

CHAPTER 29

THE MEDIA EQUATION

Outline

- I. The media equation: media = real life.
 - A. Byron Reeves and Clifford Nass propose that we respond to communication media as if they were human.
 - B. People interface with media; in other words, they respond to media using the same rules that govern face-to-face interpersonal interactions with other people.

- II. Beyond intuition that protests: (“not me, I know a picture is not a person”).
 - A. The media equation is counterintuitive.
 - B. Yet Reeves and Nass argue that the media equation applies to people even though they do not believe it does.
 1. Their point is related to the “not me” syndrome of Philip Zimbardo, who argues that people often believe that their attitudes and actions are not subject to outside influences.
 2. This belief can be dangerous because ignoring the power of outside influences makes us more vulnerable to them.
 - C. Unlike other theories of media effects that emphasize content, Reeves and Nass claim that the media equation applies to all modern media.
 - D. Reeves and Nass reject the notion of media as tools from which we can be detached; they insist that “media are full participants in our social and natural world.”

- III. Old brains fooled by new technologies.
 - A. Reeves and Nass believe that the human race responds socially and naturally to media because of the slow pace of evolution.
 1. Due to the evolution of the human brain, we treat media that personify human characteristics as human.
 2. This human biological limitation means that the media equation is an unconscious and automatic response.
 - B. People can adopt strategies to think themselves out of the media equation, but because it is mentally trying, they usually do not.
 - C. It is particularly difficult to thwart the media equation within an interactive environment.

- IV. Proving the equation.
 - A. Because the media equation connects two types of behavior that are not logically linked, proof of its validity must come from empirical research.
 - B. If the theory is valid, results on the media-human interface should match established findings of relationships between people.
 - C. Interpersonal distance: the media equation suggests that media images that appear close should engender in viewers more intense reactions than media images that appear farther away.

1. This hypothesis seems improbable.
 2. Yet Reeves' experimental research validated the prediction.
- D. Similarity and attraction: a well-validated principle of relational research is that similarity increases attraction.
1. Computers can be endowed with "personality."
 2. If the media equation is true, individuals should like a computer with a "similar" personality to theirs more than one they see as "different."
 3. Nass and Reeves' experiment with Stanford students validated this prediction.
- E. Source credibility: interpersonal communication is affected by the roles and reputations we bring to a relationship.
1. The media equation suggests also that viewers will assign a specific role or expertise to an electronic messenger.
 2. Experiments conducted by Reeves and Nass demonstrated that people respond differently to programming on television sets given "generalist" and "specialist" labels and that people generally regard a computer itself as the source of messages and have more positive responses to it than to distant sources such as programmers.
- F. Although none of Reeves and Nass' studies definitively prove the media equation, they provide inductive support in the form of empirical evidence.
- V. Critique: an intriguing one-way relationship.
- A. Reeves and Nass's media equation challenges common wisdom, is backed up with an impressive array of empirical support, and should generate widespread discussion.
 - B. Their work has proven useful to the computer industry.
 - C. Consumer advocates and scholars are less enthusiastic about the implications of the media equation.
 1. Reeves and Nass offer little hope that people can easily resist the human qualities of media.
 2. Knowledge of the media equation is only a limited defense against media's interpersonal advances.
 3. The media equation validates an "administrative" bias that can be used to control others.
 - D. Reeves and Nass' perspective on interpersonal communication comes from social psychology rather than from the field of communication.
 1. Social-psychology research is based on a one-way model of interpersonal communication within a stimulus-response paradigm rather than the two-way perspective of communication scholars that emphasizes the construction of shared meanings.
 2. Steve Duck argues that these two different paradigms affect similarity research.
 3. Reeves and Nass have not shown that the media equation applies to some of the findings of complex interpersonal research programs.

Key Names and Terms

Byron Reeves and Clifford Nass

Members of the communication department at Stanford University, directors of the school's Social Responses to Communication Technology project, and developers of the media equation.

The Media Equation

The proposition that we respond unconsciously and automatically to electronic media as if they were human.

Interface

A term for human-media interaction that suggests that we use the same rules in these encounters as in face-to-face interpersonal interactions with other people.

Philip Zimbardo

A social psychologist who warns against the "not me" syndrome.

The "Not Me" Syndrome

A way we set ourselves apart from others by clinging to the naive belief that our attitudes and actions are not conditioned by situation or circumstance.

Construction of Shared Meaning

The definition of interpersonal communication favored by most communication scholars that emphasizes the two-way flow of messages that create common interpretations.

Steve Duck

University of Iowa communication researcher who maintains that interpersonal similarity is founded on the similar construction of experience rather than on the similarity of experience itself.

Principal Changes

Previously Chapter 28, this chapter remains largely the same. Griffin has updated the *Second Look* section.

Suggestions for Discussion

As Griffin notes in the *Critique* section, this theory is intriguing and promises to generate discussion. Your students should have no shortage of reactions to the media equation, ranging from the "not me" response to recognition that, in certain situations, people do treat electronic media (particularly computers) as if they were human. They should enjoy giving examples of their interpersonal interactions with different electronic media.

Yet you should also encourage your students to challenge the theory. First, you might ask them whether or not Reeves and Nass's claim that the media equation applies to all electronic media (405) is too broad. Discuss whether their conclusions apply to radio, for example. Is the theory more applicable to visual media, as the term "interface" might suggest? (Essay Question #2 addresses this issue.)

In addition, students may wish to interrogate the conclusions Reeves and Nass draw from their experiments on interpersonal distance, similarity and attraction, and source credibility. For example, Reeves and Nass conclude from their experiments with labeled television sets that subjects attributed generalist or specialist qualities to the television sets themselves, but other conclusions might be equally plausible. Might subjects be connecting the label to the content (programming) rather than the medium (the television set)? In general, this question leads to a more general critique of Reeves and Nass' separation of content from media. Can the two be so easily distinguished? Reeves and Nass argue that the media equation holds regardless of content (405), but might their experiments suggest that content is really more salient than they suggest? What is the significance, for example, of the use of images of human faces rather than other content in the experiment about interpersonal distance? (Essay Question #3 also allows students to explore this issue.)

Comparisons with McLuhan's and Hall's perspectives should also be interesting. Do McLuhan's distinctions between hot and cool media complicate Reeves and Nass's generalizations about all communication media? If, as McLuhan says, the medium is the message, what is the message to Reeves and Nass? Clearly it is a message about our brains and how they respond to communication media, but the *Critique* section suggests that the message is also about the potential for those who create media to control others without their conscious awareness. Although Hall would not separate media from content as do Reeves and Nass, he would no doubt have something to say about this connection between the media equation and corporate control. (See also Integrative Essay Questions #1 and #2, below.)

Finally, you may want to explore with your students the implications of the criticism of the media equation by scholars and consumer advocates. Critics say that consumers need to be able to protest and resist the media's advances; ask your students if they agree and why or why not. Are students disturbed by the cozy relationship between Reeves and Nass and corporate moguls such as Bill Gates? Can they imagine the media equation being used for more explicitly problematic purposes than to make computers "user-friendly"?

Sample Application Log

Kristen

Whoa! I completely understand and identify with this theory! My roommate sometimes makes fun of me for talking about my computer like it's a person or for how I seem to take it personally when it doesn't work right. I am also known for doing this at work. My roommate's computer, though, I swear has a mind of its own. It randomly changes its colors and icons around. And my computer always seems to crash and burn right when I need it the most. It's like it's mocking me and is on a power trip or something to show me how much I rely on it and how much (sadly) control it has over my life. When it breaks, I feel bad for it like it is sick or something. I feel like it is another roommate that communicates with me and is vital for my success in college. When people try and tell me it's just a machine and that I am the actual thinking being, I may say "oh yea I know," but on the inside I am really thinking, "Yea right. Don't say that too loud or it might hear you and purposely break on me." I never say anything

bad about my computer in front of it. Sick, I know, but it's broken enough that I'm paranoid. My computer behaves like people do, so even though I know it is just a machine, my brain refuses to let me realize that. And my emotions are attached to the way my computer responds to me when I give it a command. It makes me feel like it is the superior one and that I must simply request things from it, not command them or it will break and show me just how little power I have. I definitely have a love/hate relationship with the computer. Relationship!? See! That's what I'm talking about! My computer and I have a "relationship." That's sick. I need help. This theory is too true.

Jonathan

I enjoy reading the *Wall Street Journal*. Part of the reason is that it says "please turn to page A26." I deem it more polite than other newspapers that do not make such polite requests. After reading the chapter on the media equation, I noticed that I do react similarly to how I react to other humans. If I were asked to complete a survey comparing newspapers, I probably would rate the *Wall Street Journal* higher than the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Times*, not because I think it's a better paper, but because it seems more like my friend.

Note: On Jonathan's entry, Em Griffin notes, "The media equation refers to electronic media, but you make a good point." We've included it here because it suggests an even broader application of the theory's basic concepts. Provocative, indeed.

Exercises and Activities

A humorous fictional depiction of the media equation that you might want to share with your students can be found in David Lodge's hilarious academic satire *Small World: An Academic Romance* (New York: Warner Books, 1984). In a wonderful series of episodes from the novel, the competitive, petty, and jealous academic Robin Dempsey "interfaces" with a computer equipped with the program ELIZA, which allows the computer to engage in dialogue with the user, at the computer center at a university in working-class Darlington, England. At first Dempsey's interactions with ELIZA are fairly predictable, with the computer building in a regular fashion on key words in Dempsey's questions and comments. Dempsey, however, becomes very involved with the computer, disclosing more and more information. ELIZA eventually begins to taunt Dempsey by predicting success for his chief academic rival. Dempsey's extreme reactions to ELIZA's comments suggest that the computer has become fully human for him. The reader, too, is drawn into the media equation. It is only after we also begin to believe ELIZA might be almost human that we are made aware that it is another person—Josh Collins, who runs the computer center—who has programmed ELIZA to torment Dempsey (see pages 175-76, 210-211, 274-75, 278-80, 350-52).

When Em Griffin teaches this chapter, he employs an exercise that tests both the basic notion that people treat media the same way they treat other human beings and gives students an opportunity to read and discuss a wide variety of research on interpersonal communication. He brings a stack of recent communication journals (specializing in or at least regularly including empirically based studies of interpersonal communication) to class large enough to supply each student with an issue. Griffin then instructs them to pick an article

from the issue they have been assigned, master its basic idea, then speculate about how one could use the study to test the media equation. If Reeves and Nass are correct, then what is true about interpersonal interaction would also be observable as one examined human interaction with the electronic media.

Sample Examination Questions

These are not available in the online version of the Instructors' Manual