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## **Today's Media Ecosystem: is It the End of Human Subjectivity?**

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Title: Today's Media Ecosystem: is It the End of Human Subjectivity?

Abstract: Media determine what we see, feel, think, and act, as in Friedrich Kittler's lines 'Media are determining our situation'. Media control our situation. Even we always live and think in media. It seems that media is a total system in which there is no space for subjectivity. However, didn't humans create the media and experience every medium? This essay examines the position of human beings in their relation to media. This research suggests that human agency can be restructured in tactile media and tactical media. Tactile media emphasizes humans as active subjects in perceiving and experiencing media. Tactical media assumes that culture is a set of active practices, thus each individual can use each media to create social change.

Keywords: Media, Subjectivity, Tactile, Tactical, W.J.T. Mitchell

### 1. *Introduction*

In October 2021, I attended an online symposium named MetaMedia symposium hosted by Weston Game Lab. I was impressed by Hillary Chute's sentence, 'we are always thinking in media'. This sentence was originally inspired by W.J.T. Mitchell's notion of media. Mitchell departs from Friedrich Kittler's lines 'Media are determining our situation' (Kittler, 1999: xx). Media determine what we see, feel, think, and act. Media controls our situation, like Germany's 'situation room' in World War II that plotted airstrikes in the battle of Britain. (Mitchell, 2013: 18). Even we always live and think in media, like in language, image, or audio. In the other words, borrow Derrida's expression, 'there is nothing outside the media'.

I wonder furthermore is there still any space/room for humans as a subject in the media ecosystem? I consider that we live not only in a "society of the spectacle" but also in a "surveillance society". (Mitchell, 2005: 5). Is it the end of human subjectivity?

However, didn't 'we' create the media? 'We' inhabit them, and 'we' are who experience every medium as the vehicle of our some immediacy. (Mitchell,

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2013:19). As W.J.T. Mitchell puts it, “there is always something outside the medium, namely, the zone of immediacy”. (Mitchell, 2013:19).

We are often tempted to think about the totalization of media, in which media becomes *all* of our situations. The old model of communication that consists of sender-medium-receiver has this media totalitarian tendency. This model does not consider the different cultures, social-political backgrounds, and personalities of audiences that might completely change the message of the sender. For example, the emergence of television US did not produce and encountered the same situation as Africa or South East Asia’s audience (Mitchell, 2013: 18-19). This essay attempts to look into the position of human beings in their relation to media.

I hope it is not exaggerating to ask what is the meaning of humans as ‘free agents’ in the twenty-first-century media ecosystem. Of course, I’m not in a naive perspective, that sees media merely as neutral, passive, and instrumental to the information they convey. (Mitchell, 2010: vii). I realize that media no longer mediate. Media become means of, what Teun A. Van Dijk called ‘symbolic elites’, to manipulate public communication so the dominant group of people will be affected by prejudice, such as racism, genocide-denial, anti-minority, or class bias. I prefer to say that media can affect social relations, or in Kittler’s terms, media are “not coefficients but effectors of ideology”. (Kittler, 1999: xv).

This essay consists of five main parts, i.e., introduction, what is media?, Meta-media, human agency: from tactile to tactical media, and conclusion.

## 2. *What is Media?*

Media as the plural form of *medium* is derived from the Latin word that means “middle, center, midst, intermediate course, intermediary”. This definition refers to several meanings, which are: ‘something that is intermediate between two degrees, amounts, qualities, or classes’, ‘a person or thing which acts as an intermediary, a material used in artistic expression’, ‘a channel of mass communication’, ‘the physical material that is used for recording or reproducing data, images, or sound’, ‘a substance through which a force acts on objects at a distance or through which impressions are conveyed to the senses’, and ‘a spiritualist who communicates with the dead. (Mitchell, 2010: xi).

Media as the plural form is also related to the emergence of the mass media, which begins with the eighteenth century’s investment in the paper as the medium of information circulation, to the nineteenth century’s invention of electricity, until the emergence of newspapers in the later nineteenth century, and the television in the twentieth century. In these cases, media is not merely plural of medium but opens onto the notion of a form of life, a general environment for a living (ecosystem) – for thinking, perceiving, sensing, and feeling. (Mitchell, 2010: xii).

Friedrich Kittler, in *Gramophone, Film, and Typewriter*, argues that the development of media technology was driven by military needs. For instance, the

early telegraphy was the result of a military need for the quick distribution of commands, television is a by-product of radar technology, and the computer was developed during the Second World War to both encrypt and decode military intelligence. The communication technologies were “a series of strategic escalation”. Human is important in the invention of these technologies, but then they as cognitive and self-determining agent disappear and immerse in the sophisticated technology. Human mind processes transform into silicon microprocessors, humans’ physics, and sensory parts into computer or robot hardware, and eventually the prosthetic technology that allows complete replacement of the human. This is a dissolution of humans into technologies. (Kittler, 1999: xxxvi-xxxiv).

Marshall McLuhan articulates the general field of media studies that go beyond representation including technology as the ‘extensions of man’ (Mitchell, 2015: 10). According to McLuhan, “all media are extensions of some human faculty—psychic or physical”. McLuhan was well-known for his notion that “medium is the message” (McLuhan, 2001: 9) and also “medium is the massage”. (McLuhan, 1967: 26). “The medium is the message” because it is “the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action”. (McLuhan, 2001: 11). Any medium has personal and social consequences, as the new medium or technology is the extension of ourselves. (McLuhan, 2001: 9). The ‘message’ of any medium or technology is “the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs”. (McLuhan, 2001: 10). For instance, the railway did not introduce means of transportation or wheel or road into society, but it changed, accelerated, and enlarged the scale of previous human functions, for example by creating new kinds of cities, works, and leisure. (McLuhan, 2001: 10). Meanwhile, ‘The medium is the massage’ because the medium is an extension of humans’ faculties and senses. It has a pervasive effect on our ‘personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, and social life’. No part is ‘untouched, unaffected, and unaltered’ by media. (McLuhan, 1967: 26).

McLuhan focuses on the electric technology that reshapes and restructures patterns of our social and personal world. For him, society is more determined by ‘the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication’. (McLuhan, 1967: 9). For example, children quickly recognize the alphabet or a foreign language, because they unconsciously internalize it from various media that currently circulating.

Kittler emphasizes the impossibility of understanding the media because the media form the infrastructure conditions for the possibility of understanding itself. (Mitchell, 2010: xii). In other words, the media is a necessary condition for understanding itself, so it is impossible to understand or criticize the media. Meanwhile, McLuhan emphasizes how media and mediation operations throughout history have changed the sensory ‘ratio’ and human perception. (Mitchell, 2010: xii). McLuhan underscores the fundamental relation of technology as an extension of man. In McLuhan’s thinking, there is still room for human subjectivity to think about and criticize the media.

### 3. Meta-Media: Learn from Media about Media

In this sub-chapter, I explore the nature of media by learning from media. I depart from the concept of Metapicture, which is pictures that can refer to the process of pictorial representation itself and the picture maker's world. (Mitchell, 2005: 6). Metapicture was inspired by metalanguage which is the language that describes the language. Metapicture was coined by W.J.T. Mitchell around 27 years ago and written in his book *Picture Theory* (1994). Metapicture can be present in several forms (Mitchell, 2015: 18-19) such as 1) An image that appears in another image, 2) Images that reflect on the image's nature, 3) Metaphors that provide a model of theory, 4) Analogy that portray the entire discourse or knowledge. I argue that media also have the potential to be meta-media, which is media that provide a picture of their own mediation operations and the human world. Here, I exemplify a meta-media that describes the mediation process as well as the human condition.

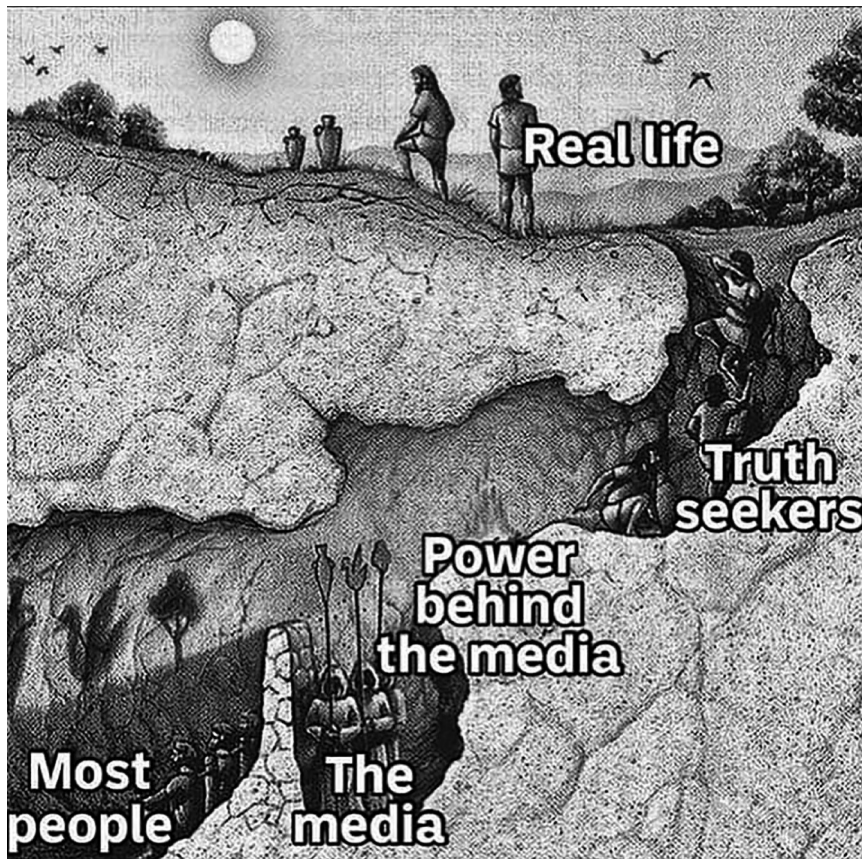


Fig.1: Media and Plato's Cave Allegory  
[instagram.com/p/CP6rT4bnKP3/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CP6rT4bnKP3/)



This picture is an example of Meta-media which portrays the media and mediation process through the parody of Plato's cave allegory. It depicts the representation of media producing shadows that are believed as reality by common people. The power behind the media, like media owners, politicians, corporations, and investors drive what should be shown in the media. Like false consciousness, the media conceals and normalizes the dominance and bias of the ruling class. Meanwhile, only the truth seeker can leave the cave and meet reality. The space of subjectivity is left only for those who think and pursue greater truth. In the next sub-chapter, I will explore a more practical way to actualize human subjectivity through and within media.

#### 4. *Human Agency: from Tactile to Tactical Media*

What is lost in the media discourse is an existential problem, which is the way this mediation process ties in the humans' life. 'What humanity is' also gradually changes affected by media, cycles of media innovation, invention, and obsolescence. Humans live, act, and move in the media. (Mitchell, 2010: iv). Can we construct human agency amid the media ecosystem? Is this the end of human subjectivity?

I offer two fields in which humans are subject in the media ecosystem: tactile media and tactical media. Firstly, tactile media asserts that media are extensions of the human senses. Only humans could comprehend the impact of the medium. Also, only humans who create, "play with and upon its sensory capabilities". Only humans can "think with their ears, their fingers, and toes". (Mitchell, 2013: 15).

Everyone experiences media according to their psychological, social, and cultural background. The same medium even can produce different experiences in different people. For example, male and female audiences react differently when watching movies. Laura Mulvey in her article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), shows that classical cinema for male audiences produces a male gaze that objectifies women and scopophilia which is the sexual pleasure that occurs when viewing pleasure objects. This male gaze is coded through the alignment between the male protagonist, camera, and audience. (Williamson, 1996: 17).

In the modern view, tactile experiences (touch, smell, and taste) are seen as inferior compared with 'vision' as the most superior sense. Modernists regard these lower senses as immature, uncivilized, childish, or even bestial. (Veres, 2019: 12). However, currently, tactile media has a better appreciation in the contemporary arts. It is shown by the emergence of many tactile museums and immersive exhibitions. The increase of tactile media appreciation is hand in hand with the idea that multisensory experience helps to create a holistic aesthetic experience and a more integral understanding of an object.

Secondly, tactical media. As Garcia and Lovink said in a short text entitled *The ABC of Tactical Media*, "Tactical Media are media of crisis, criticism, and

opposition.” They use media to give social commentary. This media is allowing users to be producers, not simply consumers. This ‘New Media’ activism challenged everyone to produce their content as a powerful tool to change the social-political circumstance.

From 1993 to 1999, Tactical Media existed as a kind of movement that is done by activists, video artists, camcorder artists, hackers, street rappers, and Nomadic media warriors. The name ‘Tactical Media’ was mentioned in the Next 5 Minutes festival series (1993-2003).

Tactical media strategies are widely used by various social movements around the world, such as the Arab Spring, the Hong Kong protest, Greta Thunberg, and the call for a school strike on Friday in protest of the slow handling of the climate change crisis, the #MeToo movement against sexual violence, Black Lives Matter which triggered protests in various countries of the world and many other movements.

Tactical Media assumes that culture is a set of active practices rather than passive texts/artifacts. The focus of culture shifts from ‘representation’ to ‘usefulness’ of representation, which is on how we as consumers use the cultural products around us. At this point, the media is called “tactical”. In this sense, consumption is considered a set of tactics in which the weak take advantage of the strong. (Garcia and Lovink, 2008).

I realize that the tactical media can also turn in the opposite direction, such as anti-democracy and religious extremism. Therefore, tactical media cannot move alone but must walk together with the education that aims to make people able to think critically, which has been the realm and explored by many other researchers. Furthermore, structural changes in the media that control users can occur through the invention of new business ethics that is not profit-oriented and attempt to decentralize the social network.

## 5. Conclusion

This research begins with the question “is today’s media ecosystem the end of human subjectivity?”. Following that, firstly, I explore what media is, learn from the media about media or what is called meta-media, and finally suggest human agency in tactile media and tactical media. Tactile media emphasizes humans as active subjects in perceiving and experiencing media. Each individual can differently respond to the same representation. Tactical media assumes that culture is a set of active practices, thus each individual can use each media to create social change.

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