Module 7
White Paper: Communication, Media, Institutions, Environments

I. Normative Synthesis

Theoretical Conclusions

With Module 7 we move into the domain where a technologized mode of thinking becomes most pervasively and manipulatively total, investigating the chief means by which this thinking comes to dominate all the other domains: namely, communication. Not only does technologized communication enter into the other domains, however: **communication technologies bind all the previously-mentioned domains—the psyche, environment, biology, culture, and governance—into a *single field of interaction*.** The key theoretical conclusion arrived at within this module (a corollary that in many ways completes the early emphasis on the psyche) is the argument that modern media environments do not merely transmit conflicts concerning other domains but, in fact, *constitute the primary theater in which conflict now occurs*.

This is how the module's lecture title, "World War Three"—derived from Marshall McLuhan's statement that "World war three will be a guerrilla war of information in which there is no distinction between civilian and combatant"—must be understood. The claim is not that contemporary media conflict resembles prior wars in their destructive impacts or scale of violence, but rather that its present-day immediacy and pervasiveness fundamentally transform the *form of conflict itself*. War, for most of the past several centuries, presupposes identifiable adversaries, bounded theaters of action, and distinctions between combatants and civilians. Conflict waged through communication media dissolves these distinctions. Everyone is inside the theater, participation is involuntary, and the line between soldier and non-soldier dissipates, as nearly everyone carries an informational "weapon" (a cell phone, a social media account) and—even if not intending to carry out ideological maneuvers of offense or defense—finds almost every digital interaction to occur on the battlefield over meaning.

It is important that we not understand communication technologies as neutral channels but as fundamentally constituents of psychological environments, and, today, these environments are dominated by conflict and conquest. Unlike tools that can be set aside, our current media establish persistent background conditions under which attention, interpretation, and response principally take place. As with physical environments (discussed in Module 3), the most powerful effects of media are invisible to those immersed within them—one does not *use* a media environment but inhabits it, *breathes* in the air it produces, *lives* according to how it directs our minds: not with a complete lack of freedom (such being ineradicable from the human soul), but certainly with a diminished awareness of how the mind has been determined in advance by the environment itself.

Seeing these technologies as constitutive of environment—rather than mere means of informational exchange—helps us to understand why these communication technologies do not produce clarity, consensus, or positive engagement (the idealized aims of an "information superhighway") but rather what seems like ever-deepening confusion, increased political polarization and tribalization, and a pendulum of exhaustion and rage that seems paradoxically to swing faster and faster. Though there are indeed many specific problems created by the digital communication environment—misinformation, bias, bad actors, rage-bait, engagement pursuit, and so on—the deeper difficulty stems from the *form* of communication itself. Media environments structured for constant immediacy of messaging and algorithmically-programmed signal amplification privilege reactionary responses over prudential judgment and emphasize visibility over veracity.

A common theme identified and discussed in this module, we returned to the collapse of temporal and spatial distance affected by our technologies today. Events occurring anywhere appear everywhere, immediately, and without mediation by thoughtful determinations of their relevance to the audience or assignment of responsibility. This spatiotemporal collapse overwhelms the human capacity for proportion. We lose thereby a habit for discernment of importance.

Here Module 7 draws upon the previous analysis of prudence conducted in Module 6. Political judgment depends upon the ability to distinguish proportionate response—or to put this in the frame of the individual human agent, to distinguish what one can act upon from what one merely observes, and to what degree that observation should occupy the individual. Media environments erase this distinction, endlessly exposing citizens to not only national problems but so too global suffering and crisis without delivering them any meaningfully corresponding agency. The result is a corrosive combination of constant overwhelming moral stimulation and near total practical impotence. Over time, this produces either deep cynicism ("black pilling") or promotes merely performative engagement, that is, the expression of outrage or condemnation, of support or encouragement—but entirely without any actual shouldering of responsibility and with the possibility of immediate disavowal or distancing, despite the cumulative effects that this effort may have. At times, some may sign a petition or contribute money to one or another cause, but this too, often, is a commitment of minimal responsibility (and, in fact, often proves to have been irresponsibly made).

It is important here again to emphasize that media conflict operates through *form* rather than by *content alone*. Competing narratives circulate endlessly, but the deeper struggle concerns which forms of communication come to dominate: short versus long form, reactive versus deliberative, anonymous versus accountable—or, in other words, those that enervate versus those that may ennoble the human soul. Through this rendering of benefit or harm, media environments do not merely reflect already-extant cultural conflicts but often *generate* (or greatly *exacerbate*) these conflicts, intensifying the tension of the environment—while simultaneously rewarding the modes of communication that fragment rather than integrate the psyche. These environments allow us to grab attention more easily, but simultaneously erode the merit of that attention. Here, we see the double-edged sword of expediency.

Further, media environments transform the nature of power and its exercise. Though power has always been fundamentally communicative—the more one can simply communicate his will and have it followed unquestioningly, the more power one has—this efficacy of communication has historically relied on territorial control and material force. Now, with the possibility of instant communication to nearly everyone nearly everywhere on the planet, geographical and material control shifts to secondary importance, so long as the communicative infrastructures remain in place. Therefore, power consists almost entirely in the capacity to frame the objects of attention. By nature of the medium, this power is diffuse. It is exercised not only by states, but by platforms, algorithms, and emergent network dynamics. One may thereby participate in the exercise of such power despite having no awareness of it.

This diffusion of power has direct consequences for institutions: those that once held a strong influence on the mediation of what was communicated, to whom, and how—institutions such as schools, churches, newspapers, and local civic bodies or associations—lose authority in media environments that bypass mediation altogether. Authority shifts from those with sufficient familiar knowledge and the capacity for localized prudential judgment to those best able to attract attention—and, subsequently, credibility becomes indistinguishable from visibility.

We also here retrieve the seminar's analysis of moral and psychological anesthetization. Continuous exposure to mediated conflict dulls moral response, and the demand for continued novelty flattens all objects into the same packaging. Thus, even great tragedy becomes "content", and the significance of any event directly tied to its novelty and attention-seizing "value". This flattening occurs not because individuals cease to care, but because, through the medium and the demands it makes upon users of it, care itself becomes overextended—pushing beyond the limits of human capacity. In other words, we cease to care because of the flattening. We turn therefore to various forms of anesthetization (short form video, binge-streaming, immersion in video games or parasocial relationships, recreational drug use, constant sexual arousal and stimulation) as a kind of psychic defense against omnipresent attentional demand: endless exposure otherwise rubs us to an intolerable rawness.

Media environments that ignore these natural human limits do not elevate human participation in national or international political relations: the "global village" (never a positive development, in the view of Marshall McLuhan—who coined the phrase, which he later replaced with the "global **theater**") fundamentally exceeds the proportions of natural human existence. Thus our environment of communication media becomes flooded with noise beneath which silence—necessary for the resolution of experience into meaningful experience—drowns.

Module 7 therefore clarifies that the deepest danger of communication technology is not particular deceptions, numerous though they are in this age, but psychological and social *disintegration* affected by the unthinking patterns of integrating these technologies into our everyday activity. Shared reality depends upon common reference points, temporal continuity, trust in mediating institutions, and individuals capable of cogent, logical, well-ordered thinking. But if our communication environments undermine these conditions, our society fragments into mutually unintelligible worlds, each internally coherent yet externally hostile, exacerbating the psychological fragmentation of individuals—and prone

to further fragmentations themselves. Though it was not a focal point of this module's discussion, it bears consideration how the advent of "Artificial Intelligence" (addressed in the ninth white paper) threatens to extend these damages a thousandfold, by amplifying the power of those who control communication, accelerating the speed at which content is produced, and substituting for the need to craft interpersonal communication. There are many other dangers of this AI technology, but none so profound as its potential to amplify all the worst conditions of our communication environments.

This analysis prepares the seminar's final synthesis in Module 8. The fragmentation of communication mirrors the fragmentation of the person. A self having been habituated to constant reaction loses the capacity for genuine inquiry, memory, and taking responsibility.

The theoretical conclusion arrived at in the inquiries of Module 7, then, is not one merely diagnostic but rather prescribes a certain caution. It shows that no technological integration is possible without restoring proportion in communication itself. Faster, broader, and more connected communication does not necessarily produce greater understanding. On the contrary, without thoughtful habits of use and development, the networks of communication media in an electric and digital environment produce a world perpetually at war—not always through weapons, but through words; damaging not our bodies, but our capacity to understand the truth and thereby to rightly order our lives.

If technology is to serve human flourishing rather than dominate the way we live, communication must once again be ordered toward truth and the ability to present what is properly meaningful for human flourishing. Without this reordering of communication, the on-going "World War Three" will continue indefinitely.

Practical Actions Indicated

1. Reassertion of limits on communication

The module emphasizes the necessity of limits on our communicative technologies' incorporation into our lives. Not all communication is beneficial, and not all immediacy is desirable. Many messages should not be sent, or should be sent only at proper times. Deliberate restraint—intentional experience and pursuit of silence, deliberate delay and pause before issuing messages, prudential judgment about what to communicate, to whom, and when—is essential for maintaining the essential good of communication, namely, the conveyance of the truth.

2. Protection and recovery of presence-based institutions

Institutions must resist complete assimilation to the technologized rationality of media environments. Primary education, worship, familial gatherings, enduring friendships, romantic relationships, and the practice of governance require presence that cannot be replicated digitally—even if the digital might in some ways legitimately *extend* (without disproportioning) these relations. Put otherwise, media may supplement but should not replace embodied communal life, and one must cultivate careful reflection to keep that extension or supplementation from disproportioning the natural rhythm of living.

3. Discernment of media fit

Different forms of communication are suited to different ends. We need habits of discernment regarding which media are appropriate to which institutional functions, rather than universal adoption on the technologized standards commonly indicated throughout the seminar. Digital forms, for instance, that are suitable for casual communiques or practical organization—such as text messaging— may be particularly *unsuited* for initial meetings or growth of familiarity, as they may lead too easily to projecting idealized personalities onto semiotically-impoverished sign-vehicles.

4. Protection of interior life

Because media environments penetrate psychic life so deeply, individuals and institutions must actively cultivate individual awareness in contradistinction to the developments fostered by media. In other words, we must establish and reinforce certain practices of reflection upon our behavior by means of which we strive to determine their formal causes—including distinctions between consciously chosen actions and unquestioningly accepted norms of behavior. For example, asking ourselves, "For what purpose did I open social media right now? What is the good I am seeking by using it?" or "What good did I achieve by scrolling the timeline?"

II. Descriptive Analysis

Central Question
Are all technologies forms of communication technology, and how do media function not merely as channels of information but as environmental factors determining the ordering of institutions, perception, and the constitution of social or cultural reality itself?

Principal Bibliography
Readings:

- McLuhan and McLuhan 2011: *Media and Formal Cause*, selections.

Recommended Readings:

- Weaver 1948: *Ideas Have Consequences*, c.5, "The Great Stereopticon".
- Deely 1994: *New Beginnings*, c.6, "How do Signs Work?"
- Kemple 2021: *Introduction to Philosophical Principles*, c.2.5 (74–107).
- Wachs 2015: *The New Science of Communication*.
- Han 2012: *What is Power?*

Orientation
Module 7 concentrates the seminar's prior analyses by focusing explicitly on communication and media. While earlier weeks examined psyche, environment, biology, culture, and governance, this week demonstrates that communication technologies not only permeate but also unify all these domains; that,

in fact, technological instruments would have no effect on any of the above unless they were somehow involved in the transmission of messages. Therefore, media should not be understood as mere ancillary tools for transmitting content but rather as the principal formative causes of our environments in their specifically psychological (cognitive and cathectic) dimension, causes that fundamentally condition how reality is perceived, conceptualized, communicated, and embedded in institutional norms.

The module explores and explicates the claim—associated most famously with Marshall McLuhan—that communication technologies exert their primary influence not through what they say but through their structuring of our attention, ordering of our time, and constraining of our social relations. We all live within some one or another media environment, and thus inhabit a particular configuration of presence and absence, immediacy and delay, publicity and privacy—which configuration patterns (*without* inescapably determining) the unfolding of our lives.

Major Findings

1. Media constitute environments, not discrete instruments

A foundational insight of Module 7 is that media should be understood as constituents of environments rather than as discrete instruments. Unlike tools that are picked up and put down, media cannot be separated from the experiences they enable and mediate. As being that-through-which objects come into our conscious lives, they create channels of expectation and interpretation that become invisible precisely because they are ubiquitous—like comfortable contact lenses, hearing aids, or clean windows, we may forget that our screens or applications are things themselves (the latter, albeit, of a very strange kind) and that they are determining the objects we experience.

This environmental character explains why media effects are difficult to isolate or regulate: namely, because we do not merely *use* our media, but *inhabit* the environments they structure.

2. The collapse of distance and the acceleration (to disappearance) of time

Modern communication technologies compress spatial distance and evaporate the passage of time. Events across the globe appear immediately present, while local contexts lose priority—and oftentimes even "appear" farther away than these global events, inasmuch as the latter are "in our hands" while the local are "out of sight". And yet the constant presence of the *new*, there being endless variety of global "content", causes the duration of every such event to become shorter and shorter in the consciousness of those who distantly experience them. This collapse of distance by the evaporation of time therefore does not simply expand awareness, but fundamentally changes our interpretation of event's significance.

In other words, when everything is equally (capable of being) present, nothing stands out as proportionately significant; there is no intensity of presence and therefore no possibility of meaningful contrast. The demand for instantaneous response to continually-changing phenomena far removed from one's own sphere of action fragments our capacity for sustained attention and erodes our ability to make truly thoughtful judgments. Conversely, actually enduring phenomena of a local variety provoke negative cathectic responses in those who encounter them, given their inculcation to the digital world.

3. Institutional transformation through media

This module shows how institutions are pressed into various conformities, contrary to their own interests, by dominant media forms: education becomes content delivery, governance is affected through effective messaging (or propaganda), and the flourishing of a community transforms into building an audience. Institutions that once depended upon the long duration of habitual practices instead adapt themselves, again and again, to the demands of platform optimization, seeking visibility and engagement.

This adaptation degrades both the appearance and often the actual possession of authority had by institutions. In other words, credibility shifts from the expression of wisdom and continuity to responsiveness and reach. "Influencers" may have no intellectual virtue, knowledge, or even expertise, and yet may gain a "seat at the table" simply by having a larger number of followers.

4. Anesthetization through overexposure

The seminar returns to the theme of anesthetization introduced in Module 2. Constant exposure to mediated stimuli produces not heightened sensitivity to objects but, simultaneously, a nervous response to the media themselves but a numbness to their content. Tragedy, outrage, and novelty circulate endlessly, dulling our capacity for well-adjusted moral response.

This phenomenon undermines not only our cognitive responsivity but also our sense of responsibility. When sufferings and problems are omnipresent but direct actions seeking their alleviation are impossible, disengagement becomes a readily-available psychological defense.

KEY EXPLANATORY CLAIMS

1. **Media shape perception independently of content**.
   This is not to say content has no influence upon the shaping of our perception—but rather, to point out how media have their own distinctive effects upon how we are habituated to perceive and therefore, consequently to that perceptual shift, to think.

2. **Electronic communication technologies reorder our experiences of time and significance**.
   By the instantaneity they enable, our electronic forms of communication alter our habitual patterns of interpreting the significance of both presence and absence, of communiques and of silence: we think less of communication in terms of *duration* and more in terms of "*moments when*". Thus we are disposed against *conversational* significance and more towards reductionistic memes; against long persuasion and in favor of immediate reactivity.

3. **Institutions conform to media environments to survive**.
   When the populations upon which institutions rely are immersed in media environments, most institutions conform to the structural dictates of those media—often unconsciously, or as a matter of the previously-discussed acceptance of their normativity.

4. **Overexposure produces apathy rather than engagement**.
   Here scale and proportion come back into focus: a disproportionate frequency of the intense, the horrific, the violent, the sad—while these may affect individuals in the moment, seldom produce lasting change as to their content of their messaging, particularly with respect to the *habitual* dispositions needed for engagement.

5. **Communication technologies mediate social reality itself.**
   The introduction of new modalities for communication reshape how we relate to one another, often in unanticipated ways. Dating apps, for instance, have radically disrupted the whole environment of intimacy, and app-based rideshare services, initially introduced as a convenient way to move oneself from location to location, have increasingly become integrated into ordering products to one's home: resulting in further isolation.