



When the Message is Embodied

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***Abstract** This study puts the spotlight on McLuhan's concept "the medium is the message," situating it within the body of scholarly work on media ecology. This paper probes the question, "How does the human body as a medium communicate the message of Christ?" Why this study? In a higher education institution like St. Paul University Iloilo where the University's vision explicitly states its identity as a Catholic University rooted in the love of Christ, the question that it always faces is, how is this vision manifested and embodied by its administrators, faculty, staff, students, and alumni? The major concept that underpins this question is, how can the human body, particularly a student, an administrator, a staff or faculty member, communicate its foundational belief and identification in Christ, the center of the University's engagement and formation as a Catholic University? This paper is qualitative in nature that seeks to provide a conceptual framework in examining the body as a medium and raises key questions on how the human body can communicate the Christian message of the Incarnation in general, and how a particular body that subscribes to this tradition exhibits and manifests its foundational mission rooted in the love of Christ.*

Keywords: Media Ecology, Human Body, Communication, Paulinian Education

1. INTRODUCTION

This research takes off from an earlier paper entitled, "The Body as the Primary Text," an analytical essay that unpacks the significance of visual images in communicating the message of the Incarnation, the foundation of the Catholic Christian faith. The earlier paper uses an interdisciplinary approach in exploring the topic by juxtaposing the theological reflections of Augustine and Julian of Norwich with the power of images in conveying a message, and anchors it in the work of Leo Steinberg, an art historian who studied the significance of the paintings on the naked baby Jesus in the Renaissance period. Through the eyes of faith, the visual image becomes a primary text, "The Word is made flesh and dwells among us."

The current study, "When the Message is Embodied," puts the spotlight on McLuhan's "the medium is the message," situating it within the body of scholarly work on media ecology especially on the concept that through mediated communication we are all both together and apart (Strate, 2008). Or, a particular medium can disembody us (e.g., when we use a cell phone to communicate, we are only heard but not seen). Yet at the same time we embody the medium, we are the medium itself, or put another way, the human body is a primary medium of communication (Strate, 2008).

Statement of the Problem

How does the human body as a medium communicate the message of Christ?

This paper examines the question by integrating the scholarly work in media ecology, particularly in treating media as media and in embodying the Catholic Christian

values as laid out in the vision, mission, and goals of St. Paul University Iloilo (SPUI).

This work focuses on the concept of the human body as “the vehicle of being in the world” and the positive and instrumental location of human existence and grasping the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 94. also in Schaub, 2012).

One of the major gaps in the study of media ecology is the study of the “oldest medium of communication”, the human body (Killmeier, 2009). In its failure to look critically on the role of the human body in communication, most studies in media ecology tend to focus on technological determinism overlooking the critical role that human agency plays in media ecology (Killmeier, 2009). Since this paper examines how the human body can communicate the message and presence of Christ, particular focus will be on the agency of the body in the media ecology. In this paper, bodies are seen not only as “the result of socio-religious discourses, but also active participants in constructing and transferring religious meaning” (Ornella, A.D., Ornella, A.D., Knauss, S., and Hopflinger, A (eds.) 2014, p. 15). This is where McLuhan’s “the medium is the message” comes into the fore as the body engaged in interpersonal relationships becomes both a message and a medium. This paper also attempts to present the age-long dichotomy between the body and mind that resulted to the dismemberment of the human person. For centuries, this dichotomy has separated the body from the mind and spirit, and vice versa. In this particular setting, the message becomes disembodied in mediated communication. Hence, most studies in media ecology tend to separate content from medium, situating McLuhan’s famous dictum, “the medium is the message” within the locus of technological determinism.

Why this study?

In a higher education institution like St. Paul University Iloilo where the University’s vision explicitly states its identity as a Catholic University rooted in the love of Christ, the question that it always faces is, how is this vision manifested and embodied by its administrators, faculty, staff, students, and alumni? The major concept that underpins this question is, how can the human body, particularly a Paulinian body, communicate its foundational belief and identification in Christ, the center of the University’s engagement and formation as a Catholic University?

This study could help the Paulinian academic community in Iloilo communicate its corporate identity as a Catholic University rooted in the love of Christ. And hopefully the Paulinian body will be able to en flesh its motto, *Caritas Christi urget nos* (the Love of Christ impels us), to carry out its mission to form and educate students into the ways of Christ.

Key concepts:

1. The body in communion. The human body is born into the community that has shared values, is shaped by that community but also has the capacity to reshape, reform or transform that community
2. The body as the medium in media ecology, is the locus of interaction, intervention, and intersection of all the other media and socio-cultural forces,
3. As a medium, the insight and reality encountered by the human body leave an imprint in the world that the body inhabits,
4. The human body receives, interprets, reframes, retells the stories of its own community.

The conceptual map

This paper is qualitative in nature that seeks to explore the key concepts presented above in examining the body as a medium and raises key questions on how the human body can communicate the Christian message of the Incarnation in general, and how a particular body that subscribes to this tradition exhibits and manifests its foundational mission rooted in the love of Christ.

Drawing on the multidisciplinary intellectual frameworks in communication, philosophy, theology and religion, the paper engages the body as a medium of communication and its place in media ecology. The contributions of Merleau-Ponty, Marshall McLuhan, and James Carey are highlighted, particularly on how their concepts on the medium of communication cast a light on the critical role of the human body in media ecology. The human body is also examined from the theology of the Incarnation, probing a question, “How does a Paulinian embody the message and presence of Christ in this world?” Here, the means of communicating the corporate identity of a Catholic University such as St. Paul University Iloilo could be explored. This conceptual framework could help the Paulinian body in Iloilo to brand, claim, and communicate its corporate identity in the community that it inhabits.

The body in phenomenology

The concept of the body-subject as a means of communication, “a medium for the world” is based on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (1962/2002) as expanded by Matthew Killmeier (2009) in his essay, “The Body Medium and Media Ecology: Disembodiment in the Theory and Practice of Modern Media.” This notion is further developed by other scholars not only in the field of communication but in religion and theology as well. In the book entitled, *Commun(ica)ting bodies: body as a medium in religious symbol systems* (2014), most contributors acknowledge that while the body is constructed by its social, cultural, and historical contexts, it also shapes these contexts. The body functions as a medium and “thus gives shape to the world and what we know about it, the insight or

reality that is encountered through the body leaves traces in our embodied existence and thus acquires a certain kind of concreteness and materiality...” (Ornella, A.D., Ornella, A.D., Knauss, S., and Hopflinger, A (eds.) 2014, p. 21). Or as one media ecology scholar puts it, “Media are the stuff with which we build our social realities” (Strate, 2008, p. 133). This is to say that the human body is the locus and the primary means where we express, perceive, become conscious of, and subject to the world that we inhabit (Killmeier, 2009). We both are influenced and influence the media environment. The body as a medium is not only shaped by the world but is an active participant in reforming and reconstructing the world. The body communicates something about oneself to the others. Thus one media ecology scholar, Killmeier (2009) encourages a critical study of the bodies as they are “more sophisticated and generative medium”, and consider how they impact and are affected by their communicative environments” (Killmeier, 2009, p. 46). As Stefanie Knauss (2014), scholar and theologian notes, the human body as a medium “enables engagement with the other (human beings, the world around us, and God) at the same time as it contributes to self-awareness and subjectivity. [This] can provide important insight into the complex structures of human existence in the face of God” (p. 56). This phenomenological concept of the body also underscores the view that human consciousness is public, it is not closed-off in the mind, like a thought encased in a spherical shaped bubble separate from the body and the world that it inhabits. In this sense, the body is the purveyor of what the mind perceives at the same time contains the message itself. It is here where the dichotomy between the mind and body is overcome. This is the take off point of Merleau-Ponty’s (1962/2002) phenomenological notion of the body that becomes key in considering the body as a medium in media ecology. This has bearing on both message and the medium particularly at looking into how the message is accessed contained, and conveyed. However, more than a medium of communication, this conceptual exploration of the body also locates it within its theological and religious significance.

Communication scholar, James Carey (1989), whose work also influences scholarship inquiry on media ecology, contends that religious thought not only describes communication but likewise presents a “a model for the appropriate uses of language, the permissible forms of human contact, the ends communication should serve, the motives it should manifest. It taught what it meant to display” (Carey, 1989, p. 31). It is this concept of communication where the paper delves deeply. In this view, communication is not considered as only a process that involves transmission of knowledge or information. Rather, it is a means “toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation

of shared beliefs” (Carey, 1989, p. 18). This is where religions play an important role on how bodies are shaped through “rituals, doctrine[s], or other regulations” of how to become bodies in the world, and that more often, these regulative powers also shape “secular” bodies when they “move beyond explicitly religious spheres” (Ornella, A.D., Ornella, A.D., Knauss, S., and Hopflinger, A (eds.) 2014, p. 21). Bodies shaped by religious beliefs interface and interact with other “secular” bodies. This hews closely with Merleau-Ponty’s (1996/2002) view that we embody our own perceptions and that “we each have a standpoint, an embodied subject position, and that perception is intentional and active” (Killmeier 2009, p. 36). We are not mere recipients of information but we are shapers and participants in making sense or finding meaning out of the realities that confront us in this world. The body as a medium can commune and communicate “in the context of religion and beyond in a way that both enables intersubjective exchange and social community and leaves space for individuality, that provides unifying structure, but is flexible enough to incorporate difference (Ornella, A.D., Ornella, A.D., Knauss, S., and Hopflinger, A (eds.) 2014, p. 21). The body could help us understand better the “sacramentality of the embodied human situation as sign and instrument of the union with God, mediating between the human and the divine, and because it allows us to make sense of how interaction with the world around us, in particular in the engagement with cultural products, can acquire meaning for us” (Knauss, 2014, p. 34). In this sense, we are not only consumers of cultural products like television programs or films, but likewise bodies capable of perceiving and finding meaning and making sense of the world. The phenomenological notion of intentionality has broken the dichotomy between the mind and the body in that an individual does not live within his or her mind but rather in this world, in his or her bodily self.

By situating the body as medium not only as a means of transmission (technology) of information but as a shaper and interpreter of social realities, this paper presents the ways by which a particular body, in this case a body within the academic community of St. Paul University Iloilo, makes visible the values and embodies the gifts of the Paulinian education in conveying the message of God’s love to the community they serve and inhabit.

The view of communication from a technological perspective (medium being mere technology or transmitter/carrier of messages) gives rise to the notion of disembodied communication. “Human perception cannot take place without the body and the senses” (E. McLuhan, 2013, p. 460). Other communication scholars like Allan Watts would even go further to say that “human perception is literally incarnation” (E. McLuhan and Peter Zhang, 2013, p. 460).

How could this be translated or operationalized? How does a Paulinian body communicate its faith and become the message itself?

The body as it acquires, contains, and communicates a message: the Paulinian experience.

2. METHODOLOGY

The description of the Paulinian body experience is culled from the following:

- A. Four focus group interviews conducted from July 24 to August 9, 2017 as part of the St. Paul University System marketing research on “brand DNA” of a Paulinian. Each session is composed of five participants representing the lay administrators, faculty members, non teaching staff, and the SPC sisters. The Paulinian body experience is explicated from the responses on the question, “What can you say are the distinctive attributes of a Paulinian education?”
- B. Three radio program interviews on “*Tatak Paulinian*,” (The mark of a Paulinian) aired on Home Radio 89.7 in Iloilo City on August 20 and 27, and September 3, and 10, 2017 from 10:30am to 11:00 am. Each segment is participated by two College students, three Senior High School students, and five Basic Education students. The basic question asked is, “What is the most memorable experience that you have at SPUI that taught you a valuable lesson?”
- C. Insights of ten students from the College of Arts and Sciences written in 2014 to reflect on their experiences in community immersion sponsored by the Community Extension Program/Social Laboratory Extension Program (CES/SLEP).

The insights of the students and other respondents from the focus group interviews are interpreted and framed from the concept that a body in a community, such as SPUI, is shaped by this community and at the same time has the capacity to reshape, reform, or transform SPUI and its larger community.

Findings: Mapping out the Paulinian body in media ecology
The Paulinian body in communion

One respondent, a lay administrator, from the focus group interview conducted on August 4, 2017 describes the Paulinian body as “caring and nurturing,” which she connects to what Paulinians abide by, “*Caritas Christi urget nos*,” which she views as a manifestation of Christ centeredness, the cornerstone of SPUI vision. Being Christ centered “makes [Paulinians] assertive, in a nice way without being aggressive, and makes them confident and

action-oriented.” From one of the radio interviews aired on August 27, 2017, a Senior High School student simply refers to this as the “body that helps an elderly ride a jeep” or a body that forms in line so each could take one’s turn in riding a tricycle, a pedicab, or a jeepney.” The body in communion, especially during community immersions, exudes joy and happiness, expressed in such statements as, “During my talk, I was happy seeing the children [listen] to what I say because they seem interested in the topic” (n.d., ABMC-2 student). Or, “Many participated in the question-answer portion because we gave out pencils to children who were happy to receive them” (n.d., ABMC-3 student). The “caring and nurturing” attribute is also embodied when students went to visit the inmates at a local jailhouse in Iloilo City. “The prisoners performed a dance number for us. I climbed on a chair just to see their one of a kind performance. I could see happy faces...Indeed they were grateful for the short time and small gift giving that we had shared with them” (n.d., ABMC-3 student). The joy of giving and receiving is embodied in both the givers and the receivers of gifts. “Seeing the smile from people who have less made me more appreciate life” (n.d., 2013, ABMC-3 student). At one of the community immersions in the district of Lapaz, Iloilo City a third year Psychology student (2013) describes the exchange between them and the residents of that community, “The outreach was a real eye-opener for me. It made me become aware of the things which I have normally taken for granted.” Another insight is offered by the student on how “caring and nurturing” takes place, “When we participate in giving and helping others, the experience can be similar...by reflecting on our efforts together we can influence one another’s perspective” (2014, BSPsych-3 student). As one SPC sisters shared in the focus group interview conducted on August 9, 2017, “Through CES and SLEP, the benefits flow both ways, the communities are empowered by the students while the communities help our students develop values of voluntarism, concern for the welfare of those who are in need, thoughtful engagements, etc... While we help develop the communities, the communities also shape the values of our students. There is an exchange. There is a simultaneous growth between our communities and our students.”

The Paulinian body as the purveyor of the message and teaching received

The Paulinian body rooted in the love of Christ (Christ-centeredness) is a body in communion with the community. It receives the vision of the University while at the same time interprets, reframes, transmits, and retells the stories in radio programs, reflection papers, and focus group interviews. What it perceives and learns through the bodily senses is shared in the same way through these same senses. As a medium, the insight and reality encountered by the Paulinian body leave an imprint in the world that the body inhabits. “The families we helped

provided me a sense of belonging and self-worth. Community service has had a strong impact [in] my life. I hope to continue mentoring not just throughout college, but for the rest of my life”(n.d., BSPsych-3 student).

What the body perceives and learns the body does. This is how a Paulinian body is viewed by the others. “Sister, I am really single out a Paulinian. She is warm, efficient, caring, a doer...”

The body is both reflective and active. As conceptually stated in this paper, the body as a medium is not only shaped by the world but is an active participant in reforming and reconstructing the world. The body communicates something about oneself to the others. As a doer, the Paulinian body communicates what she or he abides by or believes. Things are not just confined in the mind, but they are out there experienced not just individually but communally as well. As one Senior High Student in a radio program interview states, “the feeling of being able to serve, of leaving an impact to the community makes us happy, not because we are recognized but because we are able to help.” Another student in a reflection paper writes, “...community service is a way of giving back. I like making people feel that they matter, and it gives me a warm feeling at the end of the day...I grow as a person each time I do community service” (n.d., BS Psych-3 student). The message is incarnational because it does what is said and acts on what it believes. The body as a medium is not simply a recipient of an idea or an information but it likewise performs and acts to leave an impact and make a difference in the community. It is both an actor and participant in the media ecology. The phenomenology of the body that is crucial to the study of the body as a medium in media ecology underscores the view that human consciousness is public where what is both in the mind and the world correlate with one another (Sokolowski, 2000). In this sense, the body is the purveyor of what the mind perceives at the same time contains the message itself. The insights of the students, lay administrators, faculty, staff, and the SPC sisters bear this concept. What the Paulinian body imbibes is not kept to oneself but is shared in the larger community. It is embodied in a “smile,” an “eye” that is open to the realities of the communities it sees, in arms that enfold the other in an embrace. The body is the medium that contains the message and when it acts becomes the message itself. It is not simply an extension but the embodiment of what is perceived, received, and given. The message is embodied when the mind, body, and spirit move toward a shared goal, mission, and vision.

3. CONCLUSION

This paper examines media ecology from multidisciplinary frameworks in communication, philosophy, theology, and religion. By looking at a communication environment, the significance of the conceptual phrase “the medium is the message” is unpacked. Here the human body is both the carrier of the message and is the message itself. This takes on a special meaning when seen within the Catholic intellectual tradition and its foundational belief in the Incarnation. From this multidisciplinary conceptual framework, the means of communicating the corporate identity of SPUI is explored and examined through the insights of its major stakeholders: the students, lay administrators, faculty, staff, and the SPC sisters. As Paulinian students have intuited, they who belong to the Paulinian body leave an imprint in the world that they inhabit. They become both the purveyor of the message and the embodiment of that message.

Recommendations

This is an exploratory study on the significant role of the human body, the oldest and the primary medium of communication in media ecology. It is not exhaustive thus further studies could be taken to hopefully guide SPUI on how to brand, claim, and communicate its corporate identity in the community. Other areas of study could likewise be explored especially on the sacramentality of the human body and the role it plays in media ecology. As this paper suggests, the human body remains the primary medium of communication despite the advances in media technology, thus it is imperative to look at it closely from different angles as the body also hosts both the mind and the spirit.

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