...the massage?
“The major advances in civilization are processes that all but wreck the social ties in which they occur.”

—A. N. Whitehead
The medium, or process, of our time—electric technology—is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal life. It is forcing us to reconsider and re-evaluate practically every thought, every action, and every institution formerly taken for granted. Everything is changing—you, your family, your neighborhood, your education, your job, your government, your relation to "the others." And they're changing dramatically.

Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication. The alphabet, for instance, is a technology that is absorbed by the very young child in a completely unconscious manner, by osmosis so to speak. Words and the meaning of words predispose the child to think and act automatically in certain ways. The alphabet and print technology fostered and encouraged a fragmenting process, a process of specialization and of detachment. Electric technology fosters and encourages unification and involvement. It is impossible to understand social and cultural changes without a knowledge of the workings of media.

The older training of observation has become quite irrelevant in this new time, because it is based on psychological responses and concepts conditioned by the former technology—mechanization.

Innumerable confusions and a profound feeling of despair invariably emerge in periods of great technological and cultural transitions. Our "Age of

30-million toy trucks were bought in the U.S. in 1966.

Anxiety" is, in great part, the result of trying to do today's job with yesterday's tools—with yesterday's concepts.

Youth instinctively understands the present environment—the electric drama. It lives mythically and in depth. This is the reason for the great alienation between generations. Wars, revolutions, civil uprisings are interfaces within the new environments created by electronic informational media.
"In the study of ideas, it is necessary to remember that insistence on hard-headed clarity issues from sentimental feeling, as it were a mist, cloaking the perplexities of fact. Insistence on clarity at all costs is based on sheer superstition as to the mode in which human intelligence functions. Our reasonings grasp at straws for premises and float on gossamers for deductions."

—A.N. Whitehead, "Adventures in Ideas."

Our time is a time for crossing barriers, for erasing old categories—for probing around. When two seemingly disparate elements are imaginatively poised, put in apposition in new and unique ways, startling discoveries often result.

Learning, the educational process, has long been associated only with the glum. We speak of the "serious" student. Our time presents a unique opportunity for learning by means of humor—a perceptive or incisive joke can be more meaningful than platitudes lying between two covers.

"The Medium is the Message" is a look-around to see what’s happening. It is a collide-oscope of interfaced situations.

Students of media are persistently attacked as evaders, idly concentrating on means or processes rather than on "substance." The dramatic and rapid changes of "substance" elude these accusers. Survival is not possible if one approaches his environment, the social drama, with a fixed, unchangeable point of view—the witless repetitive response to the unperceived.
How much do you make? Have you ever contemplated suicide? Are you now or have you ever been...? Are you aware of the fact...? I have here before me... Electrical information devices for universal, tyrannical womb-to-tomb surveillance are causing a very serious dilemma between our claim to privacy and the community's need to know. The older, traditional ideas of private, isolated thoughts and actions—the patterns of mechanistic technologies—are very seriously threatened by new methods of instantaneous electric information retrieval, by the electrically computerized dossier bank—that one big gossip column that is unforgiving, unforgettable and from which there is no redemption, no erasure of early "mistakes." We have already reached a point where remedial control, born out of knowledge of media and their total effects on all of us, must be exerted. How shall the new environment be programmed now that we have become so involved with each other, now that all of us have become the unwitting work force for social change? What's that buzzingzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzing?
The family circle has widened. The worldpool of information fathered by electric media—movies, Telstar, flight—far surpasses any possible influence mom and dad can now bring to bear. Character no longer is shaped by only two earnest, fumbling experts. Now all the world's a sage.
your neighborhood

Electric circuitry has overthrown the regime of "time" and "space" and pours upon us instantly and continuously the concerns of all other men. It has reconstituted dialogue on a global scale. Its message is Total Change, ending psychic, social, economic, and political parochialism. The old civic, state, and national groupings have become unworkable. Nothing can be further from the spirit of the new technology than "a place for everything and everything in its place." You can't go home again.
There is a world of difference between the modern home environment of integrated electric information and the classroom. Today’s television child is attuned to up-to-the-minute “adult” news—Inflation, rioting, war, taxes, crime, bathing beauties—and is bewildered when he enters the nineteenth-century environment that still characterizes the educational establishment where information is scarce but ordered and structured by fragmented, classified patterns, subjects, and schedules. It is naturally an environment much like any factory set-up with its inventories and assembly lines.

The “child” was an invention of the seventeenth century; he did not exist in, say, Shakespeare’s day. He had, up until that time, been merged in the adult world and there was nothing that could be called childhood in our sense.

Today’s child is growing up absurd, because he lives in two worlds, and neither of them inclines him to grow up. Growing up—that is our new work, and it is total. Mere instruction will not suffice.
"When this circuit learns your job, what are you going to do?"

"Jobs" represent a relatively recent pattern of work. From the fifteenth century to the twentieth century, there is a steady progress of fragmentation of the stages of work that constitute "mechanization" and "specialism." These procedures cannot serve for survival or sanity in this new time.

Under conditions of electric circuitry, all the fragmented job patterns tend to blend once more into involving and demanding roles or forms of work that more and more resemble teaching, learning, and "human" service, in the older sense of dedicated loyalty.

Unhappily, many well-intentioned political reform programs that aim at the alleviation of suffering caused by unemployment betray an ignorance of the true nature of media-influence.

"Come into my parlor," said the computer to the specialist.
Nose-counting, a cherished part of the eighteenth century fragmentation process, has rapidly become a cumbersome and ineffectual form of social assessment in an environment of instant electric speeds. The public, in the sense of a great consensus of separate and distinct viewpoints, is finished. Today, the mass audience (the successor to the "public") can be used as a creative, participating force. It is, instead, merely given packages of passive entertainment. Politics offers yesterday's answers to today's questions.

A new form of "politics" is emerging, and in ways we haven't yet noticed. The living room has become a voting booth. Participation via television in Freedom Marches, in war, revolution, pollution, and other events is changing everything.
"the others"

The shock of recognition! In an electric information environment, minority groups can no longer be contained—ignored. Too many people know too much about each other. Our new environment compels commitment and participation. We have become inevitably involved with, and responsible for, each other.

Absolutely there is no inevitability long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening.
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 massage. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments.

All media are extensions of some human faculty—psychic or physical
...is an extension of the foot
is an extension of the eye...
clothing, an extension of the skin..
electric circuitry,

an extension of the central nervous system

Media, by altering the environment, evoke in us unique ratios of sense perceptions. The extension of any one sense alters the way we think and act—the way we perceive the world.

When these ratios change, men change.
"Now for the evidence," said the King, "and then the sentence."

"No!" said the Queen, "first the sentence, and then the evidence!"

"Nonsense!" cried Alice, so loudly that everybody jumped, "the idea of having the sentence first!"
The dominant organ of sensory and social orientation in pre-alphabet societies was the ear—“hearing was believing.” The phonetic alphabet forced the magic world of the ear to yield to the neutral world of the eye. Man was given an eye for an ear.

Western history was shaped for some three thousand years by the introduction of the phonetic alphabet, a medium that depends solely on the eye for comprehension. The alphabet is a construct of fragmented bits and parts which have no semantic meaning in themselves, and which must be strung together in a line, bead-like, and in a prescribed order. Its use fostered and encouraged the habit of perceiving all environment in visual and spatial terms—particularly in terms of a space and of a time that are uniform,

\[ \text{c,o,n,t,n,u,o,u,s} \]
\[ \text{and} \]
\[ \text{c-o-n-n-e-c-t-e-d}. \]

The line, the continuum

— this sentence is a prime example—

became the organizing principle of life. “As we begin, so shall we go.” “Rationality” and logic came to depend on the presentation of connected and sequential facts or concepts.

For many people rationality has the connotation of uniformity and connectiveness, “I don’t follow you” means “I don’t think what you’re saying is rational.”

Visual space is uniform, continuous, and connected. The rational man in our Western culture is a visual man. The fact that most conscious experience has little “visuality” in it is lost on him.

Rationality and visuality have long been interchangeable terms, but we do not live in a primarily visual world any more.

The fragmenting of activities, our habit of thinking in bits and parts—“specialism”—reflected the step-by-step linear departmentalizing process inherent in the technology of the alphabet.

— Wordsworth
"as we begin, so shall we go"
Until writing was invented, men lived in acoustic space: boundless, directionless, horizonless, in the dark of the mind, in the world of emotion, by primordial intuition, by terror. Speech is a social chart of this bog.

The goose quill put an end to talk. It abolished mystery; it gave architecture and towns; it brought roads and armies, bureaucracy. It was the basic metaphor with which the cycle of civilization began, the step from the dark into the light of the mind. The hand that filled the parchment page built a city.

Whence did the wond’rous mystic art arise,
Of painting SPEECH, and speaking to the eyes?
That we by tracing magic lines are taught,
How to embody, and to colour THOUGHT?
Printing, a ditto device

Printing, a ditto device confirmed and extended the new visual stress. It provided the first uniformly repeatable “commodity,” the first assembly line—mass production.

It created the portable book, which men could read in privacy and in isolation from others. Man could now inspire—and conspire.

Like easel painting, the printed book added much to the new cult of individualism. The private, fixed point of view became possible and literacy conferred the power of detachment, non-involvement.
The Renaissance Legacy.
The Vanishing Point = Self-Effacement,
The Detached Observer.
No Involvement!

The viewer of Renaissance art is systematically placed outside the frame of experience. A piazza for everything and everything in its piazza.

The instantaneous world of electric informational media involves all of us, all at once. No detachment or frame is possible.
"...an option to select and implement..."
Art, or the graphic translation of a culture, is shaped by the way space is perceived. Since the Renaissance, the Western artist perceived space in terms of the visual. The primitive artist, on the other hand, saw space in terms of the vertical and horizontal. The concept of space in the West was dominated by spatial measurements, while in the primitive world, space was experienced through orientation and perception. The Western artist's view of space is deeply ingrained in the concept of order, while the primitive artist's view is more fluid and less bound by linear space.
"A cell for citters to cit in."

The idea of detention in a closed space as a form of human punitive corrective action seems to have come in very much in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries— at the time perspective and pictorial space was developing in our Western world. The whole concept of enclosure as a means of constraint and as a means of classifying doesn’t work as well in our electronic world. The new feeling that people have about guilt is not something that can be privately assigned to some individual, but is, rather, something shared by everybody, in some mysterious way. This feeling seems to be returning to our midst. In tribal societies we are told that it is a familiar reaction, when some hideous event occurs, for some people to say, "How horrible it must be to feel like that," instead of blaming somebody for having done something horrible. This feeling is an aspect of the new mass culture we are moving into—a world of total involvement in which everybody is so profoundly involved with everybody else and in which nobody can really imagine what private guilt can be anymore.
Ours is a brand-new world of allatonteness. "Time" has ceased, "space" has vanished. We now live in a global village...a simultaneous happening. We are back in acoustic space. We have begun again to structure the primordial feeling, the tribal emotions from which a few centuries of literacy divorced us.

We have had to shift our stress of attention from action to reaction. We must now know in advance the consequences of any policy or action, since the results are experienced without delay. Because of electric speed, we can no longer wait and see. George Washington once remarked, "We haven't heard from Benj. Franklin in Paris this year. We should write him a letter."

At the high speeds of electric communication, purely visual means of apprehending the world are no longer possible; they are just too slow to be relevant or effective.

Unhappily, we confront this new situation with an enormous backlog of outdated mental and psychological responses. We have been left d-a-n-g-i-n-g. Our most impressive words and thoughts betray us— they refer us only to the past, not to the present.

Electric circuitry profoundly involves men with one another. Information pours upon us, instantaneously and continuously. As soon as information is acquired, it is very rapidly replaced by still newer information. Our electrically-configured world has forced us to move from the habit of data classification to the mode of pattern recognition. We can no longer build serially, block-by-block, step-by-step, because instant communication insures that all factors of the environment and of experience co-exist in a state of active interplay.
Solid integrated circuit enlarged several hundred times.
The new electronic interdependence recreates the world in the image of a global village.
We have now become aware of the possibility of arranging the entire human environment as a work of art, as a teaching machine designed to maximize perception and to make everyday learning a process of discovery. Application of this knowledge would be the equivalent of a thermostat controlling room temperature. It would seem only reasonable to extend such controls to all the sensory thresholds of our being. We have no reason to be grateful to those who juggle these thresholds in the name of haphazard innovation.

An astronomer looking through a 200-inch telescope exclaimed that it was going to rain. His assistant asked, "How can you tell?" "Because my corns hurt."

Environments are not passive wrappings, but are, rather, active processes which are invisible. The groundrules, pervasive structure, and over-all patterns of environments elude easy perception. Anti-environments, or countersituations made by artists, provide means of direct attention and enable us to see and understand more clearly. The interplay between the old and the new environments creates many problems and confusions. The main obstacle to a clear understanding of the effects of the new media is our deeply embedded habit of regarding all phenomena from a fixed point of view. We speak, for instance, of "gaining perspective." This psychological process derives unconsciously from print technology.

Print technology created the public. Electric technology created the mass. The public consists of separate individuals walking around with separate, fixed points of view. The new technology demands that we abandon the luxury of this posture, this fragmentary outlook.

The method of our time is to use not a single but multiple models for exploration—the technique of the suspended judgment is the discovery of the twentieth century as the technique of invention was the discovery of the nineteenth.
13. [Introduction]
Two Selections by Marshall McLuhan
The Galaxy Reconfigured
The Medium Is the Message

Marshall McLuhan's writings on media introduced terms and concepts that are now quite popular, and used in so many contexts that it can be difficult to figure out exactly what they were once supposed to mean. McLuhan's exhortation that "the medium is the message" is still repeated, often hollowly. The idea this phrase brought to the foreground in the 1960s—that media themselves overwhelm the importance of their "content"—is now an unspoken (and sometimes unexamined) assumption in today's vision of the world and in our understanding of our media ecology. Some of McLuhan's other striking contributions are laid out in the following excerpts from two of his most influential books. After describing how media extend human abilities and the human body itself, McLuhan distinguished between hot and cold media, which assert themselves in different ways and invite different sorts of engagement. McLuhan also argued that the culture was moving (because of our media transition) back toward tribal configurations, as he explained in one of two illustrated collaborations with Quentin Fiore: War and Peace in the Global Village—a book whose title gave politicians and pundits another famous phrase.

McLuhan saw his 350-page The Gutenberg Galaxy, the concluding chapter of which is presented here, as complementary with The Singer of Tales by Albert Bates Lord, a book that sought to describe the practice of oral literature—namely, the Homeric epics. McLuhan's point was to describe how typographic technology caused a shift in Western thought, as a starting point for understanding the current shifts brought about by what he called "electric" or "new" media. The media considered in Understanding Media, which appeared two years later, in 1964, include television and radio as well as weapons and clothing—although the digital computer did not earn its own chapter.

Understanding Media brought denouncements from those in traditional academic disciplines. Christopher Ricks, in a typical reply, wrote in McLuhan: Hot & Cool that "the style is a vicious fog, through which loom stumbling metaphors," and continued by bemoaning McLuhan's artistic taste and his idea that advertisements have artistic merit (215–216). One of Hans Magnus Enzensberger's denunciations of McLuhan is found in 018. Another harsh critic of Understanding Media— in 1967, at least — was Jean Baudrillard (V19). But Baudrillard began in the following decades to employ some of McLuhan's terminology and ideas in his own critical writing.

In declaring that popular media should be studied, and on their own terms, McLuhan achieved special fame to complement his popular infamy. Along with the ill-fated quiz show champion Charles Van Doren (whom McLuhan defended as behaving appropriately, with regard to the television medium), McLuhan was one of the first true celebrity academics. He was frequently discussed outside the academy and made a cameo appearance in Woody Allen's Annie Hall.

McLuhan appears on the masthead of Wired magazine as "patron saint," but McLuhan's irreverence was seen more clearly in Wired's spunky and ironic kid brother, the first Web daily, Suck ©, which ran for almost six years. Although McLuhan's style is not without precedent (his sometimes tentative explorations really continue the original concept of the essay from Montaigne), they are among the first modern academic writings to combine irreverence and serious thought overtly, as seen in McLuhan's intentional misquotation of Shakespeare in the second of the following selections.
While McLuhan's theories can be applied to the computer in its manipulations of different media or in its appearance as a new medium, the shift he described, from book culture to a culture of electronic media, has certainly taken place already. Looking at McLuhan's explorations, although they are directed at earlier types of "new media," is sure to aid in understanding our world's further transitions from analog to digital media. Even if McLuhan's exhortations to ignore content completely are not persuasive, it certainly makes sense at times to consider the medium on its own. Besides reminding us of the excitement of transitional times and providing us with useful and powerful ideas for thinking about our media environment, McLuhan also shows us, by example, another significant point: it is important to have fun and to explore new ways of thinking a bit, rather than always asserting, arguing, and sifting the new into old categories—and it helps to not take yourself too seriously.

—NM

McLuhan's influence remains strong in today's media writing, among enthusiasts of new media and those who are less ebullient about its prospects. Neil Postman, for instance, writes in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, "this book is an inquiry into and lamentation about the most significant American cultural fact of the second half of the twentieth century: the decline of the Age of Typography and the ascendancy of the Age of Television. This change-over has dramatically and irreversibly shifted the content and meaning of public discourse, since two media so vastly different cannot accommodate the same ideas. . . If all of this sounds suspiciously like Marshall McLuhan's aphorism, the medium is the message, I will not disavow the association . . . he spoke in the tradition of Orwell and Huxley—that is, as a prophet, and I have remained steadfast to his teaching that the clearest way to see through a culture is to attend to its tools for conversation" (8).

Further Reading


Original Publication


The Galaxy Reconfigured or the Plight of Mass Man in an Individualist Society

Marshall McLuhan

The present volume has employed a mosaic pattern of perception and observation up till now. William Blake can provide the explanation and justification of this procedure. Jerusalem, like so much of his other poetry, is concerned with the changing patterns of human perception. Book II, chapter 34, of the poem contains the pervasive theme:

If Perceptive organs vary, Objects of Perception seem to vary
If the Perceptive Organs close, their Objects seem to close also.

Determined as he was to explain the causes and effects of psychic change, both personal and social, he arrived long ago at the theme of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*:

The Seven Nations fled before him: they became what they beheld.

Blake makes quite explicit that when sense ratios change, men change. Sense ratios change when any one sense or bodily or mental function is externalized in technological form:

The Spectre is the Reasoning Power in Man, & when separated
From Imagination and closing itself as in steel in a Ratio
Of the Things of Memory, It thence frames Laws & Morals
To destroy Imagination, the Divine Body, by Martyrdoms & Wars."