

## 14 Medium Theory and Stylistics

Medium theory investigates the potential influence of communication technologies upon societies. Medium is understood not only as a channel of information transfer, but as a highly constructive shaper of social environment, including public discourse. Primarily oral, writing/printing and electronic media and their properties (e.g., the speed of dissemination of information, the number of people it reaches, whether it is uni- or bi-directional) are studied on the micro (individual) and macro (cultural) levels. The proponents of the theory 'rewrite' the history of civilisation from the medium-theory perspective claiming that individual phases of human civilisation (traditional oral, modern print, electronic global societies) are shaped by the dominant media and by their epistemologies (i.e., ways of human knowledge). For example, the medium of writing/printing enabled the development of (linear) analytical thinking and has radically altered the course of civilisation (e.g., redefinition, growth and dissemination of knowledge, growth of science, rise of nation states, Industrial Revolution, etc., cf. Meyerowitz 1994).

Marshall McLuhan (1996), a classic among medium theorists, has enriched the media discourse with aphoristic phrases like *The medium is the message*, *Medium is the extension of man*, *Hot and Cool Media*, which have become proverbial. N. Postman (1985) in his book aptly titled *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* points at the pitfalls of the electronic age controlled by the epistemology of the TV medium (for the stylistic relevance of medium see 3.1.3).

The relevance of the used medium for the stylistically based observation is unquestionable: properties of individual media determine selection of code, formal characteristics of messages, as well as conventions of their use. For example, a casual written message sent via electronic mail will employ verbal code (writing); non-verbal codes like *emoticons*: *IMHO* = *in my humble opinion*, :- ( , iconic signs ☺ ) will tend to follow conventions characteristic of informal conversational interactions, such as looser organization, little editing, etc. (cf. Crystal 2001).