

MCLUHAN, HERBERT MARSHALL (1911 - )

Canadian professor of English, literary critic, and renaissance scholar, is a writer on American mass media, which called him the "oracle of the electric age." His observations on the human consequences of technological change in communications attracted the attention of major mass media and made him one of the most celebrated and controversial commentators on popular culture. McLuhan's contributions include aphorisms, mixed-media and typographic innovations, and "happenings" inspired by his views on the effects of electricity in permitting total sensory participation without either a "story line" or a fixed point of view. His fame rode the crest of a wave of socio-cultural turmoil marking the coming of age of the first generation born in the television era.

Life. McLuhan was born July 21, 1911, in Edmonton, Canada. He studied engineering, shifted to English literature, and received a B.A. and an M.A. from the University of Manitoba. He went to Trinity Hall, Cambridge, to study and did the English tripos (multi-sensory approach to literature, I.A. Richards, F. R. Leavis, William Empson, et al). He did his doctoral dissertation on the history of ancient, medieval and renaissance communication procedures, earning another B.A., M.A., and the

Ph.D. McLuhan began his teaching career at the University of Wisconsin. Under the influence of G. K. Chesterton, Maritain, Gilson, Aquinas, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and James Joyce, whose contributions have been reflected in his writings, McLuhan became a Roman Catholic. He moved to the University of St. Louis, then to Assumption University in Windsor, Ontario, and, finally, to St. Michael's College of the University of Toronto. At Toronto he became founder-director of the Centre for Culture and Technology. In 1967-68 McLuhan served as Schweitzer Professor of the Humanities in the Center for Communications at Fordham University in New York.

Publications. McLuhan's principal published works include The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man (1951; paperback 1967), The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man (1962); Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (1964); The Medium is The Massage: an Inventory of Effects (with Quentin Fiore, 1967, and a Columbia record by the same title, released 1967); Through The Vanishing Point: Space in Poetry and Painting (in press, 1968); War and Peace in the Global Village (in press, 1968); Counterblast (in press, 1968); The Inner Landscape (in press, 1968), and Culture Is Our Business (in press, 1968). He was co-founder of Explorations

magazine, from issues of which Explorations in Communications was made by Beacon Press.

Theories: / The hard core of McLuhan's theoretical contributions is that new media, new technologies, are extensions of our own bodies that create new invisible environments whose major effects, intrinsic to their nature and inherent in their very existence, are the creation of new modes of perception, new types of sensory life, and thus new interfaces between <sup>humans</sup> ~~man~~ and society. McLuhan's thought derives from the seminal contributions of C.S. Bartlett, Siegfried Giedion (the art and architectural historian of both primitive and civilized societies in spaces), and Harold A. Innis, Canadian economic historian, who argued that communication technologies confer monopolies over knowledge and "bias" the time and space dimensions of social life. / For example, oral cultures and bulky but durable recording instruments such as clay "bind time" and fragment space. Parchment and paper easily recorded and transported but more perishable media, -- favor discontinuity in time and control over distance, hence the growth of empire. For McLuhan, a medium also determines ways of sensing and organizing experience through the particular mixture of the senses it activates. / His major theme is that electric technology is the extension of our central nervous system restoring

the human family to an integral state that he refers to as "the global village." Phonetic writing transformed the oral into the visual, switching human studies from the bards to Plato and to the written, uniform, continuous, connected space known only to Western man. Printing imposed visual and private, individualized logic and consciousness. Moreover, TV is a "cool" medium in that its relatively "low definition" engages the viewer more actively than does the "hot" medium of print which, with its "high definition," encourages detachment, as well as relative isolation. The styles of life dividing nations, societies, and generations, asserts McLuhan, stem from differential "ratios of the senses" established by the basic technology of the media. Hence, regardless of what it talks "about," the "medium is the message."

McLuhan's critics assert that, at the very least, this is technological over-determinism. There is little evidence to support McLuhan's psychological suggestions, despite the elaborate study of sensory quotients as related to occupations carried out at his Toronto Centre. The informational and representational content of a message gives communication a significance different from physical sensory contact with any other event or "environment." Media and other styles may codify experience and reality

in different ways, but fixating only on these differences may impoverish the analysis of different types of content in the same medium, or of similar content across media.

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