

# UNDERSTANDING MCLUHAN: THE TIMES AND RELEVANCE

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**Abstract** *Marshall Herbert McLuhan (1911–1980) was a Canadian writer and communication expert. He was quite famous for a lot of quotes and aphorisms, and, in 1960s, was celebrated for his catchphrase “the medium is the message.” McLuhan’s reasoning about the medium that the information it carries or disseminates can influence or control society was much debated, discussed and criticised as well. His work is referred to be the cornerstone of media theory and his term “global village” lived its fame and is still transcending. This paper attempts to study the relevance and influence of McLuhan’s philosophy and tries to correlate the significance of his various aphorisms, i.e., the terms he used. His contribution as a theorist and media/communication expert as well as an influential advocate of media determinism, remains ever persuasive. Essentially, his key concepts provide a revised outlook as proven by the time and technology we see today. Nothing truly could push him aside and this outwardly pop-cult-scientist-cum-metaphysician seems ever accurate and relevant in the times we live in.*

**Keywords:** *Communication, Medium, Message, Hot Media, Cold Media, Technological Determinism, Global Village*

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1950s, no one could have imagined the future of science and technology, as it is vivid today. The advancements were unimaginable and new gadgets were being invented, which complemented and supplemented the existing machinery. Today, we see media convergence taking place almost everywhere. No one could have ever anticipated the role it would play in our lives but Marshall Herbert McLuhan could anticipate it as early as the time when media was not so pervasive. We have a magic tool in our hands which can take us anywhere in this celestial galaxy – the tool of Internet. The invention was almost greatly predicted by one of the famous communication theorists of the century. In 1964, McLuhan aptly remarked that: “The hybrid or meeting of two media is a moment of truth and revelation from which new form is born.” He also said, “When one medium uses another, it is the user that is the ‘content’.” That is what is actually happening now to technology and science. Things constantly change their shape, size and compatibility, and this interchangeability has suitably revolutionized the world we live in. If we talk of TV and what this invention has done and is still capable of doing, McLuhan perfectly foretold the advantages of this box. He said,

*“We have to ask what TV can do, in the instruction of English or physics or any other subject, that the classroom cannot do as presently constituted. The answer is that TV can deeply involve youth in the process of learning, illustrating graphically the complex*

*interplay of people and events, the development of forms, the multileveled interrelationships between and among such arbitrarily segregated subjects as biology, geography, mathematics, anthropology, history, literature and languages.”*

McLuhan was a media determinist. He was quite influential with his thoughts about evolution and advancement of technology. He believed that technology could easily alter and condition our society and, thus, bring various changes. Today, we have social networking sites or social media platforms, where the user is not only a user but a ‘prosumer’ who produces the content as well as consumes it. The entire world is just a click away for him or her. Well, in our times of Facebook and YouTube, we apparently see that McLuhan couldn’t be more visionary and that his prophecies precisely match what we are witnessing today. When McLuhan said that books would be pushed aside by the advent of electric media and that the technology was inevitable, many got irritated and labeled him as a paradoxical fellow. This prophecy at the time was out of context and seemed far away from being true. But with time, the interpretations of such a prophecy came out as a sound argument in various academic circles around the globe. McLuhan talked about medium as the message giving little significance to content. The concept didn’t go well with many theorists and media people in general. Criticism multiplied for his works but as a gentleman, he never repudiated his concepts or dialogues; moreover, he remained open to change any of his concepts or statements upon probing.

In a much-hyped Playboy Interview in 1969, McLuhan opened up exclusively, explaining many of his concepts in a more straightforward manner (Playboy- March 1969).

*“Before anyone could perceive the electric form of the information revolution, McLuhan was publishing brilliant explanations of the perceptual changes being experienced by the users of mass media. He seemed futuristic to some and an enemy of print and literacy to others. He was, in reality, a deeply literate man of astonishing prescience.”* (Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone, 2005)

Of course, there were critiques as well. For example, Eric & Frank (2005) in their book say that,

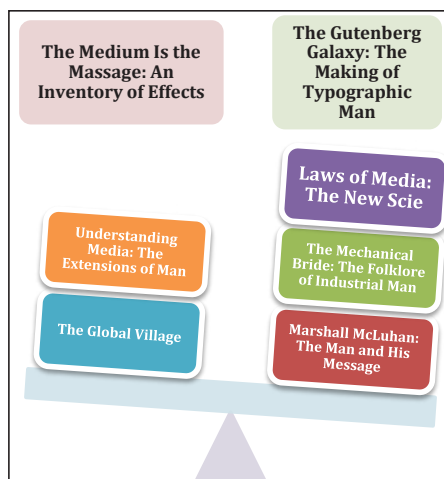
*“At one point, in the late 1960s, a rumour surfaced that a major U.S. magazine had put out a contract on McLuhan and was offering big money for a name who would waste him in print.”*

McLuhan himself accepted that he was primarily interested in exploring rather than explaining new ideas. He was typically fond of metaphors and aphorisms.

Levinson, P. (1999) supplements:

*“His books are composed of short, interlinking sections rather than sequential chapters, and are similar to the ‘acoustic’ environment of an online discussion. He considered spoken conversation the basis of human communication, and the form of his discourse thus exemplifies what he wanted to convey.”*

Douglas Coupland (2010) recounts in his book that McLuhan was famous in way that no one could have ignored him. In 1960s especially, McLuhan used to be loved, praised, hated, criticized and, at the same time, he was favorite among the youth. He was the icon of the pop culture and once *New York Herald Tribune* acknowledged him as the most important thinker since Newton, Darwin, Freud, Einstein and Pavlov.



Some Major Works by McLuhan

## WHAT MARSHALL MCLUHAN MEANT AND ITS RELEVANCE

McLuhan was famous for his puns, metaphors and aphorisms. He had a lot to narrate about almost everything especially concerning communication, media and literature. He talked about types of media: hot and cold, medium being the message, his thoughts about global village, media's rear view mirror and much more. He even appeared in a movie "Annie Hall" (1977).

## MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

This quote from McLuhan is perhaps the most famous from all the work that he did in communications. It is so famous that every academic must have heard it, read it or tried to glean its meaning. It was actually said by McLuhan when he was trying to correlate the importance of medium and the content it carries with it. He claimed that the content has a diminutive effect on society but at the same time did not depreciate the importance of it. The message contained in the medium may distract us from the medium itself, but has lesser impact than the medium that transmits it. The book 'Medium is the Message' by Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore had more to tell about this aphorism and was sharply reacted to many readers, writers and critics.

McLuhan believed that personal and social consequences of any medium, which he assumed to be human extension, were heavily altered by the machines or technology used by humans.

Frank and Eric (2005) observe that,

*“Several years after his original emphasis on the importance of the ‘medium’ over the ‘message’, it is interesting to note that the most popular shows on television are shows about shows in which the hidden ground of the medium becomes the ironic content of a show without an obvious story line.”*

They further interpret that:

*“The perception of reality now depends upon the structure of information. The form of each medium is associated with a different arrangement, or ratio, among the senses, which creates new forms of awareness. These perceptual transformations, the new ways of experiencing that each medium creates, occur in the user regardless of the program content. This is what the paradox, ‘the medium is the message’ means.”*

## GLOBAL VILLAGE

Another famous term verbalized by McLuhan is that of global village. This was certainly a case where he as a genius

was well ahead of his time in predicting the advent of an era that would be electronically connected to each other like a huge “Global Village.” Presently, if we assume this prophecy and put it to a divine test, it appears to be amazingly true. The entire world is undoubtedly connected to each other via media and the kernel is electronic in nature.

Frank Zingrone and Eric McLuhan (2005) put it forward in Essential McLuhan as,

*“Not only have his ideas endured, they have retained their primacy in communication theory. Still, no one knows better than he how electric process transforms reality. Now that we too can see so much of what he perceived, it is possible, for example, to discuss “discarnate existence” with a young person who has spent the morning surfing the Internet in search of his invisible friends around the “Global Village,” or who appreciates, almost instinctively, how all media translate reality.”*

During an interview, McLuhan meticulously warranted compensations and perils of the concept of the global village. The same we witness today and the discord or the communion that we share today stem out of the electronic environment. He said:

*“The global-village conditions being forged by the electric technology stimulate more discontinuity and diversity and division than the old mechanical, standardized society; in fact, the global village makes maximum disagreement and creative dialog inevitable. Uniformity and tranquility are not hallmarks of the global village; far more likely are conflict and discord as well as love and harmony—the customary life mode of any tribal people.”*

## HOT AND COLD MEDIA

Besides talking about the impact of electronic media and the material that it carries on to transmit to the viewers or its audiences, McLuhan also got much debated about his terms such as Hot and Cool media. Hot he used for high definition of information. He described media as extensions of their human users (senses) and defined hot media as high definition meaning abundance of information or data. Similarly, cool medium comparatively, is filled with less information or is a low definition. Here in case of cool media, the end-users have to participate actively to compensate for the lack of information. By definition, “Cool” media needs active participation rather than “Hot” media, which is already full of information and therefore needs less participation from users. This also speaks of interpretation or understanding of the content. It is easy to interpret or comprehend the content in Hot media than Cold media.

Frank Zingrone and Eric McLuhan (2005) explain the definition as,

*“McLuhan’s famous distinction between ‘hot’ and ‘cool’ media referred to the different sensory effects associated with media of higher or lower definition. ‘Hot’ media (radio, photography, cinema) are more full of information and allow less involvement of the user; ‘cool’ media (telephone, cartoons, television) are less full of information and allow much greater sensory participation by the user.”*

They further attempt to elucidate the definition of hot and cool media as postulated by McLuhan:

*“A photograph is high definition or hot; whereas a cartoon is low definition or cool, because the rough outline drawing provides very little visual data and requires the viewer to fill in or complete the image himself. The telephone, which gives the ear relatively little data, is thus cool, as is speech; both demand considerable filling in by the listener. On the other hand, radio is a hot medium because it sharply and intensely provides great amounts of high-definition auditory information that leaves little or nothing to be filled in by the audience.” (Frank & Eric, 2005)*

In conclusion, it is rather baffling that with such limited resources at the time in terms of technological advancements, at such a juncture of his era, McLuhan could easily predict unexpected soreness that electronic media would bring along with it. He hinted about violence in the form of identity crisis, quest for privatization or corporatization; the viewpoint that the social or commercial electronic culture can bring to the fore. The following statement so vividly elaborates this,

*“The instant nature of electric-information movement is decentralizing – rather than enlarging – the family of man into a new state of multitudinous tribal existences. Particularly in countries where literate values are deeply institutionalized, this is a highly traumatic process, since the clash of the old segmented visual culture and the new integral electronic culture creates a crisis of identity, a vacuum of the self, which generates tremendous violence – violence that is simply an identity quest, private or corporate, social or commercial.” (Playboy interview, 1969)*

Similarly, talking about global communion and integration, McLuhan easily prophesized about computers bringing the whole world together electronically. When asked about global telepathy he answered as if he knew about computers in its entirety. He knew what computers or electronic gadgets would carry us to.

*“Already, computers offer the potential of instantaneous translation of any code or language*

*into any other code or language. If a data feedback is possible through the computer, why not a feed-forward of thought whereby a world consciousness links into a world computer?"*

He further says, "The computer holds out the promise of a technologically engendered state of universal understanding and unity, a state of absorption in the logos that could knit mankind into one family and create perpetuity of collective harmony and peace."

Talking to McLuhan must have been mystifying for the interviewers, as if they were talking to a foreteller. Whether he talked about cybernetics, computers, electronic media, re-tribalization, youth, social transformations, global village, medium and message, hot and cool media, TV etc., all sounded sci-fi to people around at that time because the story was too good to be fictionalized.

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