Online games and Korea as Figure and Ground:
An application of Canadian Communication theory to the sociotechnical transformation in Korea

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This paper explores McLuhan's theory of media as an extension of the self through an examination of cultural use contexts. In particular, I examine his discussion regarding the myth of Narcissus as an explanation of "media narcosis," in order to draw links between Korean and North American perspectives of what might be otherwise simplistically interpreted as media addiction for which Korea is notorious.

In Korea, over half of its 50 million citizens play online games, many of whom are the younger broadband Internet generation accustomed to these modes of communication. However, as McLuhan notes, technological innovations may accelerate and enlarge the scale of previous human functions which in turn create new modes of work and leisure. In no other country has this acceleration been more concentrated and apparent than Korea.

I argue here that the pace of technological adoption, as evidenced by Koreans many uses of information and communication technologies in their myriad forms has exhibited what some may interpret as a society-wide Narcissus-like numbness to the 'irritants' of everyday social pressures.

The 'numbness' of Narcissus that McLuhan alludes to presents an alternative understanding for media use that places the user at the heart of a type of social 'shock.'
"For if Narcissus is numbed by his self-amputated image, there is a very good reason for the numbness… a person suddenly deprived of loved ones and a person who drops a few feet unexpectedly will both register shock" (M. McLuhan, 1994, p. 44). McLuhan asserts that it is the Narcissus-style continuous embrace of our own technology in daily use that places the user in a role of subliminal awareness and numbness in facing the extension of ourselves.

In the Korean case, the broad sweeping classifications of media 'addiction' and 'addicts' are far too oversimplistic. It may be that the rapid social transformation in all aspects of material and social life has caused Korean youth to find strategies in their everyday lives to cope with their experience of societal flux and the global quest for modernity, leading to further in-depth consideration of the relationship between technology and society.

Online 게임과 한국의 경우를 근거로 하여 한국의 사회기술적 변화에 대한 Canada Communication 이론의 적용

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이 논문은 미디어 자체가 스스로 확장되어 간다는 맥루한 (McLuhan) 의 이론을 문화적인 배경을 중심으로 고찰하고자 한다.

특히 한국 미디어의 유별난점에 대하여 단순히 해석하기 보다는 한국인과 북미인의 관점을 상호연관하여 맥루한 (McLuhan) 의 미디어 중독상태를 설명하기 위한 나깃수 (Narcissus) 의 신화 에 대하여 고찰하고자 한다.

한국에서는 5000 만 인구의 거의반이상이 온라인 게임을 하고 그중 대부분의 사람들이 빠른 인터넷에 익숙되어 있는 젊은세대들이다. 그러나 맥루한 (McLuhan) 이 말하였듯이 기술적인 혁신은 이전의 인간들의 역할범위를 빠르게 확장 시킬수 있고 일과 여가활동을 새롭게 전개할수있다. 세계적으로 보아도 한국에서의 역활의 확장은 매우 두드러진 현상이다.

내가 주장하는 한국인 정보 통신기술을 다양한 방식으로 이용하는면에서 기술이전속도가 빠르며 이러한 현상은 매일매일의 사회적인 자극에 감각을 잃어나깃수 (Narcissus) 의 무감각처럼 확산되어 존재하게 되었다.

맥루한 (McLuhan) 이 주장한나깃수 (Narcissus) 의 무감각은 사회적 충격의 중심에있는 미디어 사용자를 이해하는데 다른 방법에 대하여 언급한다. 나깃수 (Narcissus) 는 스스로 절단된 자기모습에 감각을 잃어 버렸다면 거기에는 명확한 이유가 있다.

만약 어떤사람이 사랑하는 사람을 잃어 버리고 또한 어떤 사람이 갑자기 몇 피트에서 떨어지면 이러한 경우 매우 놀랠것이다.

맥루한 (McLuhan) 의 주장은 우리가 매일매일 사용하는 기술들이 사용자들의 잠재의식을 깨우고 우리자신의 무감각에 직면하면서나깃수 (Narcissus) 의무감각 처럼 우리자신이 되어 가는것이다.

한국의 경우 미디어 중독자, 미디어중독등 으로 포괄적으로 분류하는것은 너무 간단하게 말하는것이다.

한국의 젊은세대는 급속히 변화되는 물질적 사회적 변화에 대처하기 위하여 기술적면과 사회변화에 적극적인 대처가 필요하여 이에 대응되는 전략을 모색하게 되므로서 기술적인면과 사회적인면을 좀더 숙고하여야 한다

"In the electric age we wear all mankind as our skin"
- Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media (p. 47).

Introduction

The media theories of Marshall McLuhan's continue to have salience in the understanding of contemporary technologies of media, arguably to a greater extent in this present Internet age than at the time of their conception in the time of the telegraph in the mid twentieth century. Not only do his theories have new relevance for the current forms of media we have at our disposal, but I argue here that the combination of available media and cultural variation in its use, as exemplified in Korea, bring his theories to a new level of relevance in the field of communication.

In this paper, I will explore McLuhan's theories regarding media as an extension of the self in terms of figure and ground. I focus upon his use of the myth of Narcissus as a type of media narcosis, and draw some links between Korean and North American perspectives of what might be interpreted as media addiction for which Korea in particular, is famous. I then draw connections between this paper and consider the implications for Canadian policy in this international light. McLuhan's discourse on media studies help to add a scalable dimension of understanding to the global phenomenon of technological adoption. This examination is relevant to everyday users, non-users, and policy makers at home and abroad.

Extensions of research

In looking at the various positive and negative effects associated with media use, much harm has been done since McLuhan's time in the promotion of a specific brand of media research that either focused too much on the specifics of the content or its dystopian effects with little or no regard for the role played by the user except as a helplessly passive consumer of media. Evidence of this can be found especially in the body of scholarship scarred by the television era, which includes Neil Postman's *Amusing ourselves to death* (1985), and Joshua Meyrowitz's *No sense of place* (1985). Moving into the Internet era, things do not seem to get much better for the user, as exemplified by Sherry Turkle's *Life on the Screen* (1995) which discusses the user's identity as fragmented and multitudinous as a mere result of being online and able to role play. While it shall not be disputed that these are immense contributions to the field of communication research, there nonetheless seems to be an academic amnesia regarding the centrality of the user and media as an extension of the self as mapped out by McLuhan's theories.

McLuhan's (1994, p. 10) use of an anonymous stanza is particularly illustrative:

> In modern thought, (if not in fact)
> Nothing is that doesn't act,
> So that is reckoned wisdom which
> Describes the scratch but not the itch.

Is appropriately used in this case to represent a gap in media scholarship looking at figure (scratch) and ground (itch). For the purposes of this paper, I present a McLuhanesque perspective in order to act as a counterweight to all too many lopsided studies that simplistically interpret a high amount of media use as a disease, among other things.

Narcissus according to McLuhan

In his book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1994), McLuhan employs the Greek myth of Narcissus as a metaphor to describe what happens to someone experiencing the extension of themselves afforded by a particular medium. According to McLuhan, the myth is powerful for how it illustrates the fascination men feel, "by any extension of themselves in any material other than themselves" (M. McLuhan, 1994, p. 41). This is exemplified in Korean media ecology by the notorious frequency of which youth can be found communicating by way of online gaming avatars, their Cyworld minihompys,[1] and doing any variety of activities on their mobile phones.

Narcissus as Narcosis

The name Narcissus is derived from the Greek word 'narcosis,' which McLuhan takes to reflect numbness. The myth of Narcissus explains that the youth was so captivated by his own reflection in the water because he thought it to be another person. He stayed there so long he grew roots, and that gave us the Narcissus flower that grows beside water in present day. McLuhan connects this myth with his own media theory in that this extension of himself by this mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the "servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image" (M. McLuhan, 1994, p. 41). Once he adapted to the extension of himself, be became a closed system. With such a myth directly concerned with a fact of human experience, the metaphor of Narcissus seems the beginning of a more reasonable explanation for the pathological use of media than its typical dismissal as a medical "addiction." Contemporary youth in both Korea and North America have been criticized for their "Narcissism," and exhibitionism in their use of online media. Yet, it would be unfortunate to accept this branding without an understanding of possible theories of media use.

The 'numbness' of Narcissus that McLuhan alludes to presents an alternative understanding for media use that places the user at the heart of a type of social 'shock.' "For if Narcissus is numbed by his self-amputated image, there is a very good reason for the numbness… a person suddenly deprived of loved ones and a person who drops a few feet unexpectedly will both register shock" (M. McLuhan, 1994, p. 44). He maintains that shock induces a generalized numbness or an increased threshold to all types of perception, and, as a result the "victim" of this shock seems immune to pain or sense.

McLuhan asserts that it is the Narcissus-style continuous embrace of our own technology in daily use that places the user in a role of subliminal awareness and numbness in facing the extension of ourselves. As a consequence, people easily become servomechanisms of the very technologies of which they feel in control.

Addiction to gadgets – irritants and counter-irritants

When a person extends oneself, there is a resultant amplification in the sense of that extension. The Narcissus myth accounts for the numbness of blocking of perception as a type of self-defense mechanism to allow the nervous system to bear such amplification and extension. McLuhan argues that Narcissus' image is a self-amputation or extension induced by "irritating pressures." However, as a counter-irritant, the image in turn produces a generalized numbness or

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[1] Cyworld is a South Korean-based social networking site, which is a combination of social networking,blogging, and music and video sharing. According to Hyun-Oh Yoo, CEO of SK Communications, which owns Cyworld, the site now has 20 million users in Korea, which equates to about 40% of the country's total population (Ewers, 2006).

shock unrecognizable to Narcissus. "Self-amputation forbids self-recognition" (M. McLuhan, 1994, p. 43).

McLuhan then attempts to draw further parallels between the nervous system and media use. He posits that the body, as a group of sustaining and protective organs for the central nervous system, serves as a buffer against sudden variations of stimulus in one's environment. He goes on to say that sudden social failure or shame is a shock that some may "take to heart" or that may cause muscular disturbance in general, signaling for the person to withdraw from the threatening situation (M. McLuhan, 1994). As pseudo-scientific as this line of reasoning may seem, it does pose a reasonable metaphor for the social reasons as to why people may 'retreat' into unhealthy or destructive forms of media use.

Counter-irritants versus comfort in an electronic age

A few years ago while studying Sony Online Entertainment's popular massively-multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG) EverQuest, I had the privilege of interviewing someone for whom that game served as a therapeutic counter-irritant. While the game had been thoroughly criticized in the media for allegedly causing suicide and unemployment, this interviewee went so far as to say, "EverQuest saved my life." With various members of the public calling for the labeling of this and other games as a 'harmful/addictive substance,' and other regulations akin to other narcotics it was difficult to see that we were talking about a form of drug-free media that my interviewee was using to get more sleep, and play instead of using his serotonin-inducing medications.

McLuhan's answer to the above disjoint is that various physical and social therapies are forms of communication, and whether they are physical or social, may serve as a counter-irritant that aids in the maintenance of equilibrium with the body's nervous system. Whereas pleasure in the form of recreation, such as sports, entertainment, or narcotics serves as a counter-irritant, an antidote for irritating forces, true comfort is the removal of irritants. "Both pleasure and comfort are strategies of equilibrium for the central nervous system," (M. McLuhan, 1994, p. 43) but when it is impossible to remove the irritant, people retreat into their reserves of counter-irritants. Along with that, "any invention or technology is an extension or self-amputation of our physical bodies, and such extension also demands new ratios or new equilibriums among the other organs and extensions of the body" (1994, p. 45).

Extensions of the selves rather than senseless addictions

It is important to understand media in McLuhan's terms as an extension of the self. This is especially the case as technological and social change is being analyzed hand-in-hand around the world, along with Korea.

Figure and ground – Laws of Media

McLuhan's concept of figure and ground as found in Laws of Media (1988) was the guiding principle of his famous statement, "The medium is the message." He used the figure/ground dichotomy to look at communication technology (figure) and explain its function in a particular context (ground.) He believed that in order to adequately assess the impact of a new technology, one had to examine the figure and ground (medium and context) together. To look at one or the other independently, divorced of its historical context was more or less pointless. For example, how could one examine the mobile phone's function without knowing if it was operating in Vancouver or Manila, or that it was not preceded by the widespread use of landline telephones in Manila? McLuhan saw the splitting and dividing of figure and ground as an obfuscation of true and accurate technological assessment and a means of control. "In fact, it is

the technique of insight, and as such as necessary for media study, since no medium has its meaning or existence alone, but only in constant interplay with other media" (M. McLuhan, 1994, p. 26).

Three reasons why the medium is the message to be considered:

1. The present environment, itself made up of the effects of previous technologies, gives rise to new technologies.
2. These technologies each, in turn, further affect society and individuals.
3. All technologies have assumptions about time and space embedded within their use and design.

McLuhan believed that an examination of figures and grounds would allow people to critically assess technology's role in society. Only in the simultaneous analysis of both would true understanding out of the message being conveyed by the medium. As summarized by McLuhan, "…the ground of any technology is both the situation that gives rise to it as well as the whole environment (medium) of services and disservices that the technology brings with it. These are side-effects and impose themselves willy-nilly as a new form of culture" (M. McLuhan, and Eric McLuhan, 1988, p. 475). Culture indeed, as in the next section I will apply the theories just discussed to an interpretation of technological use in Korea.

Figures on Korean ground

We are just beginning to figure out how technologies, which have essentially been 'air dropped' into Korea are affecting the daily life of individuals within society. No longer able to remain aloof and dissociated in our global village, engagement with the exotic 'others' of media has become engagement with people on the other side of the globe who may affect us more than our next-door neighbours might on a daily basis. The emergent body of research in the area of Korean media (Hjorth, 2006) is indicative of the massive social upheaval being experienced on this particular ground. McLuhan shows concern by noting that the very new media and technologies that we use to amplify and extend ourselves constitute, "huge collective surgery carried out on the social body with complete disregard for antiseptics" (1994, p. 64). Current media scholarship in the region is only beginning to assess the social fallout inherent in a time of both mental and physical national flux, acceleration and disruption.

Research on the appropriation of technology in Korea forces media scholars to study not only the content, but "…the specific medium and cultural matrix within which the particular medium operates" (1994, p. 11). The technological figures on South Korean ground are of particular interest for this paper, particularly because of the rapid transformation from a primarily agrarian, to industrial, to information economy that has only occurred within the last fifty years since the Korean War (1950-1953). In the last decade, the emergence of nationwide broadband Internet access has only quickened the pace of technological change in an already frenetically adapting sociocultural milieu.

Korean Narcissus numbness

McLuhan notes that technological innovations do not necessarily introduce absolutely new elements into human society, but may still accelerate and enlarge the scale of previous human functions which in turn create new lifestyles (work and leisure) and environments. In no other country has this acceleration been more concentrated and apparent than Korea. I argue here that the pace of technological adoption, as evidenced by Koreans many uses of information and communication technologies in their myriad forms has served to create a sort of Narcissus-like

numbness society-wide. It may be that the rapid social transformation in all aspects of material and social life has caused Koreans to cling even harder to the technologies implemented as a directive in such social transformation to begin with.

In a nation of nearly 50 million people, over half play online games. This figure is overrepresented in proportion by the younger broadband Internet generation accustomed to these modes of communication. These same users would also likely be found to have a mobile phone and Cyworld minihompy, which is a personal profile webpage preceding the North American Facebook phenomenon by several years, but with similar multi-faceted modes of social networking capabilities.

To further our understanding of what is occurring in contemporary Korea with reference to online game culture, we analyze ethnographic data to tie in present-day sociocultural issues with the aforementioned policy context in order to counteract what Larissa Hjorth has argued is a chronic a-contextualization of gaming cultures via Neo-Techno-Orientalism (Ma, 1999 in Hjorth 2006). The goal of this paper is a multifaceted explanation of factors that may add up to a greater number of hours clocked by Korean youth online, but are not accurately summarized as "online game addiction" in the clinical pathological sense.[2]

While it is easy to fall into the seductive trap of recounting the sheer numbers involved in these Korean media habits which one may observe in Hjorth (2006) for gaming, Cyworld, and mobile phone usage, it is more interesting at the moment to consider what keeps this momentum of use going in this context. Some researchers including myself have surmised that Korean youth are certainly dealing with many 'irritating pressures' in the McLuhan sense that may be driving them to the metaphorical side of the water in order to assume the position of Narcissus. Of such documented pressures, there is family, pressure to perform in school (many youth are in some type of tutelage from sun up to sun down, every day), and general peer pressure"…And we often create artificial situations that rival the irritations and stresses of real life under controlled conditions of sport and play" (1994, p. 42). For example, the ubiquitous PC game rooms in Korea serve as extensions of a teenager's bedroom, or the retrieval of a community centre. In North America, the PC game rooms are not near as numerous, nor would a typical teenager require such an extension of their individual room because the agency afforded to them in this culture is likely sufficient for their purposes. Thus, "it is the accumulation of group pressures and irritations that prompt invention and innovation as counter-irritants" (1994, p. 47). Essentially, Korean youth may be (unconsciously) using these technologies to both ameliorate and perpetuate the various irritants that are only increasing in contemporary Korea.

Online game participation in Korean youth

As a cultural group, Koreans have been found to spend a lot more time nurturing social networks than what is common in a country like the United States (Yee, 2000). The tendency to nurture one's social relations is very much valued by Koreans of all ages, but for youth, the choice has been increasingly limited to a select few activities, which include gaming. Between the vice-grips of schooling, which dominates the better part of the day, and the (sometimes) judgmental gaze of family at home, the adolescent in contemporary Korea finds little solace aside from that which is associated with online gaming. For youth, the choice is often between

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[2] An explanation of this perspective can be found in a study by Florence Chee and Richard Smith (2005) which looks at the North American case of the online game *EverQuest* and the idea of electronic community.

participating in gaming activities as a part of mainstream everyday life, or stay away at the risk of alienating oneself from the common activity of the social group (Chee, 2005). It is not incidental that almost all the youth interviewed for the study talked about their online activities in relation to obligation and duty, whether it was their friends and promised times for logging on or to their guild, clan or band of blood brothers. It was rare that interviewees talked about any game, in and of itself, as the motivation for logging on. It is also interesting to note that the stakes were not the same for females, as expectations were very different according to one's gender.

Price, Policy, Pressure, and Place

It is important to understand how the PC bang phenomenon came to bear, but also why it has become so popular as an activity. One may say that there are four key factors that have contributed to the success of the Korean PC bang: price, policy, pressure, and place. On **price**, many Korean youth are able to meld aspects of their online and offline lives by using cheap (and therefore accessible) computer stations at PC bangs. Gaming venues also command an important place in the courtship of some young couples due to the cost-effectiveness of socializing at these venues as opposed to other more costly places—so much so, that there are couple zones with special workstations that are joined with a loveseat. Compared to other 'bangs' such as norae bangs (Karaoke rooms), DVD bangs, and board game bangs, PC bangs are still by far the cheapest at 1000 KRWon or less where the other bangs would cost about four times as much. Secondly, while the Korean **policy** emphasis on nationwide ICT adoption and usage has created the world's "most broadbanded nation,"(Hjorth, 2008) this specific prioritization of national resources has set the tone for the types of ICT-oriented activities people choose for themselves in their everyday lives. Participation in online games makes sense in this respect, because the broadband enabled PC is already such an integral part of life for this segment of the population and is thus more easily rationalizable and/or consumed between homework, traveling to after school cram schools and the like. Thirdly, the surrounding **pressure** experienced by those currently living in urban centres, such as students embroiled in the demands of their regular and after school activities can often be found in PC bangs, using the environment as release valve. However, to call the type of behaviour "escapism," is all too convenient, Freudian, and dismissive for our purposes of understanding the situation. Rather, our fourth factor of **place** is a more nuanced consideration that is contextually sensitive to the purpose the PC bang has come to serve. Why would those of all socio-economic situations, with access to their own home computer, still pay money to use computers at a PC bang? There is certainly more to the story, as the *PC bang* has become a de facto community centre and a common place to convene with one's friends, acquaintances, and dates outside the home.

In addition to being known as a common area for youth, the fallout from the 1997 financial crisis has also cast the role of the *PC bang* as a makeshift unemployment office of sorts, where those who found themselves without an "office" to go to every day routinely spent time at the *PC bang*. Additionally, with *PC bangs* open for 24 hours, it is not uncommon to find people using them as shelters if one was in need of a place to spend several hours during the night.

Taking the factors introduced in the preceding insights, it is important to consider contextual reasons along with the readily obvious monetary reasons for why players might spend what some might call an "excessive amount" of time logged on, buying or selling items. One might see how earning money by selling online items might be attractive for many reasons. First, in the already saturated Korean job market the income may provide extra pocket money and an increased sense of independence from one's family (which often many years away and operating within a paradigm privileging collectivism). Second, there seems to be a feeling of

productiveness associated with earning a living, especially after compulsory military service when young Korean males are often in a state of uncertainty, and in a state of limbo while searching for a job and/or finishing post-secondary education. Caillois' point of view in *Man, Play, and Games* is slightly more nuanced in that he explains what we are seeing are those who do not earn as much as more of a frivolous compensation.

> Daily competition is harsh and implacable as well as monotonous and exhausting. It provides no diversion and accumulates rancor. It abuses and discourages—for, practically speaking, it provides scarcely any hope of improving one's status by means of one's earnings alone. Therefore everyone seeks to compensate (Caillois, 1961, p.119).

Indeed, the practice of selling items may very well be a way that people empower themselves with more agency and a sense of self-worth and associated fringe benefits, alongside significant social practices of youth navigating within a society of conflicting interests. Generally, if a young person in Korea is employed, it is often a low paying part-time job, known as "*arubeit*." On the other hand, if one chooses, it is quite possible to earn more selling online game items than holding down a part-time job, which, if youth had the time between school schedules, would require the right age, experience, gender, and an accepted job application—which would not be required to game online with one's PC. Another significant reason is the prevalence of compulsory military service for most young Korean males during their early twenties. Their normal social environment becomes atomized, their educational trajectories are put on hold, and employment prospects for approximately two years and two months. During this army service, communication with one's friends and family is permitted only by written letters and 45 days of vacation, taken 10 days at a time. The service is viewed as a rite of passage into true male adulthood, with bonuses attributed to one's employment applications only after service is completed.

Concluding thoughts on global policy implications

To speak of policy implications in communication is to concern the international state of affairs in doing so. Firstly, the nuanced understanding of media use that the application of McLuhan's theories provide serves to provide a more balanced look at the regulation of use worldwide. Is it possible to evaluate the medium independently of its use context? McLuhan would argue that this would be indeed impossible and unjust to attempt to sanction media use in an arbitrary manner. The hours PC game rooms are allowed to open are different all over the world due to differing classification and perception of value to citizens. Secondly, related to regulation is the issue of censure and labeling of media as possibly 'addictive.' Thirdly, arising from the above are implications for development and funding of 'leisure' and what might count as such. It is not hyperbole to say that these issues are being fought out in court battles worldwide. It is therefore imperative that as a participant in governance at a global level, that national positions on these policies are clear. It is fitting that we should seek out a Canadian theorist like Marshall McLuhan to work synergistically with other schools of thought to provide us with a foundational paradigm.

This paper explored the pertinence of McLuhan's media theories to understanding how contemporary media technologies are being used, and how they are being used. I exhibited the relevance of his thought to both North American and Korean media ecologies. Of particular focus was the concept of figure/ground, along with the myth of Narcissus as germane to the argument of what might commonly be referred to as media addiction. I then drew connections between this paper and possible implications for policy in this international light for figuring out media at the ground level.

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