THE MEDIUM IS THE MESS-IAH

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Abstract:

Playing with Marshall McLuhan's play on his famous saying "the medium is the message", when he substituted the words massage, mass age, and mess age for message, I formulated the one-liner 'the medium is the mess-iah'. I will explain what McLuhan meant by a medium and also how the term messiah arose. I will then address how the one-liner, the medium is the mess-iah provides insights into the nature of digital media in general; Steve Jobs' development of the Apple product line and the devotion of its users; and the religious and messianic belief of the advocates of the technological Singularity.

Keywords: medium, messiah, Apple, technological singularity, Singularity, AI

Introduction

To celebrate the 50th anniversary of the publication of the medium is the massage we were challenged to write an essay on the medium is the (blank) and we were further challenged to fill in the blank. At first, I was stumped by this request and thought I would not be able to contribute to this collection of essays. And then while I was working on another project critiquing the notion of the technological Singularity, which we argued was not possible (Braga and Logan 2017), I came up with this notion of the medium is the mess-iah. The technological Singularity is the notion that someday through AI (artificial intelligence) we, humans, will be able to build a computer that will be able to design a computer with a greater intelligence than it and that by iteration eventually there will be a computer with an intelligence greater than any human being. Once this is achieved it is claimed that this will usher in an age where these AI configured computers will be able to solve any problem faced by humanity. We (ibid.) have argued that this is an impossibility but others argue otherwise and have faith that the Singularity is achievable. The belief of the singularitarians is religious as I will argue and their belief in the coming of the Singularity parallels that of those religious adherents of Judaism, Christianity and Islam that believe in the coming (or actually the second coming for the Christians and the Muslims) of the Messiah. It was while working on that project that I came up with the
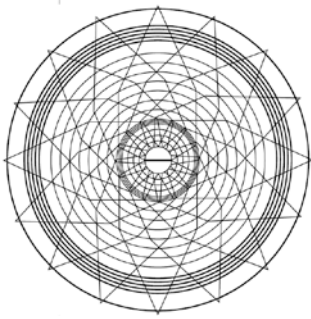
solutions to the challenge issued by Phil Rose, namely 'the medium is the mess-iah'. I would like to acknowledge Phil's help on this project by suggesting I read Appletopia, which relates the messianic mission of Steve Jobs in developing the line-up of Apple products or media, which resulted in my treatment of Steve Jobs as a digital messiah. I also want to acknowledge the encouragement of Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof that convinced me to pursue this project.

This essay will be divided into three parts. In Part 1, I will describe what McLuhan meant by a medium and how he played with 'the medium is the message', by substituting for message the word massage, then the words mass age and then the words mess age. In Part 2, I will discuss the term messiah, its origin in Judaism and its evolution in Christianity and Islam. In Part 3, I will explain why I claim that 'the medium is the mess-iah' and discuss the technological Singularity project and the contributions of Steve Jobs to the development of digital culture.

Part I. What did McLuhan mean by "the medium"

Medium is singular and media is the plural of medium. Media has a double meaning. The term media most often refers to communications as in newspapers, radio and television, but it is also the plural of medium. For McLuhan a medium is any form of technology and not just a communication medium. Television is a medium but so is an automobile, and so is a city.

Before launching into my riff on the medium is the message: the medium is the mess-iah, I will provide the reader with some background of the phrase, "the medium is the message." It is Marshall McLuhan's best known one-liner. When I give talks to the public, gatherings of students and fellow academics who are not familiar with media ecology, and ask if they know who Marshall McLuhan is, I often draw a blank, but when I ask have you heard the expression "the medium is the message," they often respond with something, like "oh yes, I have heard that before".

Marshall McLuhan riffed on his one-liner, the medium is the message, inventing the following versions:
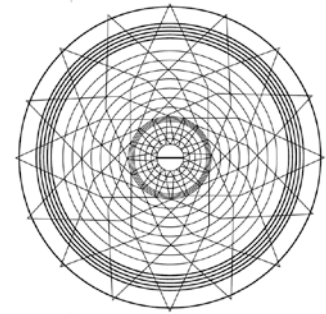
The medium is the massage, the title of his book with Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (McLuhan & Fiore 1967). The context of this one-liner occurs in the following excerpt from the book:

All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the massage. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments. All media are extensions of some human faculty – psychic or physical (ibid., 26).

McLuhan further riffed on 'the medium is the message' with 'the medium is the mass age' and 'the medium is the mess age' as described by Paul Levinson (2001, 36) in his book Digital Media:

"The medium is the message" made its first unassuming appearance... in his [McLuhan's] 1960 typescript "Report on Project in Understanding New Media" (p.9) that he wrote for the "National Association of Educational Broadcasters..." By 1964, the phrase had become the all-important title of the first chapter of Understanding Media... So popular were the discussions of that chapter title and its meaning that McLuhan could not resist entitling an entire book with a punning variation - The Medium is the Massage - by McLuhan and Quentin Fiore in 1967. Two years later "the medium is the mess-age" appeared in Counterblast (McLuhan and Parker, 1969, p.23), and the mess-age became the mass-age in Take Today: Executive as Dropout (McLuhan & Nevitt, 1972, 63).

Other examples where McLuhan used the phrase "the medium is the message" include the following excerpts from his writing:

The medium is the message because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action (McLuhan 1964, 9).

McLuhan often jested that "If the medium is the message, then the user is the content (de Kerckhove, 12)."

Although the medium is the message, the controls go beyond programming. The restraints are always directed to the "content," which is always another medium. The content of the press is literary statement, as the content of the book is speech, and the content of the movie is the novel. So, the effects of radio are quite independent of its programming. (McLuhan 1964, 267)

When I say that the medium is the message, I'm saying that the motor car is not a medium. The medium is the highway, the factories, and the oil companies. That is the medium. In other words, the medium of the car is the effects of the car. ('Living at the speed of light' in Maclean's Magazine, 1980.)

Part 2. The Moshiach, The Messiah, and the Masîḥ

The notion of a messiah first appears in Hebrew scriptures as Ha Moshiach (הַמָּשִׁיחַ), literally "the anointed one," and often referred to as a king, Melekh Ha Moshiach (מלך המשיח) or King Messiah. In Judaism, the moshiach or messiah is not divine but is a political and spiritual leader descended from the line of King David, who it is believed will be able to unite the twelve tribes of Israel, rebuild the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, and usher in a period of peace in which the entire world becomes devoted to God. Through the ages there have been many rabbis who have claimed (or have been claimed to be) the Moshiach, such as Sabbatai Zevi of Smirna in the 17th Century and most recently, the followers of the Chabad movement who have claimed that their
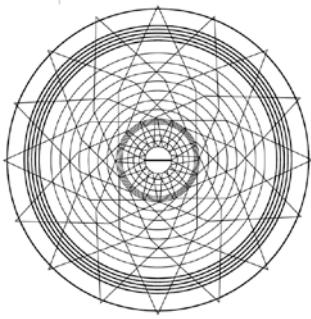
last two rabbis, Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson and Menachem Mendel Schneerson are Moshiachs.

In Christianity, Jesus Christ is regarded as the one and only true Messiah… The name Christ is derived from the Greek translation of the Hebrew moshiach (the anointed one), which was translated into Greek as khristos (χριστός). The Christian notion of the messiah differs from that of Judaism in that Jesus is regarded as the son of God and shares the godhead as part of the Holy Trinity. Like the Hebrew Moshiach, it is claimed that Jesus is part of the House of David and is descended directly from King David. Like the Jewish notion of the messiah as a king, Jesus is regarded by Christians as the King of the Jews. His birthplace in Bethlehem fulfils the prophecy in Micah 5:1&2. Jesus is also an anointed one as he was anointed by a woman with a questionable past at Bethany shortly before his crucifixion. Although Jesus did not usher in the period of peace, Christians believe that this will occur in the second coming of Christ. According to the Nicene Creed, "He will come again in his glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end… We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come."

In the Islamic tradition, Jesus is regarded as a prophet of God but does not partake of the God head. He is referred to as the Masîḥ (حيسم), where the literal translation of Masîḥ (حيسم) as with the Hebrew Moshiach and the Christian Messiah literally translates as 'the anointed one'. Islam also has the idea of a second coming of the Masîḥ at the end of times.

The coming of the Moshiach, the Messiah and the Masîḥ all represent the end of days and the beginning of a period of eternal peace, prosperity and devotion to God for all three religions. There is also the notion that all righteous humans that worship God or Allah will have eternal life.
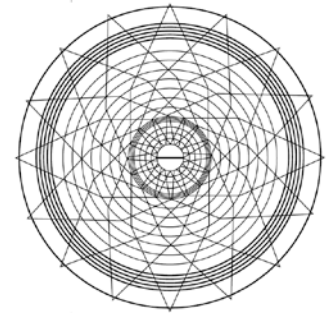
The Digital or Technological Messiah

Just as the religion-based messiahs are predicted to usher in a new period in human existence, a singularity of sorts and the end of days as we know them, there is a similar notion among those that believe that technology and media will have a similar effect and change the nature of human existence in a profound way and bring in an era of greater prosperity. We will examine ways in which messianic or religious connotations can be attached to the development of technology in general and examine in greater detail two examples from the digital age. One will be the development of the Apple product line by Steve Jobs and his promotion of them as well as the religious-like devotion of his fans. The second will be the religious fervor of the advocates of the technological Singularity and the belief of some that artificial general intelligence will provide a mechanism for everlasting life as they upload their brains to an AI configured super-computer.

Steve Jobs, the Messiah from Apple

Steve Jobs may be regarded as the messiah from Apple, who ushered in the new age of the personal computer with the Apple II computer, the graphic user interface for personal computers with the MacIntosh, the transformation of the access of popular music with the iPod and iTunes, the transformation of computing with the iMac and the iPad, and the transformation of telephony and its marriage with computing with the iPhone. It was not that earlier versions of some of these devices were developed earlier by others, but it was that each of these new forms of computing dominated their markets and changed the way people thought about electronic devices. He also inspired a following of Apple devotees whose loyalty to Apple parallels that of the loyalty of the practitioners of the traditional religions.

Steve Jobs grew up in Mountainview California, the original town of the Silicon Valley and moved to Cupertino the current home of Apple when he was 12 years old. Steve's dad Paul Jobs, a machinist and a handyman, built an electronics workshop in the family garage so his son could pursue his passion for electronics. While only 13 years of age Steve asked Bill Hewlett, the co-founder of Hewlett-Packard for some electronic components for a project he was working on. Charmed by the enthusiasm of the young boy Hewlett offered Jobs a summer job working on the assembly line at Hewlett-Packard. Although the job was modest in scope Jobs described it as like "being in heaven". Jobs' high school buddy and fellow electronics hobbyist Bill Fernandez introduced Steve to his neighbor Steve Wozniak and the rest is history.

After high school Jobs attended Reed College in Portland Oregon but dropped out after a couple of years because of the drain on his parents' finances. One course though, had a lasting influence on him, which was a calligraphy course. In his commencement address at Stanford in June of 2005 he said, "If I had never dropped in on that single calligraphy course in college, the Mac would have never had multiple typefaces or proportionally spaced fonts.

After college Jobs worked at Atari off and on in the middle of which he took a journey to India seeking spiritual enlightenment and became involved in Zen Buddhism, something that influenced him for the rest of his life. He also experimented with drugs and considered his use of LSD one of the most important experiences of his life.

In the meantime, Steve Wozniak had designed a computer, the Apple I. Jobs and Wozniak formed a company in 1976 to manufacture and market the computer, which they sold for $666.66. They worked out of the Jobs's family garage. They had success with this enterprise netting close to $800,000. This allowed them to capitalize their next venture which was the design and manufacture of the Apple II computer. It was a complete success and net them sales of $139 million in the first three years of operation. By 1980 the company was being publically traded and was worth $1.2 Billion.
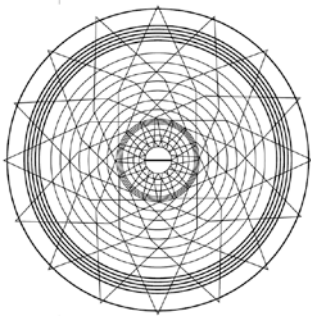
In a July 20, 2007 Macworld interview Wozniak reminisced about his partnership with Jobs:

> *We both loved electronics and the way we used to hook up digital chips. Very few people, especially back then had any idea what chips were, how they worked and what they could do. I had designed many computers so I was way ahead of him in electronics and computer design, but we still had common interests. We both had pretty much sort of an independent attitude about things in the world, we were both smart enough to think things up for ourselves. (https://www.macworld.com/article/1059036/wozniak.html accessed October 15, 2017).*

Wozniak was the technically stronger of the two, but Jobs possessed the business acumen. Wozniak was an introvert and Jobs an extrovert and between them they had all the smarts for the incredible success they made with their first commercial offering, the Apple II computer, which ushered in the personal computer revolution. Jobs' business acumen also led to another important business decision, namely not to license Apple's operating system, which Wozniak claimed contributed to the great success of Apple:

> *To make Apple such a great company in the computer field we also had to consider a lot of things. If Apple had licensed the operating system, would we still be as large and as good creating such great products? You can never look back and decide how the future would have turned out for Apple. … A lot of our biggest assets are customer loyalty and a lot of customer loyalty comes from people who believe in what Apple was, partly because it was the company that made the whole thing, the operating system, the hardware, the application, services … It's the greatness of products that come through when we get control over all the aspects of the computer (ibid.).*

Jobs had another talent that was crucial for the success of Apple and that was design, not just technical design but aesthetic and ergonomic design as well. He combined art and technology (Robinson 2013, 8) and worked assiduously to make sure that Apple's computers were easy to operate. This combination of Jobs's talents resulted in the development of the MacIntosh in 1984, the first mass produced computer to take advantage of the graphic user interface that was eventually copied by Microsoft Windows. The Macintosh together with the Apple Laserwrite contributed in no small way to the desktop publishing revolution.

In 1985 Jobs was pushed out of Apple due to conflicts with CEO John Scully, who Jobs had hired in the first place. After leaving Apple Jobs invested $50 million in Pixar becoming its major shareholder and eventually its CEO. He also negotiated the purchase of the company by Disney becoming Disney's largest shareholder and a member of the Disney board.
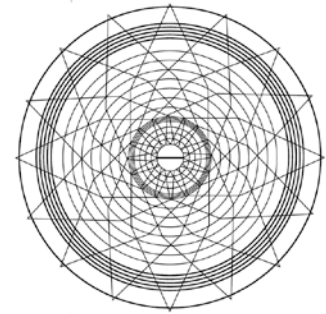
In addition to his activities at Pixar Jobs launched a new startup to develop the NeXT computer, a high-end work station with a number of revolutionary features. In the meantime, Apple was not doing very well without Jobs and a reconciliation was made in which Apple bought the NeXT company in 1997 for $429 million and 1.5 million shares of Apple. Jobs was soon at the helm of Apple again. He combined the NeXT software with Apple's hardware to create macOS, iOS, watchOS and tvOS. There quickly followed in succession a string of revolutionary products and services. The iPod and the iTunes stores transformed the pop music industry, forcing many of the big chain record stores out of business. The next game changers that Jobs unleashed upon the world were the iPad and the iPhone, both of which featured touch screens.

By 2011, the year of Jobs' passing, he had turned Apple into the most valuable publicly traded company in the world. But more importantly he had transformed the world and the lives of countless millions of users and even non-users of his products through his missionary zeal. He was truly the messiah of the digital age. He was adored by the devotees of Apple who attended his talks at MacWorld and various product releases, and who stood in long lines to be the first to purchase his products.

Brett Robinson (2013, 6) in his book Appletopia expresses the messianic journey of Jobs best and captured the religious fervor that Jobs created among his fans:

> *The cult of Apple is shorthand for the devotion of Apple technology enthusiasts, but their fidelity and fervor points to a more fundamental link between the cult of technology and the cult of the individual. Apple founder Steve Jobs is an allegoric figure for reading the ways in which technology and individual value systems intersect to produce an implicit religion. Technology, like religion, becomes a site where the physical and the metaphysical meet. The promotion of modern technology revives dreams of communion brought by networked information. The objects that transmit ephemeral bits of culture, promote virtual community, and organize the digital chaos have become sacred objects.*

The medium is the mess-iah, so what is the connection with Marshall McLuhan? E. G. Austin (2011) found a connection writing an obituary in The Economist entitled, "Steve Jobs's legacy: With Apple, the medium made the message":

> *In 1964 Marshall McLuhan, a media scholar, offered his now-famous dictum that "the medium is the message." Few people have done more to illustrate that than Steve Jobs, the visionary founder of Apple... Apple's products have changed not just how we communicate but what we communicate and even, arguably, what we think. The phenomenon McLuhan identified was one of framing, of inadvertent shaping... Jobs' approach had a teleological dimension.   With his products, the medium often made the message...*

To some extent, this is just as McLuhan predicted. Apple has a distinctive aesthetic that prioritizes simplicity and straightforwardness... you needn't read a manual to work
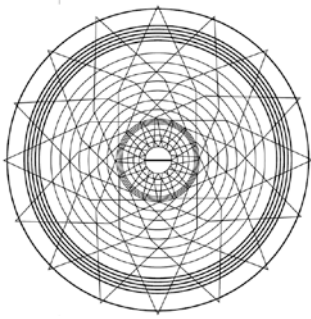
an iPad. The iPhone, the iPad and the MacBook are the medium; the message is that technology should be easy, intuitive, and fun.

If 'the medium is the mess-iah', so what is the connection with religion? Jesus Martin Barbero (1997, 112) expresses it in a very moving way:

> Despite all the promise of modernity to make religion disappear, what has really happened is that religion has modernized itself... What we are witnessing is not the conflict of religion and modernity, but the transformation of modernity into enchantment by linking new communication technologies to the logic of popular religiosity.

Robinson (2013, 103) underscores the religious dimension and devotion of Apple's devotees,

> Apple product launches and conferences remain sacred pilgrimages where Apple fans can congregate, camp, and live together for days at a time to revel in the communal joy of witnessing the transcendent moment of the new product launch. The reverence once reserved for holy relics and liturgy has reemerged in the technology subculture.

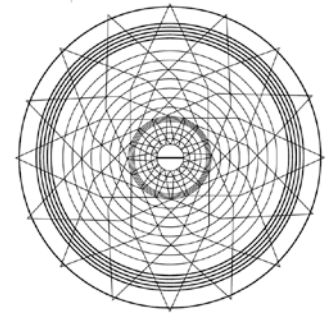### The Technological Singularity, the Silicon Messiah

The notion of the technological Singularity (aka the Singularity), or the idea that computers will one day be more intelligent than their human creators, is another messiah story. But this messiah is not a human as was the case with Steve Jobs and Apple. The messiah in this story is a medium, a computer, not an ordinary computer but one that is an Artificial Intelligence (AI) device that has achieved a level of intelligence greater than that of any human being. This device does not exist except in the imagination of its devotees who are anxiously awaiting its first coming. The high priest or John the Baptist of this movement is Ray Kurzweil, author of The Age of Intelligent Machines, The Age of Spiritual Machines, Fantastic Voyage: Live Long Enough to Live Forever and The Singularity is Near (Kurzweil 2005). He has been predicting the coming of the Singularity for most of his adult life. His latest prediction is that the Singularity will arrive by 2045 (ibid.).

The faith of the believers in the Singularity is their assertion that programmers will design a computer with an AI or AGI (Artificial General Intelligence aka strong AI) capability that will allow it to design a computer even more intelligent than itself, and that computer will be able to do the same, and by a process of iteration a technological singularity point will be arrived at where post-Singularity computers will be far more intelligent than us poor humans, who only have an intelligence designed by nature through natural selection and evolution. Some believe that once the Singularity arrives that these super-intelligent computers will take over and we humans will become their docile servants.

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A number of the believers in the Singularity have a religious zeal to them that parallels the beliefs of the deists and the group of French philosophers and men of letters who created the Encyclopédie as part of the Enlightenment. They celebrated the advancement of science and technology. They embraced the idea of the perfectibility of human intelligence as suggested by Condorcet who wrote:

> Nature has set no term to the perfection of human faculties; that the perfectibility of man is truly indefinite; and that the progress of this perfectibility, from now onwards independent of any power that might wish to halt it, has no other limit than the duration of the globe *upon which nature has cast us (www.historyguide.org/intellect/sketch.html).*

The Singularity zealots of today, paralleling the thinkers of the Enlightenment, have, to varying degrees, a religious tone to them. Here are a number of examples. One class of examples is the notion that humans, once the Singularity arrives, will be able to upload their brains to an AI configured device. Frank Tipler (2015) is making plans for the inevitable reality that our sun will one day run out of nuclear fuel and therefore will no longer be able to provide the conditions that make life on Earth sustainable. He believes that our only hope for the survival of human culture will be AI computers (AIs) that do not require the conditions that make carbon-based life sustainable. He suggests that the AIs will take to outer space. And any human who wants to join the AIs in their expansion can become a human upload, a technology that should be developed about the same time as AI technology… If you can't beat 'em, join 'em… When this doom is at hand, any human who remains alive and doesn't want to die will have no choice but to become a human upload. The AIs will save us all (ibid.).

The parallels of Tipler's proposal with Christianity are striking. God is dead but AI has been born and is our Savior and, like Jesus's self-described appellation, it is "the son of man." AI, not Jesus, "will save us all" and eternal life can be found in an AI computer somewhere in space like the "kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 3.2) and not here on Earth.

Ray Kurzweil takes Tipler's fanciful suggestion seriously. Not the part of taking to outer space once the sun stops shining but the part about the human upload. He is very careful about his diet and his health hoping we will live long enough to greet his savior the Singularity and have his brain uploaded. Just in case he does not live long enough to see the arrival of the Singularity, he has made plans to have his body frozen cryogenically.

Another advocate of brain uploading is Gregory Paul (2015) who wrote, "The way for human minds to avoid becoming obsolete is to join in the cyber civilization; out of growth-limited bio brains into rapidly improving cyber brains." He then suggests that we can then give up our physical bodies which would then benefit the Earth's biosystem. This is a variation on the Christian idea that we can have everlasting life as pure spirits. For Gregory Paul heaven will be in the clouds, computer clouds.
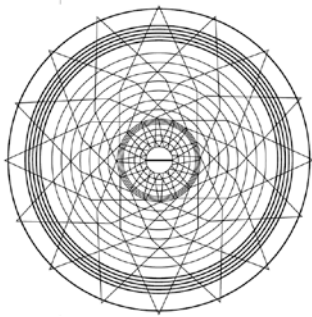
In his article "I, for One, Welcome our Machine Overlords" Anthony Garrett Lisi (2015) claims: "Computers share knowledge much more easily than humans do, and they keep that knowledge longer, becoming wiser than humans." Lisi believes that he will find a higher power through the Singularity.

In an article entitled "An Epochal Human Event" Pamela McCorduck (2015, 53) writes, "We long to preserve ourselves as a species. For all the imaginary deities we have petitioned throughout history who have failed to protect us from nature, from one another, from ourselves – we're finally ready to call on our own enhanced, augmented minds instead." Her messiah is "our own enhanced, augmented minds," presumably enhanced by the Singularity.

Sam Harris (2015) writes, "We seem to be in the process of building a god. Now would be a good time to wonder whether it will (or can be) a good one." He suggests that a super intelligent AGI could achieve 20,000 years of intellectual work in a week. His messiah is one that we will build and it will usher in an era of unimagined progress in science.

James Croak (2015) sees a connection with the Singularity and God. He writes, "Fear of AI is the latest incarnation of our primal unconscious fear of an all-knowing, all-powerful angry God dominating us–but in a new ethereal form."

Conclusion

Although the advocates of strong AI are awaiting the arrival of their digital messiah in the form of the Singularity, I do not believe their dream will come true. The reason is that human intelligence is more than logical operations and computation. It also includes a long list of other characteristics unique to humans, including curiosity, imagination, intuition, emotions, passion, desires, pleasure, aesthetics, joy, purpose, objectives, goals, telos, values, morality, experience, wisdom, judgment, and even humor. This is the ground in which the figure of intelligence thrives and it is the ground that the supporters of the Singularity ignore. They may be able to create artificial intelligence but creating artificial wisdom is not possible. Wisdom requires having values and computers cannot have values.

As for the other digital messiah that we treated in this essay, Steve Jobs, no one can doubt that he was a true messiah of the digital age who transformed digital technology and in turn transformed our culture. The world is a different place because of Steve Jobs. May his soul rest in peace.
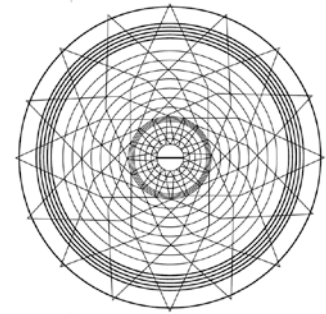
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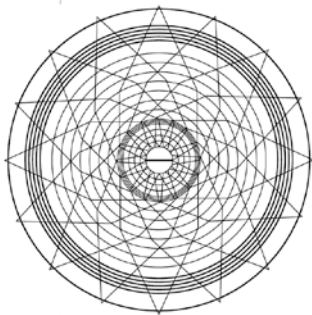
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Аннотация:

Играя со знаменитой формулой Маршалла Маклюэна, который сказал "the medium is the message" (средство коммуникации есть сообщение), и который заменял слово "сообщение" через "массаж" (massage), "массовая эпоха" (mass age) и "эпоха беспорядка" (mess age), автор данной статьи сочинил собственный афоризм, который звучит как "средство коммуникации есть мессия" (the medium is the mess-iah). В представленной статье автор объясняет свою версию того, что Маклюэн имел в виду под словом "medium" и как именно возникла идея мессии. Далее в тексте статьи автор описывает, как именно этот афоризм дает представление о природе цифровых медиа в общем; Кроме того, в поле внимания автора в связи с данным афоризмом попадает тот путь развития, который предпринял Стив Джобс для продуктов компании Apple и преданность пользователей этим продуктам. Наконец, автор рассматривает в этом тексте религиозные и мессианские убеждения адвокатов теории техологической сингулярности.

Keywords: средство коммуникации, медиа, мессия, Apple, технологическая сингулярность, сингулярность, искусственный интеллект

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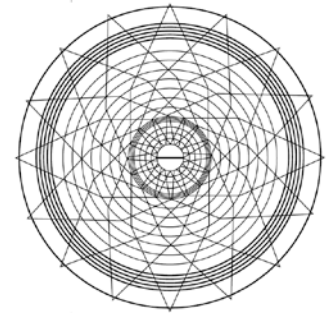
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