Marshall McLuhan: The Medium is the Message

The High Priest of Pop-Culture

In this article we will begin an examination of someone who most people do not know, but who is considered by many to be the first father and leading prophet of the electronic age, Marshall McLuhan. A Canadian born in 1911, McLuhan became a Christian through the influence of G.K. Chesterton in 1937. He wrote his monumental work, one of twelve books and hundreds of articles, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man,* in 1964. The subject that would occupy most of McLuhan's career was the task of understanding the effects of technology as it related to popular culture, and how this in turn affected human beings and their relations with one another in communities. Because he was one of the first to sound the alarm, McLuhan has gained the status of a cult hero and "high priest of pop-culture".{1} This status is not undeserved, and McLuhan said many things that are still pertinent today.

His thought, though voluminous, is frequently reduced to one-liners, and small sound bites, which sum up the more complicated content of his probing and rigorous examination of the *media*, a word that he coined. Concerning the new status of man in technological, and media-dominated society, he said:

> *If the work of the city is the remaking or translating of man into a more suitable form than his nomadic ancestors achieved, then might not our current translation of our entire lives into the spiritual form of information seem to make of the entire globe, and of the human family, a single consciousness?{2}*

In statements like this, McLuhan both announces the existence

of a *global village*, another word he is credited for coining, and predicts the intensification of the world community to its present expression. All of this was done in the early 1960s at a time when television was still in its infancy, and the personal computer was almost twenty years into the future.

McLuhan is announcing what Lewis H. Lapham says is a world of people who worship the objects of their own invention in the form of fax machines and high speed computers, and accept the blessings of *Coca-Cola* and dresses by Donna Karan as the mark of divinity.{3} The fact that more people watch television than go to church is nothing new to us, but it was one of the tell-tale signs of a cultural shift in history for McLuhan; a shift which has been imperceptible to most, and devastating to all. If anyone doubts McLuhan's warning that "we become what we behold," he should reflect on the consuming desire of many average teenagers to be like Michael Jordan, Madonna, or Britney Spears: a desire that has resulted in a culture of plastic surgery and drive-by shootings to obtain tennis shoes.

Objects of Desire

In our continuing examination of Marshall McLuhan, the patriarch of media criticism, we will explore the totalitarian techniques of American advertising and market research on the unsuspecting consumer.{4} How this is accomplished, and the effects it has, were outlined in *The Mechanical Bride*, first published in 1951. The book dealt with the influence of print media on the male and female psyche. The objective of advertising men, said McLuhan, is the manipulation, exploitation, and control of the individual.{5} If this is true, then who, one might ask, was doing the controlling, and what was the desired effect?

The advertising companies were doing the controlling, and the desired effect was nothing loftier than selling products to unsuspecting customers. Making women into objects of desire by men, and then in turn selling the women the products to help

them achieve the effect of desirability, accomplished the entire enterprise. The advertising men succeeded in creating a market where one did not previously exist. The purpose here, and earlier for McLuhan, is not to vilify the advertising industry, rather it is to provide insight into how media functions. One such insight is McLuhan's description of the contemporary mindset of a woman under the influence of advertising geniuses. He said:

> *To the mind of the modern girl, legs, like busts, are power points, which she has been taught to tailor, but as parts of the success kit rather than erotically or sensuously. She swings her legs from the hip . . . she knows that a "long-legged girl can go places." As such, her legs are not intimately associated with her taste or with her unique self but are merely display objects like the grille on a car. They are date-bated power levers for the management of the male audience.{6}*

What McLuhan correctly ascertains is not the fact that women try to look attractive for men (presumably women have been doing this for a long time), but the idea of "polishing" each and every part for a kind of optimal performance. The modern woman has been taught through advertising bombardments that every feature of her physical makeup can be enhanced for the specific purposes of gaining a husband, a promotion, or just getting a door opened.

As one might suspect, there is a male counterpart to this advertising bombardment. The overwhelming superwoman, the possessor of beauty and grace in degrees hitherto unimaginable, demands an impossibly high standard of virility from her male counterpart. The result says McLuhan, are men who are readily captured by the gentleness and guile of women, but who are also surrounded by a barrage of body parts. The man is not won over, but slugged, and beaten down in defeat.{7}

Technology as Extensions of the Human Body

In our continuing look at Marshal McLuhan, the man who coined the term “global village” and the phrase “the medium is the message,” we will reflect on what he had to say about the various ways human beings *extend* themselves, and how these extensions affect our relationships with one another. First, we must understand what McLuhan meant by the term “extension(s).”

An extension occurs when an individual or society makes or uses something in a way that extends the range of the human body and mind in a fashion that is new. The shovel we use for digging holes is a kind of extension of the hands and feet. The spade is similar to the cupped hand, only it is stronger, less likely to break, and capable of removing more dirt per scoop than the hand. A microscope, or telescope is a way of seeing that is an extension of the eye.

Considering more complicated extensions, one might think of the automobile as an extension of the feet. It allows man to travel places in the same manner as the feet, only faster and with less effort. In addition, this extension enables one to travel in relative comfort in extreme weather conditions. Most individuals already understand the concept of extension, but many are unreflective when it comes to what McLuhan calls “*amputations;*” the counterpart to extensions.

Every extension of mankind, especially technological extensions, have the effect of amputating or modifying some other extension. An example of an amputation would be the loss of archery skills with the development of gunpowder and firearms. The need to be accurate with the new technology of guns made the continued practice of archery obsolete. The extension of a technology like the automobile “amputates” the need for a highly developed walking culture, which in turn

causes cities and countries to develop in different ways. The telephone extends the voice, but also amputates the art of penmanship gained through regular correspondence. These are a few examples, and almost everything we can think of is subject to similar observations.

McLuhan believed that mankind has always been fascinated and obsessed with these extensions, but too frequently we choose to ignore or minimize the amputations. For example, we praise the advantages of high speed personal travel made available by the automobile, but do not really want to be reminded of the pollution it causes. Additionally, we do not want to be made to think about the time we spend alone in our cars isolated from other humans, or the fact that the resulting amputations from automobiles have made us more obese and generally less healthy. We have become people who regularly praise all extensions, and minimize all amputations. McLuhan believed that we do so at our own peril.

The Dangers of Over-extended Technology

We have discussed the idea of extensions and amputations caused by new technology, which is introduced into society. The automobile was previously mentioned as an extension of the foot. The car allows one to travel, just as the foot does, only faster and with less effort. The amputations which result would include loss of muscle strength in the under-utilized legs, and the reduction in the quality of air we breathe.

Something occurs when a medium like the automobile, used for transportation, becomes over-extended. The resulting amputations such as muscle atrophy, smog, and high-speed fatalities increase at a rate that challenges the benefits initially gained. Automobile fatalities, lung disease, and obesity caused by modern transportation begin to outweigh the benefits of getting to our destinations quicker and with less effort. The final movement is the reversal of the benefits. McLuhan said:

> *Although it may be true to say that an American is a creature of four wheels, and to point out that American youth attributes much more importance to arriving at driver's-license age than at voting age, it is also true that the car has become an article of dress without which we feel uncertain, unclad, and incomplete in the urban compound.{8}*

To this observation might be added the fact that we train children from a very young age to stand within a few feet of high-speed vehicles without being afraid. Less than two hundred years ago a screaming locomotive or a high speed automobile would have caused a person to flee in terror for their lives. We have slowly conditioned ourselves to not be afraid of something that is in fact extremely dangerous. Similarly, we know that speed limits of twenty miles an hour would almost certainly eliminate most car fatalities, but we also consider the advantages of getting to our destinations quicker to be worth the resulting death rate. Proof of this casual acceptance of the disadvantages of the car could be imagined if one were to consider the fate of a political candidate who ran on a platform of reducing the national speed limit to twenty miles per hour. We know the advantages, even before implementation, but we choose to accept the disadvantages because there is a privileging of all types of technological extension, even deadly and horrific forms.

We are now prepared to consider the specific types of extensions realized by the television, mobile phone, and computer. If we take McLuhan's lead then all of these must be simultaneously considered as extensions with both positive and negative amputations of previous technologies.

Four Questions Applied to Media

We are concluding our considerations of Marshall McLuhan's pertinence with an examination of ideas found in his last work, *The Global Village,* published in 1989, twenty-five years

after his monumental *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man.* In his early works McLuhan focused on the rapid change in the five centuries since the development of the printing press and movable type, and the especially rapid developments of the twentieth-century. McLuhan died in 1980 and was beginning to see the first fruits of the television generations as well as the fulfillment of some of his predictions. He was deeply concerned about man's willful blindness to the downside of technology, yet McLuhan was not an irrational alarmist.

In his later years, and partially as a response to his critics, McLuhan developed a scientific basis for his thought around what he termed the *tetrad*. The *tetrad* allowed McLuhan to apply four laws, framed as questions, to a wide spectrum of mankind's endeavors, and thereby give us a new tool for looking at our culture.

The first of these questions or laws is "What does it (the medium or technology) extend?" In the case of a car it would be the foot, in the case a phone it would be the voice. The second question is "What does it make obsolete?" Again, one might answer that the car makes walking obsolete, and the phone makes smoke signals and carrier pigeons unnecessary. The third question asks, "What is retrieved?" The sense of adventure or quest is retrieved with the car, and the sense of community returns with the spread of telephone service. One might consider the rise of the cross-country vacation that accompanied the spread of automobile ownership. The fourth question asks, "What does the technology reverse into if it is over-extended?" An over-extended automobile culture longs for the pedestrian lifestyle, and the over-extension of phone culture engenders a need for solitude.

With the radio and television we have simultaneous access to events on the entire planet. However, television culture diminishes, or amputates, many of the close ties of family life based on oral communication. The simple act of turning on a television can reduce a room of people to silence. What is

retrieved is the tribal or interrelated view of man. What it becomes or returns to is the global theater, where people are actors on a stage. One need only witness the event status of an airplane crash or weather disaster.

On McLuhan's gravestone are the words "The Truth Shall Make You Free." We do not have to like or even agree with everything that McLuhan said, but we should nevertheless remember that his life was dedicated to showing men the truth about the world they live in, and the hidden consequences of the technologies he develops.

Notes

1. 1969 interview in *Playboy* magazine originally titled "A Candid Conversation with the High Priest of Popcult and Metaphysician of Media," pp. 53-74, in *The Essential McLuhan*, Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone (ed.), (New York: Basic Books, 1995), pp.233-69.

2. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994), p.61

3. Lewis H. Lapham in the introduction to the thirtieth anniversary edition of *Understanding Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994), pp.xx-xi.

4. See McLuhan's work *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1951). This is an intensive examination of the effects of advertising and comics in producing new perceptions about what we should and do desire, as well as why we believe these things will bring us happiness.

5. "The Mechanical Bride," in *The Essential McLuhan*, Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone (ed.), (New York: Basic Books, 1995), p.21.

6. “The Mechanical Bride,” in *The Essential McLuhan*, p.24.

7. Ibid. p.25.

8. *The Essential McLuhan*, p.217.

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