

BETTY RIDEOUT

READER'S RESPONSE TO MARSHALL MCLUHAN'S
UNDERSTANDING MEDIA: THE EXTENSIONS OF MAN

I was, quite literally, a child of the 60's. Marshall McLuhan was a cultural icon, along with his often-cited expressions: *the medium is the message* and *global village*. These expressions, unlike other phrases of the 1960's (remember make love, not war?) slipped into common speech. Recently, I realized that I didn't really know what one of these expressions meant. Forty years later I decided to find out what McLuhan had in mind.

Understanding Media is not something to be skimmed; in one of life's ironies, a man famous for his interest in communication has a prose style that is dense, which becomes clear only through close study. He is the master of the epithet though, each of his chapter titles are seductive masterpieces that encouraged me to work through the book. Chapter titles include The medium is the message, The gadget lover: narcissus as narcosis, Clothing: our extended skin, Money: the poor man's credit card, The print: how to dig it and Weapons: war of the icons.

The medium is the message represents how technology creates new environments by changing cultural patterns. Within our environments we lack perspective, consequently we are not aware of these changing patterns. For example, McLuhan argues that western culture's tendency to perceive the natural world aesthetically could not have occurred until the technology created by the industrial revolution moved us from an agrarian to urban culture. Equivalently, when the printing press emerged in the sixteenth century, culture created by print medium turned perspective backwards on the Middle Ages, as if for the first time.

Media penetrate the whole of society and culture to produce a *global village*. The global village, as our first experience of universality, is unlike any culture we have known before. The global village universalizes culture; we see into *their* lives and they into *ours*. As a result, McLuhan believes, ours is an age of anxiety since living in a global village demands commitment and participation. Ignoring the world now requires defense mechanisms unlike any that humankind has used in the past. The medium of television helps to employ such defenses by fostering a culture of simulacra. As McLuhan observes: "with TV, the viewer is the screen" (p. 272).

The gateway for media begins with the individual, in part because media are technological extensions of the physical body. McLuhan observes that "the personal and social consequences of any medium— that is, of any extension of ourselves— result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology" (p. 23). Our culture mechanizes, and splits and divides things as a means of control. The paradox of this is that while mechanization is a source for tremendous growth *within* our culture, its nature precludes the possibility of truly new growth. That growth occurs only through the distance created by shifting paradigms: "just before a plane breaks

the sound barrier, sound waves become visible on the wings of the plane— this sudden visibility is a good instance of that great pattern of being that reveals new and opposite forms just as the earlier forms reach their peak performance” (p. 27). Not until one technology ends and the next begins do we gain clarity of vision.

Cubism is another good example of how a changed medium evokes a new message. Cubists disdain the three-dimensional illusion typical of most art, in favor of awareness of the whole experience of perspective; we see the top, bottom, back and front and everything else in two dimensions. Cubism, “by seizing on instant total awareness, suddenly announced that *the medium is the message*,” it is the total field— before that the message was about content only (p. 28).

In modern thought (if not in fact)
 Nothing is that doesn't act,
 So that is reckoned wisdom which
 Describes the scratch but not the itch (p. 25)

McLuhan laments our tendency to be beguiled by content and not recognize the real power embedded within its medium. He argues that when we change media we change society, and we ignore that change at our peril. Media are cultural resources just like coal or cotton or oil, and each staple influences our economy and culture— only “technological idiots” would ignore this. “The content of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind” (p. 32). Those who argue that media's role is to simplify and make our world more efficient overlooks what Blake observed, which is “that we become what we behold” (p. 33). By acknowledging that content carries only a very small part of the power of a medium, like letters lit up by electric light, we enable ourselves to see its enormous psychological effect on culture.

I agree that when a culture changes its epistemology it also changes its culture. *Understanding Media* has helped me to add another twist into the complexity of epistemology. The medium really *is* the message. Change our technological medium, whether it is oral tradition, printed word, or the internet, and we reshape not only our culture, but our sensory adaptation as well, and in turn reshape technology. McLuhan argues that the invention and use of the alphabet contributes to vision's domination over other sensory modes. I'm surprised still that something that exerts such enormous influence could exist invisibly around me. I feel as if the immaterial has been made material, and I vow to no longer be seduced by the juiciness of content alone.

AFFILIATIONS

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