorithmic ecosystems shaping social and political preferences. His ideas are also essential as a foundation in communication and sociology education, enabling academic generations to grasp that in the digital world, the medium does not just deliver messages—it shapes how we live and think. Thus, this review offers a conceptual contribution in bridging McLuhan's classical media theory with contemporary communication phenomena. It reaffirms the importance of a sociological approach to reading shifts in media as paradigm changes, while calling for more intensive empirical studies on how digital media have become the primary battlefield for meaning, power, and identity in global society.

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