

The Medium Really is the Message

Jean K. Min

The Internet generation, free of print-based thought, has many kinds of expression at its disposal.

It's been nearly four years since I started writing in cyberspace. There are people who like what I write and there are those who are less satisfied. There are lots of people who have asked how they could write like I do. In fact, a certain publishing house asked me to write a book on writing for working people. Having given it thought, I answered that this issue wasn't simply of writing, but one of communication.

I don't think I have much talent other than conveying my thoughts through text, but in fact, my area of interest is all places of communication. Of the countless means of communication that exist in this world, be it in cyberspace or "real" space, I chose writing, within that sphere, I chose cyberspace, which agreed with me.

To follow an adage by Marshall McLuhan, whom I admire as my spiritual teacher, *"the medium is the message."* No matter what I write, or what message I produce, I can't escape from the cyberspace medium I have chosen.

Not so long ago, a certain daily paper offered to run my column. After considering it, I turned the paper down. This was because it would have been entirely inappropriate to adjust my writing style, which had become

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http://english.ohmynews.com/articleview/article_view.asp?no=195948&rel_no=1 [C.ELDOC.60009591], Nov 26, 2004.

http://eng.ohmynews.com/articleview/article_view.asp?menu=c10400&no=198527&rel_no=1&back_url= [C.ELDOC.6009654]

accustomed to cyberspace, to the demands made by the printed page. It's like one of my favorite phrases, "*You are what you read.*" The medium you chose defines your existential identity.

Besides writing, another medium I've grown accustomed to is "PowerPoint." There are scholars who point out the harmful effects of PowerPoint, but the latest version of PowerPoint allows for colorful forms of expression that surpass Flash animation.

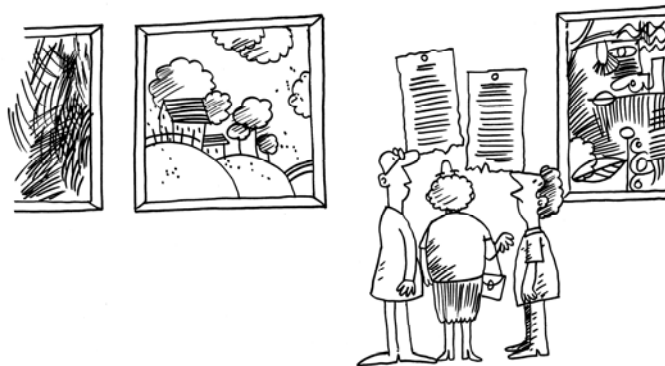
If I were to choose PowerPoint, of the countless words I would like to use, I would work hard to choose only those messages that are appropriate to the PowerPoint medium.

The main point of what I'd like to convey to you today is medium. I'll have to start writing to know, but in fact, this doesn't look like something I could convey in a day. It might require dozens of installments, or perhaps just a few pieces. Because my writing method, or to go even further, that which has exerted a tremendous influence on forming the point of view I use to look at the world is media theory, and I have waited a long time for the chance to share my thoughts with readers.

My first reason for bringing up this topic out of countless topics of conversation in this world is that I'm confident in this area, and the second one is the phenomenon of media as a core topic in understanding the 21st century global village, and the Internet Age in particular. In the last Korean presidential election, we witnessed just how dramatic a result could be called by the two candidates' choices of media.

Moreover, it would be too narrow a viewpoint to reduce "media" to newspapers, broadcasts and the Internet. Computer operating systems, mobile phone screens, department store windows, the electronic advertising screen at *Gwanghwamun* (in Seoul), movie advertisements in the subway stations, the signs on the bathrooms doors reading "men" and "women," traffic signs, ATM

screens, university classrooms... media encompasses all spaces where meaning and communication takes place. In my column, I once called this space where meaning is exchanged "media space." I shall get another chance to explain about this media space.



Well, perhaps I should begin this article; one I don't know when I'll complete.

The Medium is the Message

Let's first try to remember the following inequality

Book > font > type > letter > language > thought > meme > ?

The book is the most familiar medium to modern man, regardless of age or gender. Of the countless forms of communication, a book is a dignified one that even if the Internet were to swallow the world whole, it would stubbornly resist, having withstood the test of thousands of years. This is the story of the book.

The book is an expression of thought. The book is also a medium. If one closely examines just one simple volume, you can see it's a complex medium that contains layer after layer

of other media, much like an onion. A book contains type, which has been decorated by font. Type is the medium that contains letters. Letters are the medium that contains language. Language is the medium that contains the brain's thoughts. Thought is the medium that contains memes. Are you with me? How about we put it this way -- memes are the content of the medium known as thought. Language is the medium of the content called thought. Letters are the medium containing the content known as language. Type and font are the media containing the content known as letters. Books are the medium containing the contents known as type and font. Oh my! Perhaps I've confused you more.

Let's try to think of a couple of examples. People who have written on the Internet and agonized over which font to use would understand. With 11-point text, should I use this font or that font... it's the same piece of writing, but you must have had a different feeling depending on which font it was written in.

For a love letter, unless you're an unfeeling stone, you'll probably avoid using Gothic type. You can see that within the medium of font, there are already particular intentions; to wit, messages contained inside. Purely through the varicolored choice of font, one can convey countless messages.

The medium I have chosen to convey media theory to you is text. I could draw comics, use Flash animation or PowerPoint, or I could even call you together and directly lecture you on the subject, but I have chosen text. This is because for the message I would like to convey, I judged the medium of text as the most appropriate. Of course, my judgments could also be wrong.

In Marshall McLuhan's book *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, a great vice of print culture was pointed out. That would be the lamentable way in which printing type has drastically condensed man's freedom of thought. McLuhan pointed out that despite the fact

that expressions of thought could use innumerable and diverse media like pictures, music and dance, man has almost grown addicted to print culture, drawn by the bait of efficiency and productivity.

Like McLuhan pointed out, if we accepted the thesis that the medium is the message, the moment we chose the medium of print, we became shut off from the possibility of countless other messages.

If we rethink the problem from this point of view, we can conclude that things we take as common sense -- like campaigns to purify the Korean language, criticism of the jargon used on the Internet, and complaints made by adults about today's children who don't read books and are absorbed in online chatting and computer games - are nothing more than the groundless ravings of a generation that has grown addicted to printed culture.

This is because the Internet generation - compared to an older generation that has lived slave to print and books and hence were limited in scope of thought right from the start - are experimenting with many more possibilities of expression.

Umberto Eco once compared Protestantism to MS-DOS and Catholicism to the Macintosh. In the age when printing technology was humble and bibles were the exclusive property of the clergy, the methods employed by the Catholic Church to convey its teachings to its believers were the sacred images that filled up the walls of churches - icons - and holy paintings. Splendid Catholic cathedrals were the best-suited medium of an age without printing technology.

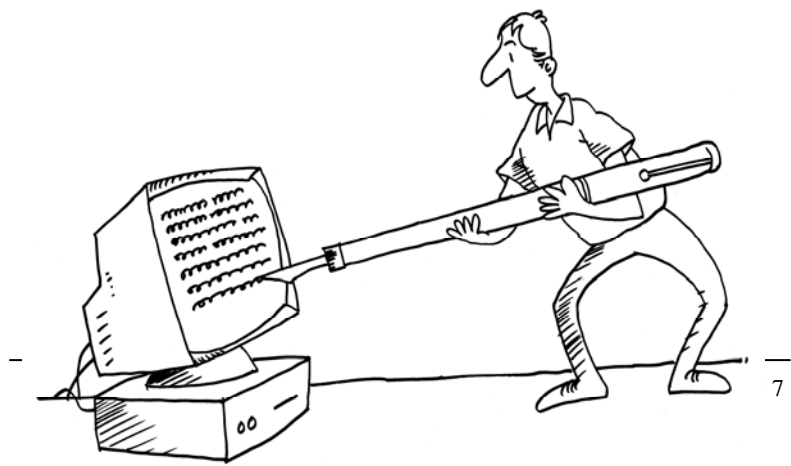
On the other hand, the invention of printing technology was decisive in the birth of Protestantism. Martin Luther tried to awaken believers by propagating the Bible, and the fact that to this day, Protestants place more importance on Bible study than

do Catholics is evidence revealing how Protestantism is a by-product of print culture. If one looks at the reformation from a different angle, one could see it as the confrontation between the medium of sacred images or icons versus the medium of the printed letter.

They say you see only as far as you know, but in fact you see only as far as the media you choose

The Internet is not a place where one screams alone and disappears. Comments go up right away, the writer is influenced by these comments and his next piece evolves. It's a two-way conversation. My space is not a place where I simply proclaim something and disappear, but rather it is like a lecture hall where I share with you my knowledge and experiences.

In addition, one didn't know whether a serial would go on for dozens of installments or finish after just a couple. This is clearly a different approach from that of newspaper serials, which are run according to a table of contents in which the order of writing



has been decided. This is because by leaving the fate of my writing to the interaction of cyberspace, posts can have an even greater sense of life. My writing will evolve, like a living organism, according to reader comments and my own circumstances. The Internet is not a newspaper published once daily or a broadcaster that changes its programming according to hourly time slots. In this space, the design of what I write follows the principles of the cyber world.

In the first part, I defined not just newspapers and broadcasters, but all space in which meaning is exchanged as media. Do you, the readers, believe your own eyes? Are you confident that what you confirm with your own eyes is absolute fact? If so, why is it that magicians manage to fool us almost every time? Can you really believe your own eyes?

Media controls content. A magician is a person who has mastered the principle upon which your brain's optical nerve system operates. That is to say, he understands quite well that the brain is a very selective and incomplete medium that doesn't see things as they really are, but rather chooses only what it wants to see.

If you master the media's operating logic, you can also control the way the media's subscribers understand the world. You can control their worldview. It's all the same world, but between the readers of the Chosun Ilbo, JoongAng Ilbo and Dong-A Ilbo (Korea's three biggest newspapers, which are generally

conservative) on one hand and those of OhmyNews on the other, that world looks completely different. Words don't convey this. Media controls content.

Marshall McLuhan once expanded media to the body. A hammer, the hand; a car; the foot; TV, the eyes... Media decides the content, but more importantly, media is the scope in which the world is contained. How does the world look? Nobody has gotten a view of what the world is. How many places can you actually visit in your lifetime? With the media known as your eyes, trying your best, the world you can see would be hard pressed to exceed a radius of several dozens of kilometers.

If those who control the media showed you only what they wished to show you, your image of the world as you understand it would be nothing more than what they showed.

If even the simple question of whether something does or does not exist is this complicated, imagine how much more so the complex world of ideology and socio-political tension must be.

Even with things we see with our own eyes, all we can do is make a judgment based on probability. Why? Because media controls content. We can only be sure that our worldview will change in accordance with the media's expansion and transformation.

For example, when did you start worrying about and having an

interest in events in some far off country? Wasn't this because the media informed you of those events? Scholars call this media role "agenda setting." This means that the media, even if it decides to simply show something without presenting any political analysis or opinions, can control its readers' or viewers' worldviews and ways of thinking.

They say you see only as far as you know. I've changed this phrase somewhat -- *you see only as far as the capacity of the media you choose.*

You are what you read ▶