

# Marshall McLuhan and the End of the World as We Know It

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Anyone who discusses modern culture has to do a great deal of contemplating of the invisible in the obvious.

*O.B. Hardison, Jr.*

**Disappearing Through the Skylight**

**A**NY DIGITAL IMMIGRANT caught in the social media whirlpool needs no reminder that things seem to be changing: “Security experts today admit that they are involved in a ‘cat and mouse game’ with hackers—and it’s not always clear who is the cat and who is the mouse” (Marron). Indeed, who is cat and who is mouse is increasingly unclear amidst the mass exhibitionism of Facebook oversharing, the irreverence of YouTube Poop, or the spectre of Wikileaks upending global diplomacy. Truth be told, social media has effectively erased the distinction between hacker and hackee, between the producer and consumer of media, creating the world of the *produser* (Bruns), wherein a mashup-remix ecosystem of metadata and free-floating signifiers prevails as an emerging new cultural order.

Marshall McLuhan saw in his time the antecedents of this new information order, writing in the introduction to *Understanding Media* in 1964 that “[t]he Western world is imploding.... Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man—the technological simulation of con-

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sciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society.” Although the technological simulation of consciousness might be a bit further down the road, McLuhan’s use of the term “implosion” could be taken to describe what we today call technological convergence. Convergence is both a technical and cultural phenomenon. It is technical inasmuch as it is a manifestation of advances made possible by digital computers and networking and cultural inasmuch as convergence is both a response to and impetus for an emerging set of social practices that represent a widespread shift toward what Manuel Castell’s has labeled *informationalism*. In brief, informationalism has been described as a technological paradigm that draws on the capabilities of digital technologies to recombine elements from different sources (for example, the “mashup”) with the distributional flexibility of global internetworking. Added to those capabilities is the ability of humans to use computing technology itself to create better technology and, hence, establish a direct feedback loop that accelerates innovation (Moore’s Law is a widely cited example of this phenomenon). Comparing the concept of informationalism to McLuhan’s work, Felix Stalder has suggested that “the medium is the message” could today be translated to “the network is the message” (29). In other words, the network as “a material configuration of processes” enabled through digital technology can be taken to be a medium of communication. Older distinctions between different types of media remain relevant, but increasingly it is the networked arrangement of discrete digital elements and artifacts (that is, nodes) working together in concert (that is, linked to one another) that represent the medium under conditions of convergence—or *implosion* as it were. The configuration and interaction of those elements is therefore one of the key structural considerations in understanding the message of today’s social technologies (see, for example, Barabasi).

Structural considerations were central to McLuhan’s intellectual engagement with communications history and became the foundation for his contribution to “Transformation Theory” and “Media Ecology” approaches that are generally associated with the Toronto School of Communication. While flirting with technological determinism, Transformation Theory offers a perspective on our time to remind us “the ‘content’ of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind” (McLuhan 18). In other words, it encourages communication scholars to seek out the deep structure that underlies the design and success of today’s social media platforms rather than preoccupy

themselves with the unceasing stream of tweets emitted from Twitter or its inevitable successor.

Transformation Theory emerged as a hybrid approach stemming from economics through Harold Innis's *Empire and Communication* and *The Bias of Communication*, as well as from a range of humanist and social-scientific scholars brought together in the *Explorations* publications of the mid-1950s. In the face of the empiricist traditions of mid-century scholarship, the Toronto School sought to introduce a humanist perspective into the social sciences through a very wide lens trained on communication media: "[The common] concern rested on the belief that certain media favor, while others do not, certain ideas and values, or more simply: each medium is a unique soil. That soil doesn't guarantee which plants will grow there, but it influences which plants blossom or wilt there" (Carpenter).

In order to grasp the unique approach of Transformation Theory, Meyrowitz's distinction between underlying medium metaphors in communication theory is helpful. Herein, Meyrowitz notes three basic distinctions taken up by media scholars: *media as conduits*, which is roughly equivalent to the effects tradition that examines content without regard to its particular form of delivery; *media as languages*, wherein scholars seek to discover the intersection between the formal grammars of media and the shaping of content (that is, use of camera angles, sound cuts, rhetorical devices); *media as environments*, wherein scholars turn their attention to encompass the far-reaching social transformations that emerge out of the material processes of the dominant mode of communication at a given time—typically categorized into three historical epochs: oral, literate, electronic.

Taking the approach of media as environments, Transformation Theory generally assumes two related but distinct courses as initiated by Innis and McLuhan. Whereas Innis trained his analysis on the political-economic dimensions of media in empire building and collapse, McLuhan tended to emphasize the "psychic and social" consequences of media as rooted in sensory reconfiguration and cognitive effects on the user.

More broadly, however, transformation theorists regard media as environmental forces that set a context, thereby shaping "the scale and form of human association and action" (McLuhan 24). This view is perhaps not unlike that of Marx's historical materialism where the economic organization of a society serves as a foundation that shapes its superstructure. The particular characteristics of the base are seen to influence virtually all aspects of the sociocultural dimensions of a society. By way of comparison, Transformation Theory takes the position that the formal, structuring

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properties of a dominant medium of communication during a historical moment acts as the base of a society that in turns shapes a superstructure in the realms of both the material and ideational. In other words, media not only shape the shape of a society in terms of material culture but also extend to configuring its cultural dreams (Romanyshyn).

Along these lines McLuhan argues for strong transformations in the human psyche when engaged with any technology:

By continuously embracing technologies, we relate ourselves to them as servomechanisms. This is why we must, to use them at all, serve these objects, these extensions of ourselves, as gods or minor religions. An Indian is the servomechanism of his canoe, as the cowboy of his horse or the executive of his clock. (McLuhan 55)

This notion of relating to our media as servomechanisms raises the question of human agency. If the medium *is* the message, then what happens to the human being as reflexive agent of continuance and change within the world? Surely it is us who use the media and not the other way around?

In response, McLuhan suggests that when we encounter a technology for the first time, the initial shock serves as an “anti-environment” that provokes wide-eyed awareness in the user, creating a moment of revelation as old and new come into juxtaposition. However, over time the user becomes numb to the structuring effect of a technology much like one quickly becomes oblivious to the constant humming of an air conditioner in a closed room. McLuhan refers to this as the stage of *autoamputation*, and it is at this point where a crucial reconfiguration of the body and mind takes place.

We ought to see this moment—that of the end of the world as we know it, in which the Internet assumes its place in a new informational order—as one in which environment and anti-environment are colliding. Perhaps it is an instantiation of James Joyce’s “collideoscope,” where old assumptions are revealed for what they sometimes are—either a form of “theory-induced blindness” or self-perpetuated dogma (Shirky 99). The ongoing debate about the merits of Wikipedia is just one example of this kind of reassessment that plunges us into deep epistemological waters (for a good account of the culture of Wikipedia, see Reagle). The bottom line is that while some traditions inherited from the past are surely worth retaining, for others their time has come. If autoamputation is indeed the next stage, then it is now when we are uniquely suited to undertake this task.

Yet McLuhan's work also serves to remind us that ultimately we can't escape the effects of a dominant medium of communication—that to some extent we are the content of that medium. Social media has made that abundantly clear to anyone who has ever used it. It is a realization that is both terrifying and inspiring: like the electric light, the microchip has no content save that which it enables. For the generation of digital natives this important realization is an invitation to participate like never before. For the digital immigrants, perhaps *our* most valuable contribution, following McLuhan's prescription, is not to condemn outright but to listen and to watch, and to learn from the natives so that we might reveal to them something of the invisible in what for them is the obvious.

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