

Marshall McLuhan and his ideas



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Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) was a Canadian philosopher, linguist, literary critic, communications theorist and a professor of English literature. He is the founding father of the field of study now termed “ media ecology”.

In Marshall McLuhan’s pioneering work on print culture, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, he presents the view that communication technology profoundly affects cognitive action and ultimately affects social organization.

For instance, the speed and intensity of societal and cognitive changes picked up tremendously with the invention of the ‘ movable type’. It resulted in the cultural predominance of the visual over the aural/oral senses. It also impacted our habits of perception and patterns of social interactions.

McLuhan further states that the development and manifestation of such concepts in our recent history as individualism, democracy, Protestantism, capitalism and nationalism are attributable to the effects of the print technology.

“ Man the tool-making animal, whether in speech or in writing or in radio, has long been engaged in extending one or another of his sense organs in such a manner as to disturb all of his other senses and faculties.” (*The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 1962)

The replacement of print media with an electronic one was foreseen by McLuhan as early as the 1960’s. This would mean the re-emergence of the aural/oral culture and Individualism will make way for the formation of a collective identity. It is in this context that McLuhan coined the famous words “ global village”.

“... the world has become a computer, an electronic brain, exactly as an infantile piece of science fiction. And as our senses have gone outside us, Big Brother goes inside. So, unless aware of this dynamic, we shall at once move into a phase of panic terrors, exactly befitting a small world of tribal drums, total interdependence, and superimposed co-existence...” (The Gutenberg Galaxy, p. 32)

In *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McLuhan points out the effect media has on an individual. He infers that media are technological extensions of the body. He writes, “ In the electric age we wear all mankind as our skin.” (Understanding Media, 1964)

Elsewhere in the book, McLuhan puts forward his theory “ The medium is the message”. It means that it is the nature of a particular medium which determines the overall effect on the audience and not the content they carry. This implies that broadcast of programs from different genres will have similar effects on the recipient. This proposal by McLuhan met with disapproval from intellectuals and critiques, as it is difficult to fathom how content can be insignificant.

“ All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the message.” (Understanding Media, 1964)

Another interesting claim in the book is the concept of “ hot and cold media”. The level of participation required by a member of the audience varies from one medium to another. For example, while watching a movie, the sense of

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vision is highly facilitated by the richness of information available in a movie image. Consequently, the viewer need not exert this particular sense organ – in this case the eyes. McLuhan asserts that more exertion of the eye is needed for, say, reading a comic. The minimal offering of visual data in a comic sequence compels a greater effort on part of the reader to fill in the missing information. Thus, with respect to visual input, a movie is said to be “hot” and “high definition”, while a comic book is “cold” and “low definition”. Here, “high definition” means a condition of sufficient data and “low definition” means a state lacking in data. The former demands lesser audience participation and the latter more conscious endeavor to derive the full value. In other words, the hotter the medium, the lesser one’s exercise of cognitive resources to interpret the presentation and vice versa. The hot and cold mediums are analogous to the concept of a photograph and its corresponding negative. I, personally, totally agree with this theory.

The theory is interpreted in another sense too. Here, hot media are ready-made media like the television and does not involve much user interaction. Contrastingly, cold media are highly interactive. In this context, it is interesting to know that the Internet or the web medium shows aspects of both the categories and cannot be qualified this way. This is due to the wide and varied methods and modes of transmission that is manifest in the medium.

Marshall McLuhan was a scholar ahead of his time. He elucidated the understanding of how cultures and societies evolve with the advancement of communication technology. His predictions about the direction mankind

would take in the twenty-first century is proving quite accurate and his writings are as relevant today as they were half a century ago.

“ Any technology tends to create a new human environment... Technological environments are not merely passive containers of people but are active processes that reshape people and other technologies alike.” (The Gutenberg Galaxy, 1962)

Works Cited:

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