

## *Media Ecology of Marshall McLuhan*

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This online chapter completes the Media and Culture section of *A First Look At Communication Theory*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition, McGraw-Hill, 2006. Em is the author of the *First Look* text and is Professor Emeritus of Communication at Wheaton College in Illinois. E.J. is completing his doctoral dissertation in the Media Ecology Program at New York University. He has a joint appointment in the Communication and Art Departments at Wheaton.

In a memorable scene from Woody Allen's classic 1977 movie [Annie Hall](#), the characters played by Allen and Diane Keaton are standing in a movie line in front of a man pontificating about film in general, and the ideas of Marshall McLuhan in particular. When a frustrated Allen interrupts the monologue and challenges the speaker's knowledge of McLuhan, the man haughtily announces that he teaches a course at Columbia entitled "TV, Media, and Culture." Allen, however, does him one better (he is the director after all) by pulling the real-life [Marshall McLuhan](#) onto the screen to inform the academic that he is in fact clueless. McLuhan tells the man, "You know nothing of my work. You mean my whole fallacy is wrong. How you ever got to teach a course in anything is totally amazing." Allen turns to the camera and says, "Boy, if life were only like this."

The fanciful scene works because many viewers were already acquainted with McLuhan and his ideas. The mild-mannered Canadian had earlier been featured in an extended *Playboy* interview, and his picture had appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine. The scene is also enhanced by McLuhan's own reputation as an anti-academic intellectual. McLuhan often criticizes scholars for clinging to a mode of thinking that was already obsolete. He explains that the electronic age demands a new approach to understanding the world of media. By taking a closer look at the *Annie Hall* scene, we can get a glimpse of McLuhan's renegade approach to media studies.

## PROBES VERSUS THEORY

McLuhan confronts the academic by saying, "You mean my whole fallacy is wrong." What does this sentence mean, and why does McLuhan say it? To answer these questions, we must consider the effect of this sentence. Upon hearing the sentence, the man is forced to scrutinize its content because it doesn't seem to make sense. The longer he examines the message the more maddening it becomes. At this point, he must either reject McLuhan's words as mere gibberish or recognize the message as saying something beyond its actual meaning.

This puzzling sentence captures McLuhan's method of media studies. He refers to this approach as launching *probes* as opposed to what he regards as the obsolete mode of constructing academic theory. [To probe](#) is to investigate, to search, to explore. McLuhan often presents his own ideas in what appears to be double talk so as to stimulate an investigation. We therefore might think of his confusing "fallacy is wrong" statement as a kind of strategic gibberish.

Strategic gibberish works like a punch line. You either get it, or you don't. If you don't, then you dismiss it as not funny or ask, "What's so funny?" Whether you have an immediate "aha" or get the punch line later, you understand what makes the joke funny. You then have *integral awareness*, which is the kind of knowledge that McLuhan believes is necessary for understanding media. *Integral awareness* is a grasp of the essential parts that make up a whole.

To get a punch line is to understand the parts of a joke that make it funny. This approach to knowledge works differently in that it conceals in order to reveal. (For that reason, McLuhan's approach to media criticism has been described as poetic.) An academic theory, on the other hand, is like an ineffective joke that explains everything along the way in such thorough detail that the punch line functions merely as a conclusion. According to McLuhan, that kind of knowledge merely encourages us to memorize explanations. Punch lines, probes, or strategic gibberish encourage us to *get it*—and to get it all at once.

For McLuhan, this *all-at-once-ness* is the difference between integral awareness and step-by-step knowing. McLuhan believes that step-by-step knowing is an obsolete mode of thinking because it reflects the line-by-line experience of reading books as opposed to the all-at-once-ness experience of electronic media. However long it may take to get a punch line, when we finally do *get it*, the relationship between all the parts clicks and it all makes sense. What was once concealed suddenly becomes revealed.

The strategic gibberish in the film works to reveal knowledge about media in the following way: Because the statement doesn't at first sound like foolishness, we try to interpret the words. If McLuhan had said, "Minkly do-day splings facoodily," the gibberish could be easily dismissed as mere gobbledegook. The punch line is revealed when the academic finds himself incapable of understanding the meaning of the content. He can't understand McLuhan because he is too literal minded. What matters is not the content but the effect of McLuhan's sentence. In other words, "the medium is the message." Do you get it?

## THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

If McLuhan has one killer punch line that sheds light on all his other probes, it is the famous aphorism that begins his groundbreaking work *Understanding Media*. He writes

In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message.<sup>1</sup>

Students of McLuhan continue to debate what he meant by this apparently simple expression—*the medium is the message*. Like his strategic gibberish in the film, the statement appears meaningful until it is scrutinized. Similarly, it is the effect of this expression that proves to be important. However, unlike the "fallacy is false" phrase, there is also significant meaning to be found within the actual expression.

The "shock" of this statement, once engaged, is that the message has been equated to the medium itself. We are accustomed to thinking that the message is what the medium delivers to its intended audience. For example, when considering the message of television, we are mostly concerned with what is *on* television—the programs. We examine the content of particular shows, offer various interpretations, and then pass judgment on the value of these shows. We may conclude that certain messages on television are harmful while other messages are innocuous or even beneficial.

McLuhan, on the other hand, claims that what is on television is merely a distraction to what is actually significant and influential about the medium. He compares the content of any medium to "the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind."<sup>2</sup> Content keeps our attention away from the actual force of the medium.

What makes content especially distracting, if not dangerous, is that we often fail to recognize that content can never be separate from the medium itself. There is no such thing as the story of [Moby Dick](#) existing outside the way it's communicated. In other words, different media do not simply deliver the content of Moby Dick. The content of Moby Dick only exists as a medium. *Moby Dick* is a book. *Moby Dick* is a movie. *Moby Dick* is an oral tale. The content of Moby Dick therefore becomes the medium itself. For this reason, we should never complain that a movie is not like the book, because a movie can never be like a book. A movie can only be a movie.

So in regard to the long-term effects of TV, it doesn't matter what is *on* the tube, because what is *on* television is always television. Whether a show is about a killer whale, crime scene investigations, discovering

the next American pop star, or what is happening around the world, the message is always the medium of television. What is important is the distinct sensory experience that the medium imposes. It's this habit of perception that McLuhan considers the greatest influence on society and culture.

## WE SHAPE OUR TOOLS AND THEY IN TURN SHAPE US

Communication media don't fall from the sky. They are human creations. So it's rather ironic that the technology we invent ends up reinventing us. In typical punch line fashion, McLuhan declares, "We shape our tools and they in turn shape us." While this isn't quite the dire warning of *Frankenstein*, *Jurassic Park*, or *The Matrix*, it does suggest that there are unintended consequences in regard to the technologies we create and use. How do tools actually shape us?

For starters, we must consider what is not being said. The unintended consequences of tools are not related to their misuse. For example, accidentally smashing your thumb with a hammer when you intended to hit a nail is not what McLuhan means. The misuse of technology, whether by accident or on purpose, is often hotly debated, but it is not an issue for McLuhan. Neither is he concerned with the idea of technology actually rebelling against its maker. In this regard, the tales of *Frankenstein*, *Jurassic Park*, and *The Matrix* are a disservice to McLuhan's ideas because they posit fantastical threats that are horribly obvious. As long as our technologies are not chasing after us, we feel safe from any unintended consequences.

For McLuhan, it's not technological abnormality that should demand our attention, since it usually already has it. Rather, it's the everyday use of technology. A tool shapes us because we use it over and over until it becomes an extension of ourselves. Because every medium emphasizes different senses and encourages different habits, using a medium day after day conditions the senses to particular kinds of sensibilities. A medium that emphasizes the ear over the eye alters the ratios of sense perception. Like a blind man who begins to

develop a heightened sense of hearing, society is shaped in accordance with the dominant sensory experience of the ruling medium.

## THE MESSAGE IS THE ENVIRONMENT

Like natural environments, media affect how we think, feel, and behave without telling us what these thoughts, emotions, or actions should be.

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 message. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments.<sup>3</sup>

The message becomes the *massage*. This pun was originally the result of a typing error that serendipitously turned out to be insightful. For McLuhan, the idea of the medium offering massages rather than messages captures the sensorial manipulation of media environments. The medium massages the senses into full submission. Television does not simply exist in the corner of a living room. Television blankets the world as a mass media environment of sense experience. In this light, McLuhan describes the turbulent 1960s with another variation on the theme—the medium is the *mass-age*.

The dominating force of media environments is partly due to their invisibility. “Their groundrules, pervasive structure, and overall patterns elude easy perception.”<sup>4</sup> In contrast, the influence of content is always more direct and obvious. We can discuss why a particular

text or show might be considered racist, manipulative, or biased. But where do we look to evaluate the media environment?

McLuhan is fond of quoting the mantra of anthropologists, "We don't know who discovered water, but we're pretty sure it wasn't the fish." In the same way, we have trouble recognizing our media environment—we're in it. Media environments are made up of complex relations. They are ecological.

The medium of television requires a particular use of technology, defined by society and culture. To partake of a medium is to accept the "groundrules, pervasive structure, and overall patterns" of its environment. This compliance to the environment is almost always unconscious. We do it without thinking. And yet without this compliance, the medium is not the medium, nor is it an environment.

For example, when you buy an iPod, you are implicitly agreeing to accept its particular environment. You are signing on to a particular mode of experience. If you decide to use your iPod as a hockey puck, then it's really no longer a digital medium. Yet most students of media would focus on the uses and gratifications of the particular content chosen by the iPod owner—a mistake McLuhan characterizes as "the numb stance of the technological idiot."<sup>5</sup> You may, of course, listen to jazz instead of acid rock, or podcasts instead of broadcasts, but you are still using the iPod as an iPod. It is this latter experience that defines the medium and its environment.

A medium is an ecology that we absorb by using technology for the purpose for which it was created. As in all ecologies, a media environment is capable of being radically altered by a significant change within its system. (In weather systems, consider global warming.) So McLuhan tracks the major ecological shifts in human history to reveal how the dominant communication medium of any age conditions people to its environment.

He's not the first to point out the pivotal role media systems have in defining an age. Noting the effect of the railroad in the wilderness, fellow Canadian [Harold Innis](#) had already suggested that sudden

extensions of communication are reflected in cultural disturbances. But McLuhan is unique in claiming that the sensory orientations of media (the message) are the primary cause of cultural change. Family life, the workplace, schools, health care, friendship, religious worship, recreation, politics—nothing remains untouched by the ruling medium.

## **A MEDIA ANALYSIS OF HUMAN HISTORY**

McLuhan divides all human history into four periods, or epochs—a tribal age, a literate age, a print age, and an electronic age. He claims the transitions between periods were neither gradual nor evolutionary. In each case the world was wrenched from one era into the next because of new developments in media technology. The schematic in Figure McL-1 represents the University of Toronto professor's view of history. As you can see, he thinks that those of us born in the twentieth century are living on the cusp of history.



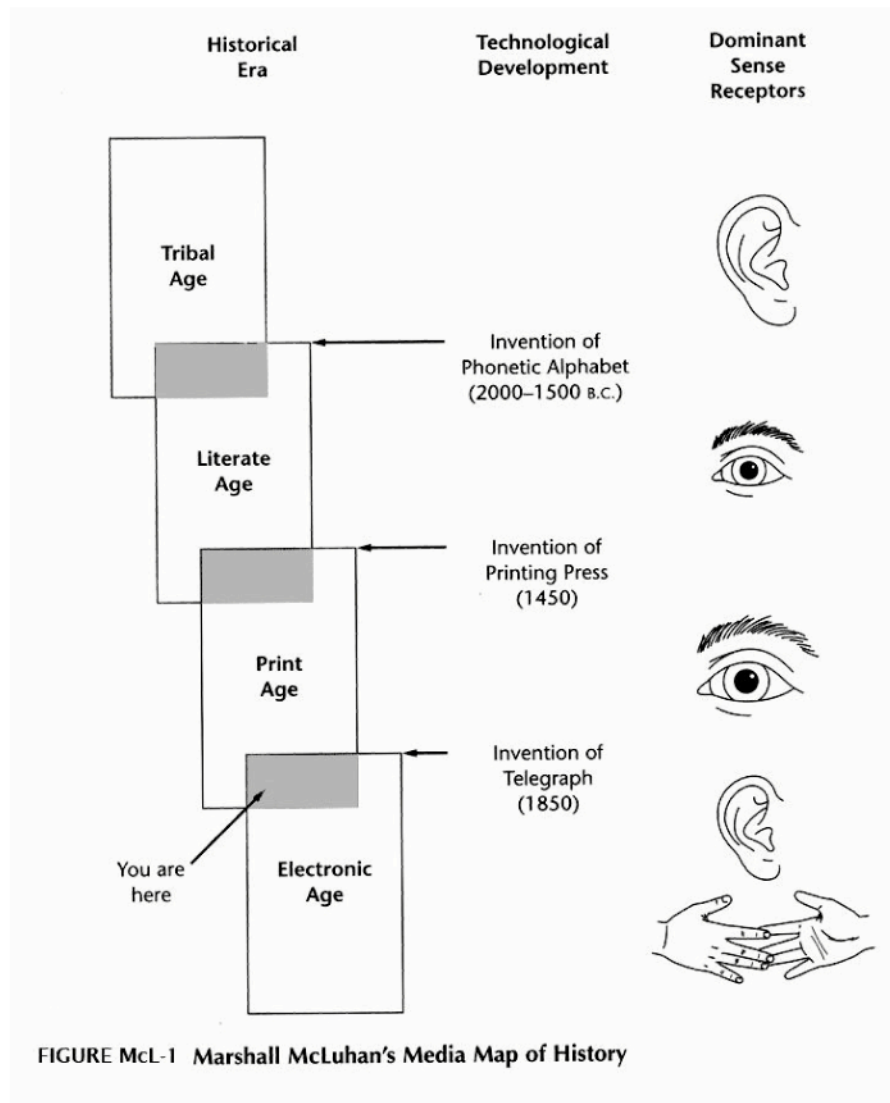


FIGURE McL-1 Marshall McLuhan's Media Map of History

According to McLuhan, the crucial inventions that changed life on this planet were the phonetic alphabet, the printing press, and the telegraph. He was certain that their developers had little idea at the time that their technological innovations would revolutionize society, but if we'd only bother to open our eyes, we'd see that the phonetic alphabet catapulted the human race into an age of literacy and Gutenberg's press launched the industrial revolution.

McLuhan frequently complains that social observers bypass the effects of dominant media environments—be they oral, print, or electronic—

when analyzing the Western world. He accuses modern scholars of being “ostrichlike” in refusing to engage the revolutionary impact of electronic media on the sensory experience of contemporary society. What almost everyone fails to see, says McLuhan, is that people alive today are caught up in a third radical breakthrough. Whatever answer [Samuel Morse](#) received when he first tapped out “What hath God wrought?” on his telegraph, the reply clearly didn’t anticipate the social upheaval the electronic media would create.

## 1. The Tribal Age: An Acoustic Place in History

According to McLuhan, the tribal village was an acoustic place where the senses of hearing, touch, taste, and smell were developed far beyond the ability to visualize. In untamed settings, hearing is more valuable than seeing because it allows you to be more immediately aware of your surroundings. With sight, we are limited to direction and distance. We can only sense what is clearly in front of us. If a preying animal is behind us or behind a tree, we are hopelessly unaware without a sensitivity to sound or smell. Hearing and smelling provide a sense of that which we can’t see, which is critical in the tribal age.

The omni-directional quality of sound also enhances community. The spoken word is primarily a communal experience. To tell a secret, we must whisper or speak directly in someone’s ear or make sure that no one else is listening. The sense of sound works against privatization. Listening to someone speak in a group is a unifying act. Everyone hears at the same time.

The spoken word is also immediate and alive. It exists only at the moment it is heard. There is no sense of the word as something that is fixed or objectified. Words lack materiality. In order to keep an idea or an event alive, it must constantly be shared and reiterated and passed down. The ethereal quality of speech doesn’t allow for detached analysis. Hearing is believing.

McLuhan claims that “primitive” people led richer and more complex lives than their literate descendants because the ear, unlike the eye,

encourages a more holistic sense of the world. There is a deeper feeling of community and greater awareness of the surrounding existence. The acoustic environment also fosters more passion and spontaneity. In this world of surround sound, everything is more immediate, more present, and more actual.

Then someone invented the alphabet.

## **2. The Age of Literacy: A Visual Point of View**

Turning sounds into something visible radically altered the ecology of media. Suddenly, the eye became the heir apparent. Hearing diminished in value and quality. To disagree with this assessment merely illustrates McLuhan's belief that a private, left-brain "point of view" becomes possible in a media environment that encourages the visual practice of reading words.

Words fixed on a page detach meaning from the immediacy of context. In an acoustic environment, taking something out of context is nearly impossible. In the age of literacy, it is a reality. Both writer and reader are always separate from the text. Words are no longer alive and immediate. They can be read and re-read. They can be thoroughly analyzed. Hearing no longer becomes trustworthy. "Seeing it in writing" becomes proof that it's true.

Literacy also jarred people out of collective tribal involvement into "civilized" private detachment. Group members who read rather than hear are transformed into individuals. Even though the words may be the same, the act of reading a text is an individual one. It requires singular focus. A tribe no longer needs to come together to get information. Proximity becomes less important.

McLuhan also claims that the phonetic alphabet established the line as the organizing principle in life. In writing, letter follows letter in a connected, orderly line. Logic is modeled on that step-by-step linear progression. According to McLuhan, when literate people say, "I don't follow you," they mean, "I don't think you are logical." He alleges that the invention of the alphabet fostered the sudden

emergence of mathematics, science, and philosophy in ancient Greece. He cites the political upheaval in colonial Africa as twentieth century evidence that literacy triggers an ear-to-eye switch that isolates the reader. When oppressed people learned to read, they became independent thinkers.

### 3. The Print Age: Prototype of the Industrial Revolution

If the phonetic alphabet made visual dependence possible, the printing press made it widespread. Prior to print, literacy was still in the grips of orality, since reading was not yet a mass reality. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan argues the most important aspect of movable type was its ability to reproduce the same text over and over again, and a pressrun of 100,000 copies of *Understanding Media* suggests that he's right. Because the print revolution demonstrated mass production of identical products, McLuhan calls it the forerunner of the industrial revolution.

He sees other unintended side effects of [Gutenberg's invention](#). The homogenization of fluid regional tongues into a fixed national language was followed closely by the rise of nationalism. Printing deified not only the Gutenberg Bible, but all written words. The press turns words into The Word, and McLuhan labels literate people "natural suckers" for propaganda. Yet he regards the fragmentation of society as the most significant outcome of the new innovation:

Printing, a ditto device, confirmed and extended the new visual stress. It created the portable book, which men could read in privacy and in isolation from others.<sup>6</sup>

Many libraries have the words "The truth will set you free" carved in stone above the main entrance.<sup>7</sup> McLuhan says that the books inside free readers to be alienated from others in their literate culture, as well as from the immediacy of their surroundings. The printed book glorifies individualism and abstraction. The weight of a scholar is

measured by the number of publications listed in his or her curriculum vitae. By amplifying the visual to the exclusion of the other senses, everyone and everything else fades into the background.

#### 4. The Electronic Age: The Rise of the Global Village

With the tap-tap-tap of the telegraph, the power of the printed word lost its bearings. Of course, Samuel Morse's invention was only the first of new electronic media devices that would make the corner Radio Shack seem like a magic shop to previous generations.

Telegraph Telephone Radio  
 Film projector Phonograph  
 Television Photocopier Answering machine  
 Computer VCR Compact disc  
 Holograph Cellular phone FAX  
 DVD Internet PDA mp3 player Video game

McLuhan insists that electronic media are retribalizing the human race. Instant communication has returned us to a pre-alphabetic oral tradition where sound and touch are more important than sight. We've gone "back to the future" to become a village unlike any other previous village. We're now a global village.

The electronic media bring us in touch with everyone, everywhere, instantaneously. Whereas the book extended the eye, electric circuitry extends the central nervous system.<sup>8</sup> Contact with the world anytime or all of the time is a daily reality. In fact, all-at-once-ness is our state of being. Closed human systems no longer exist. The rumble of empty stomachs in Bombay and the explosion of roadside bombs in Baghdad vibrate in the living rooms of Boston. As the first postliterate generation, privacy for us is a luxury or a curse of the past. The planet is like a general store where nosy people keep track of everyone else's business—a twelve-way party line or a Dear Abby column "writ large." Citizens of the world are back in acoustic space.

Linear logic is useless in the electronic society that McLuhan describes. Acoustic people no longer inquire, "Do you see my point?" Instead we ask, "How does that grab you?" What we feel is more important than what we think.

## 5. The Digital Age? Rewiring the Global Village

When [Wired](#) launched its magazine on digital culture in 1992, the editors declared Marshall McLuhan the magazine's "patron saint." At the time, there was a sense that another revolution was looming. Sniffing out this possibility, many returned to the words of McLuhan for guidance and provocations, not to mention a few good punch lines. However, digital technology does not pull the plug on the electronic age because, quite frankly, it still needs its power source. The digital age is wholly electric.

With that said, there is no doubt that the introduction of digital technology is altering the electronic environment. The mass age of electronic media is becoming increasingly personalized. Instead of one unified electronic tribe, we have a growing number of digital tribes forming around the most specialized ideas, beliefs, values, interests, and fetishes. Instead of mass consciousness, which McLuhan views rather favorably, we have the emergence of a tribal warfare mentality.

Despite the contentious nature of this tribalization of differences, many see a benefit in the resulting decentralization of power and control.

Were he alive today, McLuhan would have undoubtedly spotted other ways that digital media are altering our present environment. And he would probably speculate on whether the electronic environment is the destiny of humankind, or if there is another media force waiting to upset the ecology of the last century.



*"You see, Dad, Professor McLuhan says the environment that man creates becomes his medium for defining his role in it. The invention of type created linear, or sequential, thought, separating thought from action. Now, with TV and folk singing, thought and action are closer and social involvement is greater. We again live in a village. Get it?"*

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## RESISTANCE IS NOT FUTILE

McLuhan's critics have labeled him a "technological determinist" because they find in him no will to oppose ecological changes that he says are inevitable when new communication technologies are developed. But does he regard society and culture as hopelessly determined by the ruling media environment? Is there nothing we can do once we become aware of the medium and its message? One aspect that has been sorely neglected in the work of McLuhan is his background in aesthetics and his emphasis on the role of the artist in

the media environment. Cultural historian [James Carey](#) has argued that one of the most significant contributions of McLuhan's work is offering a new aesthetic approach to the world of media.

McLuhan frequently notes that he was misunderstood by critics because they were not familiar with aesthetics in general and [James Joyce](#) and the [French symbolists](#) in particular. By revealing the dynamics of media, McLuhan attempts to reestablish the social significance of art and artists outside the realm of traditional art. Responding to the initial criticisms of *Understanding Media*, McLuhan makes it clear that his work concerns the new role of art and artists in the age of new media.

If art is an "early warning system," to use the phrase from World War II, when radar was new, art has the utmost relevance not only to media study but to the development of media controls.... Art as a radar environment takes on the function of indispensable perceptual training rather than the role of a privileged diet for the elite.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout his work, McLuhan identifies the artist as the person capable of withstanding the forces of the media environment.

"The serious artist is the only person able to encounter technology with impunity, just because he is an expert aware of the changes in sense perception."<sup>10</sup>

"The ability of the artist to sidestep the bully blow of new technology of any age, and to parry such violence with full awareness, is age-old."<sup>11</sup>

"The artist can correct the sense ratios before the blow of new technology has numbed conscious procedures."<sup>12</sup>



These statements defy the simple criticism of McLuhan's work as technological determinism. McLuhan makes it abundantly clear that resistance is not only possible but necessary. Although this resistance at first appears limited to "the artist," McLuhan redefines the artist as any person in any field who has *integral awareness* of media environments.<sup>13</sup> In other words, there are those who are aware and those who are unaware; the former are artists, and the latter are non-artists. To be unaware is to be shaped by the patterns of media. To be aware is to be able to do something about it. McLuhan is not preaching technological determinism; he is imploring us to have the will to awaken, engage, and confront the media environment as artists.

## LAWS OF MEDIA: PREDICTING CHANGES IN THE ECOLOGY

Late in his life, McLuhan abandoned his punch line approach and expressed his intent to set forth general statements about media that others might verify—a seeming nod toward critics who accused him of being unscientific. Whether he was really ready to commit himself to objective predictions that could be tested, or alternatively, was taking a satirical poke at those who propose grand theories of media effects—we'll never know. In the middle of the project McLuhan suffered a debilitating stroke, and died two years later. Yet after his death, McLuhan's son Eric, who worked closely with his dad, published *Laws of Media: The New Science* under both of their names. The book claims there are four laws that apply to every type of media. The "laws," however, are presented as questions rather than declarative statements.<sup>14</sup>

Just as Kenneth Burke labeled his dramatic tools of act-scene-agent-agency-purpose a *pentad* (see Chapter 23), Marshall and Eric McLuhan call their four questions a *tetrad*. They believe the four questions call attention to the effect a given technology has on the environment—how it alters what we see (the figure) and what we don't (the ground).

- ***What does it enhance or intensify?*** McLuhan has long held that all media extend or amplify parts of the human body or mind. The answer to this question shows what organs or senses our technological tools make more prominent. For example the car greatly enhances how fast our feet will take us, and as any teenager knows, can increase our sense of independence.
- ***What does it render obsolete or displace?*** "When one area of experience is heightened or intensified, another is diminished or numbed."<sup>15</sup> The car rendered the horse and buggy obsolete. Thigh and calf muscles atrophied as long walks and bike rides declined.
- ***What does it retrieve that was previously obsolesced?*** The McLuhans say that retrieval is the process by which something long obsolete is pressed back into service; the forgotten ground becomes figure through the new situation.<sup>16</sup> The driver of a car becomes the modern knight in shining armor, an empowered king of the road when behind the wheel.
- ***What does it produce or become when pressed to an extreme?*** "When pushed to the limits of its potential, the new form will tend to reverse what had been its original characteristic."<sup>17</sup> In other words, what is the flip side or downside potential of the new technology? For the car, traffic jams, gridlock and urban sprawl are the ground that now figures prominently in most drivers' lives.

We've used bullets rather than numbers to set off the questions of the tetrad because the McLuhans intended no hierarchy or sequence among them. They see all four issues—and only these four—as inherent in every form of media from inception. In *Laws of Media*, they present numerous tetrads in an arrangement reminiscent of a four-square playground game. Using the shorthand labels *enhances*, *obsolesces*, *retrieves*, *reverses into*, we've constructed tetrads in Figures McL-2, McL-3, and McL-4 to show the often ignored media effects of *radio*, *television*, and the *computer*.<sup>18</sup>

**RADIO**

<p>ENHANCES</p> <p><b>Access to entire planet for everybody, everywhere</b></p>	<p>REVERSES INTO</p> <p><b>Global village theater</b></p>
<p>RETRIEVES</p> <p><b>Tribal ecological environment</b></p> <p><b>Trauma, paranoia</b></p>	<p>OBSOLESCE</p> <p><b>Wires and connections</b></p> <p><b>Physical bodies</b></p>

**Figure McL-2, Tetrad for Radio**

(Adapted from McLuhan and McLuhan, *Laws of Media*, p. 172.)

**TELEVISION**

<p>ENHANCES</p> <p><b>Sense of all-at-once-ness</b></p> <p><b>Acoustic space</b></p> <p><b>Using the eye as hand and ear</b></p>	<p>REVERSES INTO</p> <p><b>Screen of computer</b></p> <p><b>VCR (TV with memory)</b></p> <p><b>Cable with multi-channels</b></p> <p><b>Isolation</b></p>
<p>RETRIEVES</p> <p><b>Visual</b></p>	<p>OBSOLESCE</p> <p><b>Movie theaters</b></p> <p><b>Radio</b></p>

**Figure McL-3, Tetrad for Television**

(Based on Levinson, *Digital McLuhan*, p. 190.)

**COMPUTER**

<p>ENHANCES</p> <p><b>Speed of calculation and retrieval of information</b></p> <p><b>Personalized choice of information</b></p>	<p>REVERSES INTO</p> <p><b>Anarchy</b></p> <p><b>Loss of privacy</b></p> <p><b>Time bandit</b></p>
<p>RETRIEVES</p> <p><b>Perfect memory, total and exact</b></p>	<p>OBSOLESCE</p> <p><b>Library</b></p> <p><b>Sequence</b></p> <p><b>Approximation</b></p>

**Figure McL-4, Tetrad for the Computer**

(Based on McLuhan and McLuhan, *Laws of Media*, pp. 188-189.)

Forecasting the environmental effects of a new communication technology shortly after its emergence is definitely more art than science—especially predicting the nature of its reversal. But Marshall McLuhan says that a reversal *will* take place when the new medium is pressed to its limit. For McLuhan, that inevitability justifies referring to the tetrad as "a new science." One would think someone as digitally savvy as Bill Gates would have fully understood that there are no secrets in cyberspace. As the reversal in Figure McL-4 suggests, once an e-mail is sent over the Internet, it can never be deleted. Yet during the Microsoft antitrust trial, prosecutors revealed that Gates sent a "private" message to AOL execs asking, "How much do we need to pay you to screw Netscape?"<sup>19</sup> Big mistake! In order to survive and thrive in the digital age (and those perhaps yet to come), we need to grapple with the tetrad questions *before* embracing new media.

## EXPLORING POSTMAN'S "FAUSTIAN BARGAIN"

McLuhan's probes stimulated others to ponder whether specific media environments were beneficial or destructive for those immersed within them. Neil Postman founded the Media Ecology Program at New York University with this question in mind. But, unlike McLuhan, Postman believes that the primary task of media ecology is to make moral judgments about media environments. "To be quite honest about it," he once proclaimed, "I don't see any point in studying media unless one does so within a moral or ethical context."<sup>20</sup>

According to Postman, a new technology is never simply an addition to culture. It always presents us with a Faustian bargain—a potential deal with the devil. As Postman was fond of saying, "Technology giveth and technology taketh away....A new technology sometimes creates more than it destroys. Sometimes, it destroys more than it creates. But it is never one-sided."<sup>21</sup> His media ecology approach asks, *What are the moral implications of this bargain? Are the consequences more humanistic or anti-humanistic? Do we, as a society, gain more than we lose, or do we lose more than we gain?*

To answer these questions, we must consider the distinction Postman makes between technology and medium:

Like the brain, a technology is a physical apparatus. Like the mind, a medium is the use to which a physical apparatus is put. A technology becomes a medium as it employs a particular symbolic code, as it finds its place in a particular social setting, as it insinuates itself into economic and political contexts. A technology, in other words, is merely a machine. A medium is the social and intellectual environment a machine creates.<sup>22</sup>

A medium is a system. It's not an object but rather a way of thinking, expressing, and experiencing. Postman amends McLuhan's famous aphorism by stating that "the medium is the metaphor." A medium doesn't make a specific statement about the world, rather it colors everything we see around us. Like a metaphor, it unobtrusively suggests what our world is like by offering us meanings through a particular form.<sup>23</sup>

According to Postman, the forms of media regulate and even dictate what kind of content the form of a given medium can carry.<sup>24</sup> For example, smoke signals implicitly discourage philosophical argument.

Puffs of smoke are insufficiently complex to express ideas on the nature of existence, and even if they were not, a Cherokee philosopher would run short of either wood or blankets long before he reached his second axiom. You cannot use smoke to do philosophy. Its form excludes the content.<sup>25</sup>

In the same manner, the form of television works against content that is substantial and significant. The medium of television suggests that everything should be amusing, which, in turn, makes everything trivial.

Contrary to McLuhan, Postman believes that the medium of television is detrimental to society because it has led to the loss of serious public discourse. Television changes the form of information "from discursive to nondiscursive, from propositional to presentational, from rationalistic to emotive."<sup>26</sup> *Sesame Street*, *Sixty Minutes*, and *Survivor* all share the same ethos—amusement. The media environment of television turns everything into entertainment and everyone into juvenile adults.

Shortly before the 2004 U.S. presidential election, *Daily Show* comedian Jon Stewart [shocked TV audiences](#) by confronting the hosts of *Crossfire* for hurting public discourse in America. He suggested

that their program and *Hardball* turned debate into theater and "partisan hackery." Some compared Stewart's criticism to Neil Postman's sentiments in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Stewart's criticism seemed warranted, yet it was significantly different than Postman's critique of television news shows. Whereas Stewart argued that shows like *Crossfire* should be more responsible, Postman believed that on television, panelists are unable to respond in a serious manner. *Crossfire* (now cancelled) was bad at public discourse because for a while, it was good at being television—silly and shallow.

Like McLuhan, Postman prefers questions to answers, so it's fitting that his legacy be defined by three questions he urges us to ask about any new technology, be it television, computer, e-mail, cell phone, or instant messaging:

1. What is the problem to which this technology is a solution?
2. Whose problem is it actually?
3. If there is a legitimate problem here to be solved, what other problems will be created by my using this technology?

To this end, Postman expresses concerns about the coming age of computer technology. He questions if we are yielding too easily to the "authority" of computation and the values of efficiency and quantification. He ponders whether the quest for technological progress is becoming increasingly more important than being humane. He wonders if information is an acceptable substitute for wisdom. While Postman is primarily concerned with the ecology of television, his work sets a precedent for considering the moral consequences of all media environments.

## CRITIQUE: HOW COULD HE BE RIGHT? BUT WHAT IF HE IS?

Pop artist [Andy Warhol](#) said that sometime in life every person enjoys fifteen minutes of fame. Marshall McLuhan had fifteen years. Academics tend to be suspicious of their colleagues who make money and become famous, so perhaps the man's enormous popularity gave added impetus to critics' scorn for his methods and message. The pages of *McLuhan: Hot & Cold* and *McLuhan: Pro & Con*, collections of essays that critique his ideas, are filled with denunciation.

"[McLuhan] prefers to rape our attention rather than seduce our understanding."<sup>27</sup>

"He has looted all culture from cave painting to *Mad* magazine for fragments to shore up his system against ruin."<sup>28</sup>

"The style . . . is a viscous fog through which loom stumbling metaphors."<sup>29</sup>

By offering "probes" instead of "theory," McLuhan faced harsh criticism from the scholarly community. George Gordon, chairman of the department of communication at Fordham University, labels his work "McLuhanacy" and dismisses it as totally worthless. Gordon stated, "Not one bit of sustained and replicated scientific evidence, inductive or deductive, has to date justified any one of McLuhan's most famous slogans, metaphors, or dicta."<sup>30</sup> Indeed, it's hard to know how one could go about proving that the phonetic alphabet created Greek philosophy, that the printing press fostered nationalism, or that television is a tactile medium.

It is also hard to say that he was wrong because it's difficult to be certain what he said. As a writer, McLuhan often abandoned the linearity and order that he claimed were the legacy of print



technology. As a speaker he was superb at crafting memorable phrases and ten-second sound bites, but his truths were enigmatic and seldom woven into a comprehensive system. His probes were punch lines for people either to get or not get.

For those who regard testability as a mark of good theory, McLuhan's leaps of faith are a major hindrance to taking his ideas seriously. But is it fair to judge McLuhan's work using the standards of theory, when his work intended to be anti-theoretical? McLuhan dismissed his detractors by describing them as left-brain critics who are incapable of understanding right-brain concepts. From within his system, who's to say that he is wrong?

Tom Wolfe reverses the question: "What if he's right? Suppose he is what he sounds like, the most important thinker since Newton, Darwin, Freud, Einstein and Pavlov?"<sup>31</sup> This kind of praise for McLuhan's ideas is more typical of media practitioners than academic theorists. Tony Schwartz, the acknowledged leader in the field of political advertising, credits McLuhan for his insight that attitudes are not ideas you put into a person with words. They are emotional responses that can be drawn out of people through association with familiar sounds. Electronic media don't instruct—they strike a responsive chord (see Chapter 1).

Malcolm Muggeridge echoes McLuhan's media-as-message dictum in his analysis of religious broadcasting. Drawing on his former experience as BBC television host and editor of the British humor magazine *Punch*, Muggeridge proclaims the folly of believing that the message of God's love can be presented on TV without being polluted. He suggests that nothing dealt with on TV becomes more grand, beautiful, mysterious, or complicated.<sup>32</sup> He likens the efforts of TV evangelists to the misguided labor of a piano player in a brothel, pounding out the hymn "Abide with Me" in order to edify customers and inmates alike. The medium is the message.

Although it would be difficult to find anyone today who accepted all, or even most, of McLuhan's ideas, his historical analysis has heightened awareness of the possible cultural effects of new media

technologies. Other scholars have been more tempered in their statements and rigorous in their documentation. But none has raised media consciousness to the level achieved by McLuhan with his catchy statements and dramatic metaphors.

If there is a criticism of McLuhan to be made within his own system, it may be regarding the actual “effect” of his work. Do his pithy ideas produce shallow consciousness like a good advertising campaign? Has McLuhan merely McDonaldalized an important idea? Can a slogan or punch line really make a significant difference?

The late economist Kenneth Boulding, who headed the Institute of Behavioral Sciences at the University of Colorado, captured both the pro and con reactions to McLuhan by using a metaphor of his own: “It is perhaps typical of very creative minds that they hit very large nails not quite on the head.”<sup>33</sup>

## QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. What would McLuhan say about the impact of the Internet on the global village? Consider the fact that civic, political, and religious participation are declining in America.<sup>34</sup> Has electronic technology increased social connectedness?
2. How are portable media devices such as PDAs, cell phones, iPods, and handheld video games altering the media environment? How are these devices shaping sensibilities?
3. Beyond the changes in content, what are the differences in experiencing a book that has been transformed into a movie? What are the differences in experiencing a movie transformed into a television show?
4. Can you conceive of any way that McLuhan’s idea of media ecology could be proven false?

## A SECOND LOOK

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### Endnotes

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