

Help, My Parents Are Gutenborgs!

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Abstract

Half a century ago Marshall McLuhan proclaimed that “the medium is the message”. Media affect our minds more profoundly than any of the messages sent across, he suggested, so that new media may even make for new kinds of minds. McLuhan’s idea has had little impact on cognitive psychology and philosophy of mind, which have largely stuck to conventional wisdom. Now it is time for a reappraisal.

Conventional wisdom on mind and media sees the conscious mind as a private workspace for coining and processing mental contents (beliefs, desires, feelings), prior to any expression of these in public media (speech, writing, print, graphics). The mental content management system (CMS) is considered largely a natural affair, whereas handling media-borne expressions relies on culturally acquired technologies such as coding conventions. Even assuming that mental operations are conducted in a language of thought, how the mind works is supposed to be largely independent of changing media landscapes.

I shall argue that the standard view suffers from a form of media myopia by systematically neglecting the impact that subsequent new media have had on the organization of conscious mental activity.

One way to dispute the standard view is by considering the Extended Mind hypothesis (Clark 2008). If parts of our cognitive capacities are outsourced to external tools and technologies (e.g., a notebook serving as extended memory), then part of the (extended) mind becomes contingent upon the media used for storing and processing the information. New media will almost trivially spawn new types of mind. Taking this line one step further, I argue that media make their mark on the intracranial mind as well: both the mental CMS and the items it works on (i.e., the contents of conscious experience) are contingent upon historically changing media.

First I argue that the standard view entails a form of essentialism that is neither desirable nor warranted. In an evolutionary and archaeological context the essentialist bias incites a Flintstones fallacy with regard to earlier minds. Moreover, essentialism is not warranted by the evidence supporting our current view of the mind (roughly, current folk psychology). If current folk psychology serves as the basis for modeling current mental processes, then parity of reasoning requires that deviant folk psychologies should count as evidence for different types of mind (cf. Sleutels 2006).

The notion of folk psychology required by the previous argument is practical rather than theoretical, and normative rather than descriptive. For this purpose I introduce the notion of a community's 'epistemic practice' (analogous to Hutto 2008) or its 'epistemic toolkit', i.e. the collection of practical and conceptual tools that community members use for purposes of describing, organizing, and communicating their mental contents. This toolkit, I argue, is largely constitutive of the mind's CMS as well as of its consciously accessible contents.

To illustrate my point I discuss examples of changing epistemic practices closely tied to historical transitions in the media-landscape. These include the development of dialectical and mnemonic techniques (cf. Carruthers 1990), late medieval hermeneutics (cf. Olson 1994), Renaissance educational reform (Ong 1958), and the invention of systems for rational manipulation of context-free contents often associated with printing-press and Enlightenment. Each of these has left its mark on the mental organization as we know it from daily experience. If we are now Gutenborgs (the cyborg's printing equivalent) we may well have been systematically misreading our ancestors' minds. What is more, our children's minds may be rapidly developing into something different yet, with baffling consequences for mutual understanding, but also with great promise for consciousness studies.

I conclude with some thoughts on how this approach connects with recent findings in the neuroscience of consciousness.

Literature

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