

Welcome to Say What?! Episode 4. This week, The medium and the message

Yesterday, I mowed my lawn. And as often happens when I mow the grass, I began to drift into a sort of trance induced by the rhythmic whirr of my EGO Battery-powered lawnmower. Which, by the way, I highly recommend if you're considering replacing your noisy, leaky, petrol-powered grass cutter.

And as I glided back and forth across the yard in green meditation – my mind open to random thoughts – Marshall McLuhan popped in for a visit.

Back in the mid 70's McLuhan suggested electronic media, which then were television and radio, heavily influenced the shape of society. In fact, he suggested electronic media were an extension of our central nervous system.

He described media as creating a new form of awareness that affects everyone.

And he summed up his ideas in his well-known phrase The Medium is The Message.

McLuhan suggested the effect of the content is independent of, and less important than, the effect of the media itself.

In other words, the way we understand and use technology influences us more than the messages we get from the technology.

To me, that idea is even more evident now. Electronic media have become more personal, and a far more integrated part of our lives.

And so, the medium – the means we use to communicate – has an even more dramatic effect on how we define our awareness, and *how* we communicate.

The media world has changed significantly since 1996 when Bill Gates proclaimed Content is King and suggested companies will struggle to make money through advertising on the Internet.

Content is all around us, over 80% of it is sponsored content. And we can access all of it instantly.

We don't have less time to read, we have less patience with what we read.

Because there's more of it than ever in the history of reading. And most of it is available to us 24 hours a day, from anywhere we happen to be.

But there seems to be a trend influenced by the changes in technology.

Many people seem less interested in reflecting on ideas from what they read, and more interested in quick and effortless entertainment from what they read.

Fear of Missing Out seems to rule above Curiosity to Know.

TikTok, Instagram memes, SnapChat, Tumblr. They are all somewhat different, in terms of content, but similar in terms of the instant gratification they provide.

Now, I'm not being a curmudgeon and saying we all should sit for hours discussing Dostoyevsky. Although, that does sound nice. With a glass of Laphroaig.

I do think those new media are wonderful ways to communicate.

But, I also know there is something sublime about person-to-person conversation.

I think the *format* of our communication affects *how* we communicate, and the benefits we get from communication with another person.

I do think the medium affects the message.

My wife and I take walks together at least twice a day. Sometimes we walk in quiet contemplation. But during most of our walks, we have conversations.

And new ideas always emerge from those walks and talks.

We dream up new ideas for things we'd like to do together. We find solutions for things we've been mulling over. We resolve issue in our work, or with family, or in other parts of our lives.

And while walking does get the blood moving, it's also very relaxing. For the body, and the mind.

There's well-known connection between the pace of walking and thinking.

In a similar way that various tempos in music excite different feelings, the rhythm of our steps stimulates our mind in a unique way that other forms of exercise do not.

There was a great article in The New Yorker a few years ago written by Ferris Jayber called Why Walking Helps Us Think.

Jayber describes what happens in our minds when we wander.

In the article, he writes:

*"Because we don't have to devote much conscious effort to the act of walking, our attention is free to wander – to overlay the world before us, with a parade of images from the mind's theatre."*

He goes on to describe studies on how walking has a positive effect on creative thinking and innovative ideas.

I'll post a link to that article on the podcast page on my website.

I believe we evoke essentially different parts of ourselves when we communicate in different ways. Through email, making a presentation, leading a meeting, chatting in the hallway, participating in a Zoom conference, or walking and talking.

There's also a more reflective quality about in-person conversation that is difficult, or even impossible to achieve in other medium.

And subtle emotions and meanings are easier to convey when we're in conversation.

We use emojis and memes in an attempt to replace that subtlety.

It's fun, but it's just not quite the same as the personal connection of a conversation while strolling.

Plus, it's just a nice way to spend time together.

So this week, why not look for opportunities for conversation.

Even if there are 6 feet between you.

Who knows? You might just discover it's a rare medium, when well done.

That's Say What?! For this week. Thanks for listening!

The music on today's episode is from guitarist Robbie Sturtevant. His band, The Quins, are one of the hottest new groups coming out of Boston. Check them out at <https://www.thequinsband.com/> and on Facebook and Instagram @thequins.