Mental CMS and media landscapes

Jan Sleutels, Leiden University
P.O. Box 9515, 2300 RA Leiden, The Netherlands
mail@dassein.com


Abstract
While EEC is taking important steps toward understanding the systemic contingency of psychological competencies, states and processes, relatively little attention is given to questions of development and variation of these contingencies. In this respect EEC theorizing seems to retain a faintly essentialist (or ‘actualist’) bias, which may assert itself when considering the mind in historical perspective (cf. Sleutels 2006). I want to draw attention to one particular streak of historical and cultural contingency, viz. the effects of changing media landscapes on psychological competency and conscious mental organization. In a sense I suggest that philosophy of mind may profit from lessons by Marshall McLuhan, the much-maligned media theorist.

A key concept in my argument is that of a community’s epistemic toolkit, i.e., the collection of practical and conceptual tools that community members use for purposes of describing, organizing, and communicating mental states, contents, and processes (roughly, a community’s ‘folk psychology’). I argue that this toolkit is largely constitutive of our mental Content Management System (CMS), as well as of its consciously accessible contents. Epistemic toolkits are critically dependent upon features of historically changing media landscapes, which act as cognitive ecologies, or “scaffolding structures”, for the development of psychological practices and competencies. I briefly review a number of examples that seem to be particularly pertinent to present-day cognitive competencies, including the use of dialectical and mnemonic techniques (Carruthers 1990), late medieval hermeneutics (Olson 1994), and the invention of systems for rational manipulation of context-free contents often associated with printing-press and Enlightenment (McLuhan 1962).

References