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MARSHALL MCLUHAN, WHAT WERE YOU DOIN'?

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Shortly after publishing *Understanding Media* in 1964, Marshall McLuhan appeared before a New York audience and casually predicted the invention of the iPhone headset: "There might come a day when we [will]...all have portable computers, about the size of a hearing aid, to help us mesh our personal experience with the experience of the great wired brain of the outer world."¹

HERE COMES EVERYBODY

The great wired world of which he spoke came to be more commonly referred to as "the global village," a term he coined and by which he meant *electronic interdependence*. McLuhan anticipated that all electronic media, taken together, would restructure the world as we know it. Information would flow instantaneously from one situation to another, from every quarter of the Earth, electronically transforming the far-flung peoples of the world into one interconnected community analogous to a small village.

In this new environment, whatever happens to anybody, happens to everybody.² He saw it as the externalization of the human subconscious on a global scale, and it was coming together in his lifetime. He said soon the "new society will be one mythic integration, a resonating world akin to the old tribal echo chamber where magic will live again; a world of ESP."³

The planet was now connecting up into a single tribe where speech, drum, and ear would live again through everywhere-at-once technologies. World events would echo daily from the tribal drum. Indeed, the everywhere media have borne this out. "Princess Di was killed today in a terrible automobile accident." Boom. Boom. Boom. "I did not have relations with that woman, Monica Lewinsky." Boom. Boom. Boom. "Osama bin Laden was shot in the head today." Boom. Boom. Boom.

This year marks the media guru's one-hundredth birthday. Had he not died in 1980, he no doubt would be on Oprah today saying, "I told you this was coming."

WHAT WERE YOU DOIN'?

McLuhan's meteoric rise to fame was due in part to his uncanny ability to deliver jaw-dropping one-liners. His ideas about man and media often took the form of "probes," which he tossed out like grenades. Neil Postman, an intellectual child of McLuhan, said

of him, "He was the first writer I had ever encountered who could write a sentence in which the words Plato, Erasmus, Batman, and the Beatles could find a coherent place."⁴

His best known phrases—McLuhanisms, as they came to be called—included "hot" and "cool" media, "the medium is the message," and, of course, "the global village." He said peculiar things like, "The Finn cycle of tribal institutions can return in the electric age, but if again, then let's make it a wake or awake or both."⁵ (This particular line is a reference to James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, a work McLuhan said paralleled his own understanding of human communication and his cyclical view of history.)

Statements such as these made him a charlatan to some and a genius to others. Since he was underscoring the importance of the new electronic media, the entertainment industry gladly embraced him. Woody Allen gave McLuhan a cameo in his movie *Annie Hall*, in which he quips, "You know nothing of my work!" During episodes of *Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In*, Henry Gibson would occasionally look into the camera and ask, "Marshall McLuhan, what are you doin'?"

IT'S A LOOP

Although McLuhan's ideas sometimes left audiences scratching their heads, when one stands back and surveys his entire work, an overarching narrative comes into view. McLuhan believed all technologies were extensions of our bodies: the fork is an extension of the hand, the chair is an extension of the spine, the automobile is an extension of the foot, and so forth. There had been three major technological innovations in human communication that had dramatically reshaped society: the phonetic alphabet, moveable type, and electronic media. Each of these innovations disrupted man's sensory balance. The phonetic alphabet jolted tribal man to eye dominance and produced societies that were characteristically individualistic. The printing press radically altered the world with its capacity to reproduce information in unlimited quantities and at much faster speeds, enhancing individualism, specialization, and fragmentation.

One of McLuhan's observations about media is that it can reverse the effects it creates. The printing press gave rise to industrialism, which ironically gave rise to the new electronic world, which shares characteristics with primitive oral cultures. History was a kind of loop that had moved from tribe, to anti-tribe, to electronic tribe. While the alphabet and moveable type extended the eye, the world of electronic media is the externalization of the human subconscious on a global scale. "Now man is beginning to wear his brain outside his skull and his nerves outside his skin, new technology breeds new man."⁶

BEHOLD THE VORTEX!

McLuhan's narrative is one of both loss and redemption that is reminiscent of the biblical story of Paradise, Expulsion, and Paradise Regained.⁷ While he usually appeared optimistic about where the new media was heading, there was also a more pessimistic McLuhan lurking in the shadows. He was an Old World Catholic who said

things could go either way — Christ or chaos: “The extensions of man’s consciousness induced by the electric media could conceivably usher in the millennium, but it also holds the potential for realizing the Anti-Christ—Yeats’s rough beast, its hour come round at last...slouching toward Bethlehem to be born.”⁸

Toward the end of his life, he contemplated the possibilities of apocalypse. The more he thought about it, the more he saw how the global village presented itself as a “world between fantasy and dream” where the self would be swallowed up in a world of images.⁹ The destruction of our private identities produced the unpleasant consequence of fostering children incapable of civilized pursuits: “I myself think they are sinking into a kind of world where satisfactions are pathetically crude and feeble, compared to the ones we took for granted thirty years ago....Their kicks are on a seven- or eight-year-old level.”¹⁰ He complained that children raised on television seem “aimless, undisciplined, and illiterate.”¹¹

McLuhan said the electronic age was like being caught in a powerful whirlpool. He believed the only way to survive a world predicated on constant change was to stand back and scrutinize its patterns. His methodology was a matter of *seeing*, and he compared what he was doing to Edgar Allen Poe’s “A Descent into the Maelstrom.” In Poe’s story a sailor is caught in the tentacles of a vortex. While pondering his fate, the sailor notices how some objects remained at the surface and were not affected by the current. The sailor secures himself to a barrel, abandons his boat, and saves himself from drowning.

Like the sailor in Poe’s story, McLuhan believed we also must learn to stand outside the remarkable forces that swirl around us and ponder their effects. Only then can we keep ourselves from being sucked down into an electronic vortex.

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NOTES

- 1 Philip Marchand, *Marshall McLuhan* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 180.
- 2 Matie Molinaro, Corinne McLuhan, and William Toyne, eds., *Letters of Marshall McLuhan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 253.
- 3 Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone, eds., *Essential McLuhan* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 261.
- 4 Neil Postman, “Foreword,” in Marchand, *Marshall McLuhan*, x.
- 5 Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium Is the Message: An Inventory of Effects* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), 120.
- 6 McLuhan and Zingrone, eds., *Essential McLuhan*, 264–65.
- 7 Postman, in Marchand, *Marshall McLuhan*, ix.
- 8 McLuhan and Zingrone, eds., *Essential McLuhan*, 268.
- 9 See Marchand, *Marshall McLuhan*, 249.

10 Quoted in Ibid.

11 See Marchand, *Marshall McLuhan*, 249.