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## Marshall McLuhan's Theory of Communication:

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***Abstract:***

In this paper the methodological implications arising from Marshall McLuhan's classic refrains—"I don't have A Theory of Communication" and "I don't use theories in my work"—are discussed. Absent a theory, the other way to work is by observation and investigative technique: first the evidence; then later, much later, the theory—if indeed one is necessary by then. Without a theory as a guide McLuhan was influenced by artists and poets in developing the analytical and conceptual tools he relied upon to examine media and communication. He referred to his procedure as starting with a problem and digging into the toolkit for something to open the matter up for elucidation. Chief among his tools of analysis was Practical Criticism, which he viewed as a kind of critic's Swiss-Army Knife that worked equally incisively across all of the arts and through all areas of culture, from high-brow to low. The argument that emerges from this analysis of McLuhan's investigative techniques is that many of the conundrums of modern media and culture are understood most effectively through research that transcends the constraints imposed by seeking to make the case for or against the truth of a particular theory. Begin with theory, you begin with the answer; begin with observation, you begin with questions.

***Keywords:*** Theories of Communication; Marshall McLuhan; Modern Media; Modern Culture

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**Résumé:**

Dans cet article, la démarche scientifique qui est issue des citations populaires de Marshall McLuhan, soit « I don't have A Theory of Communication » (je n'ai pas une théorie de communication) et « I don't use theories in my work » (je n'utilise pas des théories dans mon travail) est repris et discuté. Sans une théorie, l'autre façon de travailler est de faire de l'observation à l'aide de techniques d'enquête : en premier lieu, trouver des preuves et ensuite, beaucoup plus tard, développer une théorie si nécessaire. En absence de théories, McLuhan a été influencé par des artistes et des poètes pour développer les outils conceptuels et analytiques qu'il a utilisés pour examiner les médias et la communication. Il se référait à cette procédure en expliquant que c'était comme commencer avec un problème et chercher dans une boîte à outils pour le meilleur outil afin d'éclaircir le sujet. Le maître de ces outils d'analyse est la critique pratique, ce qui est pour lui le couteau swiss qui peut couper à travers tous le domaine des arts et de la culture. L'argument qui émerge de cette analyse de la technique empirique de McLuhan est que les plusieurs énigmes des médias et de la culture sont mieux compris à l'aide de la recherche qui surpasse les limites imposées à ceux qui tentent de juger la véracité d'une théorie particulière. En commençant par une théorie, nous commençons avec une réponse. Cependant, en commençant avec une observation, nous commençons avec une question.

**Mots-clés:** Théories de la Communication; Marshall McLuhan; Médias Contemporains; Culture Contemporaine

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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?" Probably I should end the essay here. The long answer follows.

Just as he often said, Marshall McLuhan did not have A Theory of Communication and that he did not use theories in his work. Of course, he did have definite notions about what constituted communication and what did not. He would aver that he "used observation"; he used "probes." It is a matter of how you begin: if you begin with theory, then one way or another your research winds up geared to making the case for or against the truth of the theory. Begin with theory, you begin with the answer; begin with observation, you begin with questions. A theory always turns into a scientist's point of view and a *way of seeing* the job at hand. Begin with observation and your task is to look at things and to look at what happens. To see. That necessitates detachment, and training of critical awareness.

When McLuhan insisted that he did not use theories, he meant that he did not use them in the way that people expect theories to be used. "I don't have a Theory of Communication" means "I don't work in the way of Normal Science. I don't start with a theory to prove or disprove or submit to the torturers. I start with—and stick with—observation." He cared less for ideas about actuality than he cared for actuality itself. This stance is also quite consistent with Francis Bacon's insistence on observation. At Cambridge and later, McLuhan found much inspiration in Bacon's work. Observation necessitates using all points of view at once. Both men were committed empiricists.

Commenting on something he had written or said earlier, McLuhan (1967) offered these remarks:

In the four years since making the above observations I have discovered very many things about media and education. It is now perfectly plain 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. Environments shape their occupants. One person, complaining about my observation that "the medium is the message," simply said: "McLuhan means that the medium has no content." This remark was extremely useful to me because it revealed the obvious, namely, the content of any medium is the user. This applies equally to electric lights, any language whatever, and, of course, housing, motor cars, and even tools of any sort. It is obvious that the user or content of any medium is completely conformed to the character of this man-made environment. His entire sensory life arranges its hierarchies and dominance in accordance with the environment in which he operates.

If we say "mist on the moors tonight," we are inclined to call it poetic. When the sensory inputs are dim, the sensory response is correspondingly strong. This is why small children are always "poetic" in their responses to anything at all. A child's sensory reception is very selective, somewhat in the manner of what is offered our senses by "abstract" art. And just because the sensory offering is meagre, the sensory response is full. As we grow older, we dim down the sensory responses, and increase the sensory inputs, turning ourselves into robots. That is why art is indispensable for human survival. Art perpetually dislocates our usual sensory responses by offering a very abstract or meagre and selective input.

The medium is the message because the environment transforms our perceptions governing the areas of attention and neglect alike... Nearly everything that 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 rock-face. 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 effect of participating in the process of discovery. The TV age demands participation in this process and it is for that reason that all existing education, insofar as it is concerned with expounding what is already known, is entirely unacceptable to students....

How could he be clearer? Working thus, a theory would pose a distinct liability.

When Stephen Hawking discusses his own theory of communication, it becomes immediately obvious that one function of a theory in the hands of a scientist is to prod reality into revealing itself. “[W]e cannot distinguish what is real about the universe without a theory,” he writes. A good, elegant theory will describe a wide array of observations and predict the results of new ones. “Beyond that, it makes no sense,” he points out “to ask if [a theory] corresponds to reality, because we do not know what reality is independent of a theory” (Hawking, 1993: 44). A theory is a way of seeing and as such a formal cause of reality.

Everywhere in his writing, whether about media or culture or poetics, McLuhan probed the nature of communication and perception. *Laws of Media* is an extended meditation that comments directly on theories of communication, Eastern and Western. *Understanding Media*, *Through the Vanishing Point*, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, and *From Cliché to Archetype*, are extended meditations on media, perception and communication. Attending to how media and environments massaged the sensibilities naturally brought into focus the function of the arts—all of the arts at once, though they have tended to operate independently. (Anti-environments, or countersituations made by artists, provide means of direct attention to environments and enable us to see and understand more clearly.) These concerns prompted some seminal meditations in *Through the Vanishing Point*. Here is the opening paragraph: it is a good résumé of McLuhan’s “theory” of communication, that is, of change.

Since the advent of electric circuitry in the early nineteenth century, the need for sensory awareness has become more acute. Perhaps the mere speed-up of human events and the resulting increase of interfaces among all men and institutions ensure a multitude of innovations that upset all existing arrangements whatever.

By the same token, men have groped toward the arts in hope of increased sensory awareness. The artist has the power to discern the current environment created by the latest technology. Ordinary human instinct causes people to recoil from these new environments and to rely on the rear-view mirror as a kind of repeat or ricorso of the preceding environment, thus ensuring total disorientation at all times. It is not that there is anything wrong with the old environment, but it simply will not serve as a navigational aid to the new one.

(McLuhan & Parker, 1968: xxiii)

The concluding essay of the book, “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” opens with these observations:

In his poem “Esthétique du Mal” Wallace Stevens writes:

This is the thesis scrivined in delight,  
The reverberating psalm, the right chorale.

One might have thought of sight, but who could think  
Of what it sees, for all the ill it sees?  
Speech found the ear, for all the evil sound,  
But the dark italics it could not propound.

And out of what one sees and hears and out  
 Of what one feels, who could have thought to make  
 So many selves, so many sensuous worlds,  
 As if the air, the mid-day air, was swarming  
 With the metaphysical changes that occur,  
 Merely in living as and where we live.

He indicates that the slightest shift in the level of visual intensity produces a subtle modulation in our sense of ourselves, both private and corporate. Since technologies are extensions of our own physiology, they result in new programs of an environmental kind. Such pervasive experiences as those deriving from the encounter with environments almost inevitably escape perception. When two or more environments encounter one another by direct interface, they tend to manifest their distinctive qualities. Comparison and contrast have always been a means of sharpening perception in the arts as well as in general experience. Indeed, it is upon this pattern that all the structures of art have been reared. Any artistic endeavor includes the preparing of an environment for human attention. A poem or a painting is in every sense a teaching machine for the training of perception and judgment. The artist is a person who is especially aware of the challenge and dangers of new environments presented to human sensibility. The ordinary person seeks security by numbing his perception against the impact of new experience; the artist delights in this novelty and instinctively creates situations that reveal it and compensate for it. The artist puts on the distortion of sensory life produced by new environmental programming and creates artistic antidotes to correct the sensory derangement brought by the new form. In social terms the artist can be regarded as a navigator who gives adequate compass bearings despite magnetic deflection of the needle by changing environmental forces. So understood, the artist is not a peddler of new ideals or lofty experiences. He is the indispensable aid to action and reflection alike.

(McLuhan & Parker, 1968: 237-238)

The role of the artist became a central concern in modern poetics with, first, the Symbolists, then with Wordsworth, Coleridge and Matthew Arnold, and later the "Moderns"—Eliot and Pound, Lewis, Yeats, and Joyce—all of whom contributed to McLuhan's thought on these matters. The role of the senses is fundamental to understanding how media influence culture and transform their users. *Through the Vanishing Point* counterpoints two arts simultaneously; it uses each art as a means of probing and observing the other. In this double-plot form McLuhan found a tremendously powerful method of investigation: counterpose two situations and use each as a means of seeing the other. Each situation consists of a figure and a ground. Several paragraphs following the words above, we find

Perhaps the most precious possession of man is his abiding awareness of the analogy of proper proportionality, the key to all metaphysical insight and perhaps the very condition of consciousness itself. This analogical awareness is constituted of a perpetual play of ratios among ratios: A is to B what C is to D, which is to say that the ratio between A and B is proportioned to the ratio between

C and D, there being a ratio between these ratios as well. This lively awareness of the most exquisite delicacy depends upon there being no connection whatever between the components. If A were linked to B, or C to D, mere logic would take the place of analogical perception. Thus one of the penalties paid for literacy and a high visual culture is a strong tendency to encounter all things through a rigorous story line, as it were. Paradoxically, connected spaces and situations exclude participation whereas discontinuity affords room for involvement. Visual space is connected and creates detachment or noninvolvement. It also tends to exclude the participation of the other senses.

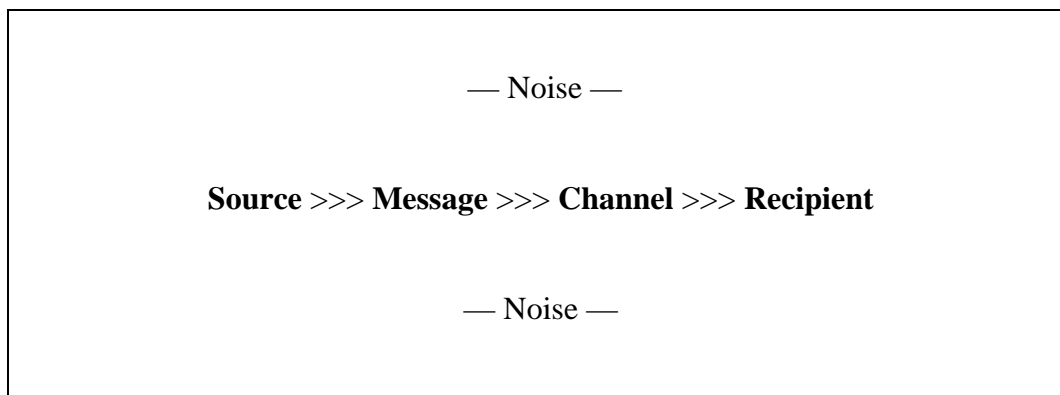
(Ibid: 240)

The theme of analogical ratios (A is to B as C is to D) is resumed in McLuhan's last-published book, *Laws of Media: The New Science*, where he relates all of man's technologies and innovations to human speech. Analogical relations also formed a major element of *From Cliché to Archetype* (1970). This epigram from the "Mimesis" chapter gives a capsule statement of his view of communication: "The entire world of technology makes sense by miming the human body and faculties." Equally, the last sentence or two of that chapter could be taken as encapsulating McLuhan's "theory". He writes:

By way of resonance and repetition, "The soul is in a way all existing things." As the hand, with its extensions, probes and shapes the physical environment, so the soul or mind, with its extensions of speech, probes and orders and retrieves the man-made environment of artifacts and archetypes.

A cliché is an act of consciousness: total consciousness is the sum of all the clichés of all the media or technologies that we probe with.

McLuhan often pointed out that the West has no theory of communication. We are denied one by our visual bias. That is to say, we have no theory of change. Communication means change. If something is communicated the recipient has changed in some manner or degree. Our "common sense" idea of communication is merely one of transporting messages from point to point. Shannon and Weaver laid the foundation of all Western "theories of communication" with their model:



But this only is a transportation theory, not a theory of communication. They are concerned merely with getting a bundle of goodies from one place to another, while keeping dreaded *Noise* to a minimum. Their “theory” contains no provision for change—except perhaps in *Noise* (which they shun as debilitating).

Here is how McLuhan framed the idea of a series in a letter to Ralph Cohen, editor of *New Literary History*, 13 July 1973:

The media are themselves, of course, mythic form in every sense, since they are epic enterprises involving all mankind in new environments of service and disservice. Joyce had discovered that all technologies are events of vision in human biology. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: “The human body is a magazine of inventions.... All the tools and engines on earth are only extensions of its limbs and senses.” Joyce uses the “magazine” metaphor throughout the *Wake* apropos “the magazine wall where the maggies seen all”, i.e. the magi, the wise people saw the entire story of human technology in the structure of the human body. Joyce proceeded to work out in detail the laws of the media which we have gradually learned to formulate as follows: that an intense impact, some shock or crisis, produces a moment of fission or abstraction of some part or function of the body and embeds it in a new material outside the body. This amounts to a new posture or situation of the old body which engenders a chain reaction both in the senses and in the environment.

He then suggests the topic in which this book had its genesis: the idea of brief studies of the theories of communication of famous or important figures in major fields.

I think I have already mentioned the desirability of a whole series of studies of theories of communication mounted upon all familiar figures in the arts and sciences. Since “communication” means change, any theory of communication, must naturally concentrate on the sort of public with which they felt themselves to be confronted. It is this public which always affects the structures which the performer chooses to adopt, and it is this public which he seeks to shape and alter in some way.

Although Ralph Cohen did not leap at the suggestion, we kept the idea “on the back burner” for years. Though Marshall McLuhan may not have used theories to shape or guide his own work, he did have definite ideas about what constituted communication, namely, the effect. Quite simply: no effect means no communication.

He found hundreds of passages in the work of the Moderns—Yeats, Joyce, Pound, Lewis, Eliot—where they speak frankly about their Theories of Communication and of the role of the poet or the artist in the new electric culture. Let me give three cases in point. Eliot, for one, never stops talking about communication, in his verse as well as in his prose. For example, here is a passage McLuhan flagged as theory of communication (TOC) material, at the end of Eliot’s meditation on “What Dante Means to Me”:

I may say that the great poet should not only perceive and distinguish more clearly than other men, the colours or sounds within the range of ordinary vision

or hearing; he should perceive vibrations beyond the range of ordinary men, and be able to make men see and hear more at each end [of the spectrum] than they could ever see without his help. We have for instance in English literature great religious poets, but they are, by comparison with Dante, specialists. That is all they can do. And Dante, because he could do everything else, is for that reason the greatest 'religious' poet, though to call him a 'religious poet' would be to abate his universality.

(Eliot, 1965: 134)

The next sentences turn away from the ideal poet toward the effect:

The *Divine Comedy* expresses everything in the way of emotion, between depravity's despair and the beatific vision, that man is capable of experiencing. It is therefore a constant reminder to the poet, of the obligation to explore, to find words for the inarticulate, to capture those feelings which people can hardly even feel, because they have no words for them; and at the same time a reminder that the explorer beyond the frontiers of ordinary consciousness will only be able to return and report to his fellow-citizens, if he has all the time a firm grasp upon the realities with which they are already acquainted.

(Ibid)

Eliot expands and clarifies this, the focus of what might be called his Theory of Communication, in the next paragraph:

These two achievements of Dante are not to be thought of as separate or separable. The task of the poet, in making people comprehend the incomprehensible, demands immense resources of language; and in developing the language, enriching the meaning of words and showing how much words can do, he is making possible a much greater range of emotion and perception for other men, because he gives them the speech in which more can be expressed.

(Ibid)

Join this piece to what Eliot wrote in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), another frequent McLuhan resort, and it is possible to appreciate the full outlines of his complex sense of poetry and of the poet as communicator (Eliot, 1960: 47-59). Everywhere he is conscious of the effect that great poetry must, and does, have.

At about the same time, Ezra Pound (1968: 41-57) wrote "The Serious Artist" (1913). The two essays are so complementary that Eliot must have had Pound's in mind or in front of him as he penned his own. "The Serious Artist" could equally stand as Pound's "Theory of Communication," as could any of a hundred other pieces and remarks in both his poetry and his prose. The celebrated *ABC of Reading* is an elaborate statement of such a Theory. Many a statement inside would provide a starting point:

Artists are the antennae of the race.

Good writers are those who keep the language efficient. That is to say, keep it accurate, keep it clear.



Language is the main means of human communication. If an animal's nervous system does not transmit sensations and stimuli, the animal atrophies. If a nation's literature declines, the nation atrophies.

All of these words had been flagged by McLuhan as "TOC" material. It becomes clear, reading Eliot and Pound, just how central to their enterprise is the training of perception and of critical awareness, and not only for the poet: the reader gets it as a side-effect of the working-over the verse gives him. *Hypocrite lecteur*. It goes without saying that any Theory that so concentrates on effect is willy-nilly fundamentally rhetorical. The heart of rhetoric is Decorum—a sensitive attuning of audience, effect, and occasion/circumstance, at every stage of the poetic process from invention to delivery.

Harold Bloom remarked that the popularity of Walt Whitman's poetry in South America gives unexpected salience to the matter of effect. Having had his impact on English verse and English-speaking consciousness in the late nineteenth century, Whitman is having exactly the effect Eliot and Pound insist it is the poet's job to produce, but on another culture entirely and a full century earlier.

Pablo Neruda, by general consent Walt Whitman's truest heir said that the appeal of Whitman to Spanish poets "was that he taught how to see and name what had not been seen or named before".

Poetry in South America is a different matter altogether. You see there are in our countries rivers which have no names, trees which nobody knows, and birds which nobody has described. It is easier for us to be surrealistic because everything we know is new. Our duty, then, as we understand it, is to express what is unheard of. Everything has been painted in Europe, everything has been sung in Europe, But not in America. In that sense, Whitman was a great teacher. Because what is Whitman? He was not only intensely conscious, but he was open-eyed! He had tremendous eyes to see everything—he taught us to see things. He was our poet.

(Bloom, 1994: 479)

Wyndham Lewis, another of the group called the Moderns, wrote tirelessly about matters of communication and did not shrink from giving his own thoughts as to what constituted communication. Even W. B. Yeats, though of a less analytic bent than Eliot or Pound, often meditated on the process of communication and how to improve the effect of his sonorities on his audience. His "The Circus Animal's Desertion," a poem about a bout of writer's block, became a focus of *From Cliché to Archetype*. It provided a key to the processes of retrieval and archetypalization that played such a large role in McLuhan's thinking:

Those masterful images because complete  
 Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?  
 A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,  
 Old kettles, old bottles and a broken can,  
 Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut  
 Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone,

I must lie down where all the ladders start,  
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.

In one of his late essays, Yeats wrote,

I wanted all my poetry to be spoken on a stage or sung and, because I did not understand my own instincts, gave half a dozen wrong or secondary reasons; but a month ago I understood my reasons. I have spent my life in clearing out of poetry every phrase written for the eye, and bringing all back to syntax that is for the ear alone. Let the eye take delight in the form of the singer and in the panorama of the stage and be content with that.

(Yeats, 1961: 529)

Evidently Yeats paid considerable attention to his reader and carefully adjusted his poems to secure specific effects on that sensibility. All of these passages had been earmarked by McLuhan as focal in each man's "TOC". Perhaps they will illustrate what he looked for in considering someone's Theory. The same annotations about "TOC" appear in every sort of book in his library.

Our question remains: How, without theories, did he himself work?

Absent a theory, the other way to work is by observation and investigative technique, like a CSI detective. First the evidence; then later, much later, the theory—if indeed one is necessary by then. Francis Bacon, whom McLuhan greatly admired, was not shy of pointing to the liabilities of theorizing prematurely. He would have made a great Grissom. In the *Novum Organum*, he cautioned,

#### XIX

There are and can be only two ways of searching into and discovering truth. The one flies from the senses and particulars to the most general axioms, and from these principles, the truth of which it takes for settled and immovable, proceeds to judgment and to the discovery of middle axioms. And this way is now in fashion.<sup>2</sup> The other derives axioms from the senses and particulars, rising by a gradual and unbroken ascent, so that it arrives at the most general axioms last of all. This is the true way, but as yet untried.

A little later, speaking of the "Idols of the Market-Place" he advised, "This class of idols is more easily expelled, because to get rid of them it is only necessary that all theories should be steadily rejected and dismissed as obsolete."<sup>3</sup> Bacon had also exploited the "power of writing in aphorisms," meaning, writing discontinuous prose as a method of probing and exploration. Connected, polished prose gives the impression that all is known, all is understood. Aphorisms, or probes, by contrast, being brief, pungent, discontinuous, Bacon called "knowledge broken": because incomplete, they invite people to dig deeper and to close the gaps. The connected statement is "more fitted to win consent or belief"; the probe, "to point to action" and discovery for oneself. Bacon makes the point in *The Advancement of Learning*:

But as young men, when they knit and shape perfectly, do seldom grow to a further stature; so knowledge, while it is in aphorisms and observations, it is in

growth; but when it once is [rendered in connected prose], it may perchance be further polished and illustrate[d] and accommodated for use and practice; but it increaseth no more in bulk and substance.

(Bacon, 1906, 1951: 39)

Bacon makes it perfectly clear that he considered his own aphoristic style an integral part of a scientific technique of keeping knowledge in a state of emergent evolution. On these same grounds, McLuhan trained himself to write discontinuously about media and environments, having found the aphoristic “probe” style preferable to that of conventional explanation. It provides a way to train sensibility and at the same time to coax experience into revealing its patterns. In the words of Bacon:

For first, it trieth the writer, whether he be superficial or solid: for aphorisms, except they should be ridiculous, cannot be made but of the pith and heart of sciences; for discourse of illustration is cut off; recitals of examples are cut off; discourse of connexion and order is cut off; descriptions of practice are cut off. So there remaineth nothing to fill the aphorisms but some good quantity of observation: and therefore no man can suffice, nor in reason will attempt, to write aphorisms, but he that is sound and grounded.

(Ibid: 163)

The problem faced by any explorer in our time, as McLuhan observed, is to invent tools that reveal the current situation, not to make logical connected statements:

Connected, sequential discourse, which is thought of as rational, is really visual. It has nothing to do with reason as such. Reasoning does not occur on single planes or in a continuous, connected fashion. The mind leapfrogs. It puts things together in all sorts of proportions and ratios instantly. To put down thoughts in coded, lineal ways was a discovery of the Greek world. It is not done this way, for example, in the Chinese world. But to deny that the Chinese have access to reason would be ridiculous. They do not have rational discourse at all by Western standards. They reason by the act of interval, not by the act of connection. In the electric age we are moving into a world where not the connection but the interval becomes the crucial event in organization.

(Stearn, 1967: 49)

In 1968, McLuhan wrote an Introduction to Harold Innis's *The Bias of Communication*. It is a remarkable performance because so much of what he says about Innis's methods applies directly to his own. For example, he notes that Innis had made the same switch from connected prose to discontinuity and probing:

[He] changed his procedure from working with a “point of view” to that of the generating of insights by the method of “interface” as it is named in chemistry. “Interface” refers to the interaction of substances in a kind of mutual irritation. In art and poetry this is precisely the technique of “symbolism” (Greek, *syμβallein*—to throw together) with its paratactic procedure of juxtaposing

without connectives. It is the natural form of conversation or dialogue rather than of written discourse. In writing, the tendency is to isolate an aspect of some matter and to direct steady attention upon that aspect. In dialogue, there is an equally natural interplay of multiple aspects of any matter.

(Innis, 1964, 1968)

McLuhan had made the switch when he began to study media and environments. This interplay of aspects can generate insights or discoveries:

By contrast, a point of view is merely a way of *looking at* something. But an insight is a sudden awareness of a complex process of interaction. 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.

It also is the basic difference between connected, rational prose and the aphoristic style—a helpful distinction to keep in mind when reading McLuhan’s later prose.

McLuhan’s celebrated “technique of discovery” consisted in applying the Symbolist art of juxtaposing forms, which everywhere leads to a series of dramatic surprises. He applied artistic methods directly to the materials and circumstances of everyday life. He discovered that the formal sensibilities of the artist could be applied outside the realm of art as the surest way to explore environments and their effects. In “The Emperor’s Old Clothes” he noted that the way a technology intrudes into a culture can suddenly illuminate relations between things normally regarded as separate:

It does help to look at the newspaper as a direct, exploratory probe into the environment. Seen in this light, there is more meaning in the aesthetic bonds between the poet, the sleuth, and even the criminal. For James Bond, Humphrey Bogart, Rimbaud, and Hemingway are all figures who explore the shifting frontiers of morals and society. They are engaged in detecting the social environment by probing and transgression. For to probe is to cross boundaries of many kinds; to discover the patterns of new environments requires a rigorous study and inventory of sensuous effects. The components of new environments cannot be discovered directly. Edgar Allan Poe’s detective, Dupin, is an aesthete. The aesthetes were the first to use the senses consciously and systematically as probes into the environment. Walter Pater’s injunction, “To burn always with a hard gem-like flame,” referred to the action of the plumber’s blowtorch, a technical invention of his day.

Every dominant technological or social or cultural form, together with all its causal powers, is always hidden by a process of protective inhibition. These forms are so total, so environmental as to resist every effort to notice or investigate them.

Thanks in part to the perceptual training in Practical Criticism McLuhan had discovered a means of using historical situations to reveal the present. He reports the technique as he finds it in Innis:

Innis taught us how to use the bias of culture and communication as an instrument of research. By directing attention to the bias or distorting power of the dominant imagery and technology of any culture, he showed us how to understand cultures. Many scholars have made us aware of the "difficulty of assessing the quality of a culture of which we are a part or of assessing the quality of a culture of which we are not a part." Innis was perhaps the first to make of this vulnerable fact of all scholarly outlook the prime opportunity for research and discovery.

... At a stroke he had solved two major problems that are forever beyond the power of the "nose-counters" and of statistical researchers. First, he knew what the pattern of any culture had to be, both physically and socially, as soon as he had identified its major technological achievements. Second, he knew exactly what the members of that culture would be ignorant of in their daily lives. What has been called "the nemesis of creativity" is precisely a blindness to the effects of one's most significant form of invention.

Without a theory as a guide, the explorer must rely on his box of tools and his native wits. In 1967, McLuhan described his own "method" of observation this way:

Literally, *Understanding Media* is a kit of tools for analysis and perception. It is to *begin* an operation of discovery. It is not the completed work of discovery. It is intended for practical use. Most of my work in the media is like that of a safecracker. In the beginning I don't know what's inside. I just set myself down in front of the problem and begin to work. I grope, I probe, I listen, I test—until the tumblers fall and I'm in. That's the way I work with all these media.

I'm perfectly prepared to scrap any statement I ever made about any subject once I find that it isn't getting me into the problem. I have no devotion to any of my probes as if they were sacred opinions. I have no proprietary interest in my ideas and no pride of authorship as such. You have to push any idea to an extreme, you have to probe. Exaggeration, in the sense of hyperbole, is a major artistic device in all modes of art. No painter, no musician ever did anything without extreme exaggeration of a form or a mode, until he had exaggerated those qualities that interested him.

(Stearn, 1967: 58, 62-63)

The Tool Kit in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* consists of the seven chapters in Part One. They detail seven general principles of media in shaping culture and society. *Understanding Media* was conceived and written as a companion to a volume that had appeared a short while earlier, *Understanding Poetry*, (Brooks, 1938, 1960)<sup>4</sup> by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. It was the first American text to employ techniques of Practical Criticism. From the first, McLuhan continued to insist that *Understanding Media* was not a finished product but a group of beginnings, a tool kit and some preliminary forays into new territory.

Chief among McLuhan's tools of analysis was Practical Criticism, which he picked up at Cambridge while it was still enjoying the first flush of its applications. It had been invented there in response to a scandal involving the English Department that surfaced in 1929 with the publication of *Practical Criticism; a Study of Literary Judgment* (Richards, 1956). Just a few years later, McLuhan arrived to find the University still a-flutter and the English Department busy exploring and adapting the new technique.<sup>5</sup> Its weaknesses and its range of uses were the subject of vigorous debate. Evidently the technique could be applied to an immense range of activity. One result: the founding of a critical journal, *Scrutiny*, and a host of books and essays. *Scrutiny* demonstrated that Practical Criticism worked equally incisively across all of the arts and through all areas of culture, from high-brow to low. It is a kind of critic's Swiss-Army Knife.

The strengths and weaknesses McLuhan dissected in the essay, "Poetic vs. Rhetorical Exegesis." Practical Criticism can tell the reader everything about a poem except whether or not it is a good poem. Significantly, Practical Criticism is not theory-based. It is performance-based. It relies on observation and critical judgment—learned skills. It is a technique of interpretation that looks for four kinds of meaning in a piece of writing: the literal sense, the feeling of the speaker about the subject, the tone (attitude to reader), the intent (the effect sought). Four-level interpretation of this sort was practiced continuously, from the Greek and Roman grammarians before Cicero and Varro, throughout the Middle Ages, to the eighteenth century. The technique rests on oral dimensions of writing, as it is based on performing the text. Learning this aspect takes considerable practice. The reader must read aloud—perform—the passage or poem in a variety of ways so as to locate the right speaker's voice, the attitude, the tone to the reader (and thereby locate the reader). In this way, the critic can find his bearings in *any* prose or poetics—whatever the subject, the field, the period, the style. The same training of critical sensibility affords instant access to each of the arts at every level of culture and sophistication from top to bottom. Popular culture and entertainments yielded to the technique as easily as did the nobler sentiments and more refined images of classical Art and architecture. As if to prove the point, F. R. Leavis produced *Culture and Environment*, applying the Practical Criticism to journalism and magazine ads and other popular forms. A few years later, McLuhan published his first book, *The Mechanical Bride*, in the same vein.

Practical Criticism makes the ideal Grammarian's tool because of its extraordinary portability from field to field. The grammarian (from Greek, *gramma*, letters—Latin, *litera*—hence a grammarian, a literary man, a man of letters) took all written texts as his province. This purview begins with the traditional "Two Books," the man-made book and the God-made book, the Book of Nature. Grammarians read and interpreted each book, the writing on the page as well as the writing on the wall, with equal facility and with the same tools. (And so the true Grammarian had to be doubly encyclopedic.) Reading the Book of Nature today means studying media and environments. At Cambridge, McLuhan had devoted his doctoral thesis to detailing the Western intellectual traditions, the Trivium and Quadrivium. Long known as the seven liberal arts, they are Rhetoric, Dialectic and Grammar; and Music, Astronomy, Mathematics and Geometry. He traced the continuous line of development from the birth of the Trivium in the ancient world to the Renaissance (the focus of the thesis), and he indicated its further progress up to the present. Practical Criticism is distinctly rhetorical, both because of its structure and approach, and because it insists on including the audience as a factor when considering any subject. Through *mimesis*, the audience is included in the poem and can always be accessed by that route. The user is the content. Grammar's twin concerns are techniques of interpretation and etymology (the subtitle of *Understanding Media* identifies their etymologies: "*Extensions of*

*Man*”). Grammar is necessarily encyclopedic. Media and literature, then, are not separate fields of interest: they are parallel texts that yield to parallel techniques of investigation. One job, as it were; two job sites. The ancients had two parallel systems for exegesis of their two Books: the four causes for the Book of Nature, and the “four levels” of interpretation for the human Book, whether sacred or profane. With a host of essays and *The Mechanical Bride*, McLuhan (1944) proved he was adept at interpreting the texts in the Book of the World. In 1944, he published “The Analogical Mirrors” in *The Kenyon Review*. In this study, he took the other route and performed a spectacular—and entirely traditional—four-level exegesis<sup>6</sup> of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poem “The Windhover”.

McLuhan and Innis fell prey to the same myopia in their respective audiences. The audience for Innis’s Economics writings resolutely ignored his work on media and culture (and for the most part continues to do so today) as undignified and not befitting proper scholarship. His “media audience” returned the favour and showed but passing interest in his work on economics—another condition which has not much changed with the passage of time. McLuhan’s two audiences—one for his literary output, one for his media work—did the same. Each ignored the work that absorbed the interest of the other. In both cases, academic colleagues tend to regard even the act of paying attention to the “other” topic a massive intellectual blunder, made the worse by dwelling on it. (Academic snobbery can be brutal.)

McLuhan referred to his procedure as starting with a problem and digging into the toolkit for something to open the matter up for elucidation. Let me give you some idea of the tools that kit held.

First, as background, a firm knowledge of the entire written tradition, the *translatio studii*, from Homer to the present. Add to that a firm knowledge of the Trivium (Rhetoric, Dialectic and Grammar), an extensive knowledge of English Literature, prose and poetry, a profound knowledge of the English language, an immense vocabulary, and a deep and abiding curiosity about etymology, nourished by a knowledge of French, Latin, German, Greek, etc.

The aphoristic style, learned from Bacon and from modern ad-men, provided much more than a way of expressing things. It supplied a way of thinking in outlines and seeing whole structures.

Being able to perform traditional multi-level exegesis made short work of assessing complexity in prose and verse, old and new, and gave swift entry into a range of texts.

Equally, long practice with Practical Criticism meant a quick and sure means of entry into any human “text” product or service.

The tool kit given in *Understanding Media*, comprises the seven general principles of media in Part One:

- The Medium/Environment is the Message
- Hot and Cool: high and low definition
- Reversal of the Overheated Medium
- The Gadget Lover: Narcissus as Narcosis
- Hybrid Energy
- Media as Translators
- Challenge and Collapse

To these, let us add the set of transformations (ongoing processes) that form the backbone of *Take Today*. Each of these is a response to pressure exerted by an environment of information accelerated to the speed of light:

Centralism yields to Decentralism  
 Hardware yields to Software  
 Job-holding yields to Role-Playing

The last book, *Laws of Media: The New Science* brought to light the tetrad, the most powerful tool ever, among a number of additional observations and techniques.<sup>7</sup>

Probes. A phrase, a sentence or paragraph or more could suddenly join the lists from current reading or study. These were of general use—they could clarify several matters, so tended to remain on hand for a while and find their way into many things written at the time. We would have them in mind when working on some new project, some book or article, or a letter here or there. Anything could serve as a probe to get at the heart of something. This would encompass anything from a poet's considered observations to scraps of doggerel or prose. For example, "The Emotion of Multitude," a brief essay (2 pages) by William B. Yeats proved especially fruitful for a period and was often quoted in full. It discusses the effect of juxtaposing two situations—the artistic effect, but we found it applies to a far broader spectrum.

Of quotes used as probes there were literally hundreds—the product of a well-stocked memory and a well-stocked library. We have seen how Yeats' remarks about "the foul rag-and-bone shop" spurred the book *From Cliché to Archetype*. T. S. Eliot's observations about "the auditory imagination," proved immensely useful. Here, from a different quarter, is Jacques Lusseyran on "the myth of objectivity":

When I came across the myth of objectivity in certain modern thinkers, it made me angry. So there was only one world for these people, the same for everyone. And all the other worlds were to be counted as illusions left over from the past. Or why not call them by their name—hallucinations? I had learned to my cost how wrong they were.

From my own experience I knew very well that it was enough to take from a man a memory here, an association there, to deprive him of hearing or sight, for the world to undergo immediate transformation, and for another world, entirely different but entirely coherent, to be born. Another world? Not really. The same world, rather, but seen from another angle, and counted in entirely new measures. When this happened, all the hierarchies they called objective were turned upside-down, scattered to the four winds, not even like theories but like whims.

(Lusseyran, 1963)

You can see a number of themes here that would attract McLuhan, as indeed they did. Principal among them must be the information about the senses and their effect on the imagination. Lusseyran proved a gold-mine of sensory data.

In addition to the foregoing items, the tool kit contained a rag-tag group of dozens of current working principles, processes, patterns and procedures for which we kept constant watch. Among these were the relation of environment and anti-environment, the principles of *figure* and *ground* (or *figure* minus *ground*), formal causality, the various modes of space generated by



sensory bias: visual space, acoustic space, tactile space, and so on. Reading afforded uncounted additional treasures, since his Grammarian's instincts taught him to apply things learned in one field to solving problems in any other.

Several examples: From E. H. Gombrich (*Art and Illusion*), he got the distinction between matching and making processes. From Eric Havelock, the so-essential details on the working of *mimesis* before the onset of the alphabet (and now after its reign). From Charles Baudelaire, the exquisite image, "*Hypocrite lecteur...*" From Jacques Ellul, a host of things, among them that real propaganda consists of the environment in action. From Elias Canetti, the dynamics of open crowds and closed crowds.

Faced with any conundrum of modern media or culture, he would bring to bear on it every one of the tools available. Few matters could long resist such an assault.

How do you work if you do not use theories in your investigations? A little stethoscope, a pry-bar or two ...

Pass the gelignite.

## Notes

- 1 An itinerant professional safe-cracker. Most dictionaries will give that much. But see Eric Partridge's *A dictionary of the underworld British and American: Being the vocabularies of crooks, criminals, racketeers, beggars and tramps, convicts, the commercial underworld, the drug traffic, the white slave traffic, spivs* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1949/1950), 783-784: He gives more than a column to the history and uses of *yegg*, which was still current at mid-century.
- 2 It is still in fashion in the twenty-first century. Pernicious habits die hard.
- 3 *Novum Organum*, aphorism lx.
- 4 On the flyleaf of my copy, he wrote, "Cleanth Brooks, a long-standing friend of mine, did revolutionize the teaching of literature in USA with this book."
- 5 Richards (1956) summarizes the experiment:  

For some years I have made the experiment of issuing printed sheets of poems—ranging in character from a poem by Shakespeare to a poem by Ella Wheeler Wilcox—to audiences who were requested to comment freely in writing upon them. The authorship of the poems was not revealed, and with rare exceptions it was not recognized. (1956: 3)

Writers were given a week to make their comments. Richards is sensitive on one point: "The standing of the writers must be made clear. The majority were undergraduates reading English with a view to an Honours Degree" (4). Such however was not the scuttlebutt around the university when McLuhan arrived. It was generally accepted that the subjects had been graduate students and members of faculty. The "scandal" was that they could not agree even as to the meaning of a poem let alone any other aspects.

- In Practical Criticism, Richards quotes extensively from the written comments (“protocols”) and seeks order amid the chaos, eventually proposing the “four kinds of meaning”: Sense, Feeling, Tone and Intent.
- 6 The four levels are the Literal, and the three figurative levels, the Allegorical, the Moral (Tropological), and the Spiritual Levels. (Despite the coincidence of the first exegetical level with the Literal Sense of Practical Criticism—they are practically the same—the two sets of four are not otherwise in parallel.)
- 7 With the subtitle, we linked the book to two others already linked to each other by title: *The new science (Novum Organum)* by Francis Bacon, and *The new science (Scienza Nuova)* by Giambattista Vico.

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### About the Author

Eric McLuhan is an internationally-known lecturer on communication and media. He has over 30 years' teaching experience in subjects ranging from reading and literature to media, culture, communication theory, and Egyptology. He has taught at many colleges and universities in Canada and abroad. He worked with Marshall McLuhan for many years and has also done extensive communication research. In 1980, with Roger Davies, he developed the Thinking and Writing workshops, and they founded McLuhan & Davies Communications, Inc., which now trains professional writers and editors across Canada and the United States, and abroad. Since 1964, he has published books and articles in magazines and professional journals on media, perception, literature, and the arts: most recently, "On Media Ecology" (*Explorations in Media Ecology*, Vol. 5, No. 3), and *Theories of Communication* (Hampton Press, 2009).

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