

In 1961, the name of Marshall McLuhan was unknown to everyone but his English students at the University of Toronto and a coterie of academic admirers who followed his abstruse articles in small-circulation quarterlies. But then came two remarkable books *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and *Understanding Media* (1964) – and the graying professor from Canada's western hinterlands soon found himself characterized by the *San Francisco Chronicle* as "the hottest academic property around." He has since won a world-wide following for his brilliant and frequently baffling theories about the impact of the media on man; and his name has entered the French language as *mcluhanisme*, a synonym for the world of pop culture.

Though his books are written in a difficult style at once enigmatic, epigrammatic and overgrown with arcane literary and historic allusions the revolutionary ideas lurking in them have made McLuhan a best-selling author. Despite protests from a legion of outraged scholastics and old-guard humanists who claim that McLuhan's ideas range from demented to dangerous, his free-for-all theorizing has attracted the attention of top executives at General Motors (who paid him a handsome fee to inform them that automobiles were a thing of the past), Bell Telephone (to whom he explained that they didn't really understand the function of the telephone) and a leading package-design house (which was told that packages will soon be obsolete). Anteing up \$5000, another huge corporation asked him to predict via closed-circuit television what their own products will be used for in the future; and Canada's turned-on Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau engages him in monthly bull sessions designed to improve his television image.

(From introduction to *Interview with M. McLuhan, Playboy*, 1969)

## McLUHANISM IN 1990s JURAJ HVORECKÝ

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**At the beginning of the 90s the world suddenly rediscovered the message of Marshall McLuhan. Why was this mysterious person rediscovered and newly reevaluated only after more than twenty five years, which have passed since the publication of his basic work?**

The answer is to be found in several parallel reasons. Immediately after its publication the book *Understanding Media* became a bestseller and at the same time it became almost the subject of a cult for any intellectual discussion. Unfortunately, the book was not followed by any other significant text, so the author has slowly and inevitably been forgotten. The book was so innovative, that even the academic community, the traditional place for the restoration of the status of similarly provocative texts, have not got involved in a continuation of the myth. Its inactivity could be justified by the fact that in the time of publication there was still no scientific field which would be able to absorb McLuhan's ideas. The theory of the media, which McLuhan started, was soberly hidden in various academic departments, including those of journalism, sociology and philosophy. The attention of academic circles was only about to turn toward mass communication and mass culture generally and therefore the message of the book was distributed among several circles, but the author's general intention remained unnoticed. It is remarkable to notice (and it is even more true in our country) that even today most media departments are oriented toward practice, not toward theory.

It is interesting to look at the relationship of the book *Understanding Media* to an intellectual movement which started almost exactly at the time of its publication, namely postmodernism. It is a shocking discovery to find that the postmodernists did not pay attention to any of McLuhan's work. Regardless of the similarity between their topics nobody with the sole exception of Umberto Eco bothered to search whether there was anyone else except for a few French who is interested in topics such as pluralism, interculturalism and conditions of communication. (However, I am suspicious that in the case of Umberto Eco his knowledge of McLuhan has a different explanation. This Italian knows all books, so therefore with a logical necessity he also knows this one.)

In spite of this, McLuhan helped to understand the cultural background of new topics of postmodernism in at least two areas. On the one hand, he has succeeded in explaining the mass character of many media, their non-elite profile and

the tension between the senders and receivers of media messages. On the other hand, and this might be even more important for the theory of postmodern culture, he was the first person to turn around the judgmental stereotypes of intellectuals toward the subject of the advertisement. The advertisement was his great topic and many contemporary ad creators still praise him. His claims 'Did you notice that most people watch advertisements for products they already own?' or 'All advertising advertises advertising' were strong enough to change the climate in the area of commenting on the advertisement market. Until the arrival of McLuhan, advertising was considered to be nothing more than an inappropriate fill up of mass media's space, which has one ultimate goal to force people to buy still newer (and often unnecessary) goods. This view was so widespread, that an average intellectual did not even try to say anything about it. Because of its allegedly manipulative role with some of the lowest human instincts, it was viewed as an intellectual taboo. Advertising was supposed to be harmful, aggressive and empty. Toronto circle members, led by Marshall McLuhan, did not take these stereotypical accusations seriously and that helped them to understand advertising in new terms. They took it to be a self-sustained media unit, whose content is not determined by a relation producer-consumer, but also includes symbolic units from other parts of culture; uses specific narrative procedures; in a way closes itself by referring toward other advertisements and by cyclic repetition creates an independent entity. That determining its cause as a label for consumerism is an extreme oversimplification was shown by the huge expansion of the massmedia since the sixties.

Progressive advertisements are everything but a simple message of a producer to a consumer to buy a new product. Familiar are serial advertisements, ads which help artists to place themselves in music charts, charts of ads, unclear ads, with aims which remain almost undecipherable. The advertisement space has coincided with the information space and the aggressiveness and harmfulness of the former one can only be taken seriously if we also take into account the aggressiveness and harmfulness of the information broadcasted in-between advertisements. Let me only remind you that the question of whether the entire coverage of The Gulf War was just an advertisement for the American military and politics, is not considered provocative anymore. Condemnation of advertising was strongly connected to a view about the existence of two images of reality, the real one and the false one. McLuhan and his colleagues have successfully demonstrated that the medium is not a substance, which is to be blamed for a content, but a message, which fills up its content randomly. Self-sufficiency of the advertising message was confirmed by the market. Creators of spots and logos soon discovered that repetition of same procedures will not help them to achieve their goal (the goal, at least partly, will always be selling goods). Big money and freedom in creation in the advertising business has attracted the best artists and so the advertisement has exactly followed the McLuhanian path from a reference to an image.

So far I have mostly given reasons why the book *Understanding media* was not taken so seriously just a few years ago. It is time now to show why the nineties caught up and brought it back to our attention. Several things have caused this to happen, but as I am going to show later, I consider one of them the most important.

A new intellectual background in the social sciences surely counts among important factors in reacknowledging McLuhan's work in the 90s. Findings in intercultural anthropological research, the sociology and history of everyday life and other areas have significantly changed our views on the determining factors of social and historical changes. The attention was switched from small groups of individuals who were supposed to make great acts of history, to the ordinary person who, according to then-existing paradigms, was just carried along by the stream of historical events. Mass phenomena ceased to be marginalized. The theory of media as presented by McLuhan is exactly such a reconstruction of this everyday history, in which printing or the telephone does not influence just white rich Anglo-Saxons, but everybody, because a new medium is his or her natural extension. If the intellectual mood of the 90s was directly positively attached to such a theory, this at least provided a better environment for recognition of the author than that which existed at the time of the publication of his book. However, the main reason for a new McLuhanian boom happened to be an unexpected event. It was suddenly demonstrated that his theory has a strong predicative value.

McLuhan succeeded in a situation where most of his colleagues, daring to create a universal interpretation of human affairs, fail. Before McLuhan, there were many attempts to find a connection between seemingly unconnected events of the human history. However, when a new era with new events came almost all of them failed, because this era completely refuted all consequences of the previous attempts. In the 90s in the case of McLuhan the truth has appeared to be on his side. The reality has coincided with the theory. A new medium was born.

It is useless to search whether McLuhan predicted the Internet in its present shape or not. He was not technically gifted and the truth is that except for a small number of visionaries (it is necessary to mention at least Nicholas Negroponte), ten years ago nobody foresaw the Internet boom. Much more important is the fact, that the new medium has all features McLuhan noticed in the older media. The Internet in fact pushed all the basic claims of his book

Understanding Media and many other remarks by the author on the media of the future to their extreme. It is clear now that his functional understanding of media features fits the Internet perfectly. The Internet became the extension of human beings in the most fundamental sense. It helped to spread them all over the planet, facilitated communication, made possible the conquest of uninhabited spaces of a cyberspace and freed them completely from a feeling of being restricted to a particular space. It extended them to infinity. The global village, probably the most profound McLuhanian term, was successfully created. The city as the center of all doings has disappeared. The medium of the Internet does not extend only to urban educated people, but to virtually everybody. If predictions about a billion Internet users at the beginning of the next century are legitimate, then they have to include a significant portion of the Third World inhabitants. It is remarkable that the symbol of the world of papyri before the invention of a bookprinting, namely the Alexandrian Library, was not destroyed even after Gutenberg and actually not even several centuries after his death. The library remained the center of knowledge for much too long. However, with the arrival of network communication its symbolic status comes to its end. And it is necessary to acknowledge now that no new center will ever emerge. Assigning a geographical place to a network server is an illusion, as pressing a couple of keys on a keyboard can move the entire content of server information to any other place.

McLuhan was also right in connecting the electronic media to education. When he said that in the age of electronic media the only role left for human beings will be to learn and to know, his claim seemed unjustified. Nevertheless, the present shows he was right. In the time when we have discovered almost everything Jules Verne predicted, the media market seems to be fully occupied. All possible extensions of a human being are allegedly already working and there is nothing else for the people left than to use them to their full extent. If we are going to put into practice the ideal of immediate access to all recorded written, visual and sound memories of the human spirit, the principle of learning will turn upside down. Because of the total accessibility of everything, the only reality will be the usage of resources. Materials so far accessible only to selected experts (manuscripts, tablets or phonographic recordings) will be freely accessible to the whole society. The fairness of access will achieve the level none of the predecessors of liberal democracy has dreamed about.

The 90s brought a new medium and as always happens on such occasions, it brought certain social expectations. Pessimists immediately started to spread views about terrorists and pedophiles, who will use the Internet to help finish Armageddon. Optimists on the other hand understood it as a device to change the present way of education, communication and governing public affairs. The schism has repeatedly justified the belief of Marshall McLuhan that media have to be understood regardless of their actual content. The content is the inner filling of a medium, not its reason for existence. To escape from an unproductive discussion over all positive and negative roles of the Internet means to accept the McLuhanian distinction between the intended content and the functional reason of every medium. Optimists and pessimist equally put the Internet into a position of a content medium, while it is nothing more than just another (maybe the last) extension of humans. So even in the case where one group uses stronger arguments than the other, victory in the dispute is an illusion. The Internet is not what the two sides think it is. In itself it is as value-neutral as a blank piece of paper. Its content is given by concrete individuals and this fact cannot change its functional reason for existence at all.

The McLuhanism of the 90s stands on real ground. It received its new legitimacy from a medium which the author did not predict in its actual shape, but which perfectly fits into most of his categories. Nevertheless, the medium itself was not enough to revive his message. The revival of interest is always a work of specific individuals. In my opinion, in this case, we can ascribe this work to a narrow group of fans. They are usually people responsible for the present shape of the Internet: visionaries, technological wizards and libertarians, who for the last 30 years have worked out the technology, legislation and intellectual background. They knew McLuhan and understood very quickly that his work would be the right background for a new medium. Today they are circled around the *Wired* magazine, which regardless of its short life (in January it celebrated its fifth anniversary), represents the top of thinking over the way the Net culture is going. The writer Bruce Sterling or a cyber rights activist John Barlow should guarantee the direction of the magazine for a time to come. It should not come as a surprise that a magazine which leads its field in both graphics and content has chosen Marshall McLuhan as its 'patron saint'.

McLuhan himself would probably be confused about his contemporary popularity and it might be he would even claim that the present interpretation of his work is misleading. But that should not be very important. What is important is the fact that his texts helped to put into life a medium, which without any doubt is going to change the state of the world as we know it. The Internet, which has grown from a small group of devotees to hundreds of millions users, is in many respects his child. The silhouette of the author of the idea of a global village from Toronto hangs over the activity, which is actually building his dream of the global village.

(Translated by Juraj Hvorecký)