McLuhanian Perspective of Facebook

Areen F. Aldardasawi[1]

Abstract

As we live in the epoch of popular culture, it is very important to understand it and study its dimensions as well as their influences upon society. Technology is a very salient manifestation of popular culture that has brought substantial changes to the world. Thus, we have to be aware of the effects and the potential effects that technology may have upon us. One type of technology is Facebook which is the most popular social network website in terms of the number of members and visitors. As a virtual society, Facebook is growing more and more popular day by day. In this article, Facebook, as a technological medium, is going to be measured and explained according to Marshall McLuhan's perspective of media and technology. Therefore, we will try to explain, in McLuhan's words, how Facebook is considered a "message" as well as a "cool" or "hot" medium. In addition, there will be an attempt to discerning the reasons why people are very attached to such a virtual social life.

Keywords: *Social Media, McLuhan, Facebook, Hot and Cold*

Introduction: Facebook Is a Popular Culture Product

In order to say that a certain phenomenon is a product of popular culture, it has to have some characteristics. According to (Storey, 1994), in order to define popular culture, first, we can simply say that it is well liked by people (Storey, 1994; Tarman, 2009; 2010). So, as Facebook is the most liked and visited social media website, it is considered a popular culture. Facebook is the world's largest in terms of the number of users also having more than one million small or medium-sized businesses on which large companies spend more than hundred million dollars advertising on Facebook per year (Sareah, 2015). This indicates how rapidly Facebook had gained approval among people (Kılınç et al., 2016). A second criterion

[1]Sakarya University- areendardasawi@yahoo.com

by which John Storey regards a popular culture is that it is the leftover after high culture characteristics are determined (Hossain & Aydin, 2011; Storey, 1994; Yigit & Tarman, 2013; 2016). High culture is characterized as complicated and difficult, therefore, Facebook, like all popular technological products, is characterized by easiness and simplicity. On the contrary of high culture, popular culture is mass-produced commercial culture as well as for mass consumption and from the people for the people (Aydin, 2012; 2013; Storey, 1994; Tarman, 2016) which obviously makes Facebook a huge wealthy company. Plus, it is socially approved by the masses because it represents them as they are members of it. It is designed to meet their needs that were structurally born by the emergence of popular culture. Plus, it reshaped people according to its standards.

In 1967, the Canadian public intellectual Marshall McLuhan has introduced the world with a masterpiece of thought about media and the world of technology. Interestingly, his theory eventuated to be applicable to technology till the present time. McLuhan's perspective of media and technology was that of a philosophical one. Considering media as extensions of our lives or bodies and classifying the types of media and technology using the dichotomy of 'hot' and 'cool' was just a brilliant way to describe the relationship between the masses and technology. Moreover, he redefined the "message" of the media by considering it as the changes that a certain technology has on people's lives (Valiandes & Tarman, 2011; Tarman & Baytak, 2011). In this article, Facebook as an extension to our social life, as a message and as "cool" medium will be discussed. Most importantly, McLuhan's hypothesis of how our tools, such as Facebook, can shape us.

McLuhan was an obscure Canadian academic until the mid-60s, when his best-selling book, Understanding Media, turned him into a pop-culture phenomenon. His playfully radical ideas perfectly reflected the spirit of the times, when the air was filled with revolutionary rhetoric and pot smoke.

McLuhan's central thesis, encapsulated in the famous phrase "the medium is the message", was that the technologies through which we take in information - the media, broadly defined - become "extensions" of our bodies, exerting a profound influence over us. When an important new medium arrives, it can reshape who we are as individuals and as a society.

The electric media of television and computers, argued McLuhan, would liberate us from our dependence on the printed word. Print was what he called a "hot" medium, one that absorbed all of our attention and left little room for participation. The medium it had supplanted, the spoken word, was by contrast a "cool" medium that left plenty of space for participation.

Reading, to put it simply, is a lonely pursuit, while speech is a social one. So when we became readers, rather than listeners, we sacrificed our shared, tribal consciousness and became locked into private consciousness.

Electric media, being cool technologies that promote interaction, would bring back our lost tribal consciousness, McLuhan believed. But our tribes would no longer be small, isolated groups. Because the new media spanned the planet, we would become members of a "global village ."

When the communal 1960s collapsed into the self-indulgent 1970s, McLuhan fell out of favor. Today McLuhan's work seems current again. Kevin Kelly, one of Wired's original editors, suggests that what McLuhan "was really talking about was the internet - two decades before it appear."

II. Facebook: The Extension of Social Life

The extension of something is the stretching that makes it bigger or longer. Similarly, media are the extension of our bodies and minds. They widen the abilities of our bodies and minds so that life becomes easier and faster. According to (McLuhan, 1964), machines as

objects were forming extensions to our bodies; like cars as extensions to feet, clothes to skin, weapons and industrial machines to hands and so on. However, in the technological era, these technologies are extensions of our nervous systems because they are intangible and usually function through our minds and feelings, in McLuhan's words, "the technological simulation of consciousness" (McLuhan, 1964).

The influences of media on the human nervous system have started ever since the emergence of technology. Taking McLuhan's light bulb for an example, the light bulb is a medium that extended the daylight so that humans can work and function ordinarily in the dark (McLuhan, 1964). Similarly, Facebook is an extension to social life in general (Kılınç & Dere, 2013). For example, when writing a status in the 'What's on your mind?' blank, we are evacuating what is in our minds concerning some situation. Therefore, by frequently updating a status that has to do with feelings, thoughts or anything alike, we are composing an extension of the daily diaries in which we write what we lived, thought or felt. Our social life is not as physical and real as it was. It became a virtual one where we gather online and still can share our news, feelings or activities at the spot. Paying someone a visit is no longer going to their house most often, but visiting their profile on Facebook is enough to know their news like marriage, engagement getting a job and so on. A text message on Facebook is an extension of the chit-chat we used to have while coming across someone while going somewhere or even the extension of the visit itself.

Adding an acquaintance as a friend on Facebook is the extension of the action of getting to know someone closely. Acquaintances become closer in distance than in real life. On Facebook, we exchange 'likes' and 'comments' which imply closer distance since we act like we just met the day before, while we never did. We act as if we continue a conversation we were having.

Moreover, Facebook is an extension of our memories because it saves a lot of photos and other memories. Moreover, it reminds us of some old posts as a memory to share. This memory may work as a reminder for our old young self where we were different in thought or shape. With that memory, we generate feelings and thoughts that we had at the time we shared. Facebook is using emotional words which are important to make people have closer social bonds.

Groups on Facebook, for example, are the extension of a social clubs concerning certain topics. A group about health contains many suggestions, conversations and discussions about healthy lifestyles, diets or exercise. Social life became easier and faster and not limited with time or space because it is lived within smart phones any time anywhere. Eventually, Facebook contains all these possibilities of social relations; H.E. Wittkower says in his *Facebook and Philosophy* the following:

> Facebook appeared to some writers as angel, and some as demon; to some as an emerging global village, and to others as isolation in disguise; to some as an opportunity for maintaining relationships, and to others as broadcast narcissism. The point from Sartre tells us why there's so much disagreement about what Facebook means: There's so much disagreement, not because there are so many ways to think about Facebook, but because there are *so many different Facebooks.* (Wittkower, 2010)

So, this is to say that these different Facebooks are just resembling and representing social life in form and content. Again as Wittkower implied, "Facebook is a kind of mirror of our social existence, and we do not always enjoy all aspects of the communities that we find ourselves to be part of."

III. Facebook Is the Message

"The medium is the message" is one of McLuhan's best known aphorisms that distinguished him as a media philosopher (Wittkower, 2010). McLuhan redefined 'message' when he related it to media. The message of media is not only its content but the package of changes that occurred on life because of using such media "the "message" of any medium or

technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs" (McLuhan, 1964). McLuhan argues that there is something called "media mates". In other words, one media contains one or more other media (McLuhan, 1964). For example, the telegraph is a medium that contains print which is another medium; the print, in turn, contains another medium which is speech, an absolute media. Likewise, Facebook contains countless media inside of it, like photographs, videos, words, articles and so forth. So, the contained media "posts, pictures, videos, etc." are the message of the containing one "Facebook".

However, according to McLuhan, this message is the reason to change how people understand or relate to the world because it is irrelevant to the medium. Well, the structure in which people exist while on Facebook is social but it still differs from the real social life. It added some bizarre characteristics to social life that cannot be performed in real life as McLuhan puts it "the machine altered our relations to one another and to ourselves". For example, people we interact well with on Facebook may mean no one to us for real. We me even pass by each other without saying hello. We may know lots of things about people we know well on Facebook, but when we have a conversation for real, it may not go further than 'hello, how are you' conversation.

The message of Facebook is wide and various to the extent that it "changes the form of human relations and activities" and in McLuhan's words, "We shape our tools and therefore our tools shape us" (McLuhan, 1964). Facebook shaped our social life accordingly in a way that imparts different characteristics to our social bonds.

IV. Facebook: Hot or Cold?

Another concept of McLuhan's theory of media is the dichotomy of 'hot' and 'cool' used in describing media according to its relationship with the senses of humans. We can say that a certain medium is hot if it engages one sense like sight or hearing such as in reading individually or listening to a song using the ear pieces respectively. Because this sense is

functioning with complete concentration and there is not distraction that necessitates using any other senses which he describes as "high-definition" media; "Hot media do not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience. Hot media are, therefore, low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience" (McLuhan, 1949). On the contrary, a cool medium is the one which requires filling in the blanks; it does not give full information so it engages more than one sense in order to have a full perceiving of the received message through media.

Therefore, and in my opinion, Facebook can never be a hot media for it contains many various contents and media mates which prevent from perceiving information in high-definition quality. Individuality is no longer a preference because in the social structure of Facebook, people like to share their most trivial moments. There is an obsession of showing the people what we think, listen to, read and do. Facebook is even getting cooler and cooler by time. Whenever it is developed with new features, it makes the chance of individuality less. Although sharing is optional, and choosing between privacy and publicity totally belongs to the user, but Facebook as a tool has shaped us the way it functions. Rare people they are who are not very active on Facebook. Facebook is very cold because it is converged, involves high participation, and lacks privacy in spite of the privacy settings.

V. The Masses Chose Cool Media

When investigating the reasons behind this salient turnout for Facebook and other social media, it is revealed that it is mainly connected with psychological and social reasons. As mentioned earlier, our tools shape us, which means that it is hard not to cope with the new social trend that is adopted by most people in the social sphere. So, not being a member on Facebook incurs a kind of loss in the social capital. So, it is better not to go against the grain in social issues in order to catch up with everything said or heard. Furthermore, Facebook is not only a social media website; it performs the role of a persona of some type. It helps in

boosting the ego of its members as they share in public and get fans out of it. Logging in and told "Good Afternoon" by Facebook sometimes is just a step that aims at the users psyche to imply a feeling of care and attention. As a site, it offers a good service for its members and they like it.

Even the elderly needed to cope with this rise of technology and new social life. My grandmother has grabbed herself a smart phone along with accounts on many social media websites after she realized that were are sitting in one room but everyone is busy with their smart phones. She is active on Facebook, she uses emojis professionally and comments harshly on what she does not like.

In this course, it is worth mentioning McLuhan's tetrads of media effects which he developed in his posthumously published Laws of Media (1988) which consist of the four concepts; enhances, retrieves, obsolesces and reserves into. He argues that these tetrads are considered as "a means of focusing awareness on hidden or unobserved qualities in our culture and technology" (McLuhan, 1988). So, the effects of any media can be viewed in the abovementioned four ways. To understand these effects using the concepts we have to put them in questions which we ask ourselves. These questions go as follows (Mcluhan, 1988):

What does it enhance?

What does it make obsolete?

What does it retrieve that had been obsolesced earlier?

What does it flip into when pushed to extremes?

Well applying these questions on Facebook will make its effects clearer as we elaborate the answers.

i) What does Facebook enhance?

Facebook is a technology that is versatile; meaning that it consists of many other media features which make of it a photo album, memo, diary, entertainment, newspaper,

social club, phone booth, post office, and more. With these continuously developed features, Facebook brought substantial changes in human behaviors. Facebook posts became one way of showing people's personality and psychology by developing the feature of "feelings" next to the "what's on your mind?", therefore, expressing ourselves has become amplified to the audience we have along with the feeling next to it to avoid ambiguity in expressing. Thus, Facebook intensifies the social relations online by making people getting to know more about each other through monitoring each others' profile pages. People are closer to each other than before. Plus, this "Facebook memories" feature reinforces feelings like appreciation of some experience, going back in time and realize how different one was thinking, nostalgia and so on. Furthermore, Facebook makes reaching people we once met and thought we will never meet again easier, like primary school teachers and friends, and faraway relatives. Moreover, social status can be shown through check ins and photographs.

ii) What does Facebook make obsolete?

We cannot really say that Facebook has made things obsolete, but it only made them less popular like congrats phone calls, real birthday wishes, TV, emails between friends, and more. Advertisements, for example, are taking a better course on Facebook than their traditional way because they take the consumer with mere a click to the shop where they can buy instantly. Privacy is also less popular because people tend to share aspects from their private lives that the audience is not very interested in like flirting with their soulmates, spending the honeymoon somewhere, travelling to some distance, receiving some gift or surprise, private moments with their children, making a cake and etc. Privacy does not seem like something preferred anymore by the masses.

Formality and good manners are also reduced in preference. One may have many people in their contact list including teachers, professors, old people and others but they act the same in public (Facebook's public). Another privacy killer is Live Maps; they provide

users of the ability of going live to the whole world in any time they prefer; for example, why would anyone care about watching someone who just took a shower and tries to get ready for school or whatever? The thing is, on Facebook, every potential act is optional but unconsciously obligatory because Facebook has already shaped the masses.

iii) What does Facebook retrieved that has been obsolesced earlier?

Facebook has contributed in making the world not only a village but a neighborhood where everyone is present at any occasion or event that happened. A discussion about some particular topic in a certain place allows people around the whole world to participate in the very topic with its details, pros and cons and so on. For example, family members who used to live together, have memories together and who naturally have parted by time can have a conversation or reminiscence at the spot as if they are sitting in one room. Moreover, the option of translation under every status is making communication even easier. Facebook makes people more aware of the world around them, therefore, uniting people to stand for each other and call for universal calls; supporting women, refugees, famine-sufferers and others.

iv) What does Facebook flip into when pushed to extremes?

Every invention of technology has advantages as well as disadvantages. When pushed to extremes, there definitely are disadvantages shown. Facebook is good in terms of reinforcing the social bonds and share news and feedbacks about various issues in the world. Nevertheless, when it is pushed to extremes it may turn into an obsession of monitoring people and control using their information which may cause serious privacy problems. For example, interestingly, when trying to post a picture on Facebook with many people, Facebook suggests tagging these people by selecting their faces and writing their names down by itself. Well this is not a good omen. It also causes aggravating some social problems like

narcissism and self-centeredness. Some members are never done with taking photos of themselves which annoys their followers.

Moreover, the act of "like" is becoming more traditionalized because people feel obliged to like some other peoples' stuff for reasons other than their fondness of the shared stuff. Let us put it this way, by liking someone's picture it implies paying their ego some attention and unconsciously asking for it in return for their own ego. Finally, the masses are out of control in terms of announcing their life events on Facebook as if they hold a huge loudspeaker in public

Method

An online survey was distributed through Facebook via a web-based platform, targeting ages 18 and above. Participants of this age range were chosen because the researcher was interested in exploring the potential effects that technology may have upon us. Through the use of technology and how the independent variables of age, gender, how one perceives the effect of technology upon us in Facebook it is the most popular social network website in terms of the number of members and visitors.

There were 296 participants were from Jordan with a 92% response rate. This sample was heavily Caucasian and well educated. The survey consisted primarily of closed-ended quantitative questions. Of the 296 participants, 81 identified as male, 209 identified as female, *1* identified as "other," and *5* declined to answer the question. During analysis, the researcher decided to eliminate the responses from the participant who identified with the "other" category to restrict the research analysis to two sexes as opposed to three when exploring gender.

Participants were asked to respond to 28 multiple-choice questions by selecting a single answer they felt best reflected their opinion and 1 open-ended question where they

could describe their opinion in their own words with regard to how they view the effects that technology (McLuhanian Perspective of Facebook).

Significance was set at $p \geq .05$. However, there were many instances when there were levels of $p = .06$ or $.07$ levels of significance, which this researcher considered as borderline significance in these findings and therefore reportable.

Conclusion

Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) was engaged in questioning and investigating the effects of print, electronic technology and various forms of 'new media' as they influence our lives. Together at the University of Toronto with Eric Havelock, Northrop Frye, Edmund Carpenter, Walter J. Ong and briefly with Harold Innis, from the early 1950's to late 1970s, McLuhan and their 'Toronto Communication School' delivered profound, if not always mainstream or quickly comprehendible insights into the history of language and speech (e.g. orality vs. literacy) and their impact on science, technology and culture. McLuhan believed that the essential message of human-made media is found when we realize that media are 'outterings' or 'utterings' (cf. 'extensions') of ourselves, and that by learning about them we thus also learn about ourselves.

This description may raise initial concerns from some readers. For example, should such topics as media and communications even count as 'scientific' (usually 'natural science' is the common meaning in Anglo-Saxon discourse) let alone suggest the possibility that they constitute the topical basis for a 'new science,' as indicated in Laws of Media's subtitle? Could an English professor ever possibly hope to solve long-standing theoretical and applied puzzles in or about science and human nature, through cross-disciplinary applications of literary theory to culture? To answer these concerns is yet another test for the McLuhan method, and may ultimately help to measure Marshall McLuhan's legacy in the increasingly

wired 'global village' and explain his lasting success and influence as a so-called sage and visionary of the electronic-information age.

In McLuhan's messages, the term 'media' is used quite broadly to include technologies, artefacts and even words and scientific theories of human discovery or invention. These may all be analyzed in his unique tetrad-form of Four Effects articulated in Laws of Media.

We found that everything man[kind] makes and does, every procedure, every style, every artefact, every poem, song, painting, gimmick, gadget, theory, technology – every product of human effort – manifested the same four dimensions." (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988).

McLuhan prescribed his so-called Four Effects (laws of media) as a complementary method to Aristotle's well-known Four Causes: Material, Efficient, Formal, and Final. The Four Effects, which I will briefly elaborate on below, were named as follows: Retrieval, Reversal, Obsolescence and Amplification or Enhancement. These Four Effects are meant to apply simultaneously, and not linearly or sequentially, mirroring the method of Aristotle's Four Causes. If applied properly and inventively, their perceptual impact on the reader will be one of aural/visual, discontinuous, resonant interplay, as they reveal already present or future features of media, culture and technology.

The combination of the four causes and the four effects is the most comprehensive and capable framework that has been developed so far whereby to evaluate the impacts and implications of new technologies. (Sheridan 1990)

In the book Laws of Media, Marshall McLuhan's earlier work unites in a general anthropic method that brings all language, aural and visual culture, technology and theoretical relativising to bear in an inspiring mix of catholic genius and mystical allure. The medium is the message and the method is what matters in Laws of Media.

The Four Effects allow for a reflexive investigative approach to whatever artefact or theory the participant (reader/listener/observer) chooses to apply them, in other words, an epistemology that is both personal and at the same time inevitably social. The tetrad model and its implications for science, philosophy and life therefore are meant to shock us (sensibly) and to open new doors to further discovery, following the historic lead of G. Vico's Science Nuova and F. Bacon's Novum Organum.

Combined with McLuhan's mosaic approach, the Four Effects in tetrad-form suggest a new way, a 'new science' to consider media, culture, technology and science. The potential perceptual reach of this simultaneous method of effects alone may open up fresh communicative connections, which arouse reasons for excitement and exploration in new scientific and humanitarian areas.

Results

Hot Media are those that contain relatively complete sensory data. With hot media the viewer has less need to become involved by filling in missing data. McLuhan refers to hot media as low in participation. Any hot medium allows for less participation than cool one, as a lecture makes for less participation than an interactive seminar, and a book for less than dialogue.

Cool Media requires the individual to participate perceptually by filling in the missing data. This participation creates healthy involvement. He refers to the completeness (Hot) or incompleteness (Cool) of the stimulus. McLuhan thinks that if we cross mediums we cause a social problem. We have a cool society and that the introduction of television (hot) has caused great problems.

The internet doesn't really fit into McLuhan's "hot" and "cool" dichotomy. It encourages participation but it also sucks up our attention and dominates our senses. When we gaze into a computer screen, we tune out everything else. The temperature of media was not McLuhan's

only subject, nor even his most interesting one. Although he was often presented as a glorifier of technological progress, he painted a subtle, sometimes disturbing picture of the future.

In applying McLuhan's tetrad of media effects to the use of Facebook, we see that Facebook is merely an extension of established communication technologies—it has not obsolesced any of these technologies; and it has not completely recovered a tribal sense of community or democracy. Facebook, then, is simply another system for delivering information to one's peers. The media are more interactive, they also more potent tools for manipulation and control. They not only transmit information to us but gather information about us.

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