

Nuances and Media

by SHERALYN ROMAN

A regular reader might expect that my column this week would once again take a cudgel to the Ford government, this time for their latest attempt at decimating our healthcare system. It is indeed tempting and we may get to that later but in the meantime, a dissection of our understanding of nuance (in writing, although we know it applies to body language too) is in order because just lately, I feel it is within the nuances of language that the message (whatever it may be) is getting lost. Marshall McLuhan is widely known for the quote "the medium is the message," to which in this age of social media we must now add further warning: that any subtleties, nuances or complexities to the message are now actually completely subverted by the medium altogether - to the greater detriment of us all.

The crux of McLuhan's most oft-quoted statement is largely understood to mean: "that the form of a medium embeds itself in the message, creating a symbiotic relationship by which the medium influences how the message is perceived."

I'd love to go back to school again (four times wasn't enough!) if only to audit a course on communications and listen in as young adults debate the relevance of McLuhan today because, in my opinion, his thoughts have perhaps never been more relevant. A quick summary, provided by Google (now there's a medium for you) posits "that modern electronic communications (including radio, television, films, and computers) would have far-reaching sociological, aesthetic, and philosophical consequences, to the point of actually altering the ways in which we experience the world." McLuhan wrote these words well before the age of social media, in 1964 to be exact, and yet they are profoundly applicable to how we consume media today. We are utterly under its spell, voraciously reading every headline, every tweet, every post or thread, at once attempting to fully engage with and understand the world around us while simultaneously distilling it down to as few words as possible. Nuance is lost in the word count. Subtext gone, context missing in action and subtleties abandoned. The result is information overload while we drown in a sea of misinformation.

What sent me down this path was a column I almost wrote last week. Conversations were had during the recent holidays that set alarm bells ringing in my head. A quick dopamine hit of social media confirmed my worst fears. But did it? Rather than tumble head first into the maelstrom of the media purporting to spread the message, I made some phone calls. I sent some emails. I did some research. Not surprisingly, the nuances of the messaging had been lost completely due in large part to the medium used to share it - Yes, Twitter, I'm talking about you. When one took the time to learn more about the topic, one learned so much more about the context and came to understand the subtle nuances behind the decisions taken. If you are frustrated about the vagueness of the topic itself that led to this epiphany, it's because I committed to confidentiality and that's one word about which my definition will never waver no matter the medium in which it was guaranteed.

In my usual manner, this is a very long way of saying McLuhan was not only correct in his philosophical musings but we are now living out the very worst of his predictions in real life. The medium is harmful, maybe even dangerous. As we rely increasingly on social "media" to provide context to our world, in turn various media sources are influencing that context. Don't get me wrong. Evolution is important and technology is a valuable tool but only if it enables the user to do better, to be better. I don't think it has. It's allowed us instead to venture down into rabbit holes that expose the very worst of human nature and it has provided a platform for those who live in the recesses to climb out and spread misinformation insidiously. Where will it end? Perhaps with this, a rebellion against recent technological "advancements" that have resulted in ChatboxAI, a "communications tool" that simulates human conversation.

It's Alexa, but on steroids. The ChatGPT app for example has already evolved to a point at which it can pretty accurately emulate the user (as an example, look up Ryan Reynolds ad for a cell phone service) to the point where they are indistinguishable from the content it creates. It's causing universities to rethink how students submit term papers because the app can pretty much write an essay well enough to receive more than just a passing grade.

Talk about how the medium has become the message. We should be very worried indeed - maybe even petrified??but the chatbot

which actually ?penned? this column doesn't want to scare you.