Media Mania?

During the lockdown, there were many challenges. The question is, was media one of them? Media is the collective form of mass communication through mediums such as the internet, social media, publishing, and broadcasting. In this essay, I will be delving into the two different perspectives on the issue, as well as drawing a final conclusion based on evidence and personal experiences. Since the rise of smartphones, teenagers have been able to take media everywhere adding to the transformative nature of numerous mediums. Philosopher Marshall McLuhan believed the arrival of new communication tools resulted in an increased focus on the content coming from the new source stating “When radio was invented, people were interested in radio programs. When TV came along, they were interested in TV shows. When you had a telephone in your house, you were interested in the conversation you were having.” This results in the debate emerging of whether transformations of media are beneficial or inhibitory. The debate splits members of society with some individuals believing this to be a disadvantage as it results in teens becoming addicted to their phones. Results from a 2016 Common Sense Media report revealed 50 percent of teens felt addicted to their phones. However, McLuhan believed media to be “The Extensions of Man '' because it greatly challenges how we think and act. During the lockdown for me, media was both a saviour and an enabler. It allowed me to complete online school and reach out to my friends and family members. However, it also enabled me to lose valuable time and catalysed feelings of isolation.

Under lockdown, most of my days looked the same. I would wake up at 7 am every day for online school. Then I would go for a run to kill some time followed by more screen time before it was finally time for bed. The only thing that didn’t remain monotonous was my social media usage. To begin with, it was just a quick tab change between classes to check my email. But soon the short burst of excitement wore off. I was disappointed. What could I possibly have to look forward to now? Next, it was checking Messenger. Then scrolling through Facebook. At first, this was harmless. What’s five minutes? The danger is when social media begins to occupy your consciousness even when you're not on it. This was especially pertinent under lockdown because I, like so many others, greatly desired feelings of connective-ness. This meant that wondering if someone had messaged me, or if someone had posted something began to take up too much of my headspace. When you check your phone, you get this acute rush of adrenaline. When a message pops up the mesolimbic dopamine pathway of the brain connects the ventral tegmental area (VTA), one of the main dopamine-producing regions, with the nucleus accumbens releasing feel-good neurotransmitters[[1]](#footnote-1). Nucleus accumbens are found in the ventral striatum, an area of the brain strongly associated with reward. This is, however, incredibly short-lived resulting in you continuing to check your messages to compensate for the disappointment. Acclaimed writer, Nicholas Carr, acknowledged this stating “[My brain] was hungry. It was demanding to be fed the same way the net fed it — and the more it was fed, the hungrier it became.” This, of course, leads to immense distraction. How can you concentrate when your phone is right there? Even after the phone is switched off it takes at least 30 minutes for you to resume concentration. This holds true to parts of my experience during the lockdown because social media inhibited me in two ways. Firstly, I was not as efficient as I would have liked to be, especially when I began flicking between tabs during class. Secondly, at times, the temporary surge made me feel disappointed and further isolated once it wore off which wasn’t ideal for my mental health.

Carr claims the media is making us dumber. We’re constantly bombarded with tweets, as a result, we can no longer sit down and read the news. Why would you when you can have it dumbed down for you on Twitter or Facebook? Carr argues that because social media doesn’t encourage in-depth thought, we begin to lose the ability to be perceptive and thoughtful. It’s too much to think of the answer yourself when you can just google it. This is, however, very inhibitory and not at all satisfying. Carr states this is “analogous to our muscles. If you exercise a certain muscle, that muscle gets stronger. If you don’t exercise another one, it atrophies. Something similar seems to happen within our brains.” When you don’t have teachers physically there with you, it is all too easy to google search the answer. This is not at all useful, especially if you want to ace your Media Studies exam - Media Studies requires a lot of critical thinking; I definitely could not get away with googling an answer. Because technology or the way most of us use it, does not encourage provocative thought members of society are beginning to lose the ability to think for themselves and to think deeply. This has worsened over time. Now with social media on our phones, there is no escaping; after all, smartphones are always with you. Another fear addressed by Carr is everything online is so quick. You can dig up dirt on someone in seconds; you can use a google search to find the answer to any problem in less than a minute. There’s no independent thought anymore, and as a result, members of society are becoming less patient. The mentality “I want it and I want it now” is becoming increasingly apparent. This raises the fear that as a society we have lost our visual acuity in reading nature and the world. If we look to earlier cultures that weren’t text orientated, their ability to navigate by maps and other means such as constellations would be notable. This further supports the argument that media is dumbing down society. The excess accessibility to media was detrimental during the lockdown which should have been a time for personal growth and a time to get ahead - instead, I fell down the rabbit hole at times. Despite this, there is still opposing evidence suggesting media can be greatly stimulating and can foster links. Aspects of my relationship with media during the lockdown also support the discordant arguments I will address in the paragraphs to come.

Psychologist, Amy Morton, wrote “Social interaction is vital for young minds, and social media might be the only way of achieving this during lockdown” during an article for the Guardian. New Zealand psychologist Nigel Latta also supported this going public during Lockdown with some advice telling parents to let their children use social media to “support engagement” and to help them feel more connected. Parts of my experience during lockdown support this claim. Although social media was a distraction at times, it allowed me to re-establish connections. I used Messenger to reach out to my cousins overseas. This led to a family reunion on Zoom which made me feel more connected than I had in a long time. I hadn’t seen some of my cousins since I was five, so I believe my use of media in that regard benefited myself and my family. I also reached out to some old friends of mine and was able to engage in deep conversation, making my days more bearable. Media usage in terms of schooling was also especially important for maintaining a normal schedule and not feeling overly isolated. The lessons where we had class google meets were especially good. Media platforms such as Google Meets and Zoom literally transports you because by being able to see someone else you feel as if you're there with them. This was vital for my sanity during the lockdown because, in a sense, it allowed me to leave my house for a bit. Another way my media usage transported me during the lockdown was through reading. I had always been a keen reader, but during the lockdown, I rediscovered it in a sense. I was fully present when I was reading, fully immersed in the lives of the characters. When reading about worldly content, feelings of isolation shattered. Who cares if I’m stuck at home when I can live a thousand lives through characters from around the world?

 McLuhan backs up the transportive nature of media believing when people began reading, they learnt how to escape their lives and were able to define themselves as individuals beyond their physical environment. Without media, this would not be possible. Without media gaining rich experiences without physically going anywhere would be impossible. In that regard, my media usage allowed for immense personal growth and communication during the lockdown. As mentioned before, McLuhan believed the media could be greatly stimulating as it has changed the way we think. Recent discoveries in the past four decades about neuroplasticity, the malleability of our brains, further support this. This is because our brains are continuously adapting to our environment; environmental changes lead to a change in the way one thinks. It is believed this is not just a change of habit, but a biological change[[2]](#footnote-2). Also, changes from reading the news to watching the news due to technological advancements connects individuals because it enables viewing of the same content at the same time provoking immense connectivity. Technology used for communication changes the way we perceive things and the way we communicate allowing for much-needed stimulation during the lockdown.

Under the lockdown in terms of connectedness, my media usage differed. There were times when I felt greatly connected and times when my media usage made me feel less connected. For example, it allowed me to connect with individuals around the world but distanced me from those in my bubble. Karr states “communication technology itself shapes the way we perceive things and the way we communicate in ways that we’re pretty much oblivious to because we’re so focused on the information coming through the medium.” Karr further supports the argument that media isolates us by applying the theory of tribalism. This is because our senses are overwhelmed nowadays, there’s background noise, music, ads and messages continuously popping up. Because of this, our brain acts as a filter, only focusing on content that really speaks to us. This results in tribalism within platforms as media consumers only connect with other consumers sharing the same interests. His main argument being media was meant to break “clicks” and further connect society however there is still explicit grouping of individuals online. Is it simply human nature to form “clicks” or is it something about the way the media presents itself? Media critics such as Edward S. Herman are strongly against the prevailing use of hypodermic needle theory in the media because by inserting the consumer with a take-home message tribalism is further established. McLuhan opposes this theory believing that, although people remove themselves from the social world, they become more individualistic. He thinks this because consumers begin to define themselves as individuals based on unique experiences from a particular mix of knowledge across a range of media platforms. McLuhan believed long term exposure to technology’s way of shaping the way one thinks ultimately had a much more significant effect on the lives of consumers than the actual content did. My experience supports this because over the two months, my media usage changed the way I thought, and the way I still think. The media I consumed, such as psychological thrillers and blogs extended my knowledge resulting in me subconsciously viewing society and media in a different light. The media I consumed poorly, such as scrolling through Facebook, made me question what it is about the relationship between media and consumer that makes it so addictive. In a sense, it made me more cautious and more mindful when on media which I believe to be beneficial; awareness is arguably the most important asset when consuming media.

To conclude, the media can be both useful and distracting. From my own anecdotal and research evidence, the clear message is this claim depends on how you use the medium. If media users take everything with a grain of salt, i.e. know the danger signs so they can be a mindful user, then I believe media can greatly benefit members of society. To combat the degeneracy of individual thought media should be used for connectedness and thought stimulation. I believe media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook should restrict convention usage such as vibrant colours and notification, as by offering instant gratification, the platforms become increasingly addictive[[3]](#footnote-3). Instead, these mediums should invest time focusing on thought stimulation. If you can use the likes of Messenger and snap chat to have meaningful conversations, then I believe they could be of great benefit. Promoting reading and critical thinking is also essential as human beings live to feel. There is nothing that makes you feel more alive than using your brain to analyse and question things. If media consumers can be more aware then this would be a step in the right direction.

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