

McLuhan and Media Ecology

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WHAT DID MARSHALL MCLUHAN contribute to Media Ecology? You might well ask what hydrogen and oxygen contribute to the existence of water.

Without those elements, there would be no water. Of course, other factors are necessary. Hydrogen and oxygen on their own, in a vacuum, are not sufficient to create water. They are profoundly necessary, but not sufficient.

Which describes McLuhan's contribution to Media Ecology to a tee. Without his work in the 1950s and '60s, there would be no field of study that sought to explain how the nuances and great sweeps of human history are made possible by media of communication—how media determine the thoughts and actions of people and society, in a “soft” way. Like how the elevator makes the skyscraper possible. Necessary to the very idea of a tall building (living and working on the top floors is impossible without a means of conveyance) but not sufficient (construction of a skyscraper requires certain engineering skills).

McLuhan got us to the top floors of communications and taught us about the pervasively “soft” influence of media in all aspects of life. We might say that media are to human society as McLuhan is to Media Ecology.

Come to think of it, McLuhan also taught us about the value of analogy in the investigation of media and their effects. But in the essay that follows, I'll try to touch first upon some of the more major nonstylistic components of McLuhan's contribution to our field.

Communication Counts

MEDIA ARE CRUCIAL. We may read a book or watch TV or log on to the Web any evening, but these encounters are never—can never be—just one-night stands. McLuhan saw that they change the way we live and who we are. And Media Ecology has taken up the task of detailing some of the many ways this has happened and will continue to happen.

The explosion of the Internet with this-dot-com and that-dot-com everywhere you turn has made the importance of communication obvious. But it wasn't always so. Indeed, the curriculum of Media Ecology, as I first encountered it in 1976, had a lot that was not first and foremost about communications. Lewis Mumford's beat was technology; George Herbert Mead's was expression of the self upon the world; Susanne Langer's was aesthetics. Most of course were related, fundamentally, to communication. To inquire into the ways that music and writing play differently in the brain—as Langer did, to take her work as an example—is inescapably to look at the impact of different modes of communication. But one got the feeling, or at least I did, that

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communication was not quite her central concern. It was rather the scales of human perception and cognition and feeling, with communication serving as the stimulant and conduit.

McLuhan's work was startlingly distinct from the others in that he put communications at center stage. Indeed, in McLuhan's schema, there was nothing else on the stage. Everything was communication. In *Understanding Media* (1964), he considered at least as many technologies as did Mumford, but each was rendered and explored as a medium of communication. Not only writing and printing were history-making media, as McLuhan's mentor Harold Innis (whom I'd rate the second most important contributor to Media Ecology) had shown. Not only telephone and television, which Innis had missed (partly because Innis hadn't focused on electronic media, partly because TV had barely come on the scene when Innis was working). But money, clothing, cars, and weapons were also critically important media in McLuhan's book.

In making everything about communication—in insisting that whether we pay for something with cash, check, or credit card says something about who we are, as George Herbert Mead might have noted (absent the credit card), had he been a Media Ecologist—McLuhan gave Media Ecology a center of gravity, a moral compass. There was no doubt in my mind in those Media Ecology seminars in 1976–1977 that McLuhan was the star, and everyone else whose books we read and discussed were planets, satellites, asteroids.

Not that anyone was blinded by, obedient to, or worshipful of the star. Far from it. McLuhan was often criticized, sometimes vehemently, by us students of Media Ecology. His prose—his style of writing—received scarcely warmer acceptance in Media Ecology than it did in the rest of the academic world. (I actually had come to savor it by this time, but that was likely because I had gone through my period of frustration with McLuhan's style when I'd first read *Understanding Media* and *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) as an undergraduate at City College in New York City in the 1960s.) His “probes”—such as hot and cool—were hotly debated, coolly assessed, even experimentally tested by some hardy souls in our program. (I recall one experimental test of McLuhan's notion of light-through/light-on by a PhD student in the class prior to mine.)

But the point is—though McLuhan said he was too “acoustic” to have a point—that McLuhan and his point of view, whether about the significance of communication in general, or the cascade of things he observed about the impact of specific media, was the point of all of these debates, assessments, and tests. McLuhan was not the first theorist we studied, and that was probably a good idea. But once his work was introduced in our seminars, it became the touchstone—whether of foundation or contrast—to just about everything else that followed.

This included the books that were published by graduates of the Media Ecology Program. Among my classmates' books, Joshua Meyrowitz's *No Sense of Place* (1985) has epigraphs by McLuhan and Erving Goffman. My *Mind at Large: Knowing in the Technological Age* (1988) is dedicated to McLuhan; my *The Soft Edge: A Natural History and Future of the Information Revolution* (1997) cites McLuhan as the first of four thinkers whose work made that book possible (the others are evolutionary epistemologist Donald T. Campbell, philosopher Karl Popper, and science fiction writer Isaac Asimov); my *Digital McLuhan* (1999) is—well, the title says it all.

All were about communication, and informed in my *American Heritage College Dictionary's* first sense of the word (“to give form or character to”) by the approach McLuhan brought to it.

The Medium Counts

BEYOND THE COMPELLING, general principle that communication counts, McLuhan also taught us that the specific medium of communication makes a big difference. A Media Ecology classmate once put it this way: We study how whether one writes with a squiggle this way or that way can change the course of civilization.

That might have been overstating the case just a bit. I'd say that whether one writes with a squiggle (i.e., the alphabet) or a picture (i.e., hieroglyphics) can and indeed did change the course of civilization. But the point is well taken either way, for what it gets at is McLuhan's "medium is the message"—the way we communicate, often taken for granted, often determines what we communicate, and therein just about everything else in life and society.

Media Ecology was very much about making that distinction. Other programs, such as the Annenberg School in Philadelphia, were also vitally concerned with communication. But their idea of communication studies was mainly analysis of content. In investigating the possible relationship between television and violence, their approach was to look for correlations between numbers of violent episodes in TV programs and numbers of violent acts committed by their viewers. In contrast, McLuhan wondered to what extent the tantalization of untouchable, beautiful images on TV engendered real-life frustration. And that was what Media Ecology was interested in, too.

Neil Postman, who wisely created Media Ecology in so much of McLuhan's image, was the one most responsible for our focus on media, technology, process, and structure, rather than content. And this resulted in other structuralists, implicit and explicit, ranging from Whorf to Levi-Strauss to Chomsky, being brought into the curriculum. But McLuhan was the signpost.

And he was a signpost that pointed, Janus-like, at the past and the future at the same time.

History Counts

DWIGHT MACDONALD observed, in the title of his article about McLuhan in Stearn's *McLuhan: Hot & Cool* (1967), that McLuhan "has looted all culture, from cave painting to *Mad* magazine, for fragments to shore up against the ruin of his system" (p. 204). Typical of McLuhan's critics, Macdonald is keenly aware of McLuhan's encyclopedic conversance with the myriad details of history—for how else would McLuhan know where to "loot"—but Macdonald attempts to twist this advantage into some kind of flaw. Media Ecology was inspired by merely the advantage.

Indeed, the study of media and their effects now seems intrinsically historical mainly because of McLuhan (and his mentor Innis), and the furthering of that approach in Media Ecology. Even before the Web, back in the 1970s, most graduate programs that studied communications and media were pointed towards the future. Interactive television, telecom satellites, community cable, and all that was sparkling and new were the buzzwords. McLuhan's "global village" had already rooted that future in millennia of human constructions and attitudes, all of which were fair game for the students of Media Ecology.

My own doctoral dissertation—*Human Replay: A Theory of the Evolution of Media* (1979)—in a sense took McLuhan's observation that electronic media recall oral patterns of

communication and turned it into a theory that media become more natural, less artificial, more human, as they evolve. Other theorists—ranging from Darwin to Popper—played major roles in my work, but McLuhan was the key resource. His historical connections popped up throughout the dissertation, as they continue to do so whenever I write about communications.

Other students in the Media Ecology Program focused on specific, signal events in history. Ed Wachtel's dissertation on the window as an archetypal medium flowered into a lifelong study of visual perspective in art and technology (see, e.g., Wachtel, 1977/1978). Typical of a Media Ecology so influenced by McLuhan, Wachtel's approach to visual rendition encompasses the full extent of human history, from cave paintings to the Web.

As we students of Media Ecology began publishing in academic journals and attending scholarly conferences, we found a kinship with historians (as well as futurists) that went beyond communications, strictly defined. Not only were my articles and reviews welcome in the *Journal of Communication*, I was early on published in *Technology and Society*. Media Ecologists began speaking at conferences not only sponsored by the International Communication Association, but by the Society for the History of Technology. These were also the venues of McLuhan, especially as he sought in the last years of his life to tell the world about “discarnate man,” telephones and privacy, the hemispheres of the brain and media, and most of all about the “laws of media.”

But there was an enduring difference between McLuhan and Media Ecologists, on the one hand, and scholars in those communication and history fields on the other. For McLuhan (1976) not only wrote of telephones and privacy, to take but one of his many threads, but rendered his thoughts in a uniquely arresting way—observing of the telephone's invasion of the home that the automobile was the last place one could be truly alone (and today, of course, the cell phone has brought down even that last remaining castle wall in motion).

This was a difference not so much in subject matter—especially with the historians of technology—as it was a difference in style.

Verve Counts

I CANNOT COMMENT with any certainty about the flavor, the atmosphere, of other doctoral communication programs, because I participated in only one. But if output in conferences and journals is any reliable indication, the general world of academic scholarship often seems to lack a certain levity, an élan in presentation, characteristic first of McLuhan and then Media Ecologists.

This, of course, cuts both ways. One person's gravity is another's plodding. The playfulness of McLuhan—his zest for coming up with new ideas or new ways of presenting old ones, rather than exhaustively rehashing the ones already in hand—was one of the prime targets of his critics. The academic world expects documentation, not word plays and analogy. But words in all their glory were important to McLuhan, if only because they, too, are a crucial medium of communication.

Media Ecology as a whole has been less playful than McLuhan. Certainly the writing style of Meyrowitz, Wachtel, Lance Strate—and me—is far more linear, less aphoristic than McLuhan's.

But our approach to our subjects—the kinds of connections we're willing to consider—flows from McLuhan. Metaphor plays a larger role in our work than does statistical evidence.

Interestingly, Media Ecology also fostered a speaking style that is probably more entertaining than McLuhan's. This was not because McLuhan didn't want to be entertaining, but because aphoristic bursts often do not lend themselves to dynamic talks. As public speakers, Media Ecologists learned more about presentation from Neil Postman than McLuhan. Indeed, Postman's sense of humor and connection to his audience were deeply instructive for many of us as teachers. I know that even now, more than two decades out of Postman's seminars, I hear myself sounding like Postman sometimes in my classrooms. And the students seem to like it.

Postman's approach was also influenced by McLuhan. Although Postman's books are far more traditional in organization than McLuhan's—they have chapters in the tens rather than the hundreds, which seem to follow one another in some order—they are nonetheless more like extended lectures than strictly scholarly works. Footnotes, references, charts, and tables rarely appear in Postman's books, because he—like McLuhan—wants to persuade via attractive verbal argument, rhetoric, rather than numbers that can be numbing. Indeed, Postman was quite explicit in communicating to us that style was at least as important as content. We students of Postman's learned that the medium is the message in that way, too. And in that way we were McLuhan's students on yet another level.

And as the years went by, it also became clear to some of us that not only were we McLuhan's students—we were among his only students.

McLuhan's Students

FOR ALL OF MCLUHAN'S extraordinary impact as a thinker in the twentieth century, the University of Toronto never saw fit to support his establishment of a proper doctoral program. Classes and seminars were conducted in the Coach House—aptly right behind the Medieval Studies Building. The ambience when I gave a lecture there in the late 1970s was of a group of heretics hiding in the catacombs of Rome, stealing nights and time and insight as we could.

The result was that, with the important exception of Walter Ong—who was a student of McLuhan's in America, not Toronto—McLuhan left the world few if any direct students to continue his work.

Media Ecology filled this gap in more than one way. First, we continued McLuhan's work in our books, articles, and conference papers, as I have briefly discussed above. But just as crucially, Media Ecologists have created a community to which like-minded souls—those who get what McLuhan was about, and are applying it in their work—can find harbor.

The first example of this I can recall was James Curtis. I was asked to review his *Culture as Polyphony* (1978) by the journal *Technology and Culture* in 1979. Curtis was (and still is) a Professor of Russian. He was well outside the formal field of communications. But his book deftly applied McLuhan, and right in synch with Media Ecology. When he presented a paper at Fordham University's symposium on Marshall McLuhan in 1998 (organized by Lance Strate), Curtis could have been Meyrowitz or Wachtel standing up there (they also presented papers), for all I could tell. In subject matter and style, Curtis was one of us.

Torontonians themselves have become part of the Media Ecology orb. Bob Logan and Derrick de Kerckhove and Liss Jeffrey and, more than anyone else, Eric McLuhan, of course, come by their McLuhan directly—not through Media Ecology—and yet they speak at Media Ecology panels and conferences and seem for all the world like Media Ecologists. Given that Media Ecology owes so much to McLuhan, it is inevitable that anyone doing McLuhan's work would become part of Media Ecology.

And so, as the new millennium dawns—exactly when depends upon your mathematical metaphysics—McLuhan rides high. As someone once remarked about Chomsky and his revolution in generative linguistics, it succeeded not because he convinced his contemporaries or critics, for he did not. It succeeded because graduate students were convinced.

We, the students of Media Ecology, were convinced by McLuhan.

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