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McLuhan Misunderstood: Setting the Record Straight

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Introduction

Marshall McLuhan was one of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century and probably the most misunderstood scholar of his time. He has his many fans, who credit him along with Harold Innis of having created the entirely new field or discipline of media ecology as it is called in North America and medium theory, the name it goes by in many parts of Europe. In addition to his fans, admirers and scholars like myself who have tried to extend his work there are still a number of detractors, critics and naysayers. Despite his enormous contribution to our understanding of media, communication, technology and their impact on the human psyche, social interactions, the arts, literature, education, work, commerce, governance and social organization there are those who question his scholarship and suggest that his writing was largely hype and whimsy and at best merely poetry. Some even go so far as to suggest that he was a charlatan. On the other hand, according to the scholar and Fordham University professor, Father John Culkin (1967), McLuhan can be regarded as “the oracle of the electric age” and “the most provocative and controversial writer of his generation.” Another admirer of McLuhan was Claude Bissel, a fellow member of the English Department who became the President of the University of Toronto and defended McLuhan from the attacks of his faculty, who found McLuhan’s ideas too radical for their careful and specialized approach to scholarship. Of course McLuhan gave as good as he got in his criticism of academe and academics, as I will describe later.

Whether one agrees with McLuhan or is critical of him all would agree that he is perhaps one of the most enigmatic and misunderstood scholars of the twentieth century. This is due, in part, to his own doing with remarks such as:

- I don’t pretend to understand my stuff. After all, my writing is very difficult.
- I don't necessarily agree with everything I say.
- You don't like those ideas? I got others.
- Do you think my fallacy is all wrong?

The purpose of this expository essay is to clear up some of the misunderstandings and misconceptions about his work. No attempt will be made to apologize for McLuhan's scholarship or ideas, as no apology is needed. Rather the objective is to make his work more accessible to a larger audience and to identify the origin of some of his key concepts. This will be achieved largely using his own words and those of his colleagues (including myself), who have reminisced about what it was like to work with him and learn from him.

What prompted this effort was the fact that I have been involved in two McLuhan projects, which have caused me to reread a great deal of Marshall's writings. One of the projects is a book on McLuhan as an educator that I am writing with McLuhan scholar and on-line education expert Alex Kuskis. The other project is the preparation for the year-long 2011 celebration of the centenary of McLuhan's birth on July 21, 1911 in Toronto and all across the globe. As I reread McLuhan and read for the first time some of his early work that I had previously overlooked I realized that he explained the *raison d'être* of his methodology and that a close reading of him cleared up many of the misconceptions of his work by his critics. I also found that reading the new biography of McLuhan (Coupland 2010) and rereading the older ones (Gordon 1999, Marchessault 2004) that new insights emerged. McLuhan was too busy generating one new idea after another to ever take the time to systematically explain his approach to media studies. I have decided to take on this challenge, as I am one of the few surviving colleagues of his and this is my way of celebrating his centenary. This is my birthday present to him.

My Line of Attack

Since it is our intention to clear up some of the misunderstandings about McLuhan and to explain some of the paradoxes of his approach to research we will begin with an explanation of (not an apology of) what some describe as his cryptic style of writing, which he himself admitted was difficult. We will also explain what he meant when he said, "I don't necessarily agree with everything I say" and show how this attitude is related to his notion of the probe and his claim that he does not have a point of view nor does he work from a theory. As he famously is quoted in the 1967 book *Hot and Cool A Critical Symposium*, "I don't explain—I explore."

Eric McLuhan (2008), Marshall's son, opened his essay, Marshall McLuhan's Theory of Communication: The Yegg with the lines:

Whenever provoked, Marshall McLuhan would declare, Look, I don't have a theory of communication. I don't use theories. I just watch what people do, what *you* do. Or words to that effect. That's the short answer to our question, "What is McLuhan's Theory of Communication?"

Despite his claim not to work from any theory or particular point of view many have branded him, pejoratively, as a technological determinist. We will show that he was a technological determinist, but that he was a soft determinist in the sense that technology by itself was not the only factor that determined human behaviour but that it was one of many contributing factors that needed to be reckoned with. Given that McLuhan never removed free will nor the possibility of human responsibility from his consideration of the impact of technology on society, the charge of technological determinism is really over the top.

We will show that his notion that electric media give rise to a field perspective is inconsistent with a simple interpretation of a direct causal connection between a technology and its impact. McLuhan after all was a media ecologist, perhaps the first, and although an ecological view incorporates causality, the relationships between the elements of a media ecology that includes the users and their technologies is not a simple one that can be summed up with a simple linear cause and effect form of determinism.

We will address the question of whether or not McLuhan was a serious scholar only because there are those who suggest otherwise. We will also address the false claim that he was an advocate of new electric media.

Another unwarranted and unsubstantiated claim made by some is that McLuhan's scholarship was unduly influenced by his deeply held belief in Roman Catholicism. We will lay to rest this ridiculous claim.

We will also explain that his many exaggerations were ploys to get the attention of his readers and/or his students. Although in many cases his exaggerations are indefensible we will show that they nevertheless correctly identified many trends that are taking longer to become evident than he had earlier suggested.

We shall examine the origin of the term media ecology, which was not coined by McLuhan himself but was first used by Neil Postman as a way to describe his program in communications and media study at New York University in the 70's, 80's and 90's.

We will close this expository essay by clearing up a number of misconceptions and misunderstanding of McLuhan's one-liners, which due to their brevity are subject to ambiguous interpretations. We will show that if these one-liners are read in the context of McLuhan's overall body of work their meaning becomes quite clear and any remaining ambiguities were intended by McLuhan and are not the product of the sloppy use of language as some have suggested.

McLuhan's Cryptic Writing Style

We begin with Marshall McLuhan's writing style, which many readers find extremely challenging. A student once asked McLuhan, "Why are your letters to the newspapers so plain and your other writings so difficult and obscure?" McLuhan responded by saying,

This question highlights the difference between exposition and exploration. Anything that I know I can explain quite simply and directly. I can package it. Nearly everything I write is concerned with areas of exploration in which I am actively engaged in discovery. That is why I say, "I have no point of view." Anyone engaged in exploration uses every available approach, every available foothold, every accessible crevice to which to cling as he scales the unknown rockface. The actual process of dialogue and discovery is not compatible with packaging of familiar views. A person engaged in exposition has nothing new to say, and he cannot communicate the effects of participating in the process of discovery (McLuhan 1970).

McLuhan obviously used his writing as a way to probe new ideas and explore and follow-up on his observations of the effects and impacts of new media (i.e. media new to the world he inhabited). Serving the needs of his readership was obviously a secondary consideration for him, but how valuable for us it is that he chose to record the workings of his mind. This explains why reading him closely pays off such big dividends because we are able to creep into his mind and explore with him the issues that puzzled him. Because he shared that process with us we are able to apply his thinking to the new media of our era, namely the digital media, and derive from his observations of electric mass media insights into the workings and effects of digital media. This makes the effort of deciphering his texts worth the effort. One never fails to get new insights each time one reads or rereads McLuhan. As Fraser McInish once remarked at an organizing meeting for the McLuhan Centenary, “Reading McLuhan is like reading the I Ching.” Each reading or re-reading always provokes new thoughts.

Unlike most academics McLuhan was more interested in discovery than in being correct every time. Even his mistakes provide insights. Because McLuhan was constantly probing, constantly trying out new ideas, not everything he said panned out as planned. The way in which McLuhan used the term probe is defined in *The Book of Probes* (McLuhan and Carson 2003): “The probe is a means or method of perceiving. It comes from the world of conversation and dialogue as much as from poetics and literary criticism. Like conversation, the verbal probe is discontinuous, nonlinear; it tackles things from many angles at once.”

It was with this in mind that he uttered what seemed to be the self-contradictory remark, “I don't necessarily agree with everything I say.” What he was saying here in exploring some of his probes he is attempting to see where an idea will carry him rather than trying to prove something that he believes to be true. A scientist who formulates a hypothesis does not necessarily believe that it is true. In fact as Karl Popper (1934) once declared for a proposition to be considered science it must be falsifiable. McLuhan embraced this tenet of the scientific method. He functioned as a scientist. He observed the effects of media and then he hypothesized and he considered his hypotheses as probes that might be true or might not be true. McLuhan even suggested a third option. A hypothesis might be half-true, which McLuhan declared would be a lot of truth. He did not need to

be exactly correct every time; he only had to keep exploring. He was also fond of pointing out the close connection between the words probe and prove. In fact one cannot prove anything by using the methods of science because if one were to prove that a proposition was true then it could not be falsified and hence by Popper's criteria the proposition would not be a scientific proposition Logan (2003).

McLuhan liked to joke when some one challenged one of his ideas or probes with the retort, "You don't like those ideas? I got others." He was very playful when it came to developing new ideas. He believed play was essential to developing new ideas. He often would remark that without the play in the wheel and axle that the wheel would seize up. He repeated this mantra over and over.

It was typical of Marshall to repeat certain one-liners in what seemed to some endless repetition but I sensed that he was testing the validity of his ideas. Although he repeated the same one-liners he did so within a new context so as to test their validity in a new circumstance. He was constantly probing and thinking out loud to see how it sounded to him and to see what kind of reaction it engendered in his audience. When he was working on a new idea he would repeat the same probe over and over each time we would encounter some new evidence or a new example that suggested that particular probe had merit. Although he was addressing me or at other times a larger audience, I always felt he was also engaged in an internal dialogue sorting out his ideas. Of course he was always interested in any comment that his audience or I had to make. He enjoyed that kind of challenge because it gave him a chance to probe his idea even further. He paid more attention to those that disagreed with him than those that merely went along with what he had to say. He had no patience for a "yes-man". He enjoyed the give and take of a dialogue in which the other side took a different position than his own. Further, he was not rigid and it was possible for him to change his mind based on someone else's argument. This was not a frequent event, but it did happen. The repetition of an idea or a probe would go on for weeks as he refined it until he was satisfied with the result. The repetitions were a form of a thought experiment like those, we physicists would conduct when we were trying to figure out how nature worked. From my perspective McLuhan operated more as a scientist than as a social scientist. I would go so far as to say that he operated more as an experimental social scientist than as a theorist. I make this assertion from the perspective of my

training as a physicist and the close to twenty years I was active as a theoretical elementary particle researcher.

I would also like to offer an explanation as to why McLuhan liked to formulate his thoughts in the outrageous manner in which he did, something that many of his colleagues could not abide and which I believe led some to consider him a charlatan. He deliberately wanted to shock his readers and/or his students in order to get them to pay attention. As he said he did not believe everything he said. Helga Haberfellner, who studied with McLuhan, recalls that often after making an outrageous statement he would say to his class “Are you going to let me get away with that?” McLuhan wanted to provoke his students or his audience to think through things for themselves. Remember because McLuhan believed that every new medium numbed its users and made them unaware of its effects he felt the need to exaggerate to make users aware of the effects of that new medium. He wrote in *Understanding Media* “I am in the position of Louis Pasteur telling doctors that their greatest enemy was quite invisible, and quite unrecognized by them” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 18). He did not want to just tell people what were the impacts of the new media he wanted them to discover it for themselves. This is why every re-reading of a McLuhan text no matter how many times it was read before never fails to reveal new insights for the reader. As he said, “the user is the content.”

The second explanation for his outrageousness was that he enjoyed being a trickster. Jokes and joking were part and parcel of his persona and his research methodology. Haberfellner reports that she once heard McLuhan say that puns were the crossroads of meaning, a form of parataxis. No wonder so many straight-laced academics found him and his techniques incomprehensible. McLuhan took jokes quite seriously because of the insights they provide. He once wrote, “I am indebted to funnyman Steve Allen for the observation that all jokes are based on grievances. I ran that backward and got, where there are grievances there are jokes.” The hidden grievances behind McLuhan’s jokes was that he saw with great clarity the effects of electric media but most of his colleagues were unable to see that. His other grievance was that his critics were unable to see the value of his probes, which gave rise to his crack, “Do you think my fallacy is all wrong?” By the way this was similar to his line in Woody Allen’s movie *Annie Hall* when he confronts the young professor in the movie line trying to explain McLuhan’s ideas to his date.

McLuhan acknowledge that writing was not his favorite form of expression. He much preferred the oral channel as noted by his biographer Philip Marchand (1989, p.58):

As far as McLuhan was concerned, the best way to explore any subject was to talk. I have to engage in endless dialogue before I write,” he once told a reporter. “I want to talk a subject over and over.” He was never so happy as when he was talking. For McLuhan, conversation had more “vitality, more fun, more drama, than writing and was the chief, almost only way, he had of arriving at insights and conclusions. “I do a lot of my serious work while I’m talking out loud to people”, he proclaimed. “I’m feeling around, not making pronouncements. Most people use speech as a result of thought, but I use it as the process.”

Technological Determinism – Not Guilty

One of the charges leveled at McLuhan in an attempt to trivialize his work is that he is merely a technological determinist.

Was McLuhan a Technological Determinist?

This is a difficult question to answer because the term “technological determinist” is a loaded term used by many scholars as a pejorative to dismiss the work of others as being naïve or simplistic. Despite the fact that McLuhan did not operate from a point of view or a theoretical base he was accused by many of being a technological determinist. P. David Marshall (2004, p. 31) is just one of many communications scholars who tried to tar McLuhan with the “technological determinist” brush: “Because of the simple relationship between technology and its capacity to transform society, McLuhan is rightly labeled a technological determinist.”

In fact, P. David Marshall is the one who is being simplistic in suggesting that McLuhan proposed that there existed a simple relationship between technology and its capacity to transform society. McLuhan developed a very rich relationship between technology and media and their impact on society. Certainly McLuhan is guilty as charged if one wishes to label anyone who posits a mere relationship between technology and societal transformation as a technological determinist. Anyone one who would deny a relationship between technology and societal transformation would be

hopelessly naïve and out of touch with social realities. However, by suggesting a relationship in part, along with many mitigating factors, McLuhan clearly asserted a multiplicity of considerations influencing the relationship between society and technology. Having extracted the poison of the charge of technological determinism, the question becomes to what extent was McLuhan a technological determinist and what kind of technological determinist was he.

There is no question that a central tenet of McLuhan's approach to understanding media is that they contribute in a very important if not dominant way to social, political, cultural, educational and economic transformations. McLuhan's notions that "the medium is the message" and media are "living vortices of power" are certainly two cases in point. Yet having established McLuhan as a technological determinist in the sense that technology's impact on societal processes is important we are left with the question as to whether or not he was a naïve technological determinist as some have claimed. Clearly McLuhan was not a single cause explainer of anything. He railed against the notion of the "point of view" and the "single vision of Newton." He described an insight as "the sudden awareness of a complex process of interaction," which is how he regarded the relationship between media and society. "We live today in the Age of Information and Communication because electric media instantly and constantly create a total field of interacting events in which all men participate" (McLuhan 1964, p. 248). A field approach rejects the notion of a linear cause and effect model, which characterizes naïve "technological determinism."

McLuhan adopted a "total-field-theory approach". He recognized the non-linear aspect of the relationship between media and society and in a certain sense foreshadowed the notion of co-evolution and complexity or emergence theory. There is even a hint of complexity or emergence theory in a 1955 paper of McLuhan (1955) in which he wrote, "It is therefore, a simple maxim of communication study that any change in the means of communication will produce a chain of revolutionary consequences at every level of culture and politics. And because of the complexity of the components in this process, predictions and controls are not possible."

I find this passage quite eerie because one of the basic tenets of complexity theory is that complex non-linear systems have properties not possessed by the components of which they are composed and it is impossible to predict these properties. In terms of Darwinian evolution this translates into the notion that one can not prestate Darwinian pre-adaptations (Kauffman, Logan et. al. 2007). The reason that I find this eerie is that as early as 1955 McLuhan seems to be aware of systems theory,

which was just beginning to emerge at that time. It is also possible that McLuhan arrived at these ideas on his own. Later in his book *War and Peace in the Global Village* (McLuhan, Fiore and Angel 1968) McLuhan refers explicitly to the general systems theory work of von Bertalanffy.

P. David Marshall (2004) suggested that, “McLuhan places too much importance on one factor in shaping society” and hence overlooks “political and economic forces.” In fact the opposite is true. McLuhan constantly examines the connections between media and communications on the one hand and commerce and the nature of work on the other hand. For example, McLuhan observed that electric technology ended the dichotomy between work and leisure. McLuhan and Nevitt (1972) co-authored the book *Take Today: The Executive as Dropout* in which they analyzed the impact of media and technology on economics and politics.

McLuhan biographer Coupland (2010, p. 187) argued that rather than overlooking political and economic forces that McLuhan actually presaged the profound changes that took place long after his passing.

McLuhan’s writing was profoundly political...the changes he foretold weren’t overnight phenomena. They were about changes in cognition, cultural shifts that would cause shifts in the evolution of humankind...such events as the collapse of communism and the [emergence of] jihad.

The charge of technological determinism cuts in two directions. McLuhan’s critics used it in the pejorative sense to dismiss his work, but there is the flip side to determinism. For example, consider the fact that determinism is at the heart of much explanatory science. Newton, Faraday, Maxwell, Einstein and Darwin were all determinists. Any formulator of a law is a determinist. Certainly *The Laws of Media* (McLuhan, M. and E. McLuhan 1988) that Marshall developed with his son Eric is another example of formal laws. McLuhan’s laws emerged from his observations of patterns in the same way that natural scientists formulate their laws from the patterns they observe.

Was McLuhan a Serious Scholar?

McLuhan was not just a scholar – he was also a social critic, a social reformer, a futurist, and an educator. McLuhan was also concerned with the impact of media on the individual or the user as he was fond of saying. In his 1963 description of the graduate course he taught out of his beloved

coach house he described media as “man made environments” that “act as both service and disservices shaping the awareness of users”.

What makes him fresh and relevant now is the fact that ... he always did focus on the individual in society, rather than the mass of society as an entity onto itself. It was Marshall's embrace of the individual –a poetic and artistic, highly humane embrace–that allowed the reader (then and now) to enter his universe. (Coupland 2010, p. 142)

Aside from his loyal fans there was no love affair between the mainstream of academia and McLuhan. One of the reasons that many academics tried to dismiss McLuhan was that he constantly attacked them as this excerpt from *The Medium is the Massage* illustrates:

Professionalism is environmental. Amateurism is anti-environmental. Professionalism merges the individual into patterns of total environment. Amateurism seeks the development of the total awareness of the individual and the critical awareness of the ground rules of society. The amateur can afford to lose. The professional tends to classify and to specialize, to accept uncritically the groundrules of the environment. The groundrules provided by the mass response of his colleagues serve as a pervasive environment of which he is contentedly unaware. The "expert" is the man who stays put (McLuhan and Fiore 1967, p. 93).

Is it any wonder that the members of the Academy disliked him and felt the need to dismiss his scholarship? He alarmed them by making them face the possibility that they were obsolete. Not only did McLuhan critique higher education he made fun of his colleagues. They never forgave him.

Perhaps the most egregious attack on McLuhan is that made by those claiming to be scholars that McLuhan was not in fact a serious scholar. This claim is without merit in view of McLuhan's early work in the field of literary criticism, which certainly fits the mold of traditional scholarship. We will also show that this charge is bogus in terms of his later work in media ecology where this so-called non-scholar made predictions that turned out to be correct, a feat not duplicated by many

social scientists. Among McLuhan's predictions that came to pass are his notion of a Global Village, his foreshadowing of the Internet and the Web, his suggestion of the power of crowd sourcing and much more.

So many of McLuhan's pronouncements about the effects of electric media are prophetic because it seems as though he was aware of the coming of the Net, the Web and other digital media. A simple example of his prescience is that he, in fact, through his writing foreshadowed the Internet. William Gibson, the author *Neuromancer*, certainly deserves credit for coining the term cyberspace but long before *Neuromancer* was written or even conceived of, McLuhan (1967, p. 67) described the Internet in the following passage in response to being asked "How is the computer affecting education" McLuhan's response was an almost exact description of the Internet:

The computer in education is in a very tentative state but it does represent basically speeded up access to information and when it is applied to the telephone and to Xerox it permits access to the libraries of the world, almost immediately, without delay. And so the immediate effect of the computer is to pull up the walls of the subjects and divisions of knowledge in favor of over-all field, total awareness—Gestalt.

McLuhan description of the Internet was complete with the exception of packet switching if you allow Xeroxing to represent the reproduction of a hard copy by a printer. And he opined this description two full years before the development of ARPANET in 1969, the forerunner of the Internet.

An even earlier remark by McLuhan (1962) in the Gutenberg Galaxy also foreshadows the Internet:

A computer as a research and communication instrument could enhance retrieval, obsolesce mass library organization, retrieve individual encyclopedic function and flip into a private line to speedily tailored data of a saleable kind.

One can also interpret without too much of a stretch the retrieval of "individual encyclopedic function" in the above quote as a foreshadowing of Wikipedia as Derrick de Kerckhove once did (www.utoronto.ca/mcluhan/marshal.htm).

McLuhan not only foreshadowed the Internet and Wikipedia but he also foreshadowed Innocentive.com, a Web site that connects companies that have a problem to solve with experts that Innocentive has aggregated. They call the process “Open Innovation,” which they describe as follows:

Open Innovation allows many people from different disciplines to tackle the same problem simultaneously and not sequentially. Anyone can participate with collaborative technology and Open Innovation training. When many minds are working on the same problem, it will take less time to solve it.

McLuhan (1971 – with my emphasis) in a convocation address at the University of Alberta said:

The university and school of the future must be a means of total community participation, not in the consumption of available knowledge, but in the creation of completely unavailable insights. The overwhelming obstacle to such community participation in problem solving and research at the top levels, is the reluctance to admit, and to describe, in detail their difficulties and their ignorance. There is no kind of problem that baffles one or a dozen experts that cannot **be solved at once by a million minds that are given a chance simultaneously to tackle a problem**. The satisfaction of individual prestige, which we formerly derived from the possession of expertise, must now yield to the much greater satisfactions of dialogue and **group discovery**. The task yields to the task force.

McLuhan not only foreshadowed the development of the Internet and crowd sourcing he with his co-author George B. Leonard in an article in the popular magazine *Look* also explained why the digital media would be so compelling to young people and to a certain degree their elders. They suggested that the age of print and the fragmentation that it encouraged was over (McLuhan and Leonard 1967).

More swiftly than we can realize, we are moving into an era dazzlingly different. Fragmentation, specialization and sameness will be replaced by wholeness, diversity and, above all, a deep involvement... To be involved means to be drawn in, to interact. To go on interacting, the student must get some-where. In other words, the student and the learning environment (a person, a group of people, a book, a

programmed course, an electronic learning console or whatever) must respond to each other in a pleasing and purposeful interplay. When a situation of involvement is set up, the student finds it hard to drag himself away.

He and Leonard (ibid.) also predicted that the relationship to humankind's knowledge would change with electrically-configured information as we are beginning to see in this the Internet Age.

When computers are properly used, in fact, they are almost certain to increase individual diversity. A worldwide network of computers will make all of mankind's factual knowledge available to students everywhere in a matter of minutes or seconds. Then, the human brain will not have to serve as a repository of specific facts, and the uses of memory will shift in the new education, breaking the timeworn, rigid chains of memory may have greater priority than forging new links. New materials may be learned just as were the great myths of [p. 25] past cultures-as fully integrated systems that resonate on several levels and share the qualities of poetry and song.

Still another foreshadowing of McLuhan was that of the smart phone as described by his biographer Phillip Marchand (1989, p. 170).

He told an audience in New York City shortly after the publication of *Understanding Media* that there might come a day when we would all have portable computers, about the size of a hearing aid, to help mesh our personal experiences with the experience of the great wired brain of the outer world.

What makes this prediction even more amazing is that there were no personal computers at the time, no cell phones and no Internet (i.e. "the great wired brain of the outer world").

The notion of the need for keeping messages short and hence the power of the one-liner foreshadows in our digital era texting, instant messaging and Twitter.

Marchand (1989, p. 276) also pointed out McLuhan's (1964, p. 291) prediction of the videocassette 20 years before its appearance in *Understanding Media* when he wrote,

At the present time, film is still in its manuscript phase, as it were; shortly it will, under TV pressure, go into its portable, accessible, printed-book phase. Soon everyone will be able to have a small, inexpensive film projector that plays an 8-mm sound cartridge as if on a TV to screen.

Let me suggest one more possible foreshadowing of McLuhan, namely that of the Web. Let me warn the reader that this is a sweeping generalization, which is at most half true but for a McLuhanite that's still enough truth to share it at least as a probe. The book that McLuhan and Fiore (1969) co-authored, *The Medium is the Massage*, broke new ground in the way in which they integrated text and illustrations as is the case with the Web. I would not claim that McLuhan predicted that the Web would emerge someday but I do believe in a certain sense he foreshadowed this development. It is interesting to note that the title of the book was intended to be *The Medium is the Message* but when they received the typesetter's they discovered that he had changed the title to *The Medium is the Massage*. McLuhan, who was a great fan of puns, liked the new title and decided to keep it.

Given McLuhan's insights into where electric media would go one can hardly deny that McLuhan was a scholar of the highest order whose insights were not matched by any other scholar of his generation. Only those who discount his predictive powers and consider scholarship to be exposition of the known rather than exploration could suggest otherwise. What McLuhan lacked in his inability to footnote his sources he made up for with his incredible insights.

Just as a footnote to his predictive powers one can claim and I do that McLuhan even foreshadowed the concept of digital natives, a term that was coined in 2001 by Marc Prensky (See <http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part1.pdf>). But in 1958, over 50

years ago, McLuhan foresaw that the youth and their parents' generation would not belong to the same culture and would not speak the same language. In the journal he co-edited with Ted Carpenter, *Exploration*, in Volume 8 he wrote, "Today the matrix of technology is releasing, not new vernaculars, but a whole series of new tongues, which the younger learn as mother tongues." In the same article he even hinted at attention economics: "The modern environment with its media carrying many messages simultaneously and at different levels demands new habits of attention." He also foresaw the transition from products to services as is the case today with the downloading of software, cloud computing and services like iTunes and Netflix. In a 1967 address to an Ontario Provincial Committee on the Aims and Objectives of Education he wrote, "All the industries of our time are service industries. With Xerox the book becomes a service industry. It ceases to be a package or a product (McLuhan 1970)." One can add to this list the notion of the Global Village, which we will visit later in this essay.

In closing this section I would like to insert the homage paid to McLuhan by a highly respected scholar, Neil Postman, who created the Media Ecology program at New York University largely based on McLuhan's work. Commenting on his first encounter with McLuhan Postman remarked, "I was enormously impressed with the range of his knowledge and also with the intellectual daring that he displayed." Postman went on to say "I can't think of a book that I've written that I could have written if not for McLuhan." (<http://www.kaschassociates.com/417web/PostmanOnMcLuhan.htm>)

Not a Technophile Nor a Luddite But a Social Critic

McLuhan was accused by many as being a champion of the new electric technology while others labeled him a technophobe. He was neither an advocate for the new technologies nor afraid of them but he was critical of the negative effects they were having on literacy as the following quote indicates:

Many people seem to think that if you talk about something recent, you're in favor of it. The exact opposite is true in my case. Anything I talk about is almost certain to be something I'm resolutely against, and it seems to me the best way of opposing it is to understand it, and then you know where to turn off the button.

The button referring to TV to be turned off was for the individual not for society as a whole. He used to joke that the only solution to the problem posed by television was “to pull the plug.” Again he was not advocating that television should be eliminated from society but rather that one should not allow television to be the dominant medium in one’s life.

His personal views of television vis-à-vis its impact on his family were even stronger.
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Did McLuhan’s Deeply Held Roman Catholic Convictions Affect His Scholarship?

There are those that claim that McLuhan’s Roman Catholic Convictions affected his scholarship. In the six years that I worked with McLuhan the only way his religious beliefs ever entered into our work was that sometimes on our way to lunch we would stop at St. Basil’s Church to attend the noon hour mass. McLuhan prayed to his God and being Jewish I prayed to my God to understand what Marshall had said that morning. It was a peaceful time in which I had a chance to meditate on our morning’s exploration and to frame questions for our lunchtime conversation.

I must confess at the very beginning of my collaboration with McLuhan I wondered if his Catholicism would affect his scholarship. I became interested in the impact of science on society as the result of a course I taught beginning in 1971 at the University of Toronto called the Poetry of Physics. I was fascinated by the problem posed by Joseph Needham in his book the Grand Titration of why abstract science began in the West despite the fact that so much of technology originated in China. I proposed that since monotheism and codified law were unique to the West and that together they give rise to a notion of universal law and that this might explain the Needham paradox. I shared these thoughts with McLuhan who immediately pointed out that the alphabet, which served as a model for analysis, classification, coding and decoding was also unique to the West. We (McLuhan & Logan 1977) combined our ideas and developed the hypothesis in a paper entitled “Alphabet, Mother of Invention” that the phonetic alphabet, codified law, monotheism, abstract science and deductive logic were ideas unique to the West and while they were not causally linked, they were self-supporting or autocatalytic. The ideas for this paper arose out of my very first

conversation with McLuhan who was interested in my Poetry of Physics course. After discussing these ideas and reaching the conclusion we arrived at he asked me to write up what we had discussed. As I did so that night I worried that perhaps the notion that the origin of monotheism was somehow linked to the alphabet and codified law might offend his religious sensibilities. I held my breath as I read him the first draft of our paper the next morning. He was fine with it and there was no discussion of religion at all. He corrected my grammatical mistakes and added some additional insights by dictation and asked me to give the manuscript to his secretary Marg Stewart to be typed up and sent off to *Etcetera*, a journal edited by Neil Postman who duly accepted our paper.

The fact that McLuhan's religious beliefs did not affect his scholarship in this case should be no surprise. He often said that his exploration of the effects of media was made without using a particular point of view or making a moral judgment. McLuhan held that "moral and emotional indignation was simply an indulgence on the part of those powerless to either act or to understand." (Marchand 1989, 121)

Let me conclude this section with a McLuhan quote, which demonstrates that despite his personal beliefs he was not afraid to criticize the Church.

I am a Roman Catholic and the Roman Catholic Church is just as befuddled as it was by the Gutenberg age. More so! They are still attempting to look for lines and blueprints, which no longer exist. They are not there. So what do you do? Well we have not discovered the strategies of behaviour or response for a situation in which there are no boundaries. It is like being in total space.

The Origin of the Term Media Ecology

There is some dispute about whether the origin of the term "media ecology" rests with McLuhan or Postman.

Eric McLuhan in an interview conducted by Laureano Ralon claims, "Media Ecology is a term I invented when we were at Fordham. I discussed it with Postman and he ran with it." (<http://figureground.ca/interviews/eric-mcluhan/>)

According to Marc Leverette in an article entitled “Towards an Ecology of Understanding: Semiotics, Medium Theory, and the Uses of Meaning” published January 2003 in the online journal *Image & Narrative*:

The term "media ecology" was first employed in November 1968, at the annual meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where Postman used the phrase in a major address for the purpose of suggesting a new direction for the teaching of English (published as "Reformed"). In coining the term, and subsequently the field of study, Postman pointed out that he was not inventing a non-existing discipline, but simply giving a name to the kinds of inquiries in which a number of scholars were already engaged. He cites as examples of practicing media ecologists such people as Lewis Mumford, Harold Innis, Peter Drucker, Jacques Ellul, Marshall McLuhan, Edmund Carpenter, David Riesman, Norbert Wiener, Ray Birdwhistell, and several others (Postman "Reformed" 161).

It is also true that in 1971, Neil Postman founded a graduate program in media ecology at the Steinhardt School of Education of NYU. I do not know if McLuhan used the term media ecology before 1968 or 1971 but I do know that McLuhan used the term “an ecology of media” as early as 1974 in a lecture documented on page 242 in the book, *Understanding Me*, edited by Stephanie McLuhan and David Staines. In 1978, in a book that we co-authored together entitled *The Future of the Library – An Old Figure in a New Ground* Marshall and I used the term “media ecology”. The book was never published due to McLuhan’s untimely passing in 1980 and it now sits on my hard drive and in the Canadian National Archives in Ottawa. These excerpts from the opening pages of our manuscript establish McLuhan’s use of the term as early as 1978. The term appears twice in our manuscript along with the term “ecology” by itself and also the term “information ecology”. Here are the two instances where the term “media ecology” appears:

1. “The library a monument to hardware, now finds itself in the new electronic age of instantaneous information, an age of software. The libraries response to this challenge has been to go multimedia. It is fighting back with audio tapes and discs, video tapes, films, music concerts, plays, art galleries,

computer terminals and centers for continuing study. In short the library is becoming a center for **media ecology** instead of remaining tied to the more culture of the book.”

2. “These are questions that require careful study by librarians, educators, communicators and all those concerned with the preservation of our cultural heritage by **media ecology**.”

And here is the instance where the term information ecology appears:

“A library that caters to left-brain needs and the interests of analytic specialists, or one that caters to right-brain needs, a center for **information ecology** which helps its users develop an overview of man’s knowledge?”

There is a report in the book *McLuhan and Me* edited by Stephanie McLuhan and David Staines that McLuhan said in a talk show interview in 1977 that media ecology “...means arranging various media to help each other so they won't cancel each other out, to buttress one medium with another.”

Although I have not been able to find the term media ecology in McLuhan’s early work he hints at the idea of media ecology often and as early as 1955, and as the following list of instances from McLuhan’s writings indicate he was on to the notion of media ecology long before 1971.

In a 1955 article he (McLuhan 1955) spoke of media as though they were Darwinian species and as such they by extension would belong to a media ecology as his biological metaphor suggests. He understood that media were constantly interacting with each other and undergoing constant change. This is clear from the following passage:

The media can be viewed as artificial extensions of our sensory existence—each medium an externalized species, as it were, of the inner genus sensation. The cultural environment created by the externalizations of the modes of sensation now favors the predominance of one sense or another, and these species struggle through various mutations in a desperate attempt at adaptation and survival.

In 1962 he wrote, “Any technology tends to create a new human environment... Technological environments are not merely passive containers of people but are active processes that reshape people and other technologies alike.”

In 1964 McLuhan (1964, p. 174) wrote, “A new medium is never an addition to an old one, nor does it leave the old one in peace. It never ceases to oppress the older media until it finds new shapes and positions for them.” The notion of field associated with electric information and its relation to the electric field was a key concept and organizing principle for the way in which McLuhan saw the post-Gutenberg world in *Understanding Media* (McLuhan 1964). A field approach implies an ecological approach. An ecosystem can only be treated and described with a field approach. There are too many elements in an ecosystem like the interactions of all forms of media and the humans that interact with each other through them for it to be described as anything other than a field. It is not possible to describe them one component at a time. Newtonian mechanics could describe the solar system one celestial body at a time but that approach broke down for describing the interactions of electrical particles because of the sheer number of them that approaches 10 to the power of 26 or 27. The same is true of the media environment consisting of 7 billion human beings and all the technological media through which they interact.

The electric age gave us the means of instant, total field-awareness (ibid., p. 47).

We live today in the Age of Information and of Communication because electric media instantly and constantly create a total field of interacting events in which all men participate (ibid., p. 248).

Electric media, because of their total "field" character, tend to eliminate the fragmented specialties of form and function that we have long accepted as the heritage of alphabet, printing, and mechanization (ibid., p. 277).

In a letter to Bucky Fuller Marshall wrote in 1964: “If one says that any new technology creates a new environment that is better than saying the medium is the message. The content of the new environment is always the old one. The content is greatly transformed by the new technology.”

In a 1966 article McLuhan (1966) wrote, “Under present-day electronic conditions the total human environment becomes made of information.

In their 1967 book *The Medium is the Message* McLuhan and Fiore (1967, p.26) wrote,

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 knowledge of the way media work as **environments**. All media are extensions of some human faculty—psychic or physical.

In 1968 McLuhan (1968) once again entertained the notion of environment when wrote,

You live unconsciously in a new environment of electric ‘software’ or information... New environments are always invisible. It is the preceding environment that is always blamed for the damage done by the new one... The Greek word for environment is *perivallo*, which means to strike from all side at once.

In 1971 he wrote, “The electric environment, has in effect, restored us to a Paleolithic stage of the hunter. The hunter is the man who must use all of his faculties to read the total environment.”

And again in 1971 McLuhan (1970) wrote,

It is perfectly clear to me that all media are environments. As environments, all media have all the effects that geographers and biologists have associated with environments in the past... The medium is the message because the environment transforms our perceptions governing the areas of attention and neglect alike... The absence of interest in causation cannot persist in the new age of ecology. Ecology does not seek connections, but patterns. It does not seek quantities, but satisfactions and understanding.

Although the only evidence I could find of McLuhan using the term ‘media ecology’ was in our book on the future of the library his constant use of the term environment to describe media implied the notion of media ecology especially in the context of this 1967 comment, "Environments are not just containers, but are processes that change the content totally." We will grant that perhaps the term of media ecology was coined by Neil Postman and later adopted by McLuhan but I believe it is

clear that the origin of the concept lies with McLuhan who is responsible for the biological spin he gave to media theory and what is now called media ecology.

In closing this section I want to refer the reader to my paper published in EME entitled “The Biological Foundation of Media Ecology” (Logan 2004 Explorations in Media Ecology 6: 19-34.) for those interested in exploring further the biological roots of media ecology. I also wish to acknowledge that in that paper I mistakenly attributed the coinage of the term media ecology to McLuhan. I have corrected that mistake in this essay and that is the only caveat I need to make for this article.

Knowledge Ecology

McLuhan developed the notion that media create an environment or an ecosystem that is best studied by what we now call media ecology, a term that he also embraced. Paralleling his notion of a media ecosystem was his notion of a knowledge ecosystem although he never used this term in which the study of one discipline in depth required one crossing disciplinary boundaries to study other disciplines as well. I would like to introduce the terms of a “knowledge ecosystem” and “knowledge ecology” based on McLuhan’s notion of the interdisciplinarity of knowledge as the quotes below will attest and also as an extension of the term he and I used in our manuscript the Future of the Library, namely the term “information ecology”.

These quotes from *Understanding Media* (McLuhan 1964) to my mind introduce the notion of a knowledge ecosystem (all knowledge is interrelated) and knowledge ecology or the study of interdisciplinarity.

In education, likewise, it is not the increase in numbers of those seeking to learn that creates the crisis. Our new concern with education follows upon the changeover to an interrelation in knowledge, where before the separate subjects of the curriculum had stood apart from each other. Departmental sovereignties have melted away as rapidly as national sovereignties under conditions of electric speed (p. 35).

In education the conventional division of the curriculum into subjects is already as outdated as the medieval trivium and quadrivium after the Renaissance. Any subject taken in depth at once relates to other subjects (p. 347).

Men are suddenly nomadic gatherers of knowledge, nomadic as never before — but also involved in the total social process as never before; since with electricity we extend our central nervous system globally, instantly interrelating every human experience (p. 310-11).

This excerpt from the famous March 1969 *Playboy* interview reveals that McLuhan (1969) believed the acquisition of knowledge not only required crossing disciplinary boundaries but also required accessing knowledge in a variety of media:

PLAYBOY: Might it be possible for the “TV child” to make the adjustment to his educational environment by synthesizing traditional literate-visual forms with the insights of his own electric culture -- or must the medium of print be totally unassimilable for him?

McLUHAN: Such a synthesis is entirely possible, and could create a creative blend of the two cultures — if the educational establishment was aware that there is an electric culture. In the absence of such elementary awareness, I’m afraid that the television child has no future in our schools.

McLuhan’s One Liners Clarified

McLuhan enjoyed using one-liners or epigrams because he believed that with the information overload that electric information creates, the one-liner was all the attention his readers would be able to muster. Although this is certainly a stretch, I would like to suggest that with his advocacy of one-liners McLuhan foreshadowed the idea of Twitter that a short succinct message is all we have time for. His use of one-liners contributed to his challenging writing style and led to a number of misunderstandings. In this section I want to address a few of his one-liners and help to clarify them. As already mentioned figure-ground analyses are very useful for interpreting ambiguities. In many cases McLuhan actually resolves the ambiguities of his one-liners but this does not let him off the

hook. As I stated before I make no apologies for McLuhan. However, since he gave us so much I contend that we can cut him some slack. All I wish to do is clear up some misunderstandings so lets go right to it starting with the most famous one of all—the medium is the message.

The Medium is the Message

This one-liner has more than one meaning. One is the notion that, independent of its content or purported messages, a medium has its own intrinsic effects on our perceptions, which are the medium's unique message. The other meaning of this one-liner is that a medium transforms its content. A movie shown on television or a play that is filmed affects its audience differently from the original. Even a telephone conversation on a cell phone is different than one on a landline—the same content but different effects and hence different messages. And finally, a third meaning suggested by McLuhan himself and quoted above, “any new technology creates a new environment.” Alex Kuskis has elaborated this point after reading a first draft of this essay with the following remark: “The message of any medium is not the content that it carries, but rather the sum total of all the changes that it produces in the world, thereby transforming it. The message of cars, for example, is all of the infrastructure created to support them; the auto industry, highways, the petroleum industry, gas stations, etc.; it is also the resulting pollution, gridlock and deaths from, autos – the totality of the changes wrought by cars.”

Another misunderstood point of this famous one-liner is the notion that it only applies to media of communication. In fact McLuhan regarded media as both communications tools and technology in general. For him a medium was anything that mediated one's interaction with their environment and with other individuals. Accordingly all tools, which he considered as extensions of our body, are media. “The media can be viewed as artificial extensions of our sensory existence (McLuhan 1955). Speech, writing, the printing press and the computer were all lumped together with the hand axe, the hammer, the automobile and the space ship and included both hardware and software. He believed, “Since all media are extensions of ourselves, or translations of some part of us into various materials, any study of one medium helps us to understand all others (McLuhan 1964, 139).” This being the case McLuhan analyzed both communication media and other tools under the single category of media. And given that all tools form an ecosystem they have to be studied using

media ecology as content analysis would not incorporate all of the interactions of the media in this environment.

The User is the Content

“The user is the content” makes no sense if it is taken literally but it makes perfect sense if one considers that each reader or viewer brings his or her own experience and understanding to a medium and transforms the content according to his or her own need and ability. This might have been one of the first post-modern one-liners. The genius of McLuhan is that with a 5-word one-liner he could express a sentiment that a post-modern theorist needed an entire essay to express.

Anyone who tries to make a distinction between education and entertainment doesn't know the first thing about either.

It was statement like this that infuriated many members of the Academy. What McLuhan was saying was simply that in the electric age of information overload in which there are so many distractions one has to keep students entertained to hold their attention so as to educate them or turned around; students educate themselves by entertaining themselves. Imposing sanctions on them and attempting to discipline them simply will not work. The proof of this assertion is that the most effective teachers and professors are the ones that are the most entertaining, i.e. most able to hold the attention of their students. Marshall certainly was one of the most entertaining professors who ever lived!!

He enjoyed using jokes to make his points and he loved to have fun with his students, who really loved him. Let me relay one example. One day not long after I began working with him, Marshall asked me to host his Monday night seminar. He told me he was having dinner with Prime Minister Trudeau and he wanted to bring the PM to the seminar and surprise the group so I was to say nothing about this. I kept my word. When I heard the motorcycles accompanying the PM, I, and I alone in that room, knew what was about to happen. McLuhan strode into the room and exclaimed, “Ladies and Gentlemen, the Prime Minister of Canada. Mr. Trudeau came into the room looked around to greet everyone, spotted me and said Bob, Hi! How are you? Marshall’s jaw dropped for he did not know that I was one of Trudeau’s policy advisors for I had never gotten around to telling him of my work in politics. He enjoyed the trick he played on the seminar group and the one I played on him. After that evening he and I spent many times together advising the PM on matters of

bilingualism and the use of TV. I hope the reader will forgive me for slipping in this personal anecdote -- it not only illustrates McLuhan as a trickster but it also gives me an opportunity to tell a story that my listening audiences have always enjoyed and I have always wanted to document. Working and learning with Marshall McLuhan was one of the most entertaining parts of my life and it certainly underscores his observation that education and entertainment are not mutually exclusive but rather mutually inclusive of each other, for entertainment can be educational and education is always entertaining.

Obsolescence never meant the end of anything, it's just the beginning

When McLuhan suggested that television obsolesced text and the book, many took this suggestion literally. Therefore, when the number of books published actually increased, they took this as a sign that McLuhan's ideas were not valid. When McLuhan said books and printed text would be obsolesced what he meant was that these media would no longer be the principal media for the consumption of information. In fact he was proven correct because radio and television took over as the principal means by which people accessed information. Likewise when print obsolesced handwriting, handwritten communication was not completely wiped out it just played second fiddle to print. Although most recorded music is digital the analog vinyl record is still very much alive. McLuhan with his son Eric codified this idea with *The Laws of Media* (McLuhan, M. and E. McLuhan 1988), which states that

1. Every medium or technology enhances some human function.
2. In doing so, it obsolesces some former medium or technology, which was used to achieve the function earlier.
3. In achieving its function, the new medium or technology retrieves some older form from the past.
4. When pushed far enough, the new medium or technology reverses or flips into a complementary form.

Television enhanced entertainment, obsolesced print, retrieved the oral tradition and flipped into YouTube.

By the way we see that digital media is now obsolescing television in the sense that young people look more to digital media to meet their information and entertainment needs instead of television.

Television cannot compete with the interactivity of digital media and their two-way flow of information. Television has become a one-way dead end medium – without interactivity and hence boring.

We Become Servomechanisms of our Technologies

“To behold, use or perceive any extension of ourselves in technological forms is necessarily to embrace it. By continuously embracing technologies, we relate ourselves to them as servo-mechanisms (McLuhan 1964, 46).” At first, technology serves as an extension of humankind but after awhile a subliminal flip takes place and suddenly the user is transformed into an extension of the technology they have come to consider part of them. This idea has been expressed in the following oft-quoted remark: “We become what we behold. We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us.” This quote has been attributed to McLuhan who used it a lot in his every day conversations, but it actually was coined by John Culkin (1967).

The Global Village

A key element in McLuhan's historical overview of communications is that electric information moving at the speed of light creates new patterns of communication and social interactions. He describes this as "an instant implosion" that reverses the specialism of the print age and contracts the globe to a village in which “everybody lives in the utmost proximity created by our electric involvement in one another's lives.” (McLuhan 1964, 35)

Electricity especially the Internet and TV brings information instantaneously from the four corners of the planet and invests distant events with a personal dimension; it is as though these are occurring in one's own community. Communities across the globe become entwined in one another's affairs. The command over space that electric and especially digital media creates reduces the entire globe to the dimensions of a village - a “global village”. The Internet is in fact a Global Village.

The term “the global village” has entered the English language to such a degree that people are more familiar with the expression than they are with McLuhan's name. Another interesting note is

that the term “globalization” was first used in 1959 one year before McLuhan coined the expression “the global village”.

The Rear View Mirror: History as the Laboratory of Media Studies

McLuhan felt that an understanding of history was essential for understanding the future and the impact of new technologies. He often used the metaphor of the rearview mirror, a device by which we are able to determine what is about to overtake us from our past. “We drive into the future using only our rearview mirror.” Furthermore, according to McLuhan, history is not to be regarded as a series of events but rather as a dynamic process with a discernible pattern, which repeats itself from culture to culture and from technology to technology.

Conclusion

I believe that I have only scratched the surface in explaining the ideas of this great thinker. No article can do justice to the ideas that Marshall McLuhan engendered. I hope that my essay helps the reader in their approach to McLuhan. However, the only way to understand McLuhan is to read him directly and figure out what he means for you for as he said “the user is the content.” Each of us that reads McLuhan takes away their own interpretation. It was my pleasure to share mine and hope that it helps you to better understand this giant of 20th century thought.

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