McLuhan Foreshadows the Digital Age

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McLuhan Talks: A/V Archive and Data Base to be transcribed and digitized and available on the Web from which TV episodes and Doc Films will be produced. Principles: The McLuhan Estate, Stuart Samuels and Bob Logan

McLuhan made a great contributions to design with the innovative work he did with Quentin Fiore and produced by Jerome Agel in creating a new way of combining text and images in their books *The Medium is the Massage* and *War and Peace in the Global Village in some ways foreshadowing the Web*. Also check out the Book of Probes McLuhan and David Carson.

The Medium is the Massage

Marshall
McLuhan

Quentin
Fiore

An Inventory
of Effects

The Medium is the Message – What are the messages of digital Media

I have identified the 14 characteristics of "new media" which explains their success and rapid adoption.

1. two-way communication

2. ease of access to and dissemination of information

3. continuous learning

4. alignment and integration, a

5. community.

These 5 messages of the Internet formulated in 1996 are also characteristics shared by all "new media." In addition "new media" have 9 other characteristics or messages.

6. portability and time flexibility (time shifting), which provide their users with freedom over space and time;

7. convergence of many different media so that they can carry out more than one function at a time and combine;

8. interoperability

9. aggregation of content;

10. variety and choice to a much greater extent than the mass media that preceded them;

11. the closing of the gap between (or the convergence of) producers and consumers of media;

12. social collectivity and cooperation;

13. remix culture; and

14. the transition from products to services.

McLuhan and Foresight: His Prophecies That Have Come to Pass

So many of McLuhan's pronouncements about the effects of electric media are prophetic because it seems as though he was aware of the coming of personal computers, the Net, the Web and other digital media long before they arrived. Not only that, whatever McLuhan observed for electric media seems to apply even more so to digital media.

"The production and the consumption of information… is the main business of our time (McLuhan)."

Personal Computer: Marshall told a group of IBM executives "about a computer for every home, no need to visit the grocery store. Their response "we have not heard of anything as crazy as that!"

Internet: "The computer in education is in a very tentative state but it does represent basically speeded up access to information and when it is applied to the telephone and to Xerox it permits access to the libraries of the world, almost immediately, without delay. And so the immediate effect of the computer is to pull up the walls of the subjects and divisions of knowledge in favor of over-all field, total awareness–Gestalt."

1962 – Internet + Wikipedia: A computer as a research and communication instrument could enhance retrieval, obsolesce mass library organization, retrieve individual encyclopedic function and flip into a private line to speedily tailored data of a saleable kind (as with Google).

He also foresaw the transition from products to services as is the case today with the downloading of software, cloud computing and services like iTunes and Netflix. In 1967, "All the industries of our time are service industries. With Xerox the book becomes a service industry. It ceases to be a package or a product."

"Instead of going out and buying a packaged book of which there have been five thousand copies printed, you will go to the telephone [read Google and/or Amazon via the Net], describe your interests, your need, your problems, …and they say it will be right over. And they at once Xerox, with the help of computers from libraries of the world, all the latest material just for you personally… They send you a package as a direct personal service. This is where we are heading under electronic information conditions. Products increasingly are becoming services."

1971 Crowd sourcing - There is no kind of problem that baffles one or a dozen experts that cannot **be solved at once by a million minds that are given a chance simultaneously to tackle a problem**. The satisfaction of individual prestige, which we formerly derived from the possession of expertise, must now yield to the much greater satisfactions of dialogue and **group discovery**. The task yields to the task force.

In 1965 he told an audience in New York City shortly after the publication of *Understanding Media* that there might come a day when we would all have portable computers, about the size of a hearing aid, to help mesh our personal experiences with the experience of the great wired brain of the outer world.

He foreshadowed eBooks and eReaders when he wrote in 1972, "When millions of volumes can be compressed in a matchbox it is not merely the book but the library that becomes portable."

What makes this prediction even more amazing is that there were no personal computers at the time, no cell phones and no Internet

Did he foreshadow Twitter? "We've invented the one-liner in place of the joke because people can not wait around to hear you tell a joke"

I would not claim that McLuhan predicted that the Web but I do believe he foreshadowed its development with *The Medium is the Massage* and *War and Peace in the Global Village.*

McLuhan foreshadowed today's DIY "As technology advances, it reverses the characteristics of every situation again and again. The age of automation is going to be the age of 'do it yourself'."

McLuhan as Futurist

Reversal of Cause and Effect: Marshall McLuhan wrote to Ashley Montague, "I feel compelled to consider causation as following effects. The effects of the telegraph created an environment of information that made the telephone a perfectly natural development (MFC, 4)." A new technology creates an environment in which other things come into being. This is a form of emergence – a technology creates a niche in which other things develop.

McLuhan suggested that the best way to study media was by "making inventories of effects (ibid.)." I would therefore suggest that the best way to continue the work of McLuhan is to make an inventory of all the technology that has emerged since his passing in 1980. The year 1980 marked the beginning of the era of personal computers and what we popularly refer to as the digital age.

In a certain sense McLuhan's description of the electric mass media and the mainframe computers of his day seems to more accurately describe today's digital media. I know this will sound crazy but I believe there is a sense in which he described our world of digital media better than he described his own era. By carefully observing his contemporary scene he was able to see into the future and describe our world. This is actually the technique he suggested for peering into the future by realizing that today's effects are tomorrow's causes.

"The figure is what appears and the ground is always subliminal. Changes occur in the ground before they occur in the figure. We can project both figure and ground as images of the future using the ground as subplot of subliminal patterns and pressures and effects which actually come before the more or less final figures to which we normally direct our interest (McLuhan)."

The idea of reversal is a key to cracking the McLuhan Code. He worked backwards from effects to their causes and from the ground or environment of media to the figure of their content. He used this technique to understand the future. He once wrote, "We look at the present through a rear view mirror. We march backwards into the future." Rather than focusing on the figure of the future through speculating he carefully studied the ground of the future, which is the past and the present. He said, "I've always been very careful never to predict anything that had not already happened (McLuhan, McLuhan, Staines 2003, 172)".

He also looked to artists to provide him with a guide to peering into the future. He was fond of Wyndham Lewis remark, "The artist is engaged in writing a detailed history of the future because he is aware of the unused potential of the present (McLuhan, McLuhan, Staines 2003, 14)." I would suggest that this sentiment of Wyndham Lewis contributed greatly to McLuhan's ideas about predicting the future based on his observations of the present as he suggested in his Playboy interview:

"Most people… still cling to what I call the rearview-mirror view of their world. By this I mean to say that because of the invisibility of any environment during the period of its innovation, man is only consciously aware of the environment that has preceded it; in other words, an environment becomes fully visible only when it has been superseded by a new environment; thus we are always one step behind in our view of the world. Because we are benumbed by any new technology — which in turn creates a totally new environment — we tend to make the old environment more visible; we do so by turning it into an art form and by attaching ourselves to the objects and atmosphere that characterized it."

Thank you for your attention

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