

Critical Media Theory

Take-Home Critical Engagement Assignment 1: What do media do?

Due in class September 3, 2024

Prompt: Marshall McLuhan is famous for saying that "the medium is the message," but the concept is more complicated than it sounds and thus has been interpreted and applied in contradictory ways. In Ch 13, Ott & Mack explain the concept and place it into the context of other media theorists who emphasize the way that media, regardless of content, reorganize social relations by creating distinctive media environments. In his piece, Armond Towns reinforces this aspect of McLuhan's theory while also explicating and critiquing the implicit racial assumptions of McLuhan's work. After reading McLuhan's work and the other readings for today, what exactly do you think it means to say that "the medium is the message"?

40 minutes. Critically engage Ott & Mack, McLuhan, and Towns. Open Book/Open Notes. Typed or handwritten.

Note about critical engagement: Your primary job here is to critically engage all assigned readings for the day as you articulate your own perspective. To me, "critically engaging" the readings means two things. At minimum, it means that instead of talking about things as if you just "know" them, you are making direct references to the readings as the sources where you learned about the things you are discussing. More important, it also means that you are not only reading the pieces for information but also paying attention to them as rhetorical *arguments*—as interpretations that come from a particular perspective and are directed towards some audience and goal—instead of as neutral representations of "the way things are." I assign this and other writing assignments so I can evaluate *how* you are reading as well as *that* you are reading. I want to know what you think about the things you are reading, and the best way for me to know that is to see you explicitly showing me how your ideas are connected to the ideas/analyses/interpretations you are reading. In the short term, thinking of the readings and the writing assignments this way will help you do better on the assignments and strengthen our class discussions, but it will also prepare you to do well on the Comprehensive Exam and, ultimately, on your final research project, which all demand that you place your voice into conversation with the voices of other scholars to effectively construct your own analytical/interpretive perspectives in relation to your research into how other people make sense of the media you are studying. Whatever you do with them when you critically engage them, I need to see direct citations (author and page number in-text citations) to all of the readings mentioned in the prompt. Given that these are all course materials, you don't need to build a Works Cited page. See the earlier reading from Graff & Birkenstein for advice on building quotes into academic writing.

Note about the time constraint: My primary reason for giving you this as a take-home instead of an in-class assignment is to give us more time for discussion in class. Because I want you to critically engage the readings, I am fine with you having your readings in front of you as you write, but let me offer a word of advice tied to the time constraint. Ideally, you will prepare for it the way you would for an in-class essay exam—carefully reading the course materials, thinking about what they mean to you, thinking about the question, making an outline, a list of pertinent quotes, and/or some notes to yourself, and then turning on your timer and working to articulate what you think in writing as quickly and effectively as you can in 40 minutes. If you prepare that way, you will be able to focus on the writing instead of spending your time searching through the readings. This approach will obviously also help us critically engage the readings in our in-class discussion as well. Finally, I understand that one outcome of the time constraint will be less precise citations, sloppier grammar/mechanics, etc., but I do expect you to try your best to produce an essay that reads well and directly refers to and critically discusses specific passages in the readings.

Note about the Honor Pledge: After you are finished with your essay, write out and sign the pledge and indicate the day and time you started and finished the essay. In addition to everything else it means more generally, signing the pledge on this particular assignment means that you completed your essay by yourself without the intent to deceive and in one sitting of no more than 40 minutes.