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## THE MEDIA OF RECORD ARCHIVES IN THE WAKE OF MCLUHAN

Hugh A. Taylor

*"Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication.... It is impossible to understand social and cultural changes without a knowledge of the workings of media."* Marshall McLuhan, The Medium is the Message.

Until comparatively recent times archives as institutions have been regarded essentially as repositories for the public records of government, and for manuscripts from the private sector. The very terms used by archivists have their origins in the administration of handwritten, textual documents on papyrus, parchment, and paper. If typescripts are added to manuscripts, then the overwhelming preoccupation of our profession has been with these "media of record." The writing of history and indeed our whole view of the past has until recent years largely depended on such sources made available in the original, in copies made by hand, and in published versions. For centuries the written, textual record was regarded as the only respectable source for scholars with surviving architectural remains, paintings and other artifacts serving more as illustration than evidence. Myth, being largely misunderstood, was dismissed as totally unreliable evidence and a product of barbarism. Omar Khayyain's moving finger wrote, and some of our most powerful images have resolved around holy writ, the tablets of stone, and the book of life. In short, civilization became dependent upon and equated with literacy.

Modes of communication in literate terms have made a profound and continuous impact on civilization, but archivists have given little consideration to this subject, central though it is to the study of administrative history. We have taken our records very much for granted while we have respected and sought to preserve their physical nature, we have regarded them simply as the neutral "carriers" of messages or pieces of information, despite the fact that the nature of each medium does shape administrative systems. The interplay between the medium and the receiver creates a communications environment over and above the content of the message and thereby becomes a message itself. Information and the medium of record must together be confronted by the reader, at which point they both become a communication and pass from a static to a dynamic state.

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Hugh Taylor, who is presently Provincial Archivist of Nova Scotia, and Vice-President of the Society of American Archivists, emigrated with his family from Britain to Canada in 1965 and has been successively Provincial Archivist of Alberta and New Brunswick, and Director of the Archives Branch, Public Archives of Canada. This article is based on a paper presented at the 1976 annual conference of the Society of American Archivists.

The foundation for this study of the relationship between the media and the message was laid by two Canadians: Harold Adams Innis, an economic historian who may be almost unknown to American readers, and Marshall McLuhan who is very well known indeed. Studies by Innis on the fur trade, the cod fisheries, and the Canadian Pacific Railway had impressed on him the extent to which the movement and processing of staples altered the lives of those involved. The staple itself became a medium of communication as it passed from hand to hand, much as with money to which it is closely related. Equally important was Innis' stylistic rejection of narrative from a fixed point of view in favour of the generation of insights through interface, as in dialogue. This approach can be a stumbling block for readers accustomed to a logical and orderly presentation by an author. Innis for this reason has sometimes been condemned as unreadable, and yet this surely is the reaction of only one part of the brain! We are rapidly learning that insight may be gained by other than rational literate means: by interface and symbolism, for instance, and by the deployment of space, intervals and silence. All of these elements of thought are much easier to depict in fine art, conversation, and literature than in the writing of history which traditionally and classically has received a linear, narrative, cause-and-effect treatment. We know that this view of past activity and process is an illusion. Perhaps that is why it took a Tolstoy to penetrate and record the confusion of a complex military engagement.

Marshall McLuhan, who greatly admired Innis, places great stress on insights arising out of the interplay of suggestive fragments of information at different levels, in contrast to the approach from a "point of view" where the detached "gaze" of the narrator magisterially, but perhaps superficially, describes the scene. For McLuhan, "an insight is a contact with the life of forms. Students of computer programming have had to learn how to approach all knowledge structurally. In order to transfer any kind of knowledge to tapes it is necessary to understand the form of that knowledge. This has led to the discovery of the basic difference between classified knowledge and pattern recognition. It is a helpful distinction to keep in mind when reading Innis since he is above all a recognizer of patterns."<sup>1</sup>

This capacity to develop insights is part of the archivist's skill in the appraisal or selection and the arrangement of disordered material. We understand well this "contact with the life of forms," which distinguishes us from librarians who of necessity must classify, if only so that we can browse through the bookshelves! Classification as an instrument of retrieval has fallen on hard times among archivists and others.

Innis believed that the source of social change was to be found in technological innovation, which extended man's physical capacity, particularly in communications technology, which could be considered as an extension of the mind of the sender. He examined the characteristics of the various media, including the media of record as they affected the Ancient World and the Middle Ages. He then extended his study to the newspaper. He

then extended his study to the newspaper. He also developed a theory of limitation in time and space. Stone, clay, wax, and even parchment, while durable, were cumbersome and "time binding." They made for static hierarchical institutions and traditions within a culture built upon oral traditions in which custom grows out of consensus, and mutually acceptable roles identify status. Paper and papyrus, on the other hand, were light, yet sufficiently durable to be "space binding" and moved rapidly. Information and detailed commands could be conveyed accurately over great distances to the delight of generals, bureaucrats, and expansionists of all kinds whose records now fill the archives of today. Innis supported his findings with a wealth of references. As McLuhan put it, "each sentence is a compressed monograph. He includes a small library on each page, and often incorporates a small library of references on the same page in addition."<sup>2</sup>

It is not surprising that another Canadian, Marshall McLuhan, should take up the study of media where Innis left off. Canada perhaps more than any other country owes its life to staples such as fur, fish, timber, and grains, and to communication systems such as railways, the telegraph, the telephone, radio, television, and now the world's most powerful communications satellite. On the prairies, where McLuhan grew up, all the communications of media of his generation came together in vital confrontation and interplay. Where Innis perceived the different media of record as affecting social organization, McLuhan sees them changing sensory perception and thought through a type of technological determinism even more complete than that of Innis. Like the sailor in Poe's A Descent Into the Maelstrom, one can recognize what is happening and survive through study of the vortex, the process, and not simply the contents. The Gutenberg Galaxy was written by McLuhan "as a footnote to the observations of Innis on the subject of the Psychic and social consequences first of writing and then of printing."<sup>3</sup> It was also a note of warning about taking media for granted. We as archivists should heed this warning and try to understand the characteristics of the media in our custody which are expressed in "messages" beyond their literary content, and pass on this awareness to the user.

Before examining McLuhan's insights into the various media of record and communication which concern us as archivists, it may be useful to look first at his observations on media in general. McLuhan's major interest is in how the media affect the person and this bias gives rise to one of his most important concepts. Each medium causes a different relationship between the human senses, a different "ratio." Much of this theory presented in the Gutenberg Galaxy and rephrased in later works. It may be summarized at the risk of gross oversimplification as follows: Communication is not just a matter of logistics, but requires the involvement of the senses to receive the message. Short of ESP, which is not discounted, the earliest form of communication was oral/aural and involved all the senses in the full interplay of interpersonal relations. Oral man was also tribal man, who lived mythically and in depth with his neighbours. Myth was the holistic perception of a complex evolution that ordinarily extended over time. In tribal society, the

the individual was a role player rather than a specialist in the fragmented, industrial sense. Words had a power and a resonance in themselves which they were to lose with the onrush of literacy.

Among McLuhan's most important ideas concerning communication was the concept that: "All media are active metaphors in their power to translate experience into new forms. The spoken word was the first technology by which man was able to let go of his environment in order to grasp it in a new way."<sup>4</sup> However, the phonetic alphabet traps words, without the benefit of expression, within a visual code of symbols unrelated to the object being described or communicated. The one to one relationship is broken, and the alphabet becomes a technological tool, an extension of the sense of sight, and a closed system, unlike the senses themselves which are "endlessly translated into that experience that we call consciousness."<sup>5</sup>

In this way, the media of record and communication, as extensions of the senses, create totally new human environments which are not passive wrappings, but active processes at war with previous environments. There is a constant interplay between media resulting in a fierce hybrid energy, for instance telegraph and newspaper, photograph and movie film, film and sound. The alphabet made Gutenberg possible, but the technology of uniformity and repeatability exemplified by moveable type was not new; it had been present in writing but was now intensified in print and standardized typefaces. Moveable type, the first industrial assembly line, led to expansion, nationalism, specialization, detachment, exploitation. It created the "public" and the passive consumer, and brought about a fragmentation of life which separated content from media through a massive dehumanization of society.

McLuhan further posited that the content of one medium is another medium, for example, thought in speech, speech in writing, and writing in printing. He expressed the importance of this concept when he wrote "the 'message' of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs."<sup>6</sup> This principle is particularly evident in the development of automation and its affect on information management.

Media can be divided metaphorically into those which are "hot," those of high definition such as the printed page, film, and radio, as opposed to "cool" media of low definition, such as T.V., comics, and automation. "Hot" media excite; "cool" media involve and invite participation through completion of the images. Electric technology, especially T.V. and automation, represent extensions of our nervous system. Instantaneous information has caused an "implosion" more violent than the Gutenberg "explosion." We now must live mythically and in depth in the "global village" of our new tribalism. The attribute "tribal" is used throughout in a strictly metaphorical and not in a pejorative sense. It is a shorthand description of those group-oriented characteristics of preliterate society which contrast with the intense individualism of typographic man.

If McLuhan's theories are brought to bear on early record keeping in North America, the following conclusions would seem to emerge. For McLuhan, the United States, in contrast to Western Europe, had no medieval particularisms to abolish in its transition to an industrialized society, and was in fact the first nation to be established on a homogeneous foundation of literacy and print culture. The Cartesian environment went unrecognized because there had been no other, in contrast to England, where ancient and medieval traditions and institutions prevented print culture from taking complete hold. The fact that there was no tradition of a permanent public agency keeping written records, is explained partly by the poor record keeping in America observed by the DeTocqueville. Ernst Posner's suggestion in response to DeTocqueville that "Archives thrive best in regimented society; poor record keeping seems to be the price of liberty"<sup>7</sup> conveys much truth with gentle irony. Europe's oral, traditional culture may have been more significant, however, in determining the nature of their archival systems. In Europe, records were, in effect, "file copies" of the complex operations of common law, custom, and land tenure. In contrast, within the print culture of the United States, a record not worth printing was generally not worth keeping.

In this setting, it was the professional historian, that exemplary product and promoter of print culture, who sought to rescue manuscripts and create archives as centers for historical research. Contrastingly, in Canada, which inherited English and European orientations, it was the Public Archives that fostered the study of Canadian history and helped found the Canadian Historical Association. Canada, as a much less, homogeneous culture, has perhaps experienced a more organic archival growth than the United States.<sup>8</sup> Canadian archivists are not so closely linked to the historians. It may be significant that in the Public Archives of Canada, the name "Historical Branch" has been changed to "Archives Branch" as being more encompassing. Likewise, the Association of Canadian Archivists has parted on friendly terms from the Canadian Historical Association. As archivists, our future lies elsewhere.

If McLuhan's insights into administrative history have value for us, he may also help us define our role as archivists in post-industrial, automated society. We may have to assume the shaman's role as keepers of the tribal memory in our global village. Using the McLuhan metaphor, we have already shown distinctly tribal tendencies despite our typographic and consequently linear acculturation. We are constantly involved with the mosaic of surviving records within our collections, and the mosaic of information spanning them. We constantly seek not an artificially imposed classification by subject, but authentic pattern recognition of media in their archival order. There are gaps in all these mosaic patterns, and the urge towards closure in which we fill and complete the relationships is immensely sense involving. This absorption is over and above our tactile involvement with a wide variety of media of record and our audio-tactile relationship with donors and researchers. We are

not operationally specialized, and our work is not functionally fragmented. In short, we enjoy a healthy mix of experiences which embraces all our senses. Even when we become managers in a large archives, we resist fracture and specialization and encourage total involvement through matrix systems, task forces and intermedia committees to further enrich the archivists still physically involved with the records themselves.

We publish relatively little and often feel guilty about this, but it is not in our nature to trap our science in print too often lest it fossilize there. We are constantly creative, pragmatic, and we instruct those under training through oral exchange and the use of classic texts in the medieval tradition. The archivist's training is an apprenticeship, and we are none the worse for that. We try not to confuse intellectual content with pedantry. McLuhan expressed the concept by saying that:

Professionalism merges the individual into patterns of total environment. Amateurism seeks the development of the total 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 persuasive environment . . . <sup>9</sup>

The "expert" is the person who stays put. In this sense we should all cherish our amateurism.

If we are to realize our role in the newly integrated tribal society of the electric age, we will have to re-examine the assumptions of the historical method which have dominated our public service for a century. The emergence of "scientific" history and the pursuit of the definitive objective account, in contrast to myth, literature, and folklore, created the professional historian. He in turn evolved the modern archivist from those who kept records for purely legal purposes. We have diligently sought out material, but we have for too long concentrated our efforts at the center of our industrial world to serve the interests of historians of centrist political history. There are signs of rapid change here as we respond to other calls, but the "archival edge"<sup>10</sup> should be faced more boldly as we move into a society without center or margin, one of regions, communities, neighbourhoods, families and environments served by local repositories and networks and fostering local studies. The archivist, because he or she is more tribal than the historian, often acquires and saves material prophetically and uses prophetic vision in scheduling and appraisal, but how often? If we are to live mythically, the past becomes both yesterday and as one with the present. The archivist once more becomes keeper of the permanently valuable in the broadest sense with little separation between today, yesterday, and something we have learned to call "history." This is particularly true of the record in machine-readable archives.

Probably the most vivid analogy to implosion and mythically is achieved by projects arising out of the "new" history. These studies collect massive data to be received and correlated by the computer, researched through a "field" approach, and made available through a number of outputs almost instantaneously. Their correlation and interface can only be achieved in measurable time by the computer as an extension of our central nervous systems and provide a kind of group memory and recall. This is particularly true of studies involving family history, case files, census, and tax returns. The process is again almost tribal in nature and much closer to oral tradition. It provides a marked contrast to the selective, detached point of view to the qualitative approach, or even to the individualists' orientation of genealogy concerned with specific ancestry in time and space.

The "new" history is largely dependent, again, on groups and teams and interdisciplinary involvement. Archival documents as aggregates of data are transferred to the new medium of magnetic tape where they retain a total validity in contrast to the old approach where each document is "mined" for information in support of a specific line of enquiry by an individual. Hitherto neglected series, especially in the field of municipal records, may yield unexpected insights. Unfortunately many archivists do not have the space to store bulky series of this kind while they await their possible automation.

Further evidence of this metaphorical tribalism and increased immediate awareness may be found in the program of the thirty-ninth conference of the Society of American Archivists in Philadelphia in 1975 which included the Society's first archival film festival. Sessions were also held on patterns in urban archives, which required a "field" approach closely related to McLuhan's "pattern recognition;" the right of privacy, an increasing problem in any retribalised society, since privacy is closely related to literate individualism and on archives, community, and the media as they related to outreach programs.<sup>11</sup> Other presentations discussed the preservation, use, and interpretation of photographs, and the linking of institutions through archival networks, particularly in Ohio and Wisconsin. Of course, this was not the first exposure these subjects had ever received, but their inclusion, as a group, in a single conference indicated an acceleration of important new trends. Add to this, the intense activity of regional associations and "activist archivists" groups, and there emerges something approaching McLuhan's in-depth relationships resonance among archivists today.

Media study may also help us with information control as we move from fragmented classification systems to exploring the concept of integrated pattern recognition. The development of PRECIS (Preserved Context Indexing System) by the British Library, with its emphasis on free language descriptors and context dependency, is in sharp contrast to the older classified indexes and is only possible on a large scale through automation. It is



now being tested for use with archival materials. McLuhan has surely said something important about the nature of the retrieval process when he contrasts Sherlock Holmes, to whom every detail is important and instantaneously related, with the official, bureaucratic, segmented approach of the Scotland Yard stereotype. Fiction perhaps, but we have here a parable about perception. We cannot go on indexing archival materials as if they were finite, self-contained blocks of information. We may have to direct the researcher to patterns rather than specifics, and one day, perhaps, this is all he will require. Meanwhile, we are faced with the deluge notes McLuhan that: "The twentieth century, the age of electric information, instant retrieval and total involvement, is a new tribal time. If Gutenberg technology retrieved the ancient world and dumped it in the lap of the Renaissance, electric technology has retrieved the primal, archaic worlds past and present, private and corporate and dumped them on the Western doorstep for processing."<sup>12</sup>

It is therefore instructive and reassuring to see how pre-Gutenberg man coped with the media of record, to see ourselves reacting in a similar way, and to consider the media of the post-Gutenberg age, since all come within our responsibility. We greatly value printed books, but as custodians we relate more closely to scribal society. We recognize our sense of involvement, both public and private, in archival affairs, and we are learning to react immediately. Failure to cope results in what McLuhan calls "rim spin" as technology speeds up process, to the point of dislocation. Automation is producing more information than can be effectively managed by conventional programs as any one in machine-readable archives knows. Traditional retrieval systems are breaking down.

As archivists we have always been less concerned with "shedding light on" the surface of our record from a fixed point of view than historians in the past have sought to do. We try to illumine the whole corpus of our collections and allow the light of relatedness to penetrate through our intricate archival reconstructions as through the interlace of an illuminated manuscript or a stained glass window. We have also re-entered an era of "light through" in a physical sense as we recognize the power of the film, and the transparent slide which may be just as involving as the stained glass window and the stone tracery. The printed book may once again become the visual aid to the other media that it once was, and not vice versa which has long been assumed as the natural order of things. If we believe that media exert such a powerful force we should understand not only the impact upon us as archivists, but also on our clients, as they too learn to move more freely from one media of record to another and recognize the difference in psychic terms.

The classroom is only beginning to feel the full impact of post-industrial society and the new media: John Dewey the educator "wanted to get the students out of the passive role of consumer of uniformly packaged learning. In fact, Dewey in reacting against passive print culture was surf-

boarding along on the new electronic wave."<sup>13</sup> The whole field of diffusion and outreach to all who appreciate archives, and not just our traditional clients is only beginning to be explored.

It is becoming increasingly clear that we can no longer view the records of the past as totally distinct from the records of today. The media of record are presenting their challenges both to the records manager and the archivist, and solutions may affect our senses in ways we should know about. Micrographics is more than a "ditto" process. It involves a significant media change from "light on" to "light through" which may subtly alter our perceptions. As we become more involved with our media and our users, the professions of archivist, librarian and records manager may become one at the point where the media of record becomes predominantly electronic and incorporates the principle of the video-disc as a near-permanent record. There is no wear since the laser scans in an almost tactile way the indentations of the encapsulated matrix or copy. Technology, by "throwing light on" information, is again turning metaphor into process, as yet another medium acting as a metaphor in an endless related chain of communication with the human consciousness, cause "closed systems" to disappear.

McLuhan does not preach instant salvation through electronics and media study. The mastery of the new languages is a tough and demanding discipline. We cannot short circuit the effort required to assimilate them to our past, but success will enrich us all. Further study of media effects must be undertaken, but as Edmund Carpenter has warned us "Knowledge of media alone is not sufficient protection from them. The moment Marshall McLuhan shifted from private media analyst to public media participant, he was converted into an image manipulated and exploited."<sup>14</sup> We should perhaps work to ensure that those who draw sustenance and insight from archives feed on a balanced diet of media and are aware of the effects. We should be more conscious of the power of media hybrids, especially in the field of conversion to microimages. If we have the power, we should ensure that our repositories have good media balance. Since we must be selective, we must also develop the insight to choose the medium of record which is most appropriate in a given situation. Above all, we must learn the "languages" of media without the benefit of syntax and with the grammar still uncertain. Only then will we be able to do full justice to our documents and our profession in the twenty-first century.

FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Harold A. Innis, *The Bias of Communication* (Toronto, 1971), p. viii.

<sup>2</sup>Innis, *Ibid.*, p. ix.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York, 1964), p. 64.

<sup>5</sup>Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (New York, 1969), p. 14.

<sup>6</sup>McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 24.

<sup>7</sup>Ernst Posner, *Archives and the Public Interest* (Washington, 1967),  
p. 162.

<sup>8</sup>Hugh A. Taylor, "Canadian Archives: Patterns from a Federal Perspective"  
*Archivaria* 1, 1976.

<sup>9</sup>Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message* (no pagination). p. 93.

<sup>10</sup>Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge", *American Archivist* 38 (January,  
1975): 5-13.

<sup>11</sup>Hugh A. Taylor, "Clio in the Raw: Archival Materials and the Teaching  
of History" *American Archivist* (July-October, 1972), pp. 317-330.

<sup>12</sup>Marshall McLuhan, *Culture is our Business* (New York, 1970).

<sup>13</sup>McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, p. 176.

<sup>14</sup>Edmund Carpenter, *O What a Blow that Phantom Gave Me* (New York,  
1974), p. 166.