

From X-Ray Units as Space Heaters to iPods as Storage Devices

By Christy Dena

Marshall McLuhan was peculiar in that he saw the effects of media as the media was emerging. Unlike the pervasive methodology of the time, he didn't analyse through a 'rear-view mirror' and instead practiced an 'anthropology of the present' (Heyer, 2000: 98). He not only saw wrinkles on the embryo, he saw throughout time a pattern to moments of media creation. He championed this staccato view of the present for over three decades, inspiring my mother when she was studying her undergraduate degree. And now, as a media studies and narratology researcher, I return to McLuhan to read his postcards from a present apparently past. I can only honour this perspective by offering my own unique present viewpoint of McLuhan's insights. The goals of this review therefore are twofold: to provide insight into the unique aspects of this publication and to provide some content in the form of a juxtaposition of McLuhan's theories with the current media ecology.

Understanding Me is a selection of never before published lectures and interviews recorded between 1959 and 1979. Published in 2003, forty-one years after its namesake *Understanding Media*, it is edited by his daughter, Stephanie McLuhan and David Staines, with an introductory essay by Tom Wolfe. Each transcript is prefaced with contextual information (often with the words of Tom Wolfe) that is helpful but teasingly deficient; for the eager scholar, where possible footnotes on McLuhan's references are provided.

Wolfe frames the collection with tales from the heady times at Silicon Valley in the 1990s: billionaires in 'leather boating moccasins without socks,' Bill Gates and *Wired*; and how they looked back to McLuhan's *Understanding Media* published some thirty years previously to have their environment explained (xi). He guides the reader through a

quick but thorough chronology of his personal life: his mother's academic fetish, his conversion to Catholicism, his intellectual influences, how Howard Gossage brought McLuhan to the press and advertising industry in America, and how the New York intellectuals dubbed him as "not serious". But Wolfe ends his foreword with a warning: as new communications theorists arise, regardless of the media they're observing, '[f]irst they will have to content with McLuhan' (xxii). Sleeves up.

The collection is presented chronologically, and begins with a talk delivered by McLuhan in 1959 to a room of educators: *Electronic Revolution: Revolutionary Effects of New Media*. He spoke of how people now live in 'classrooms without walls' and how the access students have to information outside the classroom as made 'the teacher the provider no longer of information but of insight, and the student not the consumer but the co-teacher' (1). It is now the task of educators, McLuhan implores, to train 'the young in mastery of the new global media' (9). Fast-forward or hyperlink to 2006 where many universities now forbid undergraduate students from citing content sourced from Internet in their essays. Rather than educate students on how to filter information, the Internet has matured, by implication, from a 'humble servant' to being hostile surplus. McLuhan also envisioned the 'emergence of a global community of learning' (12). Indeed, a student now can watch streaming lectures from universities all around the world in virtual worlds, through webcasts and podcasts, but they cannot enrol in a transuniversity degree.

Two years after McLuhan's book on the effects of typography was published, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan was invited to give a lecture at the *Symposium on Cybernetics and Society: 'Cybernetics and Human Culture'*. Here, McLuhan invokes a range of topics to illustrate his views: Neolithic time, Volkswagens, Kierkegaard, Plato, *Alice in Wonderland* and *Telstar*. He speaks of the artist as 'the "antennae" of the race', a continuing theme of his talks and writings, and how 'dropouts are often the brightest people in class'. McLuhan's talks are a free-flow of information he feels we should know.

Two years after *Understanding Media* and a year before the co-written book with Quentin Fiore, McLuhan is already playing with his own aphorisms at a public lecture at the Kaufman Art Gallery titled 'The Medium is the Massage' (1966). Although McLuhan does speak about Art, and how the Symbolists 'discovered that the meaning of a work of art was not as conveyor or a package, but the meaning of this was as a probe, an exploratory probe into the outer world' (92), it is clear from this transcript and the others in the collection that regardless of the audience McLuhan tried to bundle all his views in every engagement. Sure, in the NBC appearances, *What TV Does Best* (1976) and *TV as a Debating Medium* (1976), McLuhan analyses various presidency campaigns according to the candidates use of media and offers practical advice that even Howard Dean would find helpful. In *Open Mind Surgery* (1967) and *The End of the Work Ethic* (1972) McLuhan addressed business audiences and regals them with observations that how 'when information becomes totally environmental and instantaneous, it is impossible to have monopolies of knowledge or specialism' (204). But how education and business changes, the role of the artist, the effects of print, radio, TV and film, Canadian jokes, popular culture, slang and simultaneity are constant totems. He was a man on a mission.

McLuhan's rhetoric has been the subject of criticism levelled against him. In academia at the time, where specialism and 'rear-view' analysis reigned, McLuhan was making the object of analysis something that couldn't be proven and used media-friendly catch-phrases. I cannot help but wonder if McLuhan was at his peak now, would he have a blog, wiki, podcast and mobsite pushing all these ideas through an RSS feed? Rather than orator behind a mahogany plinth or leaning on a leather chair in a studio, would McLuhan be streaming through a floating avatar in a pixelated lecture theatre in an online game, warning everyone of the fatal mistake of treating an iPod as a storage device? Or would he be warning intellectuals of the fatal mistake of treating aphorisms as academic argument?

In this networked age, where there is hardly an academic without a website and the rise of a-list research bloggers, McLuhan's attempt to straddle academia and the public with

the same terms is a contemporary concern. Once in the public eye, how can an academic be free to get it wrong? In 2000, David P. Marshall argued that

‘The ultimate utility of McLuhan in the digital age can be thought of not so much in terms of his provocative remarks *per se*, but in terms of his own form of mediation. In other words, what is interesting about McLuhan is his intellectual/public practice and not his content and whether it can withstand serious scrutiny. His mediation *is* the message.’ (Marshall, 2000: 31)

This collection is an intravenous link to his mediation.

There is utility in his content however too. What is du jour in the current media climate is what McLuhan described in the 1977 talk show discussion with Mike McManus, as a ‘media ecology’: ‘it means arranging various media to help each other so they won’t cancel each other out, to buttress one medium with another’ (271). Decades after such observations the entertainment and advertising industries are suddenly panicking over fragmented audiences. With the range of media available, how can a message get through? McLuhan’s insights into the message (read: affordances) of print, TV, radio and film are incisive and still highly relevant in this age of cross-media production.

A critique of the book? It’s a book! Don’t get my wrong, I love books. I understand completely why David Staines saw the ‘literary potential of the audiovisual material’ (xxv). But I am ‘accustomed to a Niagra of data’ (52), a cross-media researcher with a Technorati-MySpace-LinkedIn-SecondLife profile, reading the times-new-roman transcripts of talks presented in other media by the grandfather of media studies. I wanted the text AND the image AND the sound. So, being a media-octopus with a carnivorous appetite, I complimented the font experience with video excerpts from the *Understanding McLuhan* CD-Rom (McLuhan, 1996) and Tom Wolfe’s documentary, screened at *Ars Electronica* in 2005 (Kerckhove, 2005). Sometimes I read a transcript and then the video, sometimes I read the transcript whilst listening to the video and sometimes I switched between the two. This satisfied my hunger for a somewhat embodied, or at least ‘discarnate’ McLuhan and helped me understand McLuhan. The comparative approach also helped me appreciate the transcripts in the book as they are, unlike the videos, completely unedited insights into McLuhan’s mind as he responds in the moment.

In his final lecture, *Man and Media*, delivered one year before his death, at the York University in Toronto, McLuhan warns about how ‘we cannot trust our instincts or our natural physical responses to new things’ (284). He invokes Edgar Allan Poe’s short story ‘A Descent into the Maelström’, and the image of the sailor who is caught in the middle of a storm.

‘He sees that his boat will be sucked down into this thing. He begins to study the action of the *ström*, and observes that some things disappear and some things reappear. By studying those things that reappear and attaching himself to one of them, he saves himself. Pattern recognition in the midst of a huge, over-whelming, destructive force is the way out of the maelstrom. The huge vortices of energy created by our media present us with similar possibilities of evasion of consequences of destruction. By studying the patterns of the effects of this huge vortex of energy in which we are involved, it may be possible to program a strategy of evasion and survival.’ (285)

McLuhan was to outline a ‘new survival approach’ in his ‘forthcoming’ book that was never published *Laws of the Media*. In the meantime, he offered framing questions to assist researchers to understand the effects of any technology:

1. What do the technology amplify, enhance, or enlarge?
2. What does it obsolesce?
3. What does it retrieve or bring back from a distant past? (probably something that was scrapped earlier).
4. What does it flip or suddenly reverse into when pushed to its limits?(287)

He mentioned that he hoped readers would offer improvements to the method. In 2005, Derrick de Kerckhove, the Director of the McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto, gave a special-format presentation at a premier arts event *Ars Electronica* (Kerckhove, 2005). The talk, titled *McLuhan still dead? 25 years later*, provided an overview of McLuhan to the artists, an audience de Kerckhove noted McLuhan would be thrilled with. De Kerckhove mentioned the ‘brain attack which had prevented him in the last nine or ten months of his life from speaking, reading and writing. A very interesting condition for one of the world’s masters of communication.’ Fortunately McLuhan did speak and write when he could to as many people he could.

McLuhan’s ideas gives us an insight into the relationship between media and society; McLuhan’s discourse gives us an insight into how an observer communicates these

insights to those embosomed; this collection of McLuhan's lectures delivered to and talks with educators, TV presenters, artists, businesspeople and students, gives us an insight into how an intellectual mediates their message. It provides, as Stephanie McLuhan observed, a 'more accessible, even unmediated encounter than is possible through his books' (xxvi). *Understanding Me* is a functional compliment to an existing library of McLuhan and is rich and reachable for the uninitiated. I feel I understand McLuhan more but more importantly, I feel he understands me.

References

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Christy Dena is a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney, Australia. She is investigating how the design and analysis of entertainment has changed in the age of cross-media production.

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