Figure/Ground: Cracking the McLuhan Code

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Abstract

In this paper we explore McLuhan's use of figure/ground, which plays a central role in his understanding of media and helps us to crack the McLuhan code.

Keywords

McLuhan. Figure/ground.

Introduction

Marshall McLuhan is regarded as a pioneer in the development of communications studies and as the founder of the media ecology movement. People have found his writing difficult to read. The purpose of this paper is to crack the McLuhan code by demonstrating how his use of figure/ground was central to his approach to understanding media and their effects.

McLuhan's explanation as to why people found his writing difficult to understand is revealed in the following letter to a friend.

My writings baffle most people simply because I begin with ground and they begin with figure. I begin with *effects* and work round to the *causes*, whereas the conventional pattern is to start with a somewhat arbitrary selection of 'causes' and then try to match these with some of the effects. It is this haphazard matching process that leads to fragmentary superficiality. As for myself, I do not have a point of view, but simply work with the total situation as obvious *figures* against hidden *ground*.

Once it is understood that the hidden ground of our time is information moved at the speed of light, then it becomes easy to see why schooling is changing so drastically (MOLINARO; MCLUHAN; TOYE, 1987, p. 478).

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McLuhan makes use of his notion of figure/ground in the above passages. This was a key concept in his work. He believed that to understand the meaning of a figure one must take into account the ground in which it operates and in which it is situated. The true meaning of any "figure," whether it is a person, a social movement, a technology, an institution, a communication event, a text, or a body of ideas, cannot be determined if one does not take into account the ground or environment in which that figure operates. The ground provides the context from which the full meaning or significance of a figure emerges. The concern with the figure/ground relationship is consistent with McLuhan's emphasis on interface and pattern rather than on a fixed point of view. It also explains why he thought that content was not independent of the medium in which it was transmitted. The medium forms a ground for the content that it transmits and as such changes the message and this is another reason that McLuhan claimed the medium is the message. The message of a medium independent of its content is the ground that it creates for any content it transmits. So a medium actually possesses two messages, one is figure or its content and the other is ground, the ground it creates for its content.

One of McLuhan's favorite examples to illustrate the way in which the context or ground can transform the meaning of a figure: is the figure of a smokestack belching smoke, once a symbol of industrial progress especially in Soviet iconography, is today a symbol of pollution. Another example is the way the meaning of a suntan has changed; once a sign of hard work in the fields, it is now a symbol of affluence and holidaying and will probably evolve into a symbol of reckless disregard for health and the risk of skin cancer sometime in the future.

I believe that McLuhan's use of figure/ground analysis allowed him to see things that others did not see and also accounts for his uncanny ability to "predict" the future by studying the present. He wrote in a letter to Tom Stepp on March 26, 1973,

> The figure is what appears and the ground is always subliminal. Changes occur in the ground before they occur in the figure. We can project both figure and ground as images of the future using the ground as subplot of subliminal patterns and pressures and effects which actually come before the more or less final figures to which we normally direct our interest (MOLINARO; MCLUHAN; TOYE, 1987).

McLuhan adds that this is easy for him to do because he has "devoted nearly all his study to ground." Ground for McLuhan was also the environment in which the figure operated but the environment was not a container as McLuhan (1969, p. 30) suggested, "Environment is process not container. The environment always manages somehow to be invisible. Only the content [one can also read figure], the preceding environment, is noticeable." Unlike the other students of media who focused on the figure, McLuhan's focus of study was always on the ground or the environment and this, I believe, was his secret advantage. It is

also the way to understand the many dichotomies that he developed in his studies.

The Reversal of Cause and Effect

"The way to study the effects, for example, if you wanted to study what the motor car was, you might find out more from what it did to the environment and the community." (MCLUHAN; MCLUHAN; STAINES, 2003, p. 90).

McLuhan suggested that the best way to study media was by "making inventories of effects." (MCLUHAN; MCLUHAN; STAINES, 2003, p. 90). I would therefore suggest that the best way to continue the work of McLuhan is to make an inventory of all the technology that has emerged since his passing in 1980, which marks the beginning of the era of personal computers and what we popularly refer to as the digital age. Technically mainframe computers made use of digital technology but because they were only accessible to a narrow range of experts and were used largely as a form of mass media I would mark the emergence of the personal computer, the PC, as the break boundary between the electric age of mass media and the digital age of today.

Closely related to McLuhan's use of figure ground relationship was his reversal of cause and effect in which he began with the effect and worked backwards to the cause that gave rise to the effect. In the quote that began the previous section on figure/ground McLuhan notes that he

begins with ground while others begin with figure and that he also begins with effects and works around to causes. He clearly associates effects with ground and causes with figure. His reversal of cause and effect is therefore clearly related to his use of his figure/ground methodology. He was also influenced by the work of artists, inventors and scientists. The method of the scientists is to observe effects and by experimentation and reasoning to determine the causes of the observed effects. McLuhan (1964, p. 68) also saw the creative process of both the inventor and the artist as working backwards from the effect they wanted to create to the cause that would lead to the desired effect.

> The Nemesis of Creativity…
>
> A. N. Whitehead… explained how the great discovery of the nineteenth century was the discovery of the technique of discovery. Namely, the technique of starting with the thing to be discovered and working back, step by step, as on an assembly line, to the point at which it is necessary to start in order to reach the desired object. In the arts this meant starting with the effect and then inventing a poem, painting, or building that would have just that effect and no other.

McLuhan (1962, p. 328) was also greatly influenced by Edgar Allen Poe and the symbolists poets in developing his notion that the artists works backwards from the effects we wants to create as the following passage from the last section of Gutenberg Galaxy reveals:

> Poe set this method to work in many of his poems and stories. But it is most obvious in his

invention of the detective story in which Dupin, his sleuth, is an artist-esthete who solves crimes by a method of artistic perception. Not only is the detective story the great popular instance of working backwards from effect to cause, it is also the form in which the reader is deeply involved as co-author. Such is also the case in symbolist poetry whose completion of effect from moment to moment requires the reader to participate in the poetic process itself.

The idea of reversal is a key to cracking the McLuhan Code. He worked backwards from effects to their causes and from the ground or environment of media to the figure of their content. He used this technique to understand the future. He once wrote, "We look at the present through a rear view mirror. We march backwards into the future." Rather than focusing on the figure of the future through speculating he carefully studied the ground of the future, which is the past and the present. He said, "I've always been very careful never to predict anything that had not already happened". (MCLUHAN; MCLUHAN; STAINES, 2003, p. 172).

He also looked to artists as providing him with a guide to peering into the future. He was fond of Wyndham Lewis remark, "The artist is engaged in writing a detailed history of the future because he is aware of the unused potential of the present (MCLUHAN; MCLUHAN; STAINES, 2003, p. 14)." I would suggest that this sentiment of Wyndham Lewis contributed greatly to McLuhan's ideas about predicting the future based on his observations of the present.

Service/disservice

McLuhan often talked about the service and disservice of technology as is the case in the following two excerpts from two of his letters:

> All I am saying is that any product or innovation creates both service and disservice environments which reshape human attitudes. These service and disservice environments are always invisible until new environments have superseded them. (To Jonathan Miller on April 22, 1970 – MOLINARO; MCLUHAN; TOYE 1987, p. 404).

> I have no theories whatever about anything. I make observations by way of discovering contours, lines of force and pressures. I satirize at all times and my hyperboles are as nothing compared to the events to which they refer. If you study symbolism you will discover that it is a technique of rip-off by which figures are deliberately deprived of their ground. You do not seem to have grasped that the message as it relates to the medium, is never the content, but the corporate effects of the medium as an environment of service and disservice (To William Kuhns Dec, 6, 1971 – MOLINARO; MCLUHAN; TOYE 1987, p. 448).

One can look at McLuhan's identification of the service and disservice of media as another example of his making use of figure/ground where the service, which was the intention of the medium is the figure and the unintended disservice is part of the ground or environment that the medium creates. Once again McLuhan begins with the ground and notices the disservices unlike other communications scholars who focus almost entirely on the service of a medium ignoring its disservices.

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 What is also interesting about the second letter to Kuhns is that McLuhan reinforces his claim that he does not start with a theory and he also admits explicitly that he makes use of satire.

Environment/anti-environment

Another example of McLuhan's use of figure/ground is his notion of environment and anti-environment where the environment, which is the ground of any new technology becomes a figure with respect to an anti-environment, which operates as the ground to the figure of that environment.

> Any new technology, any extension or amplification of human faculties given material embodiment, tends to create a new environment… It is in the interplay between the old and new environments that there is generated an innumerable series of problems and confusions… It is useful to view all the arts and sciences as acting in the role of anti-environments that enable us to perceive the environment (MCLUHAN, 1967a).

In other words it is the artist and/or the scientists by creating the anti-environment that allows us to perceive the new environment that is created by a new medium or technology. If it was not for this anti-environment we would only see the content of the new medium and not the environment that supports the new medium and that the new medium creates as McLuhan (1970, p. 192) observed in Culture is Our Business:

> Since in any situation 10 percent of the events cause 90 percent, we ignore the 10 percent and are stunned by the 90 percent. Without an

anti-environment, all environments are invisible. The role of the artist is to create anti-environments as a means of perception and adjustment. Hamlet's sleuth technique for coping with the hidden environment around him was that of the artist: 'As I perchance hereafter shall think meet to put an antic disposition on'… (l, v, 171-72)

One of McLuhan's favorite ways to describe our blindness to our environments was to point out that fish are unaware of the water they swim in. "One thing about which fish know exactly nothing is water, since they have no anti-environment which would enable them to perceive the element they live in." (MCLUHAN; FIORE; AGEL, 1968, p. 175).

Perhaps we need to identify the anti-environment of the digital environment in which we live today. Is it the digital artist? Or perhaps it is the writings of Marshall McLuhan?

McLuhan's Other Uses of Figure/Ground Technique and Reversals

We have described how McLuhan used the notion of figure/ground to develop some of the other tools he made use of to understand media including the reversal of cause and effect; the service and disservice of all media; and environments and anti-environments. We will encounter more of his figure/ground thinking when we unpack some of is famous one-liners. For example in his notion that 'the medium is the message' it is the message that is the figure

and the medium that is the ground. The same is true of the expression 'the user is the content' where the content is the figure and the user is the ground. He also claimed the reversal of the relation between producer and user

I would like to close this discussion of figure/ground with a couple of probes, which is a way of saying I am about to speculate. As McLuhan observed what was unique about his approach to understanding media was his use of figure/ground analysis and his focus or emphasis on the ground rather than the figure, on effects rather than causes, on disservice rather than service, on the anti-environment rather than environment, on the medium rather than the message, and on the user rather than the content. His focus on each of these dyadic pairs was exactly opposite to that of other media scholars. And by his own admission he used hyperbole to get his point across because he was running against the usual flow in communications studies.

The second probe is my belief that it took a highly literate thinker to have come up with the figure/ground approach that McLuhan developed. The notion of figure/ground with which McLuhan analyses media including electric ones arises from a literary perspective in which figure and ground can be distinguished. With the acoustic space of oral communication and electric-configured communication there is no figure and ground; there is only a field. McLuhan is operating out of the literary tradition quite to the

contrary of the claim of some that he is a captive of electric communication. In fact McLuhan, in my opinion, was attempting to preserve the literary tradition and trying to rescue us from the insidious invasion of television culture. Happily because of the ubiquity of computing with personal computers, smart phones and the Internet the obsolescence of written text by television has been reversed because text has become a much greater percentage of the content of digital media compared to the mass electric media that dominated communications in McLuhan's day. Many of the patterns of electric communications that he identified such as decentralization, interdisciplinarity, the shrinking of the gap between producers and consumers, the exchange of jobs for roles and knowledge becoming the driver of our economy have persisted with digital media and have in fact grown more pronounced as we shall see in Chapter 5.

One of the features of the figure/ground perspective is that what is considered figure and ground can be reversed as in certain images created by Escher. In a field every element in the field may be regarded as a figure and the rest of the elements in the field as that figure's ground.

The Medium is the Message

"The message of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs." (MCLUHAN, 1964, p. 8).

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"Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication." (MCLUHAN, 1967b).

"The medium is the message is one of the most useful remarks uttered in the 2oth century." (MAILER, 1988, p. 117).

The meaning of this one-liner is that, independent of its content or purported messages, a medium has its own intrinsic effects on our perceptions, which are the medium's unique message. "The latest approach to media study considers not only the 'content' but the medium and the cultural matrix within which the particular medium operates." (MCLUHAN, 1964, p. 11). The message of a medium is the ground that it creates for any content it transmits independent of what that content is. So a medium actually transmits two messages, one is figure or its content and the other is ground, the ground it creates for its content. The medium is the message is a classic example where McLuhan reverses the figure/ground relationship and chooses to focus on the ground instead of the figure.

The User is the Content

The idea that the one-liner 'the user is the content' conveys is still another example of McLuhan reversing the emphasis from the figure or the content to the ground or the user.

The content is the figure and the user is the ground.

Laws of Media (LOM)

The Laws of Media (LOM) for studying the counterintuitive effects of media, or technologies, scientific laws or any human-made artifact consists of the following four laws:

1. Every medium, technology or human-made artifact enhances some human function.

2. In doing so, it obsolesces some former medium, technology, or human-made artifact, which was used to achieve the same function earlier.

3.In achieving its function, the new medium, technology or human-made artifact retrieves some older form from the past.

4.And when pushed far enough, the new medium, technology or human-made artifact reverses or flips into a complementary or possibly an opposite form.

The Laws of Media (LOM) are another example of McLuhan making use of the figure/ground relationship. The medium that enhances some human function and is the subject of the first law is the figure. The medium that is obsolesced and the medium that is retrieved are the ground. And the new medium into which the medium of the first law flips into is a new figure. So the LOM has two figures and two grounds.

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A Replay of Figure/Ground

"In all patterns, when the ground changes, the figure too is altered by the new interface" (MCLUHAN; MCLUHAN; STAINES, 2003, p. 180).

"We live in the age of the instant replay, and this is one of the most remarkable developments of any age, since it enables us to have the meaning without the experience… The replay is a technique not of cognition but recognition." (MCLUHAN; MCLUHAN; STAINES, 2003, p. 218-219).

Of all of his various techniques I believe that the figure/ground relationship and McLuhan's focus on ground rather that figure holds the key to his many insights which invariably entails a pairing of two elements one of which is the figure that we are consciously aware of and receives the most attention from other scholars and the other is the ground that most are unaware of with the exception of artists. It is the ground that McLuhan focuses on before invariably working back to the figure. We have reviewed a number of examples of McLuhan's use of figure/ground which I believe holds the key to understanding his approach to understanding media and hence will allow the reader to crack the McLuhan code. I will support this hypothesis by listing all of the examples of McLuhan's use of figure/ground many of which have already been encountered in this paper and some of which have not.

We begin with a quote from his 1972 essay, *The End of the Work Ethic*:

> The present fact is that we all live in this new resonating simultaneous world in which the relation between figure and ground, public and performer, goal-seek and role-playing, centralism and decentralism have simply flipped and reversed again and again (MCLUHAN; MCLUHAN; STAINES, 2003, p. 194).

In the reversal of cause and effect it is the effect that is the ground and cause that is the figure.

In the consideration of public and performer it is the public that is the ground and the performer that is the figure.

In the relationship of jobs and roles it is the role that is the ground and the job that is the figure. 'Goal seeking' is figure and 'role-playing' is ground.

In the consideration of centralized versus decentralized environments the decentralized environment is pure ground and in the centralized environment the centralized element is figure and all the other elements that are connected to the centralizing figure form the ground.

In the consideration of percepts and concepts it is the percept that is the ground and the concept that is the figure.

"The effects are percepts and the causes tend to be concepts (MCLUHAN; MCLUHAN; STAINES, 2003, p. 213)."

In 'the medium is the message' it is the medium that is the ground and the message or content that is the figure.

In 'the user is the content' it is the user that is the ground and the content that is the figure.

In 'every technology has both service and disservice' it is the disservice that is the ground and the service that is the figure.

In 'products become services in the electric age' it is the service that is the ground and the product that is the figure.

In 'consumers become producers in the electric age' it is the consumer that is the ground and the producer that is the figure.

In the comparison of visual space and acoustic space it is the acoustic space that is the ground and the visual space that is the figure.

In the comparison of the medium of the oral myth and the book it is the oral myth that is ground and the book that is figure.

In the comparison of light through and light on it is light through that is ground and light on that is figure.

In 'the content of a new medium is an older medium' it is the older medium that is the ground and the new medium that is the figure.

In the consideration of right brain and left brain thinking patterns it is the right brain that is aware of the ground and the left brain that is aware of the figure.

In the consideration of software and hardware it is the software that is the ground and the hardware that is the figure.

In the consideration of subjective and objective thought patterns it is the subjective that is the ground and the objective that is the figure.

In the consideration of specialization versus interdisciplinarity it is the interdisciplinarity that is the ground and the specialism that is the figure.

In the consideration of monopolies of knowledge versus crowd sourcing it is the crowd sourcing that is the ground and the monopoly of knowledge that is the figure.

In contrasting a point of view with pattern recognition it is the pattern recognition that is the ground and the point of view that is the figure.

In the consideration of logic it is inductive logic or analogic that is the ground and deductive logic that is the figure.

McLuhan even applies figure ground to humour in which a joke is the figure and a grievance, which prompts the joke is the ground.

In his consideration of politics the politician's policies play the role of figure and the politician's image that of ground.

"At the speed of light, policies and political parties yield place to charismatic images."

"Politics will eventually be replaced by imagery. The politician will be only too happy to abdicate in favor of his image, because the image will be much more powerful than he could ever be."

In his consideration of education the answers or packaged information play the role of figure and the questions for exploration that of ground.

In his analysis of journalism the focus of the old objective journalism is with figure while the focus of the new journalism of Normal Mailer and Tom Wolfe is with ground.

In the consideration of program and their subliminal effects it is the program that is the figure and the subliminal effects that are the ground.

Even in his consideration of environment and anti-environment the environment, which usually plays the role of ground and is hidden, becomes figure and the anti-environment revealed to us by artists

and scientists that makes us aware of the subliminal environment is the ground.

Perhaps the most outrageous figure ground pairing was the one McLuhan made of Sputnik and the planet Earth. "Sputnik… maybe an extension of the planet itself… Nature ended… the planet became an art form, an ecologically programmable environment (MCLUHAN; MCLUHAN; STAINES, 2003, p. 208)." Sputnik is the figure and the planet is the ground.

Another pairing that McLuhan made is that the content of a new medium is some older medium. "Except for light, all other media come in pairs, with one acting as the content of the other, obscuring the operation of both. (MCLUHAN; ZINGRONE, 1995, p. 274)."

I realize that my analysis of these McLuhan pairings is a sweeping generalization but I believe it has an element of truth in it. I believe it will appeal to many McLuhanites and it will certainly offend those who have a negative view of McLuhan's thinking. I do find it curious, however, that McLuhan is constantly contrasting these pairings. This approach is implicit in his fourth law of the Laws of Media in which there is the flip or reversal. Perhaps his approach is due in part to the fact that he constantly thought in terms of metaphor which he considered to be a figure ground relationship. "All metaphors are figure/ ground in ratio to figure/ground (MCLUHAN; MCLUHAN; STAINES, 2003, p. 289)."

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Figura/Fundo:
Decifrar o Código McLuhan

Resumo

Neste trabalho, investigamos o uso por McLuhan de figura/fundo, que cumpre um papel central em seu entendimento das mídias e ajuda-nos a decifrar o código McLuhan.

Palavras-chave

McLuhan. Figura/Fundo.

Figura/fondo:
descifrando el código McLuhan

Resumen

En este trabajo exploramos el uso que hace McLuhan de figura/fondo, que juega un papel central en su comprensión de los medios de comunicación y nos ayuda a descifrar el código McLuhan.

Palabras clave

McLuhan. Figura/fondo.

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