

MARSHALL MCLUHAN AND UMBERTO ECO AS THEORISTS OF MEDIA EDUCATION*

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Abstract. Views of M. McLuhan and Umberto Eco on global media village practically coincide, as in the fact that modern society is inconceivable without the (self) media education. According to U. Eco, in the near future our society will split – or already is split – into two – those in their dealings with the media do without the critical selection of information received and those who are able to select and process information. Thus, selection and processing / understanding / analysis of media texts – the basis of people media competence in XXI century.

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Herbert Marshall McLuhan (1911 - 1980) is a well-known Canadian sociologist and educator, a media theorist. He has laid the foundation of modern media education and predicted the effect of television on contemporary society. M. McLuhan conducted extensive research on the impact of media on human life in the modern information society. His name is often mentioned among such outstanding scientists as Newton, Pavlov, Darwin and others. In 1997, Oxford Dictionary contained 346 references to M. McLuhan’s works.

M. McLuhan was given different epithets from “the clown” and “the utopian” to “the oracle electronic age” and “the guru”. Though only some of his ideas about the impact on individual modern media were confirmed empirically, it is clear that McLuhan’s ideas had a great impact both modern media research, and a system of media education.

McLuhan was born in Edmonton (Alberta province) in a family of an insurance agent and an actress, who performed in church halls. In 1928 he entered the University of Manitoba. In 1933 he won University gold medal in Science and Arts. In 1934-1936 the future theorist of media studied in Cambridge, also he taught at the University of Wisconsin and Saint Louis University.

McLuhan's thinking was influenced by Catholic philosopher P. de Sharden who believed that use of electricity expands the central nervous system. At the same time should be noted religious orientation in McLuhan's creative work. Being a Catholic, he believed that mass media are the Message bestowed upon a person over and which can be guessed only in process of their development. In 1942 McLuhan completed his doctoral thesis *Rhetoric Thomas Nash*. From 1946 to 1977 he was a professor the University of Toronto where he conducted lessons about culture and communications problems.

In 1953 McLuhan (together with E.Carpenter) established such journal as *Explorations*. The primary goal of this journal was to explain the role of press and media literacy for society formation. Practically in 1950 McLuhan was the first Canadian scientist who paid serious attention to research of media in a society.

It is significant to note that McLuhan was the pioneer of media education development in Canada: in the late fifties he developed the first educational course on media culture for university students.

In 1950-1960-s McLuhan's name became more and more famous not only among scientists. In 1951 his book *The Mechanical Bride* was published. It was devoted to advertizing industry. *Understanding Media* (1964) made McLuhan popular in the world. His approach to training media, sometimes called "the Marshall Plan", supposed to involve a pupil in media. "Don't analyze. Don't explain. Just fill a classroom with films, TV, the records, blinking lights, and let the pupils react as they will". Though, a quite reasonable question may be asked: "What is the teacher's role?" And "How functional is this method?" (McLuhan, 2003).

However, McLuhan was the first Canadian teacher who realized the importance and necessity of media education.

It was McLuhan who one of the first studied the processes of mass communications in close connection with common cultural problems, giving top priority to culture. At the same time the scientist emphasized cultural clichés of new media. Probably, it looked like a revolution for official science of the XX-th

century. McLuhan is considered to have used the term “media” for designation of different media for the first time.

Dividing all media into “cool” and “hot”, the scientist borrowed musical terminology of jazz. In jazz the term “cool” defines quiet and passionless rhythm, whereas “hot” mean sensual and fast rhythm. In his opinion “cool” media are television, phone, and others which don't express author's point of view. As for television, we can't agree with his opinion because the “author” is more than obvious. “Hot” media such as film, radio, press printing always express the author's point of view.

McLuhan realized that new technologies belong to the future, and so people (sooner or later) should come to terms with media. In general television was a subject of basic McLuhan's scientific interests. He realized that it was useless to protest against the content of television programs as he considered that spectators would be shown what they wanted. The scientist noted: education is ideally civil defense against media fall-out. Yet Western man has had, so far, no education or equipment for meeting any of the new media on their own terms (McLuhan, 2003, p.220). That is why McLuhan continued to appeal and warn: once we have surrendered our senses and nervous systems to the private manipulation of those who would try to benefit from taking a lease on our eyes and ears and nerves, we don't really have any rights left (McLuhan, 2003, p.81). He marked that development of modern information technology could lose the substantial moments. Also he noted the possible danger of media manipulative effect on people.

In 1960-s McLuhan was incomprehensible in great degree by many. Because of his revolutionary ideas McLuhan wasn't accepted by scientists. McLuhan, in his turn, criticized the experts studying media, declaring that their approaches didn't promote the studying of the subject. He wasn't in good terms with university colleagues. Moreover, students were recommended not to attend lectures of “the media guru”. As a result only seven of his students defended their dissertations.

McLuhan expressed his thoughts in rather original, inconsistent, and eclectic manner. Other strict critics said that he “talked nonsense”. As for this point, a reasonable explanation can be given. M. Vavilov assumes McLuhan’s works were misunderstood because of incompleteness of his working concept. Other possible reason is that the readers aren’t ready to grasp McLuhan’s works without preliminary acquaintance of “the Concept asymmetry of a person as a being” and “the Concept of Kappa-Florensky”. If the readers had known these works they would have understood a lot of his brilliant, unsolved metaphors.

For many years McLuhan believed in a mosaic image of modern civilization. Calling television image “the image of low definition”, McLuhan specified that this image offers an addressee few details and has low degree of informing. The TV image offers about three million dots per second to the receiver, demanding that every second the televiewer filled emptiness to generate the impression. From these he accepts only a few dozen each instant, from which to make an image. Thus the TV image requires each instant that we “close” the spaces in the mesh by a convulsive sensuous participation (McLuhan, 2003, p.359).

McLuhan considered that in television everything is constructed on reaction of a televiewer. He came to such conclusion during the experiments. Children watched westerns, or other episodes with violence scenes. The Mackworth head-camera was worn by children watching TV, which fixed that their eyes follow not the actions, but the reaction of the actors’ faces, that children didn’t pay great attention to the destructive actions. Teenagers had a great passion to strong animation. The scientist believed that a televiewer (especially a child) took an active part in assimilation of this television mosaic. Every person has his own images and pictures. It depends on life experience, education, and the televiewer’s attention at the moment of telecast viewing.

McLuhan positively estimated combined televiewings of children and adults/parents. Speaking about television and educational process, M. McLuhan noticed that by its stress on participation, dialogue, and depth, has brought to

America new demand for crash-programming in education. Whether there ever will be TV in every classroom is a small matter. The revolution has already taken place at home (McLuhan, 2003, p.381).

TV can illustrate the interplay of process and the growth of forms of all kinds. Mere classroom use of television— is useless. According to M. McLuhan television is able to change the approach to subjects, to illustrate process and develop every possible modes of study. M. McLuhan believed that the total involvement in all-absorbing “newness” occurs in young lives via mosaic TV image. Today McLuhan’s ideas about our planet as a global media village and importance/consequence of media messages for people are taken as a principle of modern media education.

Umberto Eco is a famous Italian theorist of media. Being a university professor he was engaged in media education of students. As the consecutive supporter of the semiotic theory, U.Eco has stated these theoretical opinions in his monographic volume which has been edited in different languages. Russian translation of the book *The absent structure. Introduction to Semiology* was published in 1998.

Referring to P.Baldini, R.Barthes, K.Metz, P.– P. Pazolini and other theorists and experts of media culture, U.Eco proved that the analysis of media texts of different kinds and genres (Eco, 1998b, p.71-415), based on semiotics and structuralist approaches, should be a key task of media education.

Semiotic analysis - involves an analysis of the language of signs and symbols in media texts, the analysis is closely connected with the iconographic analysis. Semiotic analysis of media texts for teaching purposes is based on semiotic theory of media education (Semiotic Approach, Le decodage des medias), proved by such famous media theorists of semiotic (structuralist) direction, as R. Barthes (Barthes, 1964), K.Metz (Metz, 1964), U.Eco (Eco, 1976), etc.

“A structure, - wrote U.Eco, - is such way of action (which I’ve developed) to name different things equally” (Eco, 1998b, p.65), however, on the other hand, “a structure is something that doesn’t exist yet. But if I have revealed it, I’ve got

only a link of the chain which points more elementary, more fundamental structures behind it” (Eco, 1998b, p.327).

This paradox shows the essence of semiotic theory using. U.Eco is right, asserting that during an epoch when mass communications are used as the tool power which is carrying out social control by means of planning messages, when it is impossible to change the ways of sending or forming messages, there is a possibility to change — such guerrilla way —when addressees select their own codes reading (Eco, 1998b, p.415).

As a matter of fact, it is the mechanism of resistance ideological influence and manipulation of the consciousness of an individual by media texts. Namely ability critically analyze and estimate media texts is a core media competence which can be regarded as “a sum total of the individual’s motives, knowledge, skills, abilities (indicators: motivation, contact, content, perception, interpretation/estimated, practical-operational, creative), to select, use, critically analyze, evaluate and transfer media texts in various kinds, forms and genres to the analyze complex processes of media functioning” (Fedorov, 2007, p.54).

The analysis of a media text is similar to “decoding”. Let’s suppose that “the code is the structure in the form of model, acting as a basic rule for making concrete messages, which thanks to it can be informed. All codes can compared with each other on the basis of more simple and more comprehensive general code” (Eco, 1998b, p.67).

There are a lot of variants of such interpretation codes and they don’t depend on professional and/or art level of the media text. That is the message turns out to be an empty form, having different meanings (Eco, 1998b, p.73). However, such book as “Finnegan’s wake” of course, can be interpreted, but Fermat’s theorem or W.Allen's full filmography is impossible to get from it by no means. It seems truism, but destructivists believed that the text can be done with everything you like. It is a scandalous nonsense (Eco, 1998a).

A contact of audience with the media text is very important for its perception/reading. It is important both sense and function, and information

component (Eco, 1998b, p.71-72). Therefore we can tell what can be the product, but never, what it has become (Eco, 1998b, p.87).

Last decades preference in media education is given to practical, semiotic theories avoiding esthetic component of media texts, as it is considered minor and unimportant for pragmatic society, using information technology.

As for Umberto Eco, he doesn't reject an esthetic component in semiotic theory of media, a message with esthetic function is ambiguous, first of all, in relation to that system of expectations which and is a code (Eco, 1998b, p.79).

In this connection two problems appear which can be considered separately, and at the same time they are closely connected among themselves:

- a) esthetic communication is such experience of communication which can be neither calculated, nor systematized structurally ;
- b) and still this experience has something that, undoubtedly, must possess a structure, and at all levels, otherwise it wouldn't be communication, but only reflex reaction to stimulus (Eco, 1998b, p.87).

The most significant in semiotic approach to media education is the following Umberto Eco's statement a work of art can't be considered as a scheme or a number of schemes, extracted from them, but he (the researcher-semiotician, the media competent reader/spectator/listener – A.F., V. K) puts it to the scheme to comprehend mechanisms which provide a great variety of perusals and, so, gives the sense to the product-message» (Eco, 1998b, p.284).

At the same time mythological consciousness is being actualized by media, and it, in it's turn, promotes the analysis of the folklore texts in media education (developed by Vladimir Propp) , for example, for trilogy about Indiana Jones by S.Spielberg or *Avatar* (2009) by J. Cameron.

Recent decades both in Western and Russian press is being discussed the Internet influence on people (unfortunately M.McLuhan hasn't lived till its occurrence), that they lose the habit of reading books and press, and, in it's turn, literacy level of population has been declining. Umberto Eco in his recent works insists that total orientation of modern audience to audiovisual, computer

media texts don't conduct to literacy decline as the computer returns people in Guttenberg galaxy, and those who surf around the Internet at night... use words. If the TV screen is a window in the world, represented by images, then the display is an ideal book where the world is expressed by words and divided into pages (Eco, 1998a).

In the Middle Ages the cathedral was considered to give everything necessary both for everyday life, and beyond the grave, as books only distract people from base values, encourage excessive knowledge and unhealthy curiosity. So 500 years ago conformists were afraid of books as now they are afraid of a computer and the Internet while it is not necessary to oppose visual and verbal communications, but improve both (Eco, 1998a). By the way, similar arguments can be found in McLuhan's works.

Moreover, Umberto Eco notes new hypertextual possibilities which are given to a modern person with computer "quests" or Internet forums: in hypertextual transposition even a detective story may be an open structure and a reader can decide for himself, whether a butler is a murderer, or somebody else, or an investigator. It isn't a new idea. Before the computer invention poets and writers dreamed about completely clear text which readers could copy as many times as they like (Eco, 1998a).

There was a precise division in traditional society into those, who make culture and who use it; people who write books and who read them. The Internet has changed everything. The era of a new samizdat is being opened: everyone can write something and be generally recognized by a lot of readers, and it is great (McLuhan, <http://www.mclucan.utoronto.ca>).

Analogous processes take place in media education. 20-30 years ago not only skilled media teachers and educational supplies were required, but also bulky technical equipment (for example, cinematographic equipment for shootings, film and projection developments), etc.

Up-to-date computer, internet, multimedia technique gives to the person unprecedented possibility for effective media self education. All necessary

educational supplies (for people of different age) and the monograph can be downloaded free of charge from media educational electronic libraries. Written down on disks or other carriers audiovisual and usual texts can be bought, hired and/or downloaded from a network. Having trained theoretically and methodically, it is possible to create a media educational forum/blog, and suggest, for example, own media texts for operative discussion (thus communicating with other Internet users from different cities and countries) ...

Conclusions. Views of Marshall McLuhan and Umberto Eco on global media village practically coincide, as in the fact that modern society is inconceivable without the (self) media education. According to U. Eco, in the near future our society will split – or has already splited – into two – those in their dealings with the media do without the critical selection of information received and those who are able to select and process information (Eco, 1998a). That is why it is necessary to teach people to choose main and useful information, otherwise, access to this information will be useless. Thus, selection and processing / understanding / analysis of media texts – the basis of people media competence in XXI century.

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