

Time, space, and the new media machine of the terrorphone

In this short article, I am concerned with how the contemporary form of the telephone, a new media machine which was of deep-rooted significance for Marshall McLuhan, promotes our obsession with forms of shared participation and social implosion. I argue that the form of the telephone involves a complex abolition of our sense of space, interwoven with unexpected socio-cultural effects, which then create new subjectivities as well as new forms of decentralization that are intuited but not fully understood. To politicize these effects, and following the revelations of the American whistleblower Edward Snowden, I identify the form of the mobile telephone as a new form of media and argue that it is no longer an 'extension of man', as McLuhan suggested, but an extension of the US State, which is producing new forms of socio-cultural collapse. I then explore how the remote-controlled time and space of what I call the 'terrorphone' cultivates, among other things, the contemporary visualization of speech. Finally, I question the desirability of unrelenting mobile telephone interaction as our only 'intelligent' choice today when such interaction is, contrary to McLuhan, not a great extension of our central nervous system, but in fact a danger to it.



LET US TALK ABOUT THE TELEPHONE. The telephone is a theme of deep interest in Marshall McLuhan's book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1994: 265–74, first published in 1964), for example; a work which is now almost fifty years old, yet as relevant today as it ever was. This is for numerous reasons; the telephone has a place in McLuhan's wide-ranging programme concerning the form and character of telephonic media and there is a theoretical concern with the telephone as a form of shared participation as well as a historical interest in teletechnologies and the question of human lives led inside an implosion.

According to McLuhan (1994: 266), the form and nature of the telephone is marked by its abolition of our sense of place, the activation of unforeseen socio-cultural consequences, such as the creation of new subjectivities such as the 'call girl', and, as with all 'electronic technology', the telephone's appearance as a fully formed, singular, stunning, event. Yet the power of the telephone for McLuhan derives from its ability to decentralize each and every operation, a fact which has been sensed but not altogether comprehended by everyone, even today. McLuhan's (1994: 267) additional move, associated with the Bell Telephone research department especially, seeks to rewrite 'book-oriented' definitions of the telephone. He does so by turning to the form of the telephone as inspiration for a counter-discourse in relation to the study of media content and as an alternative telephonic imaginary (or the function of the form of the telephone as form) to contest the arid deserts of information and game theories. For McLuhan, information and game theories are problematic because they disregard the many mental and socio-cultural transformations ensuing from the form of the telephone, which have altered the totality of our existence.



Left: The telephone has unforeseen consequences: the call-girl. Right: American intelligence: the telephone as a form of covert shared participation.

A further claim of McLuhan's concerns the telephone as a form of shared participation within the small town, specifically in the initial era of the commercial telephone in the early twentieth century. He signals the small town as a key issue, as the 'back fence' is substituted for the 'heated participation of the party line' (1994: 268), which reminds us that, once upon a time, the telephone was a new media machine used more for amusement than for the state or for commerce. These and McLuhan's subsequent claims about the telephone rendering speech visible and uniting electronic technology with the domain of speech and language from the dawn of the age of electricity reveal deep connections between the mass media of the spoken word and electronic technology, the first and second great extensions of our central nervous system, and other, perhaps more threatening, telephonic alignments in the contemporary form and character of the telephone, such as wiretapping.

Edward Snowden, previously an American contractor for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), for example, recently left the United States after disclosing to the media details of widespread telephone surveillance by American intelligence as a covert form of shared participation in the big city's contemporary, commercial, and overheated digital party line (BBC News US & Canada 2013). Shifting beyond anything that McLuhan could have envisaged in the 1960s, the CIA's 'PRISM' programme, for instance, takes advantage of the fact that the US is the world's telecommunications mainstay. 'A target's phone call, e-mail or chat', one of the CIA's PowerPoint slides revealed

by Snowden declares, 'will take the cheapest path, not the physically most direct path – you can't always predict the path'. The contemporary targeting of telecommunications pouring into and through the US, therefore, signals *a new understanding of media*: no longer a mere extension of man, *new media is a fundamental extension of the US state*.

In short, the form of the new media of the mobile telephone in particular matters because *it is instigating new forms of socio-cultural collapse*. Moreover, these new forms of socio-cultural disintegration not only abolish our sense of place but also our sense of privacy, as unexpected consequences, such as the recently revealed evidence of the telephone hacking



Understanding new media: the extensions of the state.

of celebrities and even murder victims perpetrated by News International journalists in the United Kingdom illustrates only too well (BBC News 2013). From the capacity to decentralize terror operations, as in the Madrid train bombings of 2004, which were ignited by mobile telephone, to the organization of political protests (e.g., Occupy Wall Street), the new form of the mobile telephone is creating countless unanticipated psychological and socio-cultural transformations involving shared and often secret participations within what McLuhan called the 'global village'. As the CIA's PowerPoint slide put it: when the now overheated digital party line takes command, 'you can't always predict the path' of the mobile telephone.

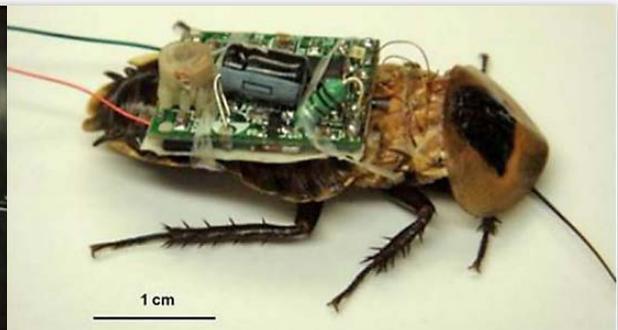
Rendering speech visible to the US state and to big business thus presently entails the invention of another new media machine, the US National Security Agency's (NSA) new media machine, which clandestinely gathers the location, telephonic speech, and recorded language of tens of millions of Americans on electronic technology. The new telephonic alignments and the technological convergence of the realm of speech and language today therefore expose the extensive electronic interconnections between telecommunications companies, such as Verizon, and the electronic technology of the US state, given that Verizon was directed by a secret court order to hand over all of its telephone data on a continuing, daily basis to the NSA. Perhaps in the late twenty-first century, then, this third great extension of our central nervous system will threaten even non-telephonic arrangements in its future form and character, as the telephonic imaginary moves beyond wiretapping and internet server tapping to Wi-Fi tracking small-town,



The new form of the telephone is shared in the global village.

non-commercial, 'offline' everyday communications in a surveillance programme known as 'Back Fence'?

Meanwhile, certain media theorists opposed to McLuhan's media theory – such as the French critic of the art of technology Paul Virilio – who live beyond the overheated participants of the digital party line, are intensifying their contemporary opposition to the mobile telephone. Yet such antagonism to the mobile telephone is not based on the idea that it is a new-fangled machine or that it is a feature of the CIA's PRISM programme. Rather, it is founded on the notion that it is an 'electronic straightjacket' from which Virilio seeks to distance himself, along with its 'universal remote control' which is presided over by the state and telecommunications corporations (Armitage 2012: 82–3). While accusing the NSA and the telecommunications industry of inducing a conformity to the remote-controlled time and space of the new media of the terrorphone, for example, we might claim a right to rendering speech invisible (Armitage 2013: 67–82). Can we break the link between electronic technology and the field of speech



Left: More threatening telephonic alignments: wire-tapping. Right: The future? Tracking small town offline communications via DARPA's hybrid insect surveillance programs.



Tool or trap? Professor John Armitage discusses the telephone as an example of threats and opportunities in contemporary tele-communication.

and language? Or is the dictatorship of individualized, relentless mobile telephone interaction our only 'intelligent' option?

A more spatiotemporally, rather materially positioned viewpoint, developing but not entirely renouncing McLuhan's interpretations of the spoken word and electronic technology, might acknowledge how the telephone – far from being a great extension of our central nervous system – is in fact a danger to it. Consider, for instance, the case of the 14-year-old British teenager Hannah Smith, who killed herself in August 2013 because of 'cyber bullying' by way of the mobile-telephone-enabled social networking site ask.fm (*The Guardian* 2013). No longer left with any free time for extended contemplation, we increasingly and publicly subcontract our bodily sense impressions and the most banal of our personal experiences ('I'm on the train'). Certainly, argues Virilio (2010: 88–9), 'we will all suddenly be collectivized in our affects, in our most intimate emotions, slipping and sliding or, more precisely, "surfing" as we will then be in a new sort of epidemic of cooperation; the pandemic of a mob once solitary, now plagued with the delirium of a UNANIMISM that the prophets of doom of the twentieth century foretold.'

The contemporary teletechnological form and socio-cultural character of the mobile telephone is thus imploding into a new kind of plague of seamlessly coordinated electronic eavesdropping. It is the virus of an information gathering of transitory feelings once controlled, now overwhelmed with the

ecstasy of infinite surveillance programmes centred on conquering our sensations and beliefs, illegal political communications, and (de)classified information that the whistleblowers of American intelligence in the the twenty-first century have exposed. Let us talk no more, then, about the simulated freedom of expression presented by the mobile telephone but, instead, about the overpowering of the freedom of expression of its increasingly imprisoned audience. ■

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