



## UNDERSTANDING MEDIA: TOWARD AN ANNIVERSARY

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An important anniversary in the history of communication studies is nearing--one which some scholars might prefer to overlook, namely that of Marshall McLuhan's principal book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (McLuhan 1964).

pite McLuhan's popularity, or perhaps because of his celebrity, academic efforts to follow up on his ideas have been limited, though popularized treatments of his concepts have been numerous (McLuhan 1975). Purchase and cataloging of his papers by the Canadian government may attract interest (Lindley 1986: 391-393). His own efforts to establish a Centre for Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto ended in 1980 (National Archives Canada, Volume 1, File 17 f) and along with that his plans for fomulating the laws of the media.\*

The McLuhan problem for communication scholars derives from the fact that their field is related to social psychology, while McLuhan was an English professor whose principal book displays more literary erudition than system. In a single chapter (on the photograph) he refers to *le paysage intérieur*, Baudelaire, historians of visual syntax, the *pointillisme* of Seurat, the Royal Society, *camera obscura*, taking the *travail* out of travel, conspicuous consumption as defined by Veblen, the new worlds of endocrinology, and considerably more. In addition, he is fascinated by quirky language, as was the subject of his dissertation, Thomas Nashe (McLuhan 1942 unpublished). It is no surprise that at Toronto he taught a course on Joyce.

For years, McLuhan seemed to prefer looking much of the time in a rear-view mirror, at the history of literature. Then he got a grant, and launched into a study for the (U.S.) National Association of Educational Broadcasters.

He already had developed some ideas on communication in writing *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (McLuhan 1962) which he said employed mosaic patterns suggested by Von Békésy (Von Békésy, 1960: 4; McLuhan, 1962: 42-43; 265) while it benefited from Popper's analysis of detribalization in the ancient world and retribalization in modern times. Though Popper doesn't consider technology, McLuhan said, his work frees *Galaxy* from a reputation for "mere eccentricity and novelty" (McLuhan 1962: 7). In fact, Popper declares that it would be disastrous to return to tribalism, once we "begin to rely upon our reason, and to use our powers of criticism, once we feel the call of personal responsibilities, and with it, the responsibility of helping to advance knowledge..." (Popper, 1950: 195) For McLuhan the electronic age makes the entire human family a single global tribe (McLuhan, 1962: 8).

\* *Editor's Note:* The McLuhan Program for Culture and Technology carries out research at the University of Toronto from McLuhan's old coach house.

McLuhan's "Report on Project in Understanding New Media" completed for the broadcaster's association in 1960, is described in an archival note as the basis of *Understanding Media* (National Archives Canada, Volume 18, Files 4-6). McLuhan began teaching a graduate seminar in Media and Society in 1963.

*Understanding Media* perhaps inevitably was a conglomerate of literary citations and media speculations given the author's background. Yet it caught on with the public, a happening ascribed by some to the time--the restless Sixties, disdainful of tradition. The enthusiasts sometimes knew only a few McLuhan phrases. Students liked to describe books as obsolete; that evidently meant an end to homework. Future journalists became cautious about plans for newspaper careers, having missed McLuhan's differentiation: unlike the book, he said, the newspaper provides a daily mosaic of human interest content (McLuhan, 1964: 204).

Communication scholars, sought after to explicate the McLuhan messages, have seemed to find them irrelevant to their research in the social sciences, one concludes from the *Journalism Quarterly* index (1974-1983). McLuhan didn't help by criticizing two noted scholars of communication, Schramm and Lazarsfeld (McLuhan 1964: 19; 297).

McLuhan might have written a popular classic if he had put his ideas into smooth essays. His erudition simply got in the way of his exposition. Yet some of the world's best scholars are difficult reading. Ultimately the ideas count, and today it seems difficult to ignore happenings which fit McLuhan's predictions: use of videotapes instead of catalogs to attract college students; the trend to more mosaic effects in newspaper design; emphasis on television advertising in political campaigns, establishment of tribal sounds in popular music. Perhaps the opening of the McLuhan files at National Archives Canada may provide the occasion for communication researchers to examine his work and from it extract topics for systematic study. Almost intuitively it seems, McLuhan opened new possibilities. His academic training did not provide the scientific approach which would have been required to explore them systematically. He completed his Ph.D. dissertation before communication research was well begun. So perhaps those who understand the methodology could consider taking some of his concepts further. As Carey said "[Harold A.] Innis and McLuhan, alone among students of human society, make the history of the mass media central to the history of civilization at large: (Carey 1967: 270-271). Certainly the development of that great theme has only begun.

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