

# **The McLuhan Communications Revolution**

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A word about what to expect in this course. Naturally it will be about the work and impact of Marshall McLuhan. But it will also be about the work of others who were directly and indirectly influenced by him. We lost McLuhan in 1980 and much has happened since but as you will see he was part of that and predicted and foreshadowed much of what has come to pass. I will also share my own work based on my collaboration with McLuhan. Let me begin with some anecdotes and stories about McLuhan the man, my friend and colleague!

## **Toronto School of Communications**

Marshall McLuhan was part of the The Toronto School of Communications which included political economist Harold Innis, anthropologist Ted Carpenter, classics scholar Eric Havelock, urban studies expert Jacqueline Tyrwhitt, economist Tom Easterbrook and psychologist Karl Williams. In the foreword to the 1972 edition of Innis' *The Bias of Communication*, McLuhan wrote: "I am pleased to think of my own book *The Gutenberg Galaxy* as a footnote to the observations of Innis on the subject of the psychic and social consequences, first of writing and then of printing.

## **Media as Living Vortices of Power**

Media are "living vortices of power creating hidden environments (and effects) that act abrasively and destructively on older forms of culture"

## **Media Create New Social Patterns and Restructure Perceptions**

Once the dominant media and technologies of a culture are known, one knows "the cause and shaping force of the entire structure [and] what the pattern of any culture [has] to be, both psychically and socially

## **"The Medium Is the Message"**

"The message of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs."

"The medium is the message" also carries the notion that a medium transforms its message or content.

## **"Media Analysis" versus "Content Analysis"**

"The latest approach to media study considers not only the 'content' but the medium and the cultural matrix within which the particular medium operates" (McLuhan 1964, 11).

## **The Content of Any Medium Is Always Another Medium**

“The content of the telegraph is print, and the content of print is writing.

The content of writing is speech, and the content of speech is thought (McLuhan 1964, 8).”**The Reversal of Cause and Effect**

"Instead of asking which came first, the chicken or the egg, it suddenly seemed that a chicken was an egg's idea for getting more eggs" (McLuhan 1964, 12). A similar idea was also developed in Richard Dawkins's *The Selfish Gene*.

The reversal of cause and effect is the technique of the artist who begins with the effect he or she wants to create in his or her audience and invents a work of art that achieves that end.

## **Figure-Ground**

The meaning of any "figure," whether it is a technology, an institution, a communication event, a text, or a body of ideas, cannot be determined if that figure is considered in isolation from the ground or environment in which it operates. The ground provides the context from which the full meaning or significance of a figure emerges.

## **Interface and Pattern Rather Than a "Point of View"**

McLuhan describes his approach of working without a "point of view" as "observation minus ideas." A point of view ties one down to a single perspective and limits the richness of insight that one can develop.

## **Service and Disservice of New Media**

Each medium is a "vortex of power" creating new environments and acting abrasively on older cultural forms. The potential for disservice and the destruction of cultural forms is enormous.

Consider the service and disservice of logic. Logic helped create a new scientific and rational way of thinking that led to many advances. However, the rational thought of the Greek philosophers, based on the technologies of the phonetic alphabet and deductive logic, also acted abrasively and destructively on the oral tradition.

### **The Absence of a Moral Judgment**

McLuhan held that "moral and emotional indignation was simply an indulgence on the part of those powerless to either act or to understand" (Marchand 1989, 121).



## **Media Studies as Civil Defense Against Media Fallout**

"Is not the essence of education civil defense against media fallout?" It is only by studying various media and their effects that one can anticipate change and be prepared for it.

"Control over change would seem to consist in moving not with it but ahead of it" (McLuhan 1964, 199).

## **The Subliminal Effects of Media**

The fish is unaware of the water in which it swims. It is blind to its environment - its medium. We, too, function and perceive reality in an information/communication environment which we take for granted.

## **The Counterintuitive Effect of Media**

Henry Ford thought that by making the Model T affordable, Americans would be able to enjoy the countryside; instead, the automobile destroyed much of the countryside.

## **Laws of Media (LOM)**

Towards the end of his career McLuhan developed a technique for studying media that he called Laws of Media.

He published two short articles on this work and continued to work on this project for the rest of his career with his son Eric McLuhan and others including me.

Eric collected the work that he and his father had researched and published it.

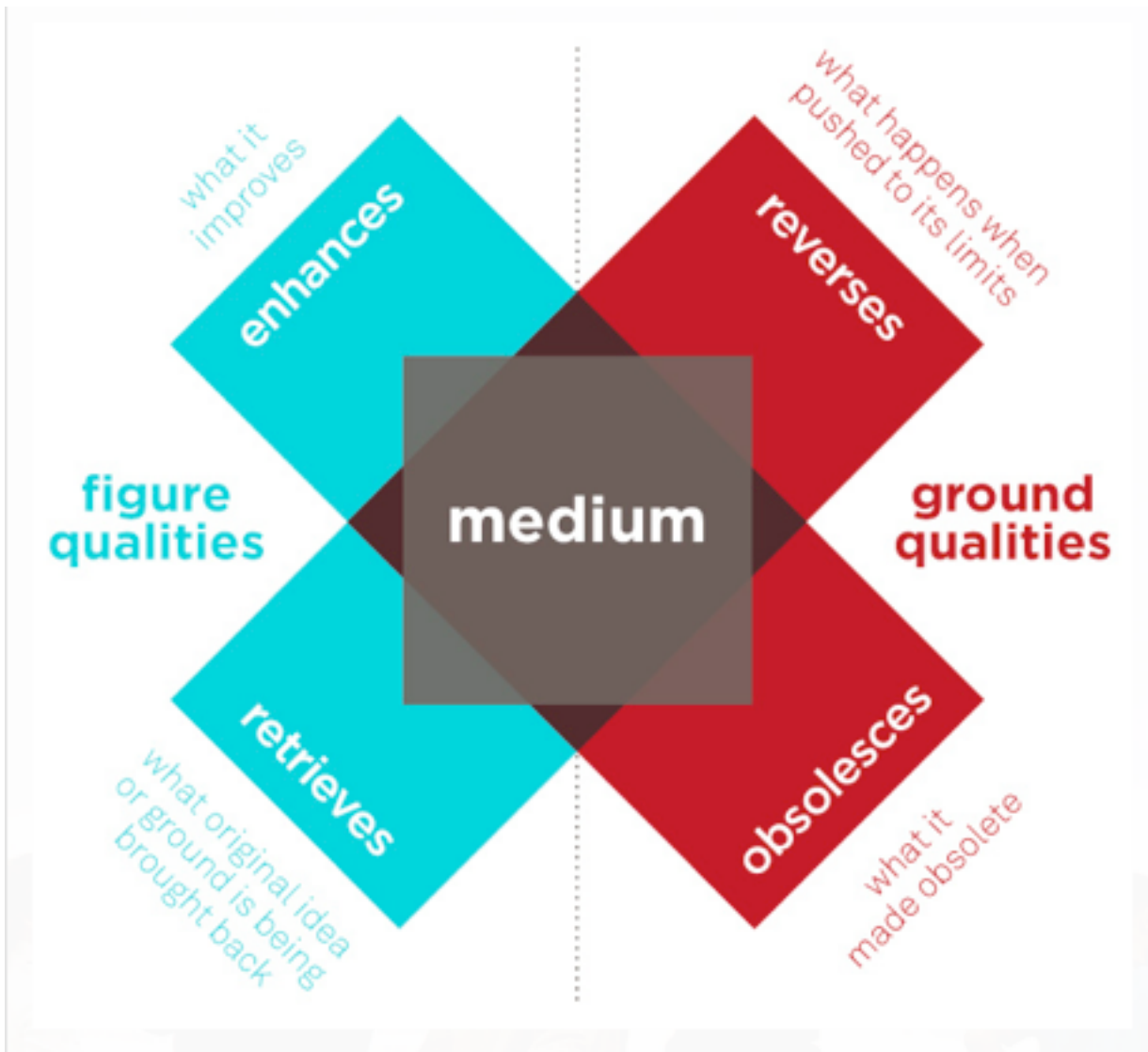
The Laws of Media (LOM) for studying the counterintuitive effects of media, technologies, scientific laws or any human-made artifact consists of the following four laws:

1. Every medium, technology or human-made artifact enhances some human function.
2. In doing so, it obsolesces some former medium, technology, or human-made artifact, which was used to achieve the same function earlier.
3. In achieving its function, the new medium, technology or human-made artifact retrieves some older form from the past.
4. And when pushed far enough, the new medium, technology or human-made artifact reverses or flips into a complementary or possibly an opposite form.

The flip in the fourth law is something that McLuhan might have picked up from the I Ching. He mentions that it is “stated in the I Ching that when any form reaches the end of its potential, it reverses its characteristics”

Let's apply the LOM to a technology or tool. What does that tool or technology enhance, obsolesce, retrieve from the past and flip into if pushed to far?

- Digital media enhances communication and information retrieval
- Obsolesces printed books, libraries, universities, experts (before you flip out remember McLuhan said obsolescence is not the end of anything but the beginning of something new)
- Retrieves the past and all cultures
- Flips into every person is a scholar



To further illustrate a LOM, I will do the medium of money and the automobile after I hear your ideas. Then you do notebooks, smart phone, tablets, the Tecnologico

## **The Equivalence of Media and Technologies**

As the Laws of the Media apply with equal validity to media and to tools, the distinction between technological inventions and media of communication is somewhat arbitrary.

## **Technology as Extensions of the Body and Media as Extensions of the Psyche**

From the Laws of the Media we discovered that technologies and media enhance human functions. Mechanical technologies serve to extend our physical bodies, while media of communication extend our psyches or nervous systems.

## **The Flip: Humankind as an Extension of Its Technologies**

“To behold, use or perceive any extension of ourselves in technological forms is necessarily to embrace it. By continuously embracing technologies, we relate ourselves to them as servo-mechanisms" (McLuhan 1964, 46). We have this fear that robots will overtake humans and control our society making us their slaves. In fact according to McLuhan our tools already control us. We fashion our cities to accommodate our cars rather the social interactions of people.



## **History as the Laboratory of Media Studies**

History is used as a dynamic tool in the study of media by the Toronto School. McLuhan wrote: "[Innis] had discovered a means of using historical situations as a lab in which to test the character of technology in the shaping of cultures."

## **Media as Staples**

McLuhan regarded technological media as staples or natural resources, exactly like wheat, cotton, or oil.

# **McLuhan's Division of History into the Three Communication Ages of Humankind**

Speech, Writing and Electric Media

I would suggest there are two others, mimetic communication and digital media. Written communication can also be broken down into manuscript writing with pictograms, alphabetic writing and the printing press.

## **Writing, the Alphabet, and the Printing Press**

In an article entitled "Alphabet, Mother of Invention," McLuhan and I indicated some of the cultural impacts that resulted from the invention of phonetic writing (McLuhan and Logan 1977). More on this tomorrow

## **New Information Patterns Emerge at the Speed of Light**

"Today it is the instant speed of electric information that, for the first time, permits easy recognition of the patterns and the formal contours of change and development" (McLuhan 1964, 352).

## **Fragmentation in the Age of Literacy**

"The literate man or society develops the tremendous power of acting in any matter with considerable detachment from the feelings or emotional involvement that a non-literate man or society could experience" (McLuhan 1964, 79). At the heart of the scientific method that writing encourages is the specialization and fragmentation of subjects, which can eventually flip into tunnel vision.

- "The separation of function and the division of stages, spaces and tasks are characteristic of literate and visual society and of the Western world. These divisions tend to dissolve through the action of the instant and organic interrelations of electricity."

## The Global Village

A key element in McLuhan's historical overview of communications is that electric information moving at the velocity of light creates new patterns of communication and social interactions, which he describes as "an instant implosion" that reverses the specialism of the literary age and contracted the globe to a village in which "everybody lives in the utmost proximity created by our electric involvement in one another's lives" (McLuhan 1964, 35).

## **Centralization versus Decentralization**

Writing centralizes whereas electricity decentralizes. In an electric circuit every no particular position is favoured.

## **Hardware versus Software**

There has been a dramatic shift in economic activity from an almost total emphasis on hardware at the height of the industrial age to a focus today on information and software products. This trend that McLuhan identified with electric mass media is even more true today with digital media and the Internet.

## Hybrid Systems

"The hybrid or the meeting of two media is a moment of truth and revelation from which new form is born" (McLuhan 1964, 55). Hybrid systems operate more efficiently than the individual components from which they emerge. Hence, the synergy they represent releases new forms of energy, creating additional "vortices of power." Electric systems, which favor integration, give rise naturally to hybrid systems.

What hybrid systems can you identify?



## **Societies Imitate Their Technologies**

McLuhan observed that the fragmentation and centralization of industrial or mechanical society was reversed in the electric age of information to systems of integration and decentralization which retrieved some aspects of the social organization of preliterate society. These observations were based on the following set of assumptions:

1. The dominant tools or technologies of a society create patterns of usage, which infiltrate or penetrate the social structures of a society.
2. These patterns change those structures.

3. Eventually, the social structures come to imitate or replay the patterns by which these dominant technologies are organized.

## **Acoustic versus Visual Space**

The oral and literate traditions are characterized by their respective oral and visual biases of communication and perception. McLuhan studied how the dominant mode of communication in a culture created a sensory bias or grid by which the rest of the world was viewed. He created the notion of acoustic space and visual space, two worlds in which oral and literate society, respectively, lived. Acoustic space not only includes the aural and the oral but also the tactile, and the interplay of these senses. It is a space characterized by direct contact with reality. Thought patterns within this world are concrete and much use of metaphor and analogy is made.

The visual world is one of abstraction and deductive logic. Geometry and science characterize visual space, whereas art and music are more representative of acoustic space. As noted earlier, the perceptual bias of visual space is linear, sequential, rational, fragmented, causal, abstract, and specialized, whereas that of acoustic space is simultaneous, concrete, intuitive, all-embracing, mystical, inductive, and experiential. Visual space is characterized with patterns associated with the specialization of the left hemisphere of the brain, acoustic space with those of the right hemisphere.

## **Multidisciplinarity versus Specialization**

McLuhan recognized and valued a generalist and multidisciplinary approach. "The specialist is one who never makes small mistakes, while moving toward a grand fallacy" (McLuhan 1964, 124). The multidisciplinary approach is the only way to get at the large patterns of the interplay between a society and its technologies. "Any subject taken to depth at once relates to other subjects"

## **The Myth of Objectivity**

McLuhan challenged many of the biases of visually oriented, left-brained specialists, including their belief in the existence of a single objective reality.

## **The User Is the Content**

If the medium is the message,  
then the user is the content.

“The user is the content” makes no sense if it is taken literally but it makes perfect sense if one considers that each reader or viewer brings his or her own experience and understanding to a medium and transforms the content according to his or her own need and ability. This might have been one of the first post-modern one-liners.

## **Art as Radar and an Early Warning System**

McLuhan was fond of quoting Wyndham Lewis, who wrote: "The artist is always engaged in writing a detailed history of the future because he is the only person aware of the nature of the present." McLuhan believed that the artist's insights were like radar or an early warning system, which could pick up the social and cultural problems and challenges that new technologies created.

## **The Oral Tradition and Probes**

The probe is a way of exploring.

McLuhan said I don't explain I explore and the probe was his tool for exploring. He often remarked that "even if a probe is half true that is a lot of truth." His method was a very useful tool, but it confounded the academic establishment, which found it difficult to condone inaccuracy even if it led to enlightened insights.



## **An Antiacademic Bias**

The unorthodox methodology of McLuhan had an antiacademic bias built into it.

"In education the conventional division of the curriculum into subjects is already as outdated as the medieval trivium and quadrivium after the Renaissance"

## **Monopolies of Knowledge**

Electric information according to McLuhan would breakup the monopolies of knowledge that writing created.