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The Meaning Is the Message

An Inquiry into New Media, Cognition, and Reflective Imagination

Alejandra Wah

Propositions

1. Highly regarded media studies scholars assume major effects of *new media art* on innate cognitive processes. From a cognitive science perspective there seem to be no effects of media technologies on innate cognitive processes, but rather on cognitions. The former are inherited, and enable the activation and the construction of the latter.
2. Human cognition is determined by an inherited basic cognitive structure which consists of neural patterns that remain stable throughout life, and generates neural patterns that are learned throughout life. The main purpose of this basic cognitive structure is to optimize the organism's chances of survival.
3. Media technologies are part of the environment, and are *exteroceptive* sources. The human organism interacts and deals with exteroceptive signals via its neural route.
4. The body of a neuron can be shorter than a millimeter in diameter, whereas the axons can be as long as meters in length. This means that neurons can reach even the most distal parts of the organism. This also means that although for research purposes the brain or central nervous system is sometimes distinguished from the organism, it is the nervous system *as a whole* which interacts with the environment.
5. The capacity for strengthening the connection between neurons (the synapses) is *memory*. The capacity for mapping the environment in neural patterns (including objects and events) is *perception*. The capacity for manipulating or recreating these neural patterns is *imagination*.
6. We must distinguish the virtual from any particular medium. "Virtualization" does not begin with digital media but is instead the inherited ability or capacity for imagining. In spite of the fact that the formal features of specific media may *facilitate* certain experiences, imagination or "virtualization" is not limited to new media or digital media.
7. It is improbable that media technologies have effects on the cognitive process of reflective imagination, which underlies the artistic experience. Media technologies are rather *a result* of innate cognitive processes, including the reflective imagination.
8. It is important to acknowledge the distinction between *evolutionary* and *cultural adaptation*. The former is about random variation resulting from genetic mutations, blind selection, and heredity. The latter is about changes in memories, perceptions, imaginations, languages, and thoughts, i.e. in the ways in which we make sense of life.
9. The cognitive strategy of reflective imagination is distinctively human and is important to the human species because it frees us from immediacy, nurtures our curiosity and wonder, guides our behaviors and actions, and keeps us moving in actuality and in simulation.
10. The fascinating problem we must deal with is that culture is grounded in biology, and yet, at the same time, the way in which we understand and make sense of biology is limited and expanded by culture.