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McLuhan and World Affairs

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McLuhan and World Affairs

When I first read *Understanding Media* (McLuhan, 1964) 30 years ago I was baffled. As an undergraduate seeking truth rather than how to seek truth, McLuhan was fun to peruse but most of what I recall reading left a mixed impression. Over the past decade, however, while trying to comprehend globalization as a neoliberal, neo-imperialist foreign policy project (I am a political economist, after all), I've been drawn back to McLuhan, re-reading his work as a means of elaborating Harold Innis's (1973: vii) guiding question: 'Why do we attend to the things to which we attend?'

Most foreign policy analysts and practitioners apply variations of what is known as neorealism – an approach to international relations that (essentially) conceptualizes the world as a competition among states using various coercive and economic capabilities. US policy, from this perspective, thus is the outcome of the 'rational' Machiavellian calculations made by its officials. For many foreign policy analysts and practitioners, McLuhan's probes concerning extensions, the global village, and his aphorism that the medium is the message have been (especially after 9/11 and with the advent of digital technologies) simplified and adapted to fit this positivist approach.

When, in 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton introduced a policy initiative called Internet Freedom – asserting that 'the spread of information networks is forming a new nervous system for our planet' (Clinton, 2010) – I was reminded of McLuhan's (1964: 110) position that electricity constitutes an 'extension of our central nervous system'. But then when she associated Internet Freedom to ideals such as freedom of expression, freedom of worship, and even the freedom to pursue 'modernity'(!), as well as global peace and security, I was also compelled to recall McLuhan's more *dystopian* concerns.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the Obama administration has embraced almost everything digital. In fact its policies concerning digital technologies feel as if they've emerged from discussions among State Department, Google, Facebook, and NSA officials, over coffeehouse get-togethers with the editors of *Wired Magazine*. When these policy perspectives, however, are assessed directly in light of the text that appears to have inspired them

(*Understanding Media*, of course), one also gets the impression that McLuhan would have associated these with 'the zombie stance of the technological idiot' (McLuhan, 1969).

Again, the philosophical question addressed by Innis has become paramount as, according to McLuhan, the global village clearly is not an ideal place to live. For one thing, it is a world of accelerating discontinuities inducing the Age of Anxiety. Electronic environments, McLuhan argued, reassert aspects of pre-modern acoustic culture in that the interdependencies of humanity are sensually apparent. However, the removed, individualistic, cause-and-effect thinking that characterized the industrial age has been marginalized. This, for McLuhan, has undermined the visual–aural balance (or tension) that he idealized in, for example, medieval monastic culture.

In my own work, admittedly influenced much more by Innis than McLuhan, the writings of the latter constitute complex elaborations of the annihilation of time (or, more specifically for Innis, the spatial biases related to modern political economic relations and thought). Through McLuhan, what is striking, particularly in the context of US foreign policy, is the general inability (rather than an unwillingness) to recognize the many contradictions now being authored by American officials as they push to universalize digital mediations. For one thing, amidst an ever-increasing volume of information and the speed-up of human interactions, a declining ability to perceive and communicate *with care* is becoming both apparent and trivialized as 'just the way it is'. In the electric age McLuhan opined that we must make sense of the world by reacting rather than analyzing as action and reaction are occurring virtually at the same time. When media are understood as the message rather than just conveyors of messages, the ideals and benefits that official Washington has discerned from its secondhand or simplified reading of McLuhan are rendered infeasible. If, in our global village, people relate and act more through emotion, intuition, and a reactionary mindset rather than discussion, deliberation, and reflection, we can better appreciate why our emerging world (dis)order is becoming a more alienating and, ultimately, violent place (Comor, 2008, 2013).

In returning to McLuhan and approaching his writings in the context of my current research, I think I have a better sense of the Promethean tragedy now unfolding. Although a computer-enabled 'process of consciousness' without 'verbalization' constitutes, for him, the dawning of a prospective cosmic consciousness (McLuhan, 1964: 80), this is not a world in which truths are formulated in thoughtful ways. In fact, the unreflexive nature of neorealist positivism and, with it, its practitioners' misapplications of McLuhan, demonstrate this very condition. Instead of the ascent of some sort of liberal democratic global civil society – one that is engaged and cooperative (at least in accordance with status quo political economic relations) – what we can foresee instead, thanks to McLuhan, is a world more accurately characterized by deepening anxieties and various forms of *disengagement*.

Surely it is this kind of dystopian insight that compelled McLuhan to develop an approach that *requires* reflexive (as opposed to just critical) thought – an ability I lacked 30 years ago. As he put it:

The extensions of man's consciousness ... hold the potential for realizing the Anti-Christ ... Cataclysmic environmental changes ... are, in and of themselves, morally neutral; it is how we perceive them and react to them that will determine their ultimate psychic and social consequences. *If we refuse to see them at all, we will become their servants.* (McLuhan, 1969, emphasis added)

McLuhan's writings help me make sense of contemporary policies that are, from a macro-historical perspective at least, worse than senseless. More than this, they help me to understand the dynamics shaping both reflexive and unreflexive thought and to appreciate the importance of promoting the former in world affairs going forward.

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